

REMOTELY CONNECTED, REMOTELY CREATIVE: LEAPFROGGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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What does locative media from remote Australian Indigenous communities look like? How does access to 3G mobile phones impact communications? What media is being created on these devices?

This paper discusses some of the strategies being used in remote Australia to leapfrog the digital divide; scoping the potential to introduce tools that encourage creative development and collaborative cultural engagement focused on skill sharing.



Remotely online, image credit Andrew Taylor

It is often said that Australians pick up on new technologies early, in particular those that assist with communications across distances. However, there is limited Internet access depending on where you live, with many remote communities having no access via phone line modem, broadband cable, satellite or Next G mobile phones. Distance is a great challenge in remote areas as there may be hundreds of kilometres to the next town, making the provision of essential infrastructure and services difficult.

This paper scopes some of the strategies being used in remote Australia to leapfrog the digital divide; and explores some key findings of recent research focused on a number of remote Indigenous communities and access to the Internet and mobile phone networks. The scoping exercise is aimed at developing a best practice approach to collaborating with remote Indigenous communities to develop effective information communications technology (ICT) literacy skills and improved access to communications technology.

Background

My interest in mobile phone Internet delivery evolved from a larger interest in new technology especially accessible and usable web design. I work in a government organisation on a sustainability behaviour change program, which uses a website as the delivery mechanism. There has been significant research undertaken for this project, which includes testing with audiences, using appropriate levels of language, ease of navigation and compliance with web standards.

The decision to research online access for remote Indigenous communities came about after I read an article discussing the high uptake of mobile phones in remote communities, particularly 'smart' phones with 3G Internet access. This was shortly after attending 'Web Directions South 2010' in Sydney where I was switched on to flexible device delivery with a web standards approach (which encompasses accessible and usable design). The developments in HTML and CSS have added increased flexibility and functionality to web design, making websites more elegant and streamlined. Cleaner code can potentially have a big impact on fast online delivery, especially if supporting images, video and documents are compressed.

As a means to build cultural understanding and working collaboratively with Indigenous communities, I became a volunteer for the Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV) program. This non-government organisation works collaboratively with communities and volunteers to realise projects that foster sustainable community development. So far I have started work on one project that is based in Canberra, *Billabong Aboriginal Development Corporation*, where I am leading a web design project.

The Australian federal government have started the process of implementing a National Broadband Network (NBN), which would not only provide much needed broadband Internet access in the remote locations of Australia, but would also speed up Internet connections in urban areas. But is this the best method for the majority of remote Indigenous communities? Other countries have leapfrogged optic fibre for satellite broadband access to the Internet and this would appear more practical for remote areas.

Identifying a potential need

As mentioned earlier, there are still significant limitations to broadband access in regional and remote locations. In recent studies, it is noted that Indigenous social policy is trending towards the centralisation of services into larger settlements

There is much talk of 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and this initiative has implications on a range of issues, most significantly access to health and education services, also other basic services like reliable access to power and communications channels.

“Closing the Gap” is an Australian Government social policy framework that is aimed at addressing Indigenous social disadvantage. In June 2009 an agreement was made between the states and territories of Australia (COAG) and the Australian Government to improve remote Indigenous public Internet access. A 2009 report titled *Closing the Gap: National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access* committed to investing in a number of priority locations around Australia.

Some facts and figures

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that at December 2010 there were 10.4 million active Internet subscribers in Australia, compared to 9.6 million in June 2010. What was revealing in one of the tables of this report was that the volume of users accessing the Internet with wireless and mobile devices has been significantly increasing since 2006. According to the data published on the ABS website in December 2010, the use of broadband and wireless/mobile access is almost on par, whereas satellite access has remained static.

The 2006 Australian census of the population revealed that there was 108,143 Indigenous people (0.54% of the total Australian population) living in remote or very remote parts of Australia (ABS2006a). There are 1187 discrete Indigenous communities across Australia. Of these 865 (73%) have a population below 50 and 987 (83%) have a population below 100. The average size of those communities with populations under 100 is 20 people. The majority of the communities identified as remote or very remote are located in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. Most of the governments 29 growth towns have a population of more than 300 people.

Cultural need for appropriate engagement

Since white settlement, there has been a plethora of laws and interventions for and about Indigenous Australians. For example, people are often surprised to know that Aboriginal people in Australia did not get the right to vote in elections until 1967. The landmark Referendum of 27 May 1967 approved two amendments to the Australian constitution relating to Indigenous Australians. Technically it was a vote on the *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginal People) 1967* which became law on 10 August 1967 following the results of the referendum. Of the Australian voting public who turned up and voted, 90.77 per cent voted in favour of the changes, which was an overwhelming response to the Referendum questions.

Just to give an example of the dire legal status of Aboriginal people prior to the 1967 Referendum, Western Australian Aboriginal people were controlled by the 1905 Aborigines Act. This Act gave the Chief Protector of Aborigines the powers of legal guardianship over all Aboriginal people to the age of 16 years. This power over-rode any parental legal rights as normally exists between child and parent. Many children, particularly children of mixed descent, were forcibly removed from their parents in droves and placed in white foster homes, missions, orphanages, and hostels. This era in Australian history is often referred to as the ‘Stolen Generations’. Aboriginal parents were often not told where their children were, names were changed or the children told that their parents were dead.

In order to move from under the burden of the 1905 Aborigines Act, Aboriginal people had to gain Australian citizenship. Aboriginal people, under the Australian Constitution, were not considered to be Australian citizens and therefore, Australian citizenship was not automatic. If an Aboriginal person gained Australian citizenship, the 1905 Aborigines Act could no longer control them.

To gain Australian citizenship, Aboriginal people had to complete an application for citizenship in which their 'caste' and the 'caste' of their parents was stated, they had to prove disassociation from Aboriginal people and culture, provide a photo and references as to their good character. This went before a board who decided if citizenship was approved. Once it was gained, the Chief Protector of Aborigines could remove it at any time.

If you did not have citizenship, as an Aboriginal person, you were classified under the Flora and Fauna Act.

In 2008, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave a formal apology to Aboriginal people who suffered under this regime. The event was initially seen as significant step towards acknowledging the many mistakes of past government policy. This gesture has been somewhat undermined by the continuation of the previous Liberal (Conservative) governments Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which has seen the implementation of measures that appear extreme, include quarantining of welfare payments, bans on alcohol and pornography and a weakening of native title rights over homelands.

There have been many implications for Indigenous Australian as a result of policy decisions. The NTER, (re-branded and expanded after a change in government and after the formal apology as 'Closing the Gap') has seen many children removed from families. In 2009 it has been reported that 4300 Aboriginal children taken from their parents in New South Wales alone. The reference point that launched the intervention was a report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, Little Children Are Sacred*, which found child sexual assault to be widespread throughout Aboriginal communities. These measures are highly contentious and there are a range of views both for and against approaches to managing social issues in remote Indigenous communities.

The problem with past and present government policy implementation is that there has been very little consultation with Aboriginal people about issues that affect them directly and significantly. This very short chronology highlights that there has been a continuing lack of respect and understanding of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures despite some successes.

In contrast, some organisations are making legitimate and serious efforts to engage with Aboriginal people respectfully and sensitively. For example, when I attended the two day training to be a volunteer with ICV, there was a lot of emphasis on how to collaborate with Indigenous communities in a culturally appropriate way. What was also emphasised was that volunteers work on projects that are owned by the community, and of which are focused on sustainable community development. This approach empowers the community to drive the project and build skills and resources for their community and its people.

Relevant research projects

To date there has been limited research undertaken in the area of Internet and communications technology access for remote Indigenous communities and the research that has been undertaken has varied results. For example, in the 2009 research titled *Report to Wujal Wujal Aboriginal shire Council on Mobile Technology in the Bloomfield River Valley*, it was documented that 55% of Indigenous residents interviewed in a survey had owned at least one mobile phone compared to non-Indigenous residents who had 71% ownership. This report also evidenced that there was reliable reception in some areas,

around 50% of the region identified. What was surprising in this report was the relatively low percentage of home based Internet, which was 9.5% and only 7% of private dwellings had a fixed phone line. Another point of interest was that many respondents had the perception that there was widespread use of mobile phones. This may be attributed to many families sharing phones, creating an impression that 'just about everyone has them'.

By contrast, the 2011 report *Home Internet for Remote Indigenous Communities*, focused on three communities Kwale Kwale, Mungalawurru and Imangara which all currently have no mobile phone coverage despite 30% of people owning a mobile phone. The people owning mobile phone, purchased the phone to use in town, there was a number Around 30% of this group used mobile phones to access the Internet for music downloads and or chat. Of these three communities only 6% of total residents had a laptop or a home computer, although 58% of people have used a computer at some time. Only two thirds of this group had ever been online and 75% of Internet users were under 30 years of age. This report also documented that the 2006 census revealed that only 20% of Indigenous households in remote and very remote Australia have an Internet connection, compared with 60% of non-Indigenous people in the same statistical area.

Both of these reports signal the importance of providing other alternatives to the NBN. The *Home Internet for Remote Communities* report recommends that a broadband assistance program be established to assist in the implementation of satellite broadband access and Wi-Fi networks. The Wi-Fi network would be available community wide, providing access to any dwelling as a shared resource. The Bloomfield River Valley report recommends to extend coverage in the area, reliable access to computers, train local people in managing mobile phones and the provision of an equitable Universal Service Obligation.

These examples also highlight that there is still a long way to address the digital divide for remote residents. One of the biggest challenges is that because mobile phone uptake is much higher than individual home access to the Internets, people are currently vulnerable to mobile phone companies installing transmitters so they have reliable access to mobile networks.

It has also been mentioned in the media and via word of mouth reports about how mobile phone companies are exploiting customers in remote areas because of limited literacy and awareness of the contracts being entered into.

An excellent video titled *Mobile Moola Matters* by students in Alice Springs High School, was a winner in the 2008 Australian Securities and Investment commission *Moola Matters* competition. The film discusses the dangers of high mobile phone bills. This humorous short film talks about how you can financially manage having a mobile phone with tips like using pre-paid and talking face-to-face instead.

Despite the fact that there is uneven access to communications channels there has been significant investment in media production and broadcasting by Aboriginal people in remote Australia.

Indigenous owned media production

Yuendumu is a community in Central Australia that had relatively early take up of communications technology. Early experimentation with video production, preceded the establishment of a 'pirate' radio station in 1985. Early video production activities at Yuendumu were associated with the Warlpiri Literature Centre.

Walpiri Media's establishment coincided with the federal government's plans to launch the first Australian owned satellite - AUSSAT. The AUSSAT satellite brought national television to much of remote Australia for the first time. The deployment of AUSSAT involved the establishment of a Remote Commercial Television Service, the management of which was put out to tender. Alice Springs based Aboriginal media organisation Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) was successful in its tender application launching Imparja Television in 1988.

Imparja is a private, fully commercial television company registered in the Northern Territory. It is globally unique, being totally owned and controlled by Northern Territory and South Australian Aboriginal shareholders, who do not receive dividends, investing all profits back into the development of the company. Imparja also provides the satellite access for National Indigenous Television (NITV).

By 1995, Yuendumu had access to email, video conferencing network, two television stations two radio stations and telephone and facsimile. Walpiri Media (now known as PAW Media) continues to have a strong interest in media and creative media production.

About RIPIA (Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access)

In 2009 the Northern Territory Government entered into an Agreement with the Australian Government to provide or improve public Internet access facilities and training services in computer and Internet use to 19 Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory.

The Project is jointly run by the Department of Business and Employment and the Department Natural Resources, Environment, Art and Sports through Northern Territory Library.

RIPIA aims to deliver the following outcomes:

- Increased public access to online resources and services, for financial, educational, health, economic and social purposes;
- Increased awareness of the benefits and uses of online resources and services;
- Increased computer literacy
- Increased information literacy enabling the search for, evaluation and use of online information; and
- Increased Internet use that facilitates transactions and communication with government agencies, businesses, communities and families.

In 2010 the Project was delivered to 19 Indigenous communities. In 2011 the Project will be delivered to 40 Indigenous communities which includes the 19 communities from 2010.

It is also clear from the many conversations I have had with people who have recently spent time in remote communities, that if there is Internet access, then there is a lot of participation on social media channels, mainly Facebook and YouTube. For example, at 1 August 2011 there was well over 1.9 million views of "Zorba the Greek Yolngu style" by the Chooky Dancers www.chookydancers.com, from north-eastern Arnhem Land in Northern Australia. The Chooky Dancers has used the Internet very effectively to promote their work and they have performed in film and on music videos.

Conclusion

At such an early point in the research project there are no significant conclusions as yet, except to state that there is still a significant digital divide for many people living in Australia which will not be sufficiently rectified with the rollout of the NBN. This paper highlights the need for a multi-pronged approach to providing Internet access to remote communities, including 3G mobile Internet and Satellite broadband.

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