



Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Indigenous Advisory Forum

Meeting Report

Wednesday, 28 October 2020, 2:00 – 4:00PM AEDT
by videoconference

PRESENT:

Heron Loban	Chairperson (ACCAN Board)
Jennifer McFarland	Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS)
Metta Young	IndigiMOB
Ben Smede	IndigiMOB
Steven Tranter	inDigiMOB Digital Mentor
Jesse King	Stronger Smarter Institute
Brendon Adams	Wilcannia NSW
Tess Reading	National Centre for Indigenous Excellence

ACCAN:

Teresa Corbin	Chief Executive Officer
Una Lawrence	Director of Policy
Rebekah Sarkoezy	Policy Officer

APOLOGIES:

Leigh Harris	Ingeous Studios
Percy Bishop	Groote Eylandt and East Arnhem Land Regional Council
Nathan McIvor	Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation
Christine Ross	Christine Ross Consultancy

GUEST SPEAKERS:

Dr Daniel Featherstone

The purpose of ACCAN's Indigenous Advisory Forum (IAF) is to identify the most important telecommunications consumer issues from the perspective of key representatives from Indigenous communities and organisations, with a view to incorporating these into ACCAN's future policy priorities and workplan.

This is ACCAN's second Indigenous Advisory Forum for 2020. The first, held on 24 June, focussed on consumer protection related issues. By contrast, this meeting was focused on access to communications services, and on the measures needed to promote better outcomes for remote Indigenous communities.

This report summarises the discussions at the meeting, and the presentation of the *Remote Indigenous Communications Review* by Dr Daniel Featherstone. A draft copy of the *Review* was circulated to attendees before the meeting.

1. Overview and context of ACCAN's Remote Indigenous Communications Project (Una Lawrence)

- ACCAN has long been involved with remote Indigenous communications issues, including in relation to infrastructure and digital inclusion.
- ACCAN has been seeking to undertake more advocacy in this area but has had difficulty identifying areas of need and possible solutions due to an overarching lack of information and transparency about existing projects addressing remote Indigenous communications.
- To assist ACCAN supporting better outcomes for remote Indigenous communities (RICs), ACCAN commissioned Dr Daniel Featherstone to undertake a research project identifying the broad range of national and State/Territory remote Indigenous communications programs, assess gaps and areas of need, and develop recommendations for ACCAN's future work in this space.
- Dr Featherstone has identified areas where there are gaps in previous and current remote Indigenous communications projects, and proposing what needs to be done
- In ACCAN's view, it is a good time to advocate for better remote Indigenous communications, as COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the significance of communications for RICs, and the current Communications Minister has expressed interest in making improvements in this area.
- This report will be vital for ACCAN's understanding what it can do support the delivery of better communications outcomes for RICs.

1. Presentation on key findings of the Remote Indigenous Communications Project (Dr Daniel Featherstone)

- Historically, there has been lots of work addressing RICs communications needs up until this point.
- The purpose of this report is to undertake a review of all the initiatives addressing Indigenous digital inclusion up until now.
- The report consists of:
 - A summary of existing and recent funded programs
 - An analysis of community needs
 - Recommendations for future work
- A large variety of stakeholders were consulted in the development of this report, including individuals from all levels of government, Aboriginal Land Councils, Indigenous community groups, communications service providers and technical experts.

Context

- Due to COVID-19, RICs were locked down to stop the spread of the virus. This meant RICs had to rely on wholly online methods of accessing services and communicating outside community.

- Concerningly, many RICs faced connectivity difficulties. Some were wholly cut off due to a lack of connection. There were also difficulties accessing community WiFi and health services.
- COVID-19 has drawn attention to just how heavily RICs rely on connectivity, and how underserved and digitally excluded many RICs are.
- Media organisations played a significant role connecting communities where infrastructure failed, via radio and other methods.

Key findings of the report

- Overall, there have been improvements in connecting RICs since 2010. This is largely due to the rollout of the NBN. Key environmental changes include:
 - The development and rollout of NBN Skymuster satellite services
 - Communications infrastructure co-investment and the Mobile Blackspots Program
 - Implementation of the Community Phones Program
 - Intra-community Wi-Fi rollouts
- Connectivity has come a long way but there is still a sizeable gap between communities, and digital inclusion remains a persistent issue.
- Connectivity varies between communities due to:
 - Community size,
 - Remoteness,
 - Available infrastructure, and
 - Local coordination.
- There is a persistent digital divide:
 - Big and small communities,
 - Agencies and service providers, and residents,
 - Rich and poor,
 - Age groups, and
 - Language speakers.
- Digital transformation and Closing the Gap initiatives are driving awareness of this gap.
- Regrettably, there has been no progress on the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan, which was an Australian government commitment in response to the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review.
- The transition of government service delivery to online modes is a real driver of change.
- Connectivity barriers that are not currently addressed include:
 - Last mile access (that is, individual or residential access)
 - Affordability
 - Quality and reliability – congestion remains a big issue
 - Barriers to using online services, including language and digital literacy
 - Growing demand for increased data and speeds
 - Community access facilities
 - Access to ICT equipment
 - Cultural and language barriers
- The report estimates that roughly \$4m a year is being spent by the Federal government on communications in RICs. This is a comparatively low amount.
- RICs have a variety of communications needs, requiring connection speeds up to 20Mbps.
- An issue needing urgent attention is that where residents cannot access the internet for Centrelink reporting, they can lose access to payments.
- Key barriers to be addressed include:
 - Affordability, as it remains a substantial barrier
 - Mobile coverage and services, which can be congested or patchy

- Ageing and congested telephony
- Long delays in service connections and maintenance
- The need for a power backup in the advent of a power outage
- Opportunities for improvement include:
 - Expanding terrestrial (land-based) networks in the Top End and areas where satellite becomes congested
 - Expanding WiFi mesh services for communities without mobile services. Public access WiFi needs appropriate safeguards and fair pricing
 - NBN Public Interest Premises should be upgraded to Skymuster Plus
 - Developing place-based digital inclusion plans on a local or community level
 - Developing plans for how to serve heavy data uses (for example, for video content)
 - Establishing an Indigenous owned and led ISP

2. Discussion on issues identified in the report

There was broad support for the issues identified from the group.

- Brendon from Wilcannia spoke to the significance of connectivity from an individual and inter-personal level.
 - Poor internet should not be considered a 'fact of life' and it is disappointing to see no urgency from governments. For people who depend on social payments or experience mental health difficulties, connectivity is vital and is a lifeline.
 - RICs depend on each other and internal supports, so being contactable can become a life or death matter. It's vital in a crisis.
 - One difficulty is that governments rely on a statistical basis for evidence of urgency. Brendon is aware of 8 suicides in community during COVID-19 alone – how is this not urgent? Statistical justification does not determine the severity of an issue.
- Heron Loban noted that digital inclusion relates to all other Closing the Gap targets
- Jennifer McFarland from CAYLUS testified to the patchwork nature of approaches to this issue. There are difficulties navigating and sourcing funding, and there is limited support from local councils due to an 'ideological opposition' to free internet services. Navigating the various stakeholders is difficult when parties are opposed about the nature of the problem.
- NBN Co has been difficult to contact. There are limitations to what it can do as a wholesaler. NBN Co has been advocating for temporary equipment installations to remain permanent.
- There was discussion of the difficulties in determining which organisations should take on the role of delivering services, both as RSP but also in providing and maintaining public WiFi access points in communities.
- Regional councils have limited appetite in taking either role on. There are examples of libraries and schools doing this. Public WiFi hotspots have been shut down due to concerns about people congregating which is extremely unfair.
- Inclusive – or rather, non-inclusive – design of online services is also a problem in RICs. Government services are designed to re-direct users back to online self-service. This is a major problem if services are unavailable, or there are digital literacy limitations.
- The use of voice recognition can be non-inclusive, as it often doesn't recognise people using traditional language and traditional names.
- These factors support the need to make sure Indigenous people influence the design of online services to ensure they are appropriate
- Steven Tranter from IndigiMOB discussed the importance of public payphones and said satellite phones had worked well in emergencies.

- There was discussion of voucher-based user pay systems for communications in RICs. There is apparent price-gouging in some instances, where communities are charged \$1,000 for accessing 100GB of data. It is unclear who is responsible or how these prices are set.
- Jesse King from Stronger Smarter Institute spoke to the role that schools could play in supporting public WiFi access. This is an under-utilised resource, and connectivity is essentially wasted outside of school hours. Concerns about network privacy, safety and security are unfounded and play into stigmatising stereotypes about Aboriginal people; this systemic racism must be addressed. There are technical solutions to privacy and security that should be used to address these concerns.
- It is important that resourced organisations and institutions do not act as gatekeepers to connectivity. A spotlight needs to be shone on areas where shared community WiFi has been done well, like in some parts of the Torres Strait.
- There was discussion of digital inclusion as a long-term social investment. Huge savings are made by delivering services online, so why not repurpose these savings as an investment into community via connectivity?
- Substantial and useful investment is needed – it is more than just flying drones around a classroom.

3. Next steps – where to from here?

ACCAN invited feedback on its planned next steps, which are:

- Release *Remote Indigenous Communications Report* and share it with Federal ministers. An attached cover letter will advocate for development of First Nations Digital Inclusion Strategy and creation of a steering committee.
- Advocate for and support development of a First Nations Digital Inclusion strategy with a focus on access to services, affordability of services and equipment, and digital ability. This should be developed by a First Nations steering committee.
- Establish an ACCAN Indigenous Communications Expert Group to provide input and feedback on ACCAN's work and participate with ACCAN in strategic advocacy
- Host a roundtable in first quarter 2021 focused on development of First Nations Digital Inclusion strategy. Invitees would include government, telcos, NBN Co, Coalition of Peaks reps, community representatives, First Nations Media etc.

Some other groups not present may like to be involved and ACCAN will follow up with them. ACCAN emphasised the importance of this work being First Nations-led. ACCAN will send out more information about its proposed strategy and invite feedback by email.