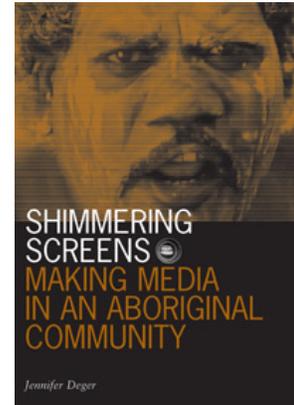


Jennifer Deger, **Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community**, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 256 pp., \$67.50 (hardcover), \$22.50 (paperback).

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From the perspective of communication studies, research on alternative and community media often focuses on such key analytical dimensions as democracy, cultural identity, community communication, and community networks (Jankowski, 2002). From an anthropological perspective, studies on popular media accessed by the general public and the interaction between (new) technology and community understandably focus on issues of collective/ethnic identity. The anthropological approach is not without its limitations in terms of scholarly novelty. But it allows for an in-depth and multidimensional examination of media, ethnicity, and cultural identity, providing a wide window for those less familiarized with cultural studies.



Shimmering Screens is one book that offers a rich, multilayered understanding of media, technology, perception, imagination, and culture. To communication researchers like myself, the landscape seen through this particular anthropological window may be somewhat unfamiliar, especially certain narrations on highly conceptual and philosophical levels. However, I was still constantly amazed by the new ideas and in-depth explorations of ethnic culture presented in this impressive volume.

The author, Jennifer Deger, is an Australian who records and reflects on how the younger generations of Yolngu (an aboriginal people in Australia) see media technology and its interaction with their ethnic heritage culture. Since 1995, Deger has conducted fieldwork in the Yolngu communities of Gapuwiyaku, located in the remote areas of northern Australia. She carried multiple identities simultaneously: anthropologist, media trainer/producer, sworn relative of the Yolngu, and so on. She lived in the Yolngu community, worked with her local informant and sworn brother Bangana, a cultural broker with a self-styled vision for Yolngu media. Together, the two of them produced radio programs about the cultural heritage of the Yolngu, audio recordings of Yolngu rituals and ceremonies, as well as a major TV program, *Gularri: That Brings Unity*, whose production lasted for two years. They also collaborated with international media organizations in these endeavors.

Their productive collaboration lasted more than three years, until 2002, when Bangana suffered a fatal heart attack, leaving behind five children. Deger was in the middle of her writing. According to Yolngu tradition, all photographs, audio recordings and video images of the deceased are not supposed to be shown or heard again to prevent any misfortune to relevant family members. Luckily, Bangana's widow saw herself as a "modern Yolngu" and approved the usage of Bangana's pictures, including the one on the

book's front cover – quite a creative visual representation, indeed – when it was published four years later.

The postcolonial societies of late 20th century often are deluged with popular Western music, Hollywood film, electronic technology, and the teaching of English language. In this process, it is usually the Australians of European descent (or Balanda as they are called by the aboriginals) who document via photography, make audio-visual recordings, and interpret the lifeworlds in which the aboriginals and their ancestors live. It is thus extraordinary for the book to show how the locals, like Bangana, used mimetic communication technology – camera, camcorder, sound recorder, as well as state-subsidized micro-power radio and satellite TV broadcasting – to transmit traditional culture to the younger generations of Yolngu. How, then, do the Yolngu, who retain much of their traditional culture, use media communication tools actively to present themselves? How do they want to be seen through the gaze of outsiders?

Drawing from long-term field observation and active participation, Deger maintains that the Yolngu culture and its imagination are far from being colonized. They attach special meaning to technology, media, and even media access itself, thus demonstrating unique Yolngu subjectivity. For instance, Bangana's grandmother was very traditional. She knew many ancient stories, so her grandchildren asked her to take part in the production of instructional TV programs to which she agreed. However, she worried about her soul being "snatched away" or becoming a "spectacle" in the eyes of the cameraperson. She therefore told her grandchildren to inform the documentary team: "Once is enough," and she insisted on not taking part again. To her, resistance is not a foreign notion.

Even more so, *Gularri*, the TV program directed by Bangana before he passed away, is full of balance and innovation as it skirts between the opposing forces of knowledge transfer and cultural taboo, deliberate revealing and calculated concealing, insider and outsider, public and private. It also represents the diverse interpretations by different tribal groups of their own culture. Gularri is the name of a big river, with which all Yolngu associate as being an origin of life. All the tribes are scattered along this river. The TV program thus tells stories of different tribes, with representatives from each invited to narrate their culture and history. Some groups and tribes have similar ancestors and tales; others have less-known taboos. For example, only men are allowed to enter ancestor cemeteries at the time of ceremony. There are also particular codes of music, image, totem, vessel, story, and related knowledge, which constitute a very rich cultural heritage that needs both careful protection and comprehensive revealing so that this TV program connects with its audience. Therefore, it was essential for the director to discuss and negotiate with the local people, then use skills of selective representation, highlighting, and obscuring in the construction of the documentary. In so doing, the author noticed that Bangana often used voice-over and ambiguous shots in his video recording and postproduction to gloss over certain taboos of particular importance. These may be unintelligible to outsiders. But the Yolngu can easily tell the deeper meaning therein from this "reconstructed" world of the TV program. Although the same ritual may be interpreted differently in the tribes and even among individuals, they can accept each other as members of the same community, of the same ancestor soul, after all. Through such a sensual (especially visual) exposure,

Yolngu youth can make strong connections with their tribes, learn to appreciate the knowledge of their ancestors, and exchange their ideas and imaginaries. Collective identification is thus reinforced.

Readers of this book should feel fortunate and grateful. It's now no longer difficult to know Yolgnu culture through the photographs and images collected within its pages. These include traditions, symbols, and the meaning of life behind the modern Yolngu existence, as well as knowledge that is otherwise hidden from outsiders (e.g., Australian Caucasians) and even female members of the Yolngu tribes.

This book raises many key questions, for example, surrounding issues of cultural transmission, as in the case of Bangana's visual communication skills, notion of beauty, and cultural expressions through the senses. This was also the case with the grandmother who refused to be filmed again, when questions of memory, imagination, and connection with ancestors were evoked. When Bangana suddenly passed away, his wife and children gave a lot of thought to the treatment of his photos, videos, and audio recordings, as these "remnants" were in high demand (Bangana was quite a well-known figure in the aboriginal cultural sphere of Australia and internationally). Through such in-depth engagement with these various moments of cultural revelation, the author successfully demonstrates an intrinsic relationship between the conceptual and the sensual.

References

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