New research highlights urgent need to close digital divide for Indigenous communities

New analysis commissioned by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) shows that urgent action is needed to address the digital divide in remote Indigenous communities in the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns.

While much of the nation turned to digital services such as videoconferencing and telehealth during the rolling lockdowns put into place during the COVID-19 pandemic, very few remote Indigenous communities were able to work or learn from home, or access government and health services online. With access by service providers limited by travel restrictions, many people were left without access to essential services. In some remote communities, the Wi-Fi hotspot, the only point of access, was switched off to avoid people congregating.

"COVID-19 saw communities without food and necessities of life because of the lack of access to adequate, reliable, and robust telecommunications," said ACCAN Board Member and proud Torres Strait Islander, Dr Heron Loban.

ACCAN's *Remote Indigenous Communications Review* found that despite the increased availability of infrastructure to remote communities, there are still significant gaps in access and usage of communications technologies due to lack of last mile delivery or community access facilities, issues of affordability, and barriers to engagement with online services.

Dr Daniel Featherstone, lead author of the ACCAN report and former General Manager at First Nations Media Australia, examined existing programs that support telecommunications and internet access in remote Indigenous communities and any gaps or outstanding needs identified by community stakeholders.

According to the *Remote Indigenous Communications Review*, there is a gap in access to communications infrastructure for small to medium size remote communities, of about 50-350 people, which is not met by existing programs. There is an urgent need to fix this connectivity gap, and work with communities on services suited to their needs, such as public internet access via community wide WiFi.

Where local infrastructure is available, affordability remains one of the key barriers for remote Indigenous communities. Many community members have low and unreliable incomes, so manage their budget using pre-paid mobile and WiFi internet vouchers that are typically charged at a premium, leaving less for other essentials.

The *Remote Indigenous Communications Review* also reveals the serious service reliability and congestion issues that remote Indigenous communities experience. Local Authorities from Angurugu in the East Arnhem region reported that four days of no service in February led to major social unrest because there was no access to phones, internet or EFTPOS for purchase of food.

 "Positively, we found that both governments and the telco industry are aware of the need to address the communications needs of remote Indigenous communities; there has been approximately $155 million government investment in communications infrastructure for these communities since 2015*," said Dr Featherstone.

However, the *Remote Indigenous Communications Review* found that current government infrastructure programs, which require industry co-investment, have now run their course in terms of addressing the specific challenges of remote Indigenous communities.

"We need to make sure that remote Indigenous communities with small populations are not left without access to phone and internet services. To do this, we need a targeted and coherent Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy, co-designed with First Nations people."

As the peak body for communications consumers, ACCAN will work with a steering committee of Indigenous representatives to advocate for the urgent funding and introduction of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy.

"With most government services now requiring a MyGov account and internet access, it's vital that the government takes action to avoid deepening the digital divide in remote Indigenous communities," said Dr Loban.

"Without an investment in telecommunications infrastructure, digital access and devices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' full, active participation in digital society and the economy, the divide will never close."

Dr Featherstone believes that by building on the progress of the last decade with targeted investment and coordination, there is good reason to believe that the gap in Indigenous digital inclusion can be significantly reduced in the next 5-10 years.

*excluding nbn Sky Muster and industry investment

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