



Our Phones, Our Rights

Translated and community-appropriate
telecommunications resources for
remote Indigenous communities



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Ian Watson
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Our Phones, Our Rights: translated and community-appropriate telecommunications resources for remote Indigenous communities

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Executive Summary

The *'Our Phones, Our Rights: translated and community-appropriate telecommunications resources for remote Indigenous communities'* project was developed by Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM). It aims to provide remote Indigenous community members in areas with low levels of English-language literacy with appropriate and locally-developed information on telecommunications rights and appropriate, cost-effective use of mobile phones and the internet. The QRAM project team worked with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters, graphic designers, remote community members and telecommunications experts to develop culturally-relevant and translated audio and printed resources, including a series of four one-minute radio programs, posters and fact sheets translated into five key Indigenous community languages.

The project also focused on building a clearer understanding of the current barriers and problems facing mobile phone and internet users in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with the research elements of the project based on a series of 25 semi-structured individual and small group interviews with remote community members. Key observations of this research (developed through thematic coding of interview content) included:

- Evidence of increasing reliance on mobile phones in remote Indigenous communities, coupled with problems of affordability and access to reliable service provision. This is resulting in many community members being unable to access reliable and affordable communications essential to their well-being and quality of life.
- Evidence that many remote Indigenous community members are confused about, or unaware of, the costs of their mobile phone and/or internet costs and need clearer information about the costs of phone calls and, in particular, data usage.
- Evidence that many remote Indigenous community members are unwilling to contact telecommunications service providers directly if they have a problem with their mobile phone or internet, preferring instead to speak with trusted individuals or those from respected community organisations.
- A need for more locally-relevant communications tools and channels that address issues with literacy and processing of complex English-language content. This may include empowering key community members or workers through training and provision of information resources, as well as development of communications tools using plain English, translated content, audiovisual formats, and formats which enable conversations with community members.

Key recommendations based on these research outcomes include:

- Production and distribution through effective community networks, of simple, clear information about mobile phone and internet costs in culturally-relevant formats, including plain English and translated communications materials, with a focus on audiovisual materials to overcome barriers with English-language literacy.

- Provision of more community-based support and information for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to assist them through problem-solving and complaints resolution processes. This could be achieved through empowering local community members and existing community organisations as key touchpoints for others in the community.
- Provision of information, training and support for telecommunications service providers and complaints bodies to ensure they are more understanding of the communications difficulties and cultural barriers relevant when helping remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members address problems with their mobile phone and/or internet use.

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Introduction

The *'Our Phones, Our Rights: translated and community-appropriate telecommunications resources for remote Indigenous communities'* project was developed by Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM). It was designed to provide remote Indigenous community members, in areas with low levels of English literacy, with appropriate and locally-developed information on telecommunications rights, and appropriate and cost-effective use of mobile phones and the internet.

The project also focused on building a clearer understanding of the current barriers facing mobile phone and internet users in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Project delivery

The QRAM project team worked with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters, graphic designers, remote community members and telecommunications experts to develop culturally-relevant and translated audio and printed resources. These provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with practical information on consumer rights, using mobile phone and internet services in a cost-effective manner, and ways to resolve problems with mobile phone and internet services.

The project team worked with remote community members to develop four one-minute radio programs promoting consumer rights, which were translated into five key Indigenous community languages. This audio content was broadcast to remote Indigenous communities around Australia.

Key messages about consumer rights were also developed into a translated poster and fact sheet series, with copies distributed to councils and community organisations in remote Indigenous communities.

Research elements of the project

An important part of this Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM) project was research designed to increase our understanding of the current barriers and problems facing mobile phone and Internet users in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with a particular focus on access to information and support in communities where there are low levels of English-language literacy.

The research consisted of 25 semi-structured individual or small group interviews with people living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These interviews focused on gaining a clearer understanding of levels of use and of access to mobile phones and the internet in these communities. They also examined the access by remote community members to clear and understandable information relating to mobile phone and internet contracts, as well as communications difficulties faced when dealing with telecommunications service providers or attempting to resolve problems and access information. They explored the potential communications solutions that could meet the needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in addressing the issues raised with service provider interaction, resolution of problems and development of a clear understanding of telecommunications costs and contracts.

Project Delivery

The QRAM project team produced and distributed a range of culturally-relevant and translated audio and printed resources which aimed to develop:

- An increased awareness among remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members of their consumer rights when using mobile phones and/or the internet
- Increased involvement of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and media workers in content production and local use of translated audio and printed resources
- An increased awareness among remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members of ways to ensure mobile phone and internet costs are minimised (such as by avoiding high levels of data usage)
- An increased awareness among remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members of actions they can take if they have a problem with their mobile phone or internet bills or service
- Ongoing use of a set of translated consumer education materials by remote media organisations and community organisations to promote consumer rights in community languages

The project team worked with remote community members to develop a series of four one-minute radio programs promoting consumer rights. These radio segments were developed through a process of ongoing consultation with, and input from, remote Indigenous community members, ensuring their relevance to the target audience. These radio segments were translated into Torres Strait Island Creole, Arrernte, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri by community-recognised local translators.

These radio segments focused on the following key topics:

- What you need to think about if you want to get a mobile phone - outlining key things people in remote communities need to ask, with clear ideas for specific questions.
- How you can keep your phone and internet costs low - using plain language to outline ways to minimise high costs when using mobile phones and/or the Internet.
- What to do if you receive a large or unexpected bill - giving clear instructions on how to deal with a large bill, and how to avoid these in the future.
- How to resolve a problem with your telecommunications service provider - providing clear directions for sorting out problems with service provision, contracts or bills.

The project team also produced 500 copies of an audio CD of the project content, including all translated audio segments, with copies of these CDs provided to Indigenous radio stations, local councils and community organisations in remote communities around Australia.

For each language group, key messages about consumer rights were developed into a translated poster and fact sheet, providing important information about mobile phone and internet rights in local languages. Both posters and fact sheets focused on providing clear information about the following issues:

- Information community members need to know if they are thinking about getting a mobile phone
- Key steps community members should take if they are worried about a large phone bill
- Key steps community members should take if they have a problem with their phone and/or telecommunications service provider

200 copies of posters and fact sheets in Torres Strait Island Creole, Arrernte, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri were produced, with these translated printed communications tools distributed to councils, community organisations and service providers in remote Indigenous communities.

There is strong evidence of a high level of interest in, and high levels of usage of, the content developed through this project - especially the translated resources. The English version of the audio segments was broadcast nationally on an estimated 83 remote Indigenous radio stations over a three-month period, ensuring they were heard by a large and diverse national audience.

Translated versions were broadcast over a three-month period across an estimated 51 remote Indigenous communities where these languages are spoken regularly. A large number of remote radio stations, and networks servicing these stations, provided positive feedback on the project content, noted the importance and relevance to their audiences of the translated audio messages, and indicated they would like to receive additional content of this kind.

Similarly, there were high levels of interest in both the English-language and translated posters and fact sheets, with over 60 community organisations requesting additional copies of these resources, including 34 requests for additional translated resources. Feedback on the format of these printed resources was highly positive, with many organisations and individuals commenting on:

- The use of simple and clear illustrations to ensure messages were easily understood by remote community members
- The engaging, colourful and somewhat humorous visual style of the content
- The use of clear messages to provide practical information to remote community members
- The use of translations to overcome barriers to English-language literacy in remote communities

Methodology

Research into the opinions, experiences and perceptions of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members is not without problems and requires critical analysis of the research format, setting and content of research questions. Smith (2012: 180) notes that research in postcolonial settings can be problematic due to dominant Westernized assumptions which inform the research focus, and which therefore guide/determine the research findings. As Ezeh (2003: 203) notes, a researcher who visits a different cultural group with expectations informed by an extraneous normative system is likely to be disappointed. Delaney (1998: 298) notes the importance here of conducting and analysing research in a way that does not simply reduce difference to banal universals, or merely celebrates difference. Research carried out involving remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members must therefore begin with the development of open discussion, facilitated by trusted individuals who are able to generate unrestricted dialogue.

As Gorman and Toombs note (2009: 6) “a collaborative approach between researchers and Aboriginal communities is pivotal to developing a research project consistent with Indigenous cultural values”. This involves relinquishing some of the power and authority that has often rested with the researcher (Swadener and Mutua, 2008: 41), and recognising the role of community members as “sources and local experts in their own right” (Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis, 2008: 269). Using core discussion topics, local facilitators and an environment which supports free-flowing discussion enables researchers to avoid “boxing and labelling” Indigenous community members, and their motivations and behaviours, according to categories which do not fit (Smith, 2012: 154).

To ensure community members were able to provide their opinions and responses in a comfortable environment and without influence from others, this research project consisted of 25 semi-structured interviews or small group interviews with people living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As Holstein and Gubrium (2002: 120) note, use of semi-structured interviewing is an especially useful mode of inquiry as it can result in the production of meanings that address issues relating to particular research concepts.

Interviewees were identified based on recommendations from a local Indigenous research assistant (Meadows et al used local people as research assistants and recommend this approach – 2007). This local research assistant (a local Indigenous media worker or key community member with an understanding of local communications needs and protocols) was provided with support and training by the QRAM team to allow them to play a key role in facilitating and conducting interviews. ‘Chance meeting’ interviews were also used wherever possible, reflecting the informal community setting of the research and the successful use of this form of interview by previous researchers in remote Indigenous settings (Meadows, 2002; Watson 2013, 2016). Most interviews were held in local community settings, such as local gathering places outside shops or council offices, with some interviews also held in the homes of interviewees or at the local radio station. While some interviews were conducted in private (based on the wishes of the interviewee), others were in small group settings or conducted with others watching.

The interviews were fluid in nature, allowing interviewees to freely express their views about key issues relating to their use of mobile phones and the internet, and their access to important

information about billing, costs, contracts, service provision and complaints mechanisms. This type of semi-structured interviewing allows clarification of points, extension of responses, and the ability to remind respondents of points they might not have mentioned (Gillham 2000: 14). While the interviewer attempted to facilitate without overly directing the interviewee’s talk (Rapley, 2004: 20), it is acknowledged that the interviewer may in some cases have needed to guide the interviews to ensure the key areas of the research project were addressed, recognising that “all interview statements are actions arising from an interaction between interviewer and interviewee” (Jensen, 2002: 240). All interviews were transcribed, and analysed based on themes and application of codes to data (Rapley, 2004: 27). As Jensen (2002: 247) notes, this use of thematic coding allows qualitative researchers to identify the occurrence of particular themes or frames in the context of communication.

Research participants

The location and number of interviewees in each location is summarised in the table below:

Location	Number of interviews	Number of interviewees*	Gender	Age range
Cape York, QLD	12	19	9 male, 10 female	15-49
Kimberley, WA	5	9	5 male, 4 female	16-56
Central Desert, NT	8	12	7 male, 5 female	17-37

* Includes the total number of interviewees in both individual and small group interviews (2-4 community members per group)

Key research themes

The research interviews focused on discussion based around the following key themes:

Levels of access to (and use of) mobile phones and the internet by interviewees and others in their community

Levels of access to clear and understandable information relating to mobile phone and internet costs

Levels of access to clear and understandable information relating to mobile phone and internet contracts

Communication difficulties experienced when dealing with telecommunications service providers

Communication difficulties experienced when attempting to resolve complaints and/or access support to deal with problems with telecommunications service providers

Potential communications solutions that could meet the needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where there are low levels of English-language literacy

Findings

Access to mobile phones and the internet

There were a mixed range of responses from community members across the three locations when asked about their use of mobile phones. However, most interviewees reported increasing levels of mobile phone use in their community, including their own use, that of friends and family members, and observations of use by others in the community. This comment by an interviewee in Queensland was typical of many across all interview locations:

“Yes, we all have one, or we want one. So I have one, not all of my friends do, but more and more, yes, they get them. Everyone wants a phone, because that’s how we stay in touch or whatever. It’s important for us.”

However, some interviewees, particularly in Western Australian and the Northern Territory, noted that a lack of reliable service (and high numbers of ‘black spots’) was preventing many community members from using mobile phones:

“I don’t know, because we used to always want that mobile phone, but if it doesn’t work, someone tells the other person, then maybe they’re not getting one. You can go just down the road there (points) and it stops working. So people don’t want one now.”
(interviewee, Northern Territory)

Other interviewees indicated frustrations with large bills and high costs were resulting in many community members abandoning their use of mobile phones. In some cases high costs of mobile phone services and bills has resulted in community members sharing phone usage.

“I used to have one, but I always have to pay so much. Too much money. So now I don’t have one, but my wife does. That’s enough.”

A large number of interviewees clearly linked access to the internet to the use of mobile phones, indicating that mobile devices are the primary means of access to the Internet in these remote communities. Very few interviewees accessed the Internet through PCs or laptops, with this mainly occurring in work environments, rather than in the home.

“We do it on these phones (get online). That’s what we do. You get on Facebook or Instagram, or you get some music on there. So if you have your phone, you are always on there (the internet).”
(interviewee, Queensland)

Access to clear and understandable information on costs and contracts

Interviewees in all locations noted that they were often confused about, or unaware of, the costs of their mobile phone and/or internet services. Large numbers of interviewees noted problems with 'bill shock' when receiving unexpectedly large phone and data usage bills.

"That first time, when I got that bill, I thought 'no way, that's way too much'. Because I didn't know how I spent that much. And I couldn't pay for it."
(interviewee, Western Australia)

Many interviewees spoke about a lack of clarity in terms of why they were being charged so much for their mobile phone and internet usage. Comments of this kind related closely to frustrations with pre-paid services running out of credit on a regular basis, and a lack of understanding as to why data limits were being reached so quickly.

"It's like I'm not really using it, but I still have no credit. So I have to get more. And I try to ask about why, but there's really no one to tell me. You can't get that answer you need."
(interviewee, Queensland)

Related to this, many interviewees noted that they were unsure of who to approach to find out information about mobile phone and internet costs, as well as advice on how to reduce their costs or bills.

Many interviewees expressed a desire for simple, clear information about mobile phone costs before they signed up to pre-paid plans, while others noted the need for information (or sources of information) explaining their current usage levels and costs.

"Once you have it (a mobile phone) you sort of just have to put up with it. They make you pay. If they could give you someone who can explain 'this way is cheaper', or 'this would be better for you'. That would be good. Because you just get it, and you pay, and you don't know what else to do."
(interviewee, Queensland)

Some interviewees noted the complexity of material they had attempted to access, or been provided with, before signing up to pre-paid or post-paid mobile phone plans. Other interviewees felt they had, conversely, been provided with little or no information prior to being sold a mobile phone plan/contract, as demonstrated in this small group interview exchange in the Northern Territory.

"They told me all this stuff, and had these many papers. I just said 'is this a good one for me?'. I don't understand all of that stuff they are trying to tell me."

"Yes. For me, I did not see much. They told me about it, but not much. No papers, or anything. So you sort of have to trust that person, that they are helping you."

Communication difficulties

A large number of interviewees, in all locations, expressed frustrations with dealing with telecommunications service providers. Many community members noted a lack of responsiveness from service providers when they were having problems with reception or phone functionality.

“If it breaks, who do you talk to? Or when you go there in the bush, and it doesn’t work for you. So I try to call them and talk, but I don’t think they listen to me. They just say ‘oh, we will sort it out’. But it doesn’t change, and now I can’t use my phone here.”

(interviewee, Western Australia)

Many interviewees also reported problems with communicating clearly with telecommunications service providers about concerns over the size of bills or the short periods of time between recharging pre-paid services.

“So it is okay for only one or two days, then I need to pay more. And when I ring, I wait, and then I try to speak to someone. But my language, my English is not good, and them too when they talk to me, I don’t understand. If I can talk to them, like you here, it would be okay. But when I call, nothing can happen.”

(interviewee, Northern Territory)

Very few interviewees had attempted to resolve complaints with telecommunications service providers (either directly or through accessing support). Comments from interviewees when asked about this centred on a perceived powerlessness, with community members noting that they felt complaining would not fix problems, and would be a difficult process (and often one that they felt uncomfortable going through). This comment from a Queensland interviewee provides some insight into this reticence to complain about mobile phone or internet problems:

“It is not something (complaining) that we are used to doing. I never ring a place or a number or what have you and complain. We talk to people here, in the community, and try to sort things out. But for the phone stuff, we don’t know. We just do what we can.”

This comment reflected many similar comments from interviewees in all locations that revealed local community connections were the primary method used to resolve problems with mobile phones and/or the Internet, with many community members reaching out to trusted organisations or individuals within the community as a way of seeking support and information.

“I always ask my sister there, because she works in the council office. So she can look up some information for me or help me get it fixed up. When I didn’t pay and my phone, it didn’t work because I didn’t pay, and she helped me with that. So it’s good that I have her.”

(interviewee, Queensland)

Potential solutions

Interviewees in all locations stressed the need for locally-available community members or workers (such as local council staff) who can provide the wider community with trusted and appropriate information. This idea of empowering local community members as key touchpoints for others in the community was summarised well by an interviewee in the Northern Territory:

“If you have a local person, and maybe you train them, or give them some help. Then we can all ask that person. If we want a phone, or if we have a problems, we know that’s the one we talk to. It makes it easier.”

Many interviewees also pointed to the importance of providing remote community members with simple information explaining ways to reduce mobile phone and internet costs, as well as explaining ways to resolve common problems. It was noted by many interviewees that this information should be translated, where possible, into local community languages.

“If you have that one in language, then people will know that. But if you don’t, then a lot of our people won’t understand. So yes, in language is good.”

(interviewee, Northern Territory)

Interviewees also suggested that audiovisual material is important when explaining detailed information, such as mobile phone contracts, payment plans or bills, to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members. This included ideas for radio content, video content and animations.

“We have this for the health stuff, like the ones about smoking or things like that. It’s on the radio, so people don’t have to read it, they can listen. Then they have it at the clinic there, they show it to you there. So you can watch it and understand.”

(interviewee, Queensland)

Conclusions

While it is acknowledged that this small amount of qualitative research provides a limited snapshot of mobile phone and internet usage, problems with this usage, and the communications needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, a number of key themes have emerged from this research which are worthy of further investigation.

Coupled with evidence of increasing levels of use of mobile phones in the remote communities in this research, it is clear that many community members are not using mobile phones because of a lack of reliable service and high costs. This may be leading to more sharing of mobile devices among friend and family networks. Use of the internet is clearly linked to access via mobile devices, with low numbers of community members in these remote communities getting online via PCs and laptops in work places, and very few having computers at home. It is clear that community members are reliant on mobile phones as a key way of communicating, accessing information and connecting to others outside of the community. However, many community members are struggling with the reliability of service provision and their ability to pay large phone bills, resulting in many community members being unable to access reliable and affordable communications essential to their well-being and quality of life.

There is also evidence that remote Indigenous community members are often confused about, or unaware of, the costs of their mobile phone and/or internet, and need clearer information about the costs of phone calls and, in particular, data usage. This lack of access to information about costs and plans begins when they get their phone and/or plan, and continues throughout the period they use their mobile phone. The lack of awareness of community members as to where to go for information on costs and details of data usage points to the need for simple, clear information about mobile phone and internet costs to be provided in culturally-relevant formats.

It is clear that many remote Indigenous community members are unwilling to contact telecommunications service providers directly if they have a problem with their mobile phone or internet, preferring instead to speak with trusted individuals or respected local community organisations. Coupled with this, many community members are not used to the process of lodging a complaint or resolving a problem through formal processes. When community members have attempted to find out information or resolve problems with telecommunications service providers, they have noted a lack of responsiveness and problems communicating their issues clearly.

The issues faced by remote Indigenous community members in resolving problems directly with telecommunications service providers, coupled with a desire to seek help locally in the community, points to the need for more community-based support and information for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to assist them through problem-solving and complaints resolution processes. This could include supporting key individuals and/or organisations in communities through training and provision of resources to act as key community touchpoints for local community members to approach when having problems with mobile phone or internet services (this model has been used in other areas such as aged care problem resolution and provision of advice on legal issues and tenancy problems). It also points to the need for telecommunications service providers and complaints bodies to be more understanding of the communications

difficulties and cultural barriers that may need to be overcome in helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander address problems with their mobile phone and/or internet use. This could include additional training of service provider staff, including cultural training and provision of strategies for understanding and overcoming communications barriers faced by remote community members.

A number of options emerged from the research for locally-relevant communications tools that address issues with literacy and processing of complex English-language content. The development of communications tools using plain English, as well as translated content where possible, may assist in ensuring remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members have greater access to information about mobile phone and internet costs and ways to resolve problems with service provision, bills and contracts. These tools should, where possible, be developed in audiovisual formats, or designed in formats which enable conversations with community members, thereby overcoming barriers to understanding in communities where there are low levels of literacy (especially English-language literacy).

Recommendations

While the scope of this project's research was somewhat limited, the outcomes of the semi-structured interviews conducted in remote communities have been used to inform the following recommendations. These focus on improving the provision of information about mobile phone and internet services, costs, and complaints processes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas of Australia.

Recommendation one

Production and distribution, through effective community networks, of simple, clear information about mobile phone and internet costs in culturally-relevant formats, including plain English and translated materials. These should focus on audiovisual materials to overcome barriers with English-language literacy. The success of the resources developed for this project, the high levels of interest in obtaining more copies of these resources, and the large number of community organisations requesting other resources of this kind in the future, all point to the high level of community demand for information of this kind in relevant formats. While some similar products exist (such as content produced by the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman), ongoing efforts could be made to provide information needed by remote communities in languages and formats that meet specific community needs.

Recommendation two

Provision of more community-based support and information for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to assist them through problem-solving and complaints resolution processes. This should be done through empowering local community members and existing community organisations, through training and provision of resources. These people will then be better enabled to act as key community touchpoints for community members to approach when having problems with mobile phone or internet services. This model has been used in other areas such as aged care problem-resolution and provision of legal and tenancy advice.

Recommendation three

Provision of information, training and support for telecommunications service providers and complaints bodies to ensure they are more understanding of the communications difficulties and cultural barriers that may need to be considered in helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander address problems with their mobile phone and/or Internet use. This could include additional training of service provider staff, including cultural training and provision of strategies for understanding and overcoming communications barriers faced by remote community members.

Author

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Ian Watson has been working on remote media and communications projects in Australia for over 15 years, and is Project Manager for the Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM) Aboriginal Corporation. Ian is a member of the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research (Griffith University), a contributor to a range of peer-reviewed communications journals and books, and is completing a PhD focusing on research into remote Indigenous media and communications in Australia, Mexico and Canada.

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