

THIS EDITION:

# **THE NEW NORMAL- LIVING AND WORKING IN THE DIGITALLY DEPENDENT AGE**

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**Telehealth and the Regions**

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**The Future of Work for  
Small Businesses**

ACCAN is the peak organisation representing all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emergency services. Our mission is to ensure that communications are trusted, inclusive and available for all Australians.

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## CEO MESSAGE

**W**elcome to the winter edition of the ACCAN magazine. This quarter, we explore how our world has shifted online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what this means for the future of healthcare, work, and education.

Our Feature Article this quarter looks at how the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the digital divide for many Australians. We speak to the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance about their National Digital Inclusion Roadmap and the way forward to creating a more digitally-included nation.

In Policy news, we explore ACCAN's new accessible communications roadmap. This innovative new approach lays the foundation for a future where communications services are accessible for all.

Our policy team also share how ACCAN's COVIDSafe community sector letter came to be, what successes we've seen from the letter and what further action is required to ensure communications consumers' rights are protected.

This edition also examines the future of work for small businesses in a post-COVID world.

Our featured Grants project this quarter is First Nations Media – the national peak body for First Nations not-for-profit broadcasting, media and communications. First Nations Media are researching the experiences and perspectives of digital inclusion in two Indigenous communities.

Finally, in Members News we talk to Gabrielle O'Kane from the National Rural Health Alliance about telehealth and the regions.

We know that the past few months have been extraordinarily difficult for many of our members, and for consumers generally. We would like to acknowledge the positive role that many in the telco industry have played during this crisis; from NBN Co's Education Assistance package which has provided free or discounted home broadband for thousands of families in need, to the various financial hardship offerings that Retail Service Providers have provided to customers.

For all the latest ACCAN updates, follow us on Facebook ([facebook.com/accanau](https://facebook.com/accanau)) or Twitter ([twitter.com/ACCAN\\_AU](https://twitter.com/ACCAN_AU)). The ACCAN website has lots of useful information, tip sheets and guides for communications consumers. As always, if you have any comments, suggestions or feedback, please email [ceo@accan.org.au](mailto:ceo@accan.org.au) or call me on **02 9288 4000**

Warm regards  
**Teresa Corbin**  
ACCAN CEO



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# NEWS ARTICLES

**NEW COMPLAINTS DATA SHOWS CUSTOMER SERVICE ISSUES CONTINUE FOR TELCOS**

**New complaints data released today suggests that telcos need a customer service shake-up as consumers continue to deal with no or delayed action from telecommunications providers, according to ACCAN.**

Nearly a third (31 per cent) of complaints escalated to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) by between

January and March 2020 related to issues with no or delayed action from telecommunications providers. An additional 11 per cent of complaints had a resolution agreed to by the telco and consumers, but not met.

"While we acknowledge that the natural disasters of summer 2019-2020 placed extraordinary demands upon the telecommunications networks, this has been an ongoing issue for consumers for a long time," said ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin.

"If there are legitimate reasons for a delay in fixing a

consumer's phone or internet problem, it's important that telcos are communicating this openly and often so that their customers can understand what the problem is, and when they can expect it to be addressed."

The TIO Quarter 3 Complaints report also shows that 5,441 consumers lodged complaints about not having a working phone or internet service between January and March 2020. This is a nearly 70 per cent increase from the previous quarter.

"We saw the devastating impact that the bushfires had on our

communities during the summer of 2019-2020, and for many this included losing access to a range of communications services from landline phones to internet connections," said Ms Corbin.

"We hope to see this number fall dramatically in the next report as telcos and NBN Co work to connect consumers who lost access to their telco services during these natural disasters."

The Federal Government has also recently announced a \$37.1 million investment to strengthen telecommunications resilience in bushfire and disaster prone areas so that communities can stay connected during emergencies.

Small businesses reported similar issues as residential consumers to the TIO during the Q3 period, with complaints increasing 8 per cent from the previous quarter. Small businesses made up 15 per cent of complaints to the TIO between January and March 2020, with issues including no or delayed action by provider, service and equipment fees, and no phone or internet service driving the most complaints.

Ms Corbin reiterated that every consumer has the right to make a complaint and be heard by their telco.

ACCAN's guide to making a complaint and other telco tips can be found at [accan.org.au/tips](http://accan.org.au/tips).

**SMALL BUSINESSES NEED TELCO SERVICES THAT ARE FIT FOR PURPOSE**

**ACCAN has thanked the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) for investigating systemic issues affecting small businesses' communications services.**

"A reliable phone and internet service is fundamental for most modern small businesses," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin

"Unfortunately, in the past few years we've seen the share of TIO complaints from small businesses continually increase. The TIO's report helps to identify some of the complex issues that small businesses face when there is a fault with their phone or internet service."

Ms Corbin said that one of the key takeaways for small businesses from this report is the importance of having telco services that are fit for purpose.

"For example, if you're looking at getting an NBN internet plan, make sure that you're looking at business-grade plans that are designed with your needs in mind."

The TIO's report also highlights communications issues between small business and retail service providers when fixing faults.

"It's really important that telcos are communicating consistently and clearly with their small business customers when issues occur. Small business owners have to juggle countless tasks during the day, and don't have the time to endlessly chase updates on faults."

Small businesses can find advice on choosing a small business NBN internet plan and making a complaint on ACCAN's website.



# TELCO SERVICES FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

WRITTEN BY MEGAN WARD

**The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the vital role of telecommunications for small businesses. The internet has allowed many small businesses to stay connected to their customers, retain employees and continue to operate during this unprecedented time. However, the telecommunications landscape in which businesses operate is currently sub-optimal; issues with reliability, affordability and suitability of services hinder small businesses.**

The pandemic has provided an opportunity to reflect on the importance of telecommunications for small business and imagine a future in which businesses are better supported by telecommunications networks. The goal should not just be to return to the way things were before the pandemic, but to create an environment in which enhanced telecommunications networks assist businesses and allow them to grow.

Currently a barrier for small businesses is reliability of services; loss of internet connection for even a day can result in a significant financial loss for businesses. At present, rules regarding reliability are only aimed at landline telephones. In the future, regulatory safeguards for installation, connections and fault repairs should be retargeted towards internet services. This will ensure that telecommunication providers have appropriate incentives to minimize the chance of a fault and providing compensation when it does occur.

Business grade services with enhanced response times are currently available. However, for smaller businesses, they are often unaffordable. In the future, cost should not be a deterrent for

small businesses to opt for enhanced service levels. This will make sure that when a problem occurs, the issue is resolved quickly, and businesses can continue to operate.

Presently, small businesses are buying NBN internet services which are inappropriate for their needs. Often small businesses purchase asymmetric internet services that focus on download speeds, rather than upload speeds (e.g. 50/10 Mbps). However, many actually require a higher amount of upstream bandwidth (e.g. 50/50 Mbps) to allow them to upload large files or participate in video conference calls). In the future, we would hope to see symmetrical services be more widely available and more affordable for small businesses.

Currently, the NBN internet options available to small businesses are complex and businesses are often unaware of which service is most appropriate for them. To make the situation worse, retailers are providing poor advice or misinformation to small businesses. In the future, targeted information and education for small businesses should be available to help them make the best decisions when choosing a service. Selecting a service which is most suited to a business's needs will help to prevent issues down the line.

Small businesses have faced and will continue to face many hurdles in the coming months; access to suitable, affordable and reliable telecommunications services should not be one of them. It is a pivotal time for businesses as they move online and stay connected to customers through the internet. It is also the perfect time to start envisioning a future for small business which comprises a robust contemporary telecommunications environment.

# INTERVIEW WITH DR GABRIELLE O'KANE, CEO OF THE NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH ALLIANCE

WRITTEN BY MELYSSA TROY

**As the peak body for rural and remote health in Australia, the National Rural Health Alliance has been a vocal supporter of telehealth and the many benefits that it can bring, especially for those outside of metropolitan areas.**

In the wake of COVID-19, we spoke to Dr Gabrielle O'Kane, CEO of the National Rural Health Alliance to hear about how people in regional, rural and remote Australia were adapting to telehealth and what the future may hold for this technology-driven approach to healthcare.

**What are the Benefits of Telehealth for Regional Australians?**

Telehealth is incredibly important for people in rural, regional and remote Australia who often have poorer access to health care. This poorer access is often because of greater distances, lack of public transport, and more dispersed services. Telehealth provides an alternative for consumers who might otherwise delay or avoid managing their health care, but it is only a part of the picture. It must not replace face-to-face care services in rural, regional and remote Australia, but should



instead complement these face-to-face services where they are unable to be provided. Telehealth should also where possible be delivered by local practitioners and not out of the major cities by bigger corporate firms, which takes jobs away from rural areas and ultimately diminishes quality healthcare for rural communities.

**Has There Been a Noticeable Uptake of Telehealth in Regional Australia During the Covid-19 Crisis?**

Yes, COVID-19 has seen a dramatic uptake in telehealth consultations. This has been largely due to the Australian Government expanding the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items available for practitioners to offer telehealth services. Telehealth has allowed patients to keep up their regular health checks and proactively manage their health care if they are, for example, they don't want to visit a health practitioner because of the risk of catching COVID-19 from other patients, or are self-isolating. It has also helped practitioners who themselves are in a vulnerable group (for example people who are pregnant or immunocompromised) conduct consultations from their own home and not put themselves at risk.

**What Do You See as the Future of Telehealth in Regional Australia? Will It Play a Greater Role in Health Care Moving Forward?**

Telehealth can and should play a greater role in the way people in rural, regional and remote Australia access health care after

COVID-19, so we want to see many of the MBS items for telehealth remain in place after the pandemic. But we do need to ensure that local jobs are protected and that telehealth, delivered out of the major cities, does not replace face-to-face consultations or telehealth delivered by locals. After all, face-to-face appointments will always be vital and there are many services that simply can't be delivered remotely.

**How Would Greater Internet Connectivity Help the Adoption of Telehealth in the Regions?**

Better internet connectivity is a very important part of the picture. In order for people in rural, regional and remote Australia to be able to access telehealth, they need to have a high-quality internet connection that is reliable, has enough data, and is affordable. We acknowledge that NBN Co has made some changes to respond to COVID-19 but still hear from consumers and practitioners about poor quality internet, especially in remote communities.

**Is There Anything Else You Think Our Readers Should Know?**

Digital literacy is another important aspect [of telehealth]. Telehealth is only successful when consumers have the digital skills to use the technology and health care providers are comfortable with delivering the service via technology. We call for greater investment in health literacy and digital literacy programs for both consumers and practitioners.

# COVID-19 HIGHLIGHTS DIGITAL DIVIDE

WRITTEN BY MELYSSA TROY

**At the end of March, much of the nation went into lockdown in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily life for millions of Australians was impacted as many workplaces, educational institutions and even gyms shifted online. While for some this change to remote working, learning and recreation was welcomed as it allowed for a new flexibility, a significant number of Australians were suddenly at risk of being left behind.**

Under this new way of life, those without access to digital technologies and sufficient digital literacy found it hard to engage with government services, education and their workplaces. The

UN's recently released Roadmap for Digital Cooperation has said that to meaningfully participate in today's digital age, people need to have access to a high-speed broadband connection. This is an issue for the more than 2.5 million Australians that are not online, the vast majority of which are from low-income households.

ACCAN and other community organisations were quick to raise this issue with the Federal Government. In a letter to the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, Paul Fletcher, nearly 30 cross-sector community organisations including the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), CHOICE, The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), and The Smith Family outlined several recommendations that would enable communities to keep connected, work remotely, and access essential services such as education, government services, and telehealth.

Another leading voice in the call for digital inclusion has been the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance (ADIA). This shared initiative of over 400 business, academic and community organisations work together to accelerate action on digital inclusion. The ADIA has written to the Government to propose a National Digital Inclusion Roadmap which aims to address the need for everyone in Australia to be able to make full use of digital technologies.

"We're having a range of conversations with folks in Government to progress the ideas in the National Digital Inclusion Roadmap. There's a shared sense of the importance of action on digital inclusion so we remain hopeful of further developments," said ADIA spokesperson Ishtar Vij.

The ADIA are calling on the Government to implement a number of initiatives to address the affordability of internet services, digital abilities needed to use them, and the accessibility of online services for people with disability and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

One of the key asks of the ADIA National Digital Inclusion Roadmap is for the implementation of a National Capabilities Framework that defines the skills Australians need to safely and effectively engage online. ADIA claim that this would provide the foundation for Government, businesses and community organisations to work together to progress digital skills development.

In explaining the organisation's vision for a digitally-included nation, Ms Vij said that digital inclusion is about social and economic participation at its heart.

"Using online and mobile technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate and promote wellbeing across the whole of society. We believe everyone in Australia should be able to make full use of digital technologies."

While parts of the country are beginning to open up again, many people believe that we will not just revert back to our old ways. Digital innovations like telework, online studying and telehealth that helped to keep the nation ticking along will likely be here to stay. It's important that this new normal addresses the issue of digital inclusion so that nobody is left behind.





# THE FUTURE IS ACCESSIBLE

WRITTEN BY MEREDITH LEA

**At ACCAN, issues relating to accessibility have always been at the forefront of our policy and consumer education efforts. After celebrating our 10th birthday and reflecting upon the positive changes that we had successfully advocated for, we started contemplating what accessibility improvements ACCAN would like to see in the communications sector in 2020 and beyond. We considered the existing communications issues affecting people with disability and wondered what issues may arise in the future.**

From this, ACCAN started developing an Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap in consultation with the disability sector. Towards the end of 2019 and the start of 2020, we sought feedback from a range of organisations supporting people with disability. We asked about the top three communications issues that were currently affecting people with disability, the top three communications issues that contributors thought would affect people with disability in the future, and suggestions for possible solutions to address these existing and anticipated communications issues. Through email conversations, phone calls and group brainstorming sessions, we received responses from 35 organisations, including Disabled Peoples Organisations, advocacy groups and disability service providers, as well as nine individuals with disability who offered their own personal insights of their lived experience.

The insights offered by contributors illustrate that people with disability encounter a range of barriers to equal communications

access. Many of these accessibility barriers cut across different parts of the communications sector. For instance, the lack of information provided in a range of accessible formats is something that relates to telecommunications retail service providers and internet service providers, but also more broadly to those developing online content, audio-visual content, digital inclusion training programs, and so on.

Based on this feedback, we developed a roadmap that outlines what it would look like if people with disability in Australia had full and equal access to all communications technologies and services. The roadmap encompasses areas such as the accessibility of telecommunications services and devices, online environments, and audio-visual content; the affordability of communications technologies; and the safety and reliability of communications technologies. ACCAN and others will use the roadmap to keep track of accessibility improvements within the communications sector.

ACCAN is proud to have a wide range of disability organisations as members, and as valuable contributors to and supporters of our work. We are looking forward to continuing to work with our members and the broader disability sector on issues affecting people with disability, and to collaboratively progress towards a fully accessible communications sector.

The Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap is now available on ACCAN's website. We encourage all our members and stakeholders to read the roadmap and to consider what you can do to help improve the accessibility of the communications sector for people with disability.



# COVIDSAFE APP THOUGHTS FROM PRIVACY EXPERTS AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

WRITTEN BY STEPHANIE WHITELOCK

**ACCAN convened a roundtable of nearly 40 community organisations and privacy experts in early May in response to the government's announcement that a contact tracing app would be launched as a first step towards reopening the Australian economy and lifting lockdown restrictions in place since March.**

In particular, roundtable discussion focused on the Privacy Amendment (Public Health Contact Information) Bill 2020, drafted to regulate use of the app, and the adequacy of the app in addressing the needs of all Australian consumers.

Following consultation, a letter to the Federal Health Minister voiced concerns about the privacy controls of the app, proposed several measures to increase community trust and confidence in its operation, and ultimately support greater uptake. These included stronger legislative privacy protections, improved public education, increased OAIC funding to manage complaints and improved accessibility for people with disability.

Signatories to the letter included the Australian Council of Social Services, Community Legal Centres Australia, Australian Federation of Disabilities Organisations, Australian Privacy Foundation, Country Women's Association and multicultural and First Nations organisations.

ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin said that she was pleased with the amendments to legislation regulating the app which addressed a number of concerns raised by ACCAN and other

consumer groups across the fields of health, technology, privacy, human rights, digital inclusion, communications and community interests.

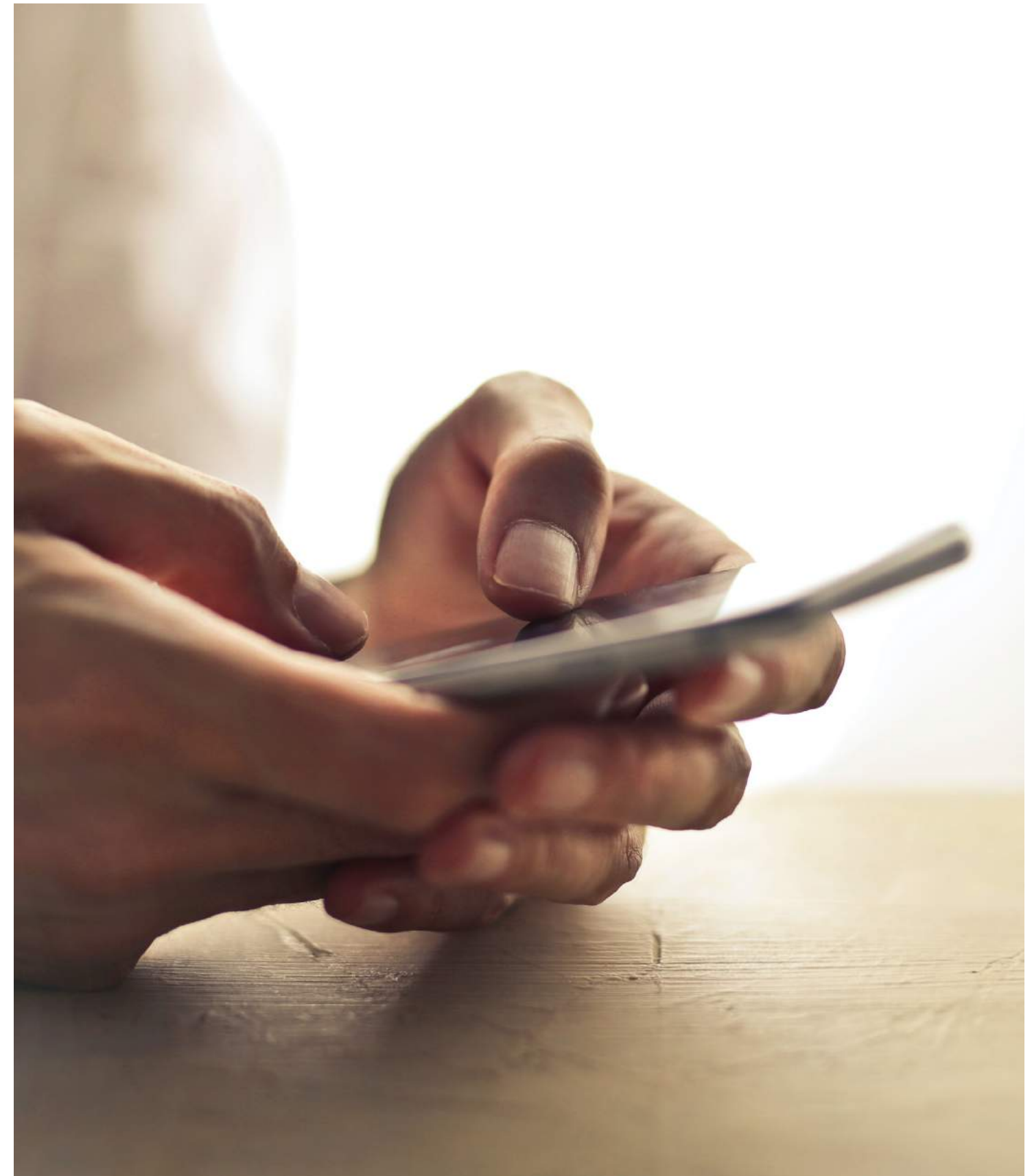
Roughly 50 per cent of the changes proposed by the letter were incorporated into the legislation, offering stronger privacy protections for consumers.

"We welcome the new transparency and accountability measures that have been incorporated into the Bill, such as a requirement for the Minister for Health to produce a report to Parliament on the operation and effectiveness of the COVIDSafe app, and an expanded oversight role for the Australian Information Commissioner and Privacy Commissioner," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin.

"But we continue to have concerns about the technical shortfalls of the COVIDSafe app which limit the number of people who are able to download and effectively use the app, as well as issues relating to public education about the app," she said.

The Digital Transformation Agency (DTA) and the Department of Health are now working with Apple and Google to fix technology problems associated with the Bluetooth connectivity of COVIDSafe, which would allow more individuals to use the app if they chose to opt in.

ACCAN will continue to engage with the Government, the DTA, and the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 on the COVIDSafe app and appropriate safeguards for consumers.



# FIRST NATIONS MEDIA AUSTRALIA

WRITTEN BY CATHERINE WYBURN



**First Nations Media Australia is the national peak body for First Nations not-for-profit broadcasting, media and communications. The organisation supports the First Nations broadcasting and media industry to provide essential media and communications services to metropolitan, regional and remote First Nations' people and communities. The organisation's key roles are representation, policy and research, member services and industry development, promotion and networking.**

In the 2019 ACCAN grants round, First Nations Media were successful in obtaining a grant to explore the experiences and perspectives of digital inclusion in 2 Indigenous communities. The project is being undertaken by inDigiMOB, a partnership between First Nations Media and Telstra. InDigiMOB aims to bridge the digital divide in remote communities through informal peer-to-peer digital skills training that values the experience and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. InDigiMOB has a strong track record over the past four years of facilitating digital activities and workshops with remote Indigenous communities.

The inDigiMOB research team had begun work on the project, originally designed to include storytelling and case studies, with the top end community of Groote Eylandt and the central Australian community of Titjikala when travel restrictions due to COVID-19 came into force, making further access to

remote communities impossible.

InDigiMOB manager Ben Smede and researcher Metta Young have found a way to preserve the intention of the original project in line with the inDigiMOB vision of improving digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The research will now draw on First Nations Media's and inDigiMOB's extensive contacts and partnerships and use an online survey methodology to gather information about the experiences of digital access, digital communications and digital service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic in remote Aboriginal communities across the country.

The survey is intended to develop an understanding of the key digital challenges experienced by remote Aboriginal organisations and consumers during this time. These can include crucial access to information, health or financial services. The revised project responds to the fact that the pandemic has brought the issues of digital inclusion/exclusion in remote Aboriginal communities to the fore. The research team and ACCAN believe that much can be learned from the experience during the pandemic in order to improve digital inclusion in these regions.

There is currently minimal evidence available about the specific issues encountered in remote Aboriginal communities in terms of digital access. The survey will provide further insights and an evidence base to inform the digital inclusion action plans required as part of the rebuild and recovery efforts post the pandemic restrictions.



Photos supplied by InDigiMOB Project, First Nations Media Australia

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and tips go to visit:*

[accan.org.au/tips](https://accan.org.au/tips)

