



Indigenous Focus Day 2015

COMMUNIQUE

The Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day is a gathering of remote Indigenous Australians to explore the opportunities of appropriate digital access and the challenges of connectivity in the bush. It is a dedicated forum for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to describe projects from their communities in the use of broadband and telephony applications, and share experiences of positive change as well as challenges and pitfalls.

The 2015 Indigenous Focus Day was held on Tuesday 14 July, and was coordinated by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association and the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network.

The day focused on consumer needs, bringing together people from remote communities from northern and central Australia that have most to gain from digital inclusion. The dynamic program explored common issues for remote community users under the themes of affordability, accessibility, awareness and appropriateness.



75 participants from the Indigenous community, from regional constituencies, community organisations, and from Indigenous agencies from across Australia focused on the opportunities presented by digital inclusion and the obstacles that warrant attention. Participants included Aboriginal and Torres Strait entrepreneurs, teachers, community leaders and broadcasters.

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association General Manager, Daniel Featherstone stated the overarching themes at the outset of the day.

“Remote Indigenous people, the most digitally excluded group in Australia, become the quickest adapters when connectivity becomes available.”

Featherstone summarised the plethora of commercial and social activity that encompasses the work of participants engaged in the forum discussion.

“The Indigenous Focus Day presentations demonstrate the innovative ways that remote people and communities seek to reduce the divide and use broadband and mobile devices for locally relevant storytelling, enterprise, employment, and cultural and language continuity.”

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network Chief Executive Officer, Teresa Corbin echoed those sentiments. Corbin asserted that the Indigenous community's communication services provide valuable consumer information, informing and empowering individuals and groups to use technology and telecommunications for greater digital inclusion.

Christine Ross of Noongar Radio welcomed participants to the sacred country of the Larrakia Nation. As part of her introduction on sacred ground, Ross acknowledged the thirtieth anniversary of the return of Uluru to the people of the central desert region. In the wake of this historic event, Ross emphasised the role of the forum to help shape policy and lend direction. Ross introduced Joe Morrison, former Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Land Council, who gave the keynote address.

Morrison began by describing the scope of the Council, nine offices looking after 36,000 Aboriginal people who collectively bear immense cultural knowledge. Lamenting the exclusion of the Council from the national dialogue on the National Broadband Network (NBN), Morrison described the challenges of a deficient digital environment.

Digital resources prove essential for:

- supporting the management of landscape;
- prevention of illegal poaching;
- monitoring of the national coastal border;
- emergency communication in cyclone situations;
- provision of health care;
- livestock management,
- mapping and navigating;
- legal transactions;
- inter-office communication;
- building on tourism opportunities.

Morrison expressed surprise that the white paper for the development of northern Australia could omit from its report technology concerns unique to the bush. Proactively, Morrison concluded by calling for a remote Indigenous communications strategy and provision of affordable access to high-speed, data rich communication resources for active people building enterprise in remote areas.

Following up on the keynote, shorter presentations were given by the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence, the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service, Indigenous Consumer Assistant Network, the Telstra Indigenous Directorate, Ethos Global Foundation, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, the East Arnhem Regional Council, the Central Land Council, the Machado Joseph Disease Foundation, Indigital and representatives from the Numbulwar School.

Other presentations described the Kanamkek-Yile Museum at Wadeye, e-tourism and interactive museum activities in Barmah National Park on the Yorta Yorta Nation, internet facilities in remote Indigenous communities, and challenges with mobile phone plans, satellite internet services, media privacy and intellectual property.

The presentations were grouped under four themes of obstacles to Indigenous digital inclusion—*Affordability, Accessibility, Awareness, Appropriateness*. Following each of the theme sessions, the forum participants split among four breakout groups to discuss the presentations and identify strategies to address the theme. The recommendations from each group were then shared with the larger group.

Participants pointed out that prescriptive models of top-down policies and one-size-fits-all solutions do NOT work in remote Australia. Two fundamental interlaced truths underlined the day's conversation:

- Indigenous communities have the same (if not greater) internet access demands for enterprise, employment, emergency, education, entertainment, commerce, and communication, especially due to lack of physical services; and
- large shared households, low incomes and high mobility make it difficult for billed services.

Digital skills have become increasingly important for career development. This requires appropriate training, ongoing and readily available access to digital tools, digital mentoring and technical support. While urban Indigenous people also have issues of digital exclusion, there are some major barriers that inhibit digital facility in remote Indigenous communities. They include:

- lack of communications infrastructure;
- excessive hardware pricing and maintenance;
- inappropriate and unaffordable web services;
- lack of language-based and relevant content;
- limited digital training and on-ground support.

These barriers should not and cannot constrain the digital environment in remote areas. Twenty-first century electronic communication must support ongoing and emerging standards in governance, education, and commerce regardless of location. Electronic communication becomes much more important in remote regions with vast distances and small populations, with transportation expensive and travel time prohibitive. In these remote areas, digital communication serves as a tether, binding people into a larger operable community. Effective communications is becoming an essential element to the ongoing viability of many small communities.

While the needs of remote communities mirror those of larger urban centres, the imperatives guiding rollout differ. In Indigenous communities, the mainstream model of a satellite set-up in each individual home does not work. In remote Indigenous communities, a different social structure predicated on family and kinship has historic roots and contemporary practicality. Family demand on the available satellite services overtaxes the single bill payer, making pre-paid service essential. Toward achieving greater equity for these communities, providers must make pre-paid packages financially comparable to the billed accounts that users have in metro areas.

Whereas a contract system promises the provider the convenience and security of business continuity and regularity in a large urban environment, a pre-paid system assures greater ongoing self-reliance in remote regions.

While there is a recognised need for safety nets to equalise affordable access in remote areas, the current Universal Service Obligation does not include mobile, data or pre-paid services.

Beyond the pre-paid rubric, the forum specified a number of models of digital outreach. Through the Australian Government funded Indigenous Community Phone initiative, Australia Private Network placed over 300 stand alone satellite stations in Indigenous communities of 50 members or fewer. Currently, the National Broadband Network delivery of satellite data does not support realistic data volume and speed. Through the consultative guidance of Ethos Global Foundation (one of the Indigenous Focus Day sponsors), Australia Private Network has equipped 285 of those satellite phone stations with Wi-Fi, allocating 20 GBs of data use per unit per month. Also, NBN are working on a pilot project with another member group, CAYLUS, to develop a retail product that allows public sharing of the satellite service via community WiFi networks.

With the new communication installations and their accompanying technical, training, and financial challenges, language and culture remain central foundations for maintaining identity and purpose when it comes to developing intellectual and material resources. Community ownership of digital resources can support the development of cultural knowledge internally and cultural awareness externally, and ensure protection of intellectual property. Participants deliberated on the assignment of ownership and custodianship in a digital world and the negotiation of privacy, language, and issues of design:

- How do you protect traditional knowledge in a digital format? Who in the community assumes responsibility for managing access to knowledge in the digital space?
- What archival processes are needed? What types of access platforms are needed? How can interfaces be designed to be user-friendly and incorporate local language and images? What happens when platforms close down or formats change?
- If corporations store knowledge, who owns the data? How can individuals or communities reclaim data collected about them? How might the use of wearable technology and smartphones compromise privacy?

Some key outcomes of the discussion emphasised the need for timely, responsive, and cost-effective solutions in three prime areas: community; education; commerce.

Community

Nationwide trends seem to support the individuation of resources in the family home, with each household's satellite connectivity allowing the broadest range of viewing and online options, tailored to individual needs and preferences. With close proximity to maintenance services, the industry can support this individuation and multiplicity in metro areas.

In remote areas, community aggregates work better than individual solutions. In small population areas, individuals and families work more efficiently when they congregate and share resources. Digital communication not only enhances this collective social process, it becomes essential when maintaining systems, far removed from the resources that provide rapid and readily available technical support. Toward making the case understood, ACCAN has a role at the NBN table, joining the dialogue around product design. Land Councils play an important role mediating design and implementation issues. The guidance must come from bottom-up, from the community whose authority in the field remains most knowledgeable and best equipped to propose workable, sustainable solutions.

Education

Digital resources foster inclusion. Sub-par systems, limited bandwidth and download volume, perpetuate barriers all too often exacerbated because of geography and culture. Digital systems maximize opportunities for remote Indigenous individuals and groups to share in the flow of global information vital for commerce, engagement, education, everyday transactions, and political participation and advocacy.

In particular, the staff of Batchelor Institute pointed out the growth and increasing essential service of distance education. IDLS (Indirect Digital Learning Sessions) can augment the intermittent visits of academic staff, maintaining better continuity, longevity, and thoroughness of instruction.

On a different plateau, digital systems open up a vitally important intergenerational flow, supporting mentorship, maintaining family structure, endorsing education on multi-dimensional levels. Young people (youth under twenty-five years of age comprise over fifty percent of Indigenous remote communities) can exchange digital insights with their elders who interpret and transfer traditional knowledge. During this exchange, the collective might develop new systems for addressing evolving demands in a twenty-first century remote Indigenous traditional digital society.

Commerce

Australia has a vested interest in maintaining the centre, as a vital and vibrant part of the country. Having a vital coastal rim with a hollow continental core threatens the cultural and ethical identity of the nation. Toward realising inclusive integration of all regions and their occupants, the government must negotiate a co-investment with industry to balance affordability with need.

Once integrated, the remote communities face the same digital world challenges of metro regions. Cyber-bullying, worse than physical aggression, goes viral quickly affecting the most vulnerable at the most vulnerable stage of childhood – adolescence. On the positive side, digital experience mandates new codes of mobile behavior. When establishing their online identity and community, individuals must negotiate "friendship" – how to distinguish a "friend" and how to behave online with friends.

Digital commerce offers communities self-publication, the sourcing, screening, and uploading of information in local language. Digital tele-help across the spectrum from health advice to financial allocation saves resources by diminishing the need for long trips. Access to information supports people coming onto the Lands as tourists and as contributing visitors, such as teachers.

Whereas electronic technology tends to substitute for face-to-face contact in metro areas, ironically in remote regions digital communication might bridge distances and enhance virtual face-to-face exchange.

Finally, serving archival needs in a weather-challenged, sprawling, low population region, digital resources allow for broad distribution of information without compromising the integrity of original documents. This transition sustains issues of ownership and custodial responsibility, an area of common concern shared by individuals, groups, and institutions in metro and remote areas.

Conclusion

The Indigenous Day Forum concluded that the maintenance of traditional knowledge continues to evolve over a sixty thousand year legacy, adapting to changing conditions and emerging opportunities. Non-western cultural perspectives must negotiate continuously with global imperatives and systems. While systems hosted with communities seem vulnerable, representatives must tread carefully when negotiating property rights to corporations or onto the "cloud." Intellectual property transactions become that much more acute in a commoditized world where everything seems convertible into monetary value. Toward achieving a comfortable balance between perpetuity and change, the new communication software and hardware must support an emerging new social infrastructure that builds on the strength of traditional knowledge in a rapidly evolving digital world.



Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day 2015 | Darwin, Charles Darwin University

Indigenous Focus Day 2015 COMMUNIQUE was written by David Tafler.

Appendix 1: Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day 2015 Sponsors

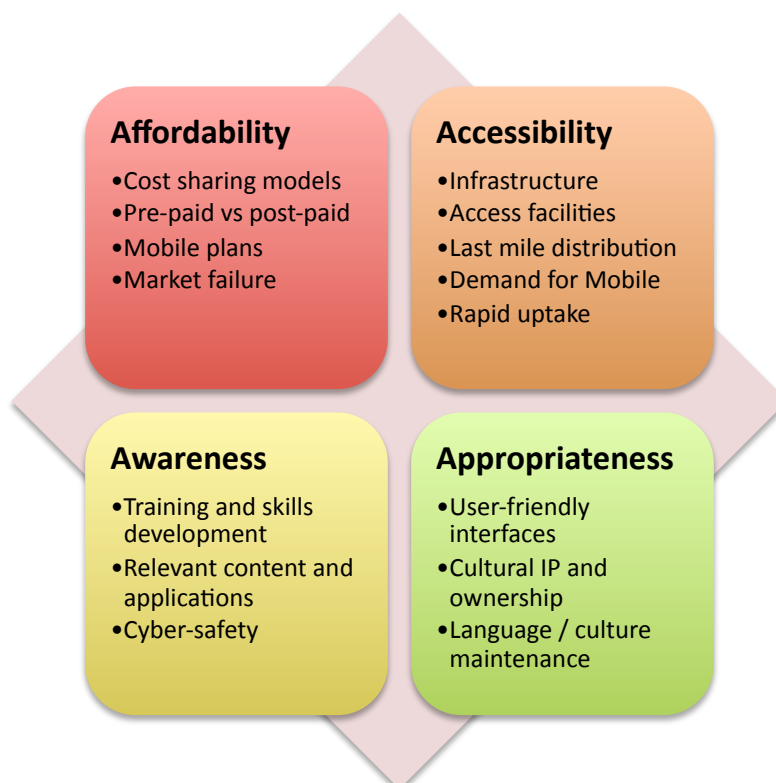
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Appendix 2: Indigenous Focus Day 2015 – Key Outcomes

- A dedicated community-driven strategy is needed to be developed to ensure digital inclusion of the most excluded group in Australia. One-size-fits-all models don't work;
- There are many opportunities of inclusion- jobs, enterprise, language and cultural development;
- Economic profiling is needed to provide evidence of the demand and benefits of inclusion;
- Community and cultural ownership are critical to local engagement;
- LTSS provides an opportunity, but needs to have last-mile distribution, skills development, relevant content and applications for greater inclusion.

Appendix 3: Indigenous Focus Day 2015 – Themes



Appendix 3: Indigenous Focus Day 2015 – Full Program

Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day 2015 Full Program can be downloaded here:
<http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/indigenous-focus-day-2015/>

Appendix 4: Indigenous Focus Day 2015 – Photos

Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day 2015 photos can be viewed here:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/irca>

Appendix 5: Press Release

Indigenous Focus Day explored obstacles to digital inclusion

ACCAN News | Created on Monday, 20 July 2015 11:25

Find the article here:

<http://www.accan.org.au/news-items/media-releases/1079-indigenous-focus-day>

Appendix 6: Website Links

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network: <https://www.accan.org.au/>

Indigenous Remote Communications Association: <http://irca.net.au/>

Broadband for the Bush Alliance: <http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/>