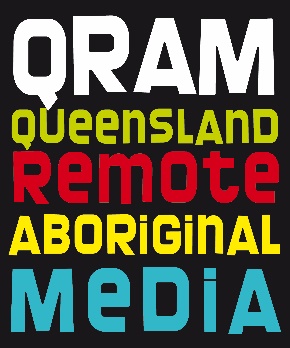
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| Yarning and Learning |
| Communication use and issues in remote Indigenous communities |
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| **Ian Watson** |
| **17 June 2015** |

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Yarning and Learning: Communication use and issues in remote Indigenous communities

Authored by Ian Watson

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# Executive Summary

The ‘Yarning and Learning’ project was developed by Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM), to provide remote communities around Australia with much-needed culturally-relevant information on their rights as telecommunications consumers, and advice on how to use mobile phones and the Internet wisely and in a cost-effective manner. It also used best-practice Indigenous research methodologies to develop a clearer picture of mobile phone and internet usage, barriers, problems and opportunities in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This report is presented in two parts, the first outlining the delivery of the project, and the second presenting the results of the subsequent research.

The QRAM project team worked with remote communities and communications experts around Australia to develop culturally-relevant communications materials for remote Indigenous communities providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with practical information on consumer rights, using their phone and Internet services in a cost-effective manner, and ways they can resolve any problems relating to their phone and Internet services. The project team used the input of a steering committee and remote broadcasters to develop a series of 12 one-minute radio programs which were broadcast on 72 remote Indigenous radio stations around Australia, as well as seven Indigenous radio stations in major cities and regional centres and at least 43 other community radio stations. The project team also developed a printed educational resource tool, with 500 copies produced and distributed to community and Indigenous radio stations nationally, as well as a range of key community organisations and telecommunications organisations.

To gather more information on telecommunications use and issues in remote Indigenous communities, the project team conducted a series of four focus groups and 14 semi-structured interviews with people living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. An established Indigenous research methodology was used to explore more fully mobile phone and Internet usage, and the barriers and opportunities in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**.** This research points to high, and increasing, levels of use of mobile phones in remote Indigenous communities, as well as increasing access to the Internet via mobile phones. At the same time, the findings build on existing research in this area that documents the significant barriers remote Indigenous community members experience in accessing reliable and affordable phone and internet services, along with gaps in awareness of consumer rights and processes for resolving problems with service providers. This research points to the need for ongoing provision of information about consumer rights, cost-effective use of phone and internet services, and complaints and problem-resolution mechanisms in culturally-relevant formats to remote Indigenous audiences. It also highlights the need for further research into the significant opportunities for social and economic development presented by increasing levels of mobile phone and internet use in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia.

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# Introduction

The use of mobile phones and the Internet (mainly through mobile phones) in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have emerged as key mediums of communication in remote communities in Australia. Increasing numbers of remote Indigenous community members are using mobile phones as their primary way of staying in touch with family, friends and community members, especially when they need to travel outside of their community (Papandrea, 2010; Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008). At the same time, anecdotal feedback from, and observation of, remote Indigenous community members suggests increasing access to online entertainment and information, and accessing social media.

Despite this reliance on mobile phones for communication and access to online information and entertainment, there is little culturally-appropriate consumer information in remote communities about phone costs, how to deal with communications problems, and how to resolve issues with phone charges and billing. There is also little information promoting the use of phones as an effective way of accessing important information about health, mental health and other key issues affecting people in remote communities. Further, there is a need for more research into the patterns of usage of telecommunications in these remote communities, as well as the experience of people in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities when using phones and the Internet (including research into problems they may be having and their issues in resolving these problems).

This project was developed by Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media, who have a unique insight into the communications needs and usage patterns of people in remote communities. It sought to provide remote communities around Australia with much-needed culturally-relevant information on their rights as telecommunications consumers, and ways in which they can ensure they are using mobile phones and the Internet wisely and in a cost-effective manner (summarised in Part A of this report). It also used best-practice Indigenous research methodologies to help develop a clearer picture of mobile phone and Internet usage, barriers, problems and opportunities in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (summarised in Part B of this report).

# Part A: Project delivery

To deliver the communications elements of this project, the QRAM project team worked with remote communities and communications experts around Australia to develop culturally-relevant communications materials for remote Indigenous communities providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with practical information on:

* consumer rights
* ways remote Indigenous consumers can ensure they are using their phone and Internet services in a cost-effective manner
* ways community members can resolve any problems relating to their phone and Internet services
* ways community members can access key mobile and online health, mental health and community support services

## Project planning

A **project steering committee** was developed, including members of remote Indigenous communities, remote broadcasters and communications specialists, and peak industry bodies, including the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) and Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network (ICAN). This group provided advice on project content, as well as reviewing draft project content (radio scripts and booklet content).

A **workshop of remote Indigenous broadcasters** was held in Cairns at the QRAM training centre to develop ideas for project content and discuss key telecommunications issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities. This workshop was also used to develop draft content for radio scripts, discuss the presentation style of the radio segments, and examine potential barriers to community understanding of the final content (including issues surrounding language use and complexity of messages).

## Content development

The project team used the input of the steering committee and remote broadcasters to **develop scripts for a series of 12 one-minute radio programs**. These scripts were reviewed by ACCAN and steering committee members, as well as remote Indigenous communications workers, prior to finalisation. The project scripts were also focus tested with remote Indigenous community members to ensure the language and content was relevant and appropriate. The topics covered by the scripts are summarised below:

**Track 1: Is this the right phone contract for me?**

This track provides some simple advice on the questions you should ask before you sign up for a mobile phone contract.

**Track 2: How should I choose an Internet service provider?**

We need to be a bit careful before we choose an Internet service provider. This track outlines a few things you need to think about before you get online.

**Track 3: My bill is really scary!**

It’s never nice getting a big phone bill. This track tells you what you can do if you’ve received a bill, and you’re not sure why it’s so big.

**Track 4: I’m trying to keep my phone costs down…**

This track looks at how you can keep your data use and calls under control so that you don’t end up with a large bill.

**Track 5: I need to reduce the amount of data I’m using…**

This track provides some advice on simple ways you can limit the amount of data you are using on your smartphone.

**Track 6: I can’t afford to pay my phone bill!**

This track talks you through the steps you can take if you receive a phone bill you think you can’t pay.

**Track 7: What are some good ways to save money on my mobile phone and Internet use?**

This track gives you a few tips for keeping the cost of your mobile phone and Internet as low as possible.

**Track 8: How to I change or end a contract?**

This track lets you know what your options are if you want to change or end your current phone contract.

**Track 9: How can I make a complaint about my mobile phone service?**

If you have a problem with your phone or Internet, then it’s important that you do something about it.This track lets you know who to talk to, and what you should ask them.

**Track 10: What can I do about cyberbullying?**

Cyberbullying is a real issue for people in our communities these days. This track lets you know what you should do if you’re being bullied.

**Track 11: Safe use of mobile phones and social media**

This track provides some simple advice on ways you can use phones and social media safely, and reminds you that you need to be really careful about the images and videos you share.

**Track 12: Accessing mental health support online or on your mobile phone**

This track lets you know about the key mental health services and information you can access on your mobile phone or computer.

## Broadcast and distribution

The radio segments were narrated by Aboriginal actor and comedian Anthony Newcastle, together with character voices provided by Indigenous community members. This ensured their relevance to the target audience. They were **broadcast nationally on over 80 remote Indigenous radio stations** over a six-month period, ensuring they were heard by a large and diverse national audience.

Feedback from radio stations suggests widespread use of the audio segments by community and Indigenous radio stations nationally, with a focus on remote Indigenous radio stations. It is estimated that the content was played regularly on:

• At least 72 remote Indigenous radio stations around Australia

• At least 7 Indigenous radio stations in major cities and regional centres

• At least 43 other community radio stations

The project team also developed a **printed educational resource tool**, with 500 copies produced and distributed to community and Indigenous radio stations nationally, as well as a range of key community organisations and telecommunications organisations. This 16-page A5 full-colour booklet included an audio CD of the project content, as well as printed information on consumer rights, effective use of mobile phones and the Internet, and key health and other services that can be accessed through mobile phones and online.

The **project was launched** at Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) Festival in Bamaga, Far North Queensland in September 2014.

To gather more information on telecommunications use and issues in remote Indigenous communities, the project team conducted a series of four focus groups and 14 semi-structured interviews with people living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. An established Indigenous research methodology was used to explore more fully the mobile phone and Internet usage, barriers and opportunities in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**.** The methodology and outcomes of this research project are outlined in the following sections of this report.

# Part B: Research Project

## Literature Review

The challenges faced by Indigenous Australians in accessing and using basic telecommunications services are well documented. These challenges include “vast geographic distances, small and remote populations, the cost of deploying telecommunications infrastructure and harsh environmental conditions”, coupled with the socioeconomic disadvantages faced by many people living in these communities (Australian Communications and Media Association, 2008: 5). Bandias and Vemuri (2005: 237) note that a range of Australian Government reports have “citied inadequate infrastructure, lack of service provision, the high cost of access and ‘‘thin’’ markets as key impediments” to provision of telecommunications service in remote Australia. The digital divide between those with reliable access to new forms of information technology and those without is widest between remote Indigenous community member and other Australians (Gunkel, 2003: 499), with the Central Land Council’s 2010 submission to Reconnecting the Customer Inquiry noting that remote Aboriginal communities “are least serviced by telecommunications providers” (Central Land Council, 2010).

At a basic level, access to mobile phone coverage has been extremely limited in many remote Indigenous communities. As of 2008, Telstra data showed 3G mobile coverage was available only to an estimated 26 per cent of remote Indigenous communities (Australian Communications and Media Association, 2008: 6). Large geographic areas of Australia have consistently been unable to access reliable mobile phone services, with Rennie, Crouch, Wright and Thomas (2013: 589) noting that mobile phone (3G) coverage for Indigenous residents of central Australia was limited to about 7000 people in seven discrete locations, or only about 50% of the total population. For community members living in outstations or moving outside of community boundaries, there is no access to mobile phone coverage.

At the same time, use of mobile phones has emerged as a key communications medium for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who do live in areas where there is some form of coverage, particularly among young people (Papandrea, 2010: 52). This is partly due to low levels of use of residential fixed-line services (Australian Communications and Media Association, 2008: 6), with few households in these communities having a fixed-line phone (Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008: 390). It is also a result of the linkage between the use of mobile phone communications and traditional forms of community communication, with the aural and graphical characteristics of mobile technology aligning closely to “strengths in Indigenous oral and graphical culture” (Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008: 384).

Access to and use of the Internet has been increasing dramatically in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in recent years. As Brady, Dyson and Asela note, Indigenous people around the world are becoming more and more interested in ICT (2008: 384). This Internet access has followed an interesting pattern in remote Indigenous communities in Australia, in effect ‘leap-frogging’ PCs and laptops, which have experience low levels of use in these communities (Daly, 2005: 3) and moving directly to online access via hand-held devices. Internet connection in households in these communities has, like fixed-line phone services, historically tended to be either financially or technically unattainable. In 2006, it was estimated that Indigenous Australians were almost 70 per cent less likely than non-Indigenous Australians to have an internet connection in their home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Much of the access to the internet by young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been through computers at schools, with 2008 statistics showing that over nine in ten (91%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 5-14 years who used a computer had accessed it from a school (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Internet access in remote communities has been even more problematic, with 2006 estimates showing 20% of Indigenous households in remote and very remote Australia had an internet connection, compared with 60% of non-Indigenous households in the same statistical area (Rennie, Crouch, Wright and Thomas, 2013: 583). This figure dropped as low as 2.2% for households in remote areas of central Australia. From community to community, Internet access can be highly variable in remote areas of Australia (McCallum and Papandrea, 2009: 1231), with communities experiencing difference in the “types of access, bandwidth, reliability and cost” (Rennie, Crouch, Thomas and Taylor, 2010: 52). The issue of ITC skills and knowledge further impacts on the use of community-based internet sites, with McCallum and Papandrea (2009: 1245) noting the lack of “prerequisite knowledge and skills for more intensive internet use”. Use of the internet via PCs, therefore, has been limited in many communities to the very basic fulfillment of economic needs, such as checking a bank account balance (Papandrea, 2010: 54).

Arguably, the increased use of mobile phones in communities (Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008) could provide an opportunity for direct access to the internet without reliance on computers in homes or community hubs. However, as more and more remote community members begin to use mobile phones as both their key means of communication and their key medium for accessing the internet, it is clear that equitable access to mobile services and the internet is not simply related to reliable coverage. Remote community members living in areas with reliable, or somewhat reliable, coverage are still impacted on by financial constraints and lack of access to appropriate information and support in the area of consumer rights. A number of recent cases and research projects have highlighted examples of remote community members being sold mobile phone packages that were poorly matched to their needs and budgets (see Loban, 2013; Rennie, Crouch, Thomas and Taylor, 2010). While use of mobile phones in remote communities has opened up new opportunities in terms of education, health, banking and social networking, it has also “facilitated access into remote Indigenous communities by unscrupulous businesses using high pressure sales tactics such as telemarketing” (Loban, 2013: 6). A number of remote Indigenous communities have reported “poor customer service, extreme instances of bill shock and astronomic complaint levels” (Central Land Council, 2010).

There is clear recognition internationally that access to reliable communications and the internet are fundamentally important to the well-being of communities, families and individuals. As Bandias (2010: 47) notes, “improved access to telephones, the internet and ICT services has the potential to mitigate the negative effects of the geographic and social isolation experienced by the community”. This research project explores the ways remote community members are using their mobile phones, their access to online information and social media, and the potential this use may open up for improving service delivery and well-being in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Australia. It also explores problems community members experience with service provision, bills and connectivity, examining in detail community perspectives on barriers to phone and internet usage by Aboriginal and Torres Strait people in remote areas.

## Methodology

The research consisted of a series of four focus groups and 14 semi-structured interviews with people living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (all of whom lived in communities with mobile phone coverage).

Each focus group was comprised of five to eight community members, based on recommendations from a local Indigenous research assistant as to which community members would be comfortable speaking in each other’s company. These focus groups were informal and semi-structured, allowing participants to generate questions and concepts, express opinions, and pursue their own priorities in their terms and using their words (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 5). By allowing focus groups to be flexible and fluid in nature, it was hoped that participants would be encouraged to express a wide range of attitudes, as well as developing shared values in a group setting (Waterton and Wynne, 1995: 141). Group discussion was encouraged as part of the focus group process, allowing the development of collective notions shared and negotiated by members of the group (Gunter, 2000: 44).

The location and number of participants in the focus groups is summarised in the table below:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Location** | **Date** | **Number of participants** | **Gender** | **Age range** |
| Cape York, QLD | 6 March 2015 | 5 | 3 male, 2 female | 17-48 |
| Cape York, QLD | 6 March 2015 | 7 | 4 male, 3 female | 18-52 |
| Kimberley, WA | 9 March 2015 | 7 | 4 male, 3 female | 17-38 |
| Central Desert, NT | 9 March 2015 | 8 | 3 male, 5 female | 18-52 |

The focus groups were complemented by 14 semi-structured interviews with remote community members (6 in Cape York, 4 in the Kimberley and 4 in the Northern Territory). Semi-structured interviews were used “to give the interviewees the space and the authority to examine their own experiences” (Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008: 389). As HolsteinandGubrium (2002: 120) note, this form of 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 and recommend the widespread use of local people as research assistants – 2007). ‘Chance meeting’ interviews were also used wherever possible, reflecting the informal community setting of the research. This form of interview has been successfully used by previous researchers in remote Indigenous settings (Meadows, 2002; Watson, 2013). As with the focus groups, 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. 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 was acknowledged that the interviewer might in some cases need to guide the interviews to ensure the key areas of the research project are addressed. This recognises that “all interview statements are actions arising from an interaction between interviewer and interviewee” (Jensen, 2002: 240).

All focus groups and interviews were analysed based onthemes 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.

## Results

Key themes emerging from analysis of the research findings are outlined below.

### Use of mobile phones in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is widespread and increasing

Analysis of the outcomes of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews suggests that even in very remote communities, large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people own, or have access to, a mobile phone. This was summarised by a community member in Cape York, who noted:

*We all have these phones, the mobile ones. Most people now, especially the young ones. But most people now, yes, have them.*

Reasons why so many people in remote communities feel they need a mobile phone are related to the geographic isolation of where they live, the need to be in contact when working in remote areas, and social reasons (especially among young people). A number of community members commented on the importance of having a mobile phone to stay in touch when outside of their community, such as to “feel safe if I am driving and I get broke down” or “stay in touch if I am out working in case I need something or something goes wrong”. A significant number of community members also indicated that having a mobile phone was seen as important as peers and family members already had them, with one community member in the Northern Territory noting that mobiles are “something everyone has, so we want one too”. The importance of having a phone for social reasons was summarised by a young person in the Kimberley:

*All my friends like to stay in touch. So they text, or they are on Facebook or something, and I don’t want to miss out. Sometimes everyone’s just sitting there with their phones looking at them, so if you don’t have one, what do you do? (laughs)*

There is also evidence that the proportion of people using a mobile phone as a key (or primary) means of communication has increased significantly in the past 2-3 years, and continues to increase. A number of interviewees and focus group members commented on the changes that have happened in their community and networks of families and friends in terms of increased ownership and use of mobile phones, including one interviewee in the Kimberley who noted that “a few years ago, not so many people had them, but now almost everyone does”.

Community members who were part of the research project who currently do not have a phone indicated they planned to get one soon, as noted by a focus member in Cape York:

*Yes, I will get one soon. I am looking right now at how to get one, and what I can afford.*

There was also some evidence in the research of sharing of mobile phones between friends and family members, as noted by a focus group member in the Northern Territory:

*Sometimes I will give someone my phone to use, for a call or to send a message or to check something out. So I pass it to them, then they give it back to me later.*

### Use of the Internet through smartphones in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is widespread and increasing

Both focus groups and interviews have revealed strong usage of mobile devices to access information, news and entertainment through the Internet. While this use of the Internet through mobile devices varies slightly from location to location (with more people in remote areas of Queensland regularly accessing content from the Internet than in other locations), all focus groups resulted in evidence of widespread use of the Internet. A focus group member in Cape York noted:

*I think most people here are using their phones in this way. They are going to Facebook, or checking the weather, or YouTube or downloading music or whatever. So yeah, people are on the internet a lot.*

A significant proportion of interviewees and focus group members indicated their primary use of the Internet was for access to entertainment content and social media. A number of community members indicated they were using their phones regularly to “check out what’s happening on Facebook” or to “look at something that someone has told me about, like a video or something funny”. An interviewee in the Northern Territory noted:

*We all like to be on Facebook, but some of us just like to follow YouTube or watch something. Lots of people are downloading music, and some are watching TV shows and stuff. But mainly it’s that Facebook stuff, because that’s how some people say connected.*

A smaller number of community members reported using their mobile phones to access news and information, including weather updates and “looking at ABC or other news sites”. A focus group member in Cape York noted:

*It’s good to be able to check the weather, and make sure before we go out for work or go down the river. So now you can just do that – that look at what you need to know, ‘oh, it’s going to be a storm later’ and then you know you should come back early. It’s easy now.*

### Mobile phones are playing a key role in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in helping community members stay connected with friends and family

Responses from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews suggests one of the primary reasons cited by people in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for wanting to have a mobile phone is because of a desire to stay connected to friends and family. For some community members, this was because mobile phones are now the easiest way to stay connected with people as they move around the community, as noted by an interviewee in Cape York:

*Before, you had to ask around. No one had a phone at home. No one had a mobile phone. You had to ask people: ‘Is (name of person) at the Arts Centre, or has he gone up to the road?’ Now you can just send a text or you can call them. So it makes things easier for people. It’s the same at work. Some people had walkie talkies or whatever. But now it’s just your phone. They can call you any time.*

For many community members, mobile phones are also providing an easy way to stay connected with family members and friends in nearby communities, regional or urban centres, or other parts of the country. A focus group member in the Kimberley observed that:

*People move around a lot. Or they have to go somewhere for work, or for medical stuff. The young ones might go off to school. So we can stay in touch. That might be Facebook, or just to call them. I have family in other places, so I can call them, or send them a message. You can take a photo to show them.*

### Social media use is high in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

As mentioned in the sections above, there is clear evidence that the majority of participants in this research are using some form of social media on a regular basis, primarily through mobile devices. This high level of connection to social media (primarily Facebook) was summarised by an interviewee in Cape York:

*It’s such a big part of my life now. I think it’s the same for a lot of people here now. I like to go on (to Facebook) a few times every day to check things, or update things. I like to take pictures, so I put those there. It can take up a lot of time, but it’s fun. I play games also there.*

There is also strong evidence that participants are observing these high levels of engagement with social media in others in their community, especially younger people, as noted by a focus group member in the Northern Territory.

*I think most young people are really on there a lot. They spend a lot of time on there, because they don’t want to miss out on something someone else is saying or doing, you know? So for our young people, they all want the phone, and they all want to be on there (social media) talking to each other and what have you.*

When speaking about social media, most focus group members and interviews referred clearly to using ‘Facebook’. There were only two references to the use of other forms of social media such as Instagram, and no references to Twitter use. Further investigation of this with an interviewee in Cape York elicited the following observation:

*For most of us, it’s just Facebook. Everyone is on there, so that’s what we do. But some people are starting to use Instagram. A few. I don’t know about Twitter. Maybe some people follow someone famous or something, but not so much. It’s not what they like to do.*

### There is some limited evidence of access to online health and mental health information (as well as other key information) among remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members

While health and mental health information are not key areas of online searching for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, there is some evidence of community members using the Internet to investigate health and mental health signs and symptoms, and to access information on support and treatment options. While use of the Internet is currently strongly focused on social media and access to entertainment content, some interviewees reported they had used the internet to look up health or mental health information online, as noted by an interviewee in Cape York:

*I have tried to find a couple of things. Mainly for health, for my kids. I’ll look up and see if I can work out what is going on with them.*

Importantly, there is also strong evidence that those involved in the research would be prepared to access this kind of information in the future if content was promoted to, and tailored to, them specifically. This was summarised by the same interviewee in Cape York:

*I think that kind of information is important to us, yes. And it would be useful for us. But people won’t just go there to find it. They would, I think, if you had someone at the clinic tell them about it. Or a poster or something. But we don’t know to go and find it on the internet, so we don’t.*

### Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are concerned about large bills and high phone and Internet costs

Receiving large and/or unexpected bills was a common concern among participants in focus groups and semi-structured interviews. A number of community members commented on the experience of receiving a large bill themselves, or provided examples of family members or friends who had struggled to pay their phone bills. A focus group member in the Northern Territory observed:

*A couple of times I will get a phone bill, and it will seem like so much. Like much more than I thought it would be, and I am worried about paying it. If it arrives with another bill, I get really worried. I think that’s why a lot of people pay for it, they pre-pay. Because if you get a bill and you can’t pay, it’s a big problem.*

There is strong evidence, which needs more analysis, that community members are concerned about potential high costs of phone calls or Internet use. Many interviewees and focus group members noted that they had been shocked by the cost of using their mobile phones, either by receiving large bills or by running out of credit very quickly. A focus group member in Cape York noted:

*I think people don’t know how much things cost. Like, what happens if you call someone down south, or if you watch a video, or buy a song. What bit is costing what? Then before you know it, you’ve spent your money, and you can’t even make a call or do anything.*

### Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are unsure how to minimise their phone costs or data usage

Within the aforementioned data, there is some evidence that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are unsure of why their bills are high, and/or unsure of how they can potentially minimise their call costs and/or data usage. As one interviewee in Cape York noted:

*It can be hard to work it out, why it costs so much. Because you don’t know how much it will cost if you download a movie, or they tell you that you are close to going over your limit, but you don’t know what happens when you do. So you just end up paying a lot, sometimes. People here like to get music, or watch videos, or call people down south. So suddenly they’ve spent a lot of money. It’s not explained to them how.*

There is also some evidence that community members are unaware of options to change their plans, and may not understand the current provisions and limits of their plans or pre-paid services. A focus group member in the Northern Territory summarised this:

*When people get their phone, they are just sort of told what will be best for them. Then when they use it, they want to use it all the time, so they end up paying too much money. And they don’t know what to do to fix it. They don’t know they can call up and ask for a change to their agreement or whatever. So they feel stuck.*

### Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members experience problems with reliability or quality of phone and Internet services

Despite increased access to mobile phones and the Internet by remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, the research found that a large number of people experience ongoing problems with unreliable access to phone networks and slow or intermittent access to the Internet. These problems were most highly reported in the Northern Territory, but there is evidence in all locations of concerns about being able to access reliable phone and Internet services. A focus group member in the Northern Territory observed:

*It’s getting worse, I reckon. At my house, sometimes you can’t get a signal. Or you want to go on Facebook, but it won’t go there. It takes a long time. It used to be better.*

Focus group members also mentioned the impact of unreliable phone services on the lives and their community, as this focus group exchange in Cape York illustrates:

*I worry, because now we are so used to everyone being there, on their phone, if you want them. So if the kids go around the community, they just say ‘don’t worry, I have my phone’. But if they go down to the river, maybe their phone doesn’t work. And you don’t know where they are.*

*Yes, in the old days, they would tell someone. We’d say ‘you don’t go down there unless you tell someone’.*

*Right, but now they think it’s okay because they have a phone. But if that phone don’t work, it’s unsafe.*

### Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are confused about their phone and Internet contracts and their consumer rights

There is strong evidence that many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members do not fully understand their rights when dealing with service providers. This included some observations by focus group members and interviewees that indicated they did not think it was possible to complain about problems with their costs, bills or service. A focus group member in the Northern Territory noted:

*If something goes wrong, or you think it’s costing too much, what can you do? I don’t think about contacting them (the service provider).*

Related to this is the idea that phone contracts and/or services can’t be changed once they are set in place, as a focus group member in Cape York observed:

*I told my sister that she could change that contract. That she could ring them and tell them she wanted a better one, because she always running out of being able to get on the Internet. But she said ‘no, you can’t change it’. A lot of people think that way. You get your phone and you sign your name and that’s it. Finish.*

Some community members were also unsure about what would happen if they tried to end their contract or change phones or packages, as a focus group member in Cape York noted:

*I think people need to know what happens if they want to get out of it, like cancel it and get a new phone or get a new… a new bill or what have you. They think they can’t end it. They just have to keep paying. They have to know their rights, if they can or can’t, and if it costs money.*

Some respondents reported dealing with service providers who were unhelpful or ‘forceful’ when explaining contracts to them, or outlining how to use prepaid services. This was captured in a focus group exchange in the Kimberley:

*They (the service provider) tell you it’s a good deal. It’s the best thing for you. They kind of force you to get a phone, and to get a certain type of calls or Internet…*

*But yeah, if you ask what you are getting, they’re not helping you. They’re like: ‘it’s what you need, so just get it’. Then you have to pay all the time, you pay too much.*

*There’s no one to tell you, in a way you’ll understand, what it’s all about. How much it will cost. If it will work. They just want you to buy it.*

There was strong evidence of confusion or a lack of understanding about how much community members are paying for their phone and/or Internet services, as noted by an interviewee in the Kimberley:

*I don’t know what I pay, to be honest. I just try to pay the bill. Does it seem like a lot of money? Yes. But I don’t know what I can do, how it could be less. I don’t know how much for each phone call or whatever.*

There is strong evidence that community members would like more support and information (including translated content in community languages) that will help them to understand their rights and obligations before signing up to contracts, as well as during the contract period. A community member in Cape York suggested some “simple posters that let people know their rights, let them know who they can talk to about any problems”. A focus group member in the Northern Territory suggested:

*You need some things in language, things people can listen to, because that’s important for people. They won’t read something, but if you can tell them, they understand. So yeah, tell them with a video or a CD or something, like radio there, tell them what questions they should ask, what they need to know.*

### Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are unaware of how to resolve issues with their phone or Internet service provider

Closely related to some of the aforementioned themes, the outcomes of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews suggest a low level of awareness of support remote Indigenous community members can access to resolve problems with bills, contracts, pre-paid services or service provision in general. Some comments highlighted a cultural problem with complaining about services of any kind, with a focus group member in Cape York noting that “people up this way just don’t like to complain, we won’t phone up someone and tell them something is not right”. An interviewee in Cape York explored this idea further:

*You can’t just tell people that they can phone someone or go online if they have a problem. For a start, people aren’t used to calling up places to say ‘please help me with this’. They like to talk to someone they know, or someone local. Then also, they sort of don’t know what to ask about. So if you could say: ‘are you paying too much for your phone, for your bills?’ then they might say ‘oh, yeah, I am’. Then you can tell them they can get some help with that. They need to know what to say, you know what I mean?*

Other focus group members and interviewees focused on what they felt to be a lack of awareness of where community members could go if they wanted to resolve a problem with their phone or Internet service. A focus group member in the Kimberley noted:

*We don’t know who you talk to. If your phone is broke or whatever, or you got some problem, we don’t know who to talk to. We can’t go to the store and sort it out.*

Here again, interviewees and focus group members reported a high level of interest in information that explains processes for dealing with, and resolving, issues with bills, contracts, pre-paid services or service provision in general. An interviewee in Cape York noted that:

*You need some simple information that people here understand. If this happens – do that. If there’s this problem – this person will help you. If not, people won’t sort out a problem. They will just ignore it.*

### Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members are concerned about issues relating to cyberbullying and inappropriate sharing of images and information online

There is some evidence from the research that the increased use of texts and social media within remote communities (especially by young people) is causing some tensions and arguments, especially a result of phones and social media being used for ‘gossip’. A focus group member in Cape York noted that:

*Young people here, they like to put messages there (on social media), and sometimes they can be quite cheeky. They might be about one other young fella, and he gets angry. Then people start to fight. Because all the ones, all the people, now know about it. They get shame (embarrassed). So maybe they fight.*

Community members also indicated they were concerned about a range of issues relating to cyberbullying. In some cases, community members indicated a general concern about online bullying among young people, as a focus group member in the Kimberley observed:

*We worry about bullying. We hear about it. We don’t want our young people to be doing it, to be affected by it. Already it is going on. So yes, it is scary for us.*

Other community members had observed specific instances of online bullying, or the effects of these instances. An interviewee in Cape York spoke of “young people, boys, being mean to a girl, making comments about her with their phones, so she felt bad”. An interviewee in the Northern Territory noted:

*It happens, because they end up angry or cry or fight. They team up against one person, they use their phones to make fun of them, or don’t tell them something and all laugh about it. They feel alone.*

A small number of community members, in one of the Cape York focus groups, also noted concerns about the use of phones or the Internet to share inappropriate or hurtful images or content. One focus group member commented that:

*They might take a bad photo, one that people should not see. But they don’t know that if they send it to someone, even a friend, everyone will get to see it. So they could get in trouble, or they could get hurt. So they need to be told more about what it means when you send someone a photo or put it on Facebook or something like that.*

This previous comment was one of many made by interviewees and focus group members who expressed a desire for more local community education about appropriate use of new technologies, especially for young community members. This was summarised by an interviewee in Cape York:

*More and more young people are now using their phones all the time. We tell them how to act, but they need to be told how to act proper when they use their phones. They could get into trouble, or get into fights, something like that. So we need to have information for them, so they can learn what they should do, what they should not do.*

# Conclusion

While limited in scope in terms of the numbers of remote communities involved, feedback from community members indicates that in regions where there is some coverage, use of mobile phones is widespread and increasing. Findings in the remote communities involved in this research project align well with those of Brady, Dyson and Asela (2008: 393), who point to a very high rate of mobile phone adoption and ownership in Indigenous Australia. This increased use of mobile phones for communication has been accompanied in the communities investigated by an increase in access to the Internet via smartphones.

While previous studies have noted the use of mobile phones primarily for talking, texting and staying in touch with family and friends (see Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008), there is clear evidence in this research project that many community members are using mobile phones to access social media and download music and movies. There is also some evidence that access to online news, as well as health and mental health information, is increasing in these remote communities. However, the desire of community members to get online and communicate primarily via their mobile devices is resulting in significant issues in terms of costs and problems with service providers. Even in communities with high levels of mobile phone ownership, issues are experienced with reliability and quality of phone and Internet services. As Bandias and Vemuri (20015: 246) note, higher service delivery costs and thin markets can act as impediments to the commercial roll out of new services in remote communities, with many Indigenous communities “at a significant disadvantage in the mobile phone market” (Loban, 2013: 8).

The high, and often unexpected costs, of phone and Internet usage have the potential to create ongoing problems for many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers. The costs of phone contracts, pre-paid services, phone calls and data download continue to be limiting factors affecting the ability of remote community members to access reliable communications that meet their needs and wants (see also Rennie, Crouch, Wright and Thomas, 2013; Papandrea, 2010; Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008). In communities where income levels are low and households are among the most disadvantaged economically in Australia, the cost of phone services can be a significant proportion of family and individual incomes. Rennie, Crouch, Wright and Thomas (2013: 591) note a 2007 study of mobile phone use in remote Northern Territory communities found that participants on Centrelink benefits were spending on average 13.5% of their income on their mobile phone, and those on CDEP were spending 8.3% of their income on their mobile phone.

Added to concerns from remote community members about the high, and often unexpected, costs of phone and Internet bills and lack of reliable coverage, this research project has noted ongoing issues faced by individuals when seeking to resolve these problems. Many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members were confused about their phone and Internet contracts and their consumer rights, and there were low levels of awareness of mechanisms for complaining or sorting out problems. It is suggested that more information needs to be provided to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in formats that are easily understood and culturally relevant, to build awareness of consumer rights and complaints mechanisms (see also Loban, 2013).

Mobile phones are now playing an important and growing role in meeting the communications needs and wants of remote Indigenous community members. They provide a style of oral communication that suits more traditional forms of Indigenous communications (Brady, Dyson and Asela, 2008: 388). They also have the potential to open up a range of new social and economic benefits for these communities and those who live there (McCallum and Papandrea, 2009: 1254) and overcoming the digital divide that has existed in these communities for long periods (Rennie, Crouch, Thomas and Taylor, 2010: 66). As Bandias (2010: 47) notes, improved access to telephones and the internet has “the potential to mitigate the negative effects of the geographic and social isolation experienced by the community”. Access to the Internet and social media via mobile phones provides remote community members with new avenues for connection to like-minded people and communities national and globally, with Indigenous communities using new technologies in innovative and creative ways (Eardley, Bruce and Goggin, 2009: 18). As an essential service for Indigenous people living in remote communities, and as a catalyst for future social connections, creative outlets and access to important news, information and services, there is a need for ongoing improvements to levels of access to reliable and affordable mobile phone and internet services. This research report suggests that this increased access must be accompanied by affordable service provision, coupled with clear information provided on telecommunications consumer rights.

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