CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

INDIGENOUS DIGITAL INCLUSION DISCUSSION PAPER

SUBMISSION FROM THE CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

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Contents

Executive Summary

The Central Land Council (CLC) has been advocating for improved telecommunications for our communities for many years. We put forward a set of recommendations on this in our recent submission to the *2021 Review of Regional Telecommunications*. In this present submission we draw attention to that previous one, as much of what we stated there will also have relevance to the problems and issues in relation to Aboriginal digital disadvantage.

Many of our people live in very remote communities, and face significant disadvantages in regard to all aspects of digital technologies. Affordable, reliable and accessible digitally based services and facilities are essential for our communities, in almost every aspect of our daily lives. This includes health, education and training, for accessing essential information including for emergencies, and for a wide range of other purposes, including culture, tourism and entertainment. Many of the problems and challenges faced by our communities in regard to digital access have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the issues faced by our communities in that context point to some of the deeper, structural problems of socio-economic and other forms of disadvantage endured by many of our people.

Speed, ongoing reliability of connectivity, accessibility (including affordability), ease of use, and servicing for digital online technologies across a wide range of forms are of critical importance. Another related concern is the appropriateness of the data technology. In this submission we raise crucial questions about the ways in which digital based technologies and services are introduced, taken up, and used by our communities and families.

With the rapidly changing landscape of digital technology, services and innovations, we stress the need for education, information and awareness strategies to ensure that our communities are fully prepared and have the capacity to take up these developments, and that those developments and innovations are appropriate. This is especially important given the increasing dependence on digital ways of doing things for much of what we require in our everyday lives, and in an ongoing way.

At the heart of this submission is our call for stronger measures to ensure that our people participate fully and equitably included in design, planning, policy and implementation for digital based technologies and services. We highlight the need for a fully inclusive and participatory approach to the digital world. Our recommendation in this regard suggests community based mentors, mediators, or facilitators to take the lead and work closely with the planners and providers of digital technologies and services. We argue for the need to ensure that our communities take ownership, and exercise control over all decision-making in digital technology planning and implementation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Engagement, Participation and Consultation in Integrating Digital Technologies and Innovations in our Communities

We recommend measures for full and equitable engagement with the providers of digital technologies, services and facilities, to ensure that our communities have ownership of digital

integration at all stages including design, planning, rollout, implementation and use. Accordingly, we recommend the following:

- *Ethical and appropriate engagement* with Aboriginal communities and organisations, to ensure effective consultation and negotiation across all telecommunications matters;

- *Strengthening* for Aboriginal participation in planning and developments in the field of digital services and technologies, and other measures aimed at closing the digital divide. To ensure that more is done in this area, we recommend the following:

  An Aboriginal Working Group, or Reference Group to be established, in partnership with governments and digital providers, that will include the following roles:

  Advocacy for the needs and interests of Aboriginal people in all matters relating to the digital space, including issues of connectivity, affordability, reliability, costs and funding; and

  Representation for our people, to ensure that governments, telecommunications providers and other stakeholders and interested parties, are fully informed of our needs and interests, especially in the context of emerging technologies and innovations, projects and planning; and

- Community based Mediators, Mentors and/or Facilitators to be nominated by our people, to take leadership roles in working closely and liaising and communicating with digital authorities, providers and any other organisations involved in the planning and introduction of digital technologies in our communities. This is to ensure that digital technologies and innovations are introduced in appropriate, culturally sensitive ways, and are tailored to meet our specific needs and requirements on Country.

Recommendation 2: Educating and Awareness for New Information and Communications Technologies

The CLC recommends that the Government and other digital providers and agencies provide greater investment in, and commitment to, the provision of education, information and awareness for Aboriginal people in regional and remote Australia, about the new and changing digital data communications technologies, programs and services, both existing and emerging. This should include information and education about the implications of these new technologies, and of any challenges, actual or potential, that these pose for our communities. It should also aim to improve understanding of, and access to relevant funding options, application procedures and forms, and upgrading of skills and training in digital access and usage across the whole range of aspects.

Recommendation 3: Focused, Place- and Community Based Research into Aboriginal Needs and Concerns about Digital Planning, Implementation and Use.

We recommend improved, targeted research and studies into the needs and concerns regarding digital technologies and innovations in Aboriginal communities. This should go beyond surveys, and demographics, to encompass in-depth, qualitative social, ethnographic

and anthropological research, including culturally informed 'deep listening', and other forms of engagement with communities, to gain a much greater understanding of the ways in which our people access, use and share, and produce information with digital based technologies. This should include inquiries into our needs for the present, and for future planning.

Where possible, such research and studies should be led by Indigenous experts.

To enable this, we recommend the following:

- Place-based approaches, working with communities on Country;

- The engagement of community-based Mentors, Mediators and Facilitators as recommended above (Recommendation 1) in all research and studies of our digital needs and concerns; and

- Negotiated approaches to ensure Aboriginal people are central to digital roll out, and have control over decision-making and planning.

Recommendation 4: Digital Safety: Community Protection and Security.

We recommend that digital designers, providers, and all those involved in planning and implementing digital technologies and innovations in Aboriginal communities, provide adequate, appropriate and effective safeguards embedded in the technologies and services, to ensure our communities' safety and security in accessing and using these. This needs to include cybersecurity and other measures, to prevent risks of misrepresentation, misuse, cultural harm, and data theft, among other threats to community digital safety.

Recommendation 5: Capacity Strengthening, Skills and Training for Digital Technologies.

We recommend more resources to be provided to ensure Aboriginal communities are well positioned in the context of new and emerging developments in digital planning and implementation. This should include training, skills development, and information, particularly to facilitate digital ability.

Introduction

Background to the CLC

The CLC is a Commonwealth corporate entity established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* ('ALRA'), and covers an area of almost 777,000 square kilometres in the southern half of the Northern Territory. Amongst other functions, it has statutory responsibilities for acquiring and securing interests in land and the management of that land. The CLC is also a Native Title Representative Body under the *Native Title Act 1993* ('NTA'). Pursuant to the ALRA over 50% of the area administered by the CLC is Aboriginal Land Trust, held on behalf of traditional owners. Given existing pastoral land was not able for claimed, under the ALRA, Aboriginal land tends to be very arid and remote. In addition, traditional rights and interests in land is asserted and recognition under the *Native Title Act 1993*, and traditional owners, unable to claim land under the ALRA, have succeeded in

obtaining rights to small portions of land, under NT legislation, known as Community Living Areas.

Through its elected representative Council of 90 community delegates the CLC continues to represent the aspirations and interests of approximately 17,500 traditional landowners and other Aboriginal people resident in its region, on a wide range of land-based and socio-political issues.

The CLC aims to improve the lives and futures of its Aboriginal constituents through sustainable development and change. The CLC's development approach is based on an integrated and strengths-based strategy of building economic, social and cultural capital. Significant work is being carried out under the various functions of the CLC in each of these related areas, through initiatives in: natural and cultural resource management; the development of remote enterprise and employment pathways; innovative community development work, ensuring land owners use income generated from land use agreements for broad community benefit; and land administration and land use agreements for third parties and traditional owners.

Indigenous Digital Exclusion – A Brief Overview

It is crucial to stress that digital disadvantage for Indigenous Australians is linked to our peoples' disadvantaged socio-economic situations.[1] As one writer points out, these interconnected aspects of disadvantage include the unequal ways in which digital technologies and services are distributed and implemented, and the capacity, skills and training that our people need in order to be able to effectively take up and use these technologies and services.[2] This goes to the challenges of enabling 'digital literacy'. One commentator suggests as a possible approach to address many of these problems, that 'greater intervention and comprehensive strategies by government and the information profession are needed to promote a socially inclusive information society, both empowering of Indigenous Australians and of benefit to all'.[3] The CLC agrees with this point to some extent, but with the very important condition that any interventions by governments and others (such as companies and corporations) aiming to address the digital divide must be carried out through collaborative and equitable participatory, community based approaches. We reiterate this view later in this submission in relation to our overview of some of the community based initiatives that are being trialled in our communities, such as inDigiMOB and language projects.

Reliable, fast and secure access to the Internet remains problematic for our communities, with many of their needs still not being adequately met. Reliable and fast Internet connection is vital for many critical aspects of our communities' lives, including for health and medical delivery, education, consumer needs including banking, transport, and a very wide range of other uses, as well as for emergencies. Cultural uses are also very important, with increasing needs for good and fast data access, storage and privacy. In addition, the digital space is also important for our production of information such as in tourism, and for the assertion of our rights and identity.

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[1] Katrina Samaras, 'Indigenous Australians and the "Digital Divide"', (2005) *Libri,* vol. 55, pp. 84–95.
[2] Samaras, p. 84.
[3] Ibid.

The CLC has previously expressed our concerns in regard to proposed funding schemes for regional connectivity. In our submission to the *2021 Review of Regional Telecommunications*, we drew attention to a problem we identified in telecommunications infrastructure funding. The processes and procedures requiring consumers to submit complex grant applications, and to engage with relevant State or Territory Governments in seeking co-contributions, including from telecommunications companies are onerous, and there is insufficient guidance as to how all this should be prepared. These co-contributions are sought as a means of enabling the standards of infrastructure and service delivery can be at the same levels for regional and remote communities, as for urban ones.

It is the CLC's view that these kinds of inequities potentially widen the digital divide, instead of reducing it, in that they exacerbate the challenges that Aboriginal people in regional and remote areas are already facing. Our communities do not have sufficient capacity, information or resources to prepare competitive applications for grants under this scheme as it is currently proposed.[4] This is another reason why we recommend that there should be stronger engagement with Indigenous communities, including education, information and awareness strategies for telecommunications.

Many of the concerns and problems in regard to Indigenous access to, and using digital services and technologies were discussed in the 2020 Report *Remote Indigenous Communications Review* (the Featherstone Report), published by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN). That Report notes that remote Indigenous communities '*... are among the most disadvantaged and digitally disengaged in the country'.[5]* Unfortunately many of these problems and challenges are still to be addressed for digital inclusion for our communities. According to that Report, the COVID-19 lock down has 'exacerbated' the 'pre-existing digital divide'.[6] The Report found that, despite an increase in adoption of digital services such as videoconferencing, remote server access, and telehealth 'for those with access and skills', communities that are not connected to digital networks face even greater disadvantage.

The Featherstone Report presents these confronting facts:

> *Very few remote Indigenous people have the option of home schooling, working from home, or accessing basic services online. Most RICs have restricted all non-essential movement due to the high risks associated with COVID infection, increasing the need for remote access to services, including health, education, Centrelink, MyGov, justice, banking and so on.*
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> *However, with an estimated 30% of remote and very remote Indigenous people without household access to telephony or internet, and many Shire/Council offices, schools and other service centres closed, some essential services have not been available to many remote Indigenous people.[7]*

It is with these stark details in mind that we set out our concerns and recommendations in this submission.

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[4] CLC Letter to Director, Regional Connectivity Program, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, 11 March 2020.
[5] Featherstone Report, p. 7.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Featherstone Report, 2020, p. 7.

Information Disadvantage

A key aspect of the digital space is the use, dissemination, and production of *information*. In this regard, for Indigenous Australians, the digital divide is very much about *information disadvantage*. As one writer states 'Indigenous digital disadvantage may also be considered as a dimension of information poverty, understood as the perception of being without access to needed information'.[8] In an age when there is a rapidly growing need for information, and an increasing reliance of digital media to access this, those who have less opportunities for accessing this are profoundly disadvantaged. In this context, the growing speed at which information is delivered and distributed, including essential and urgently needed information has significant impact in terms of Indigenous digital disadvantage and information poverty.

The speed at which information is produced, and the vast volumes of information, place expectations on the consumers of information to be equipped to access and to understand it, and to use, and respond to it quickly and efficiently. An example of the need for information quickly and urgently is in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, which we discuss later in this submission. One study on this has detailed some of these concerns:

> The significance of the digital divide lies in the increasing importance of ICT [Information and Communication Technologies] access to economic, social, and political opportunity in the information society …. For example, information-based goods, services, and employment represent increasingly significant sources of wealth in an information-driven economy …; the government and private sectors are increasingly shifting to online information and service delivery …; and the Internet has emerged as a new site for education, social interaction, and political engagement …

> As opportunity becomes increasingly wedded to ICT access, there is concern that existing social inequalities constraining access for the disadvantaged will be perpetuated or exacerbated ….[9]

These quotes support much of what we are addressing in this submission about digital disadvantage in Aboriginal communities.

Access to Digital Services as a Human Right

We suggest in this submission that equitable and affordable access to digital technologies is a question of *rights*. There are many critical uses of digital technologies required by our communities in which restrictions or limitations that might arise in regard to these have implications for our capacity to exercise our rights. Our rights to the digital domain must be fully exercised in regard to the entire range of services and facilities such as health, education and training, banking, and a very wide range of other facilities. Other examples are the increasing reliance on digital to engage in vital land rights and native title negotiations, including information about meetings and developments. Similar issues pertain to using digital communications and other technologies and tools in negotiating with mining and

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[8] Samaras, p. 85.
[9] Ibid.

development companies, and managing our cultural materials and knowledge databases, and communicating with relevant holding and collecting institutions.[10]

One of the many issues we have long been concerned with is the rights and interests of our communities as consumers of digital technologies, services and applications. We have responded to issues, and lobbied organisations such as the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), and the Australian Communication Media Authority (ACMA) in regard to rights and obligations to high quality and reliable telecommunications for our communities.

For example we supported and encouraged the ACCAN in its work in *Reconnecting the Customer* (RTC), with its recommendations concerning the relationships that telecoms service providers have with consumers. We support the view that these relationships should be ongoing and enduring, from advertising, through point of sale, to customer service, credit management, service difficulties, and complaints handling. These must all form part of a regime for stronger protection for consumers' rights, and are of the utmost importance for Aboriginal people, many of whom are particularly vulnerable and are experiencing continuing disadvantage.[11] It is in this context that the CLC has also supported recommendations to strengthen our peoples' representation on, and participation in reforms relating to digital technologies and services. This goes to our rights to be properly and equitable represented in all policy, programs, planning and decision making in the digital space.

The Universal Service Guarantee

Our rights to equal and effective access (including affordability) to digital services place obligations on the providers of those services and communications to ensure this right is recognised and upheld. These rights and obligations are crucial for many Indigenous communities who are already facing situations of disadvantage. One aspect of the right to communications, including digital, is the Universal Service Obligation (USO), formerly known as the Universal Service Guarantee (USG). The USG aims to provide 'all Australian homes and businesses with access to both broadband and voice services, regardless of their location'.[12] A report of November 2018 on the USG produced by the Commonwealth Government Department of Communications and the Arts described the USG as a system that 'would ensure all Australian premises, irrespective of location, have access to voice and broadband services.'[13] The USG services would be delivered 'on a commercial basis' through the National Broadband Network (NBN) and other networks. Our concern in regard to the NBN's responsibility for the USG, is to ensure that this is effectively implemented, with no impediments or constraints arising from remoteness or small demographics of our communities.

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[10] Samaras
[11] Letter (undated) from the CLC to the Public Inquiry Section, ACMA, in relation to the 'Reconnecting the Customer' Draft Report.
[12] Development of the Universal Service Guarantee, Summary Report 2018, Department of Communications and the Arts, https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/phone/phone-services/universal-service-guarantee-telecommunications.
[13] Ibid., p. 5.

Later in this submission we make reference to a NBN initiative involving the delivery of free Wi Fi facilities in Aboriginal communities. Although that initiative appears to be consistent with the NBN's USG, we draw attention to some of our concerns in the rollout of this.

Unequal Power Relations in Accessing and Using the Digital Domain

The disadvantages of unequal and/or problematic access to digital based technologies and services are among the contributing factors to the powerlessness that Indigenous people experience. This is at the heart of questions about rights to information, including a self-determining right for Indigenous peoples in regard to control over decision-making. The centralisation of digital based technology provision and distribution, and the predominant use of English language in this, are key factors contributing to powerlessness, and limitations to enjoying full rights in Indigenous self-determination.

Our submission's recommendations address these problems by emphasising the need for full and equal participation by our communities in digital planning, development and implementation.

Covid-19 Impacts on Digital Disadvantage

The onset of COVID-19 has had significant deleterious impacts on communities' digital access in the CLC region. These impacts have been experienced, for example, in some of the Town Camps in Alice Springs, as reported by SBS NITV in April 2020, and are also referred to in the Featherstone Report.[14] The effects of lock downs have exacerbated the communication and digital access problems already experienced by many isolated and remote Aboriginal communities. These have included ongoing disconnection from essential digital and phone services, resulting in lack of access to much needed facilities, such as obtaining provisions from stores, and ongoing delivery of health and education. The COVID-19 situation for Aboriginal communities, as elsewhere, also resulted in increased reliance on digital technologies, for essential services such as telehealth, online education, and for everyday communications. The disconnection from the digital domain has been a major problem, including with significant safety concerns, among others. We take up the issues of safety and security later in tis submission.

The impacts of COVID-19 have highlighted underlying structural and systemic problems across the whole CLC region, that is, the structural disadvantage and persistent issues associated with the 'digital divide'. They serve to strengthen our call for all parties to adequately and effectively address the ongoing problems of connectivity faced by our communities, to aim to find permanent solutions.

Other Problems in Delivery of Digital Technologies

There are a range of other problems that need to be considered in accessing ongoing and reliable digital technologies and services.

Uncertainty and Instability in Governments

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[14] As reported by Else Kennedy, 5 April 2020, see https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/04/04/town-camps-alice-coronavirus-raising-stakes-digital-divide.

In our submission to the *Review of Regional Telecommunications* we drew attention to a concern we have about uncertainties in the longer-term provision and delivery of digital technologies. This results, in large part, from changing governments and bureaucratic structures and management, which often result in a lack of continuity for programs, policies and funding initiatives. This has serious implications for our communities in particular, who already face many challenges in regard to continuity of connectivity and access to digital services.

Changing Demand for Digital Services and Technologies

Remote Aboriginal communities face challenges of isolation and the lack of local alternatives, and this means that residents are even more dependent on digital services that are essential to provide access many government and business services; and this dependency will continue to increase as more services are delivered digitally. While some communities have mobile phone and high speed data services as a result of the mobile blackspot program and other federal and territory government sponsored initiatives, many remote and isolated communities still rely on ageing and obsolete technology, such as High Capacity Radio Concentrator (HCRC) links to provide fixed telephone services and NBN satellite links to provide data services.

These technologies do not provide sufficient bandwidth to support video conferencing and other real-time applications that are being increasingly used to deliver health, education and social services. The variation in communications capability across communities means service providers need to restrain their digital service delivery approaches to suit the lowest level of connectivity in their service areas, thus limiting the opportunities to introduce telehealth, online learning and other high bandwidth dependent services that are vital to our communities' needs.

Information Production by Our Communities

As well as issues and problems in regard to *accessing* digitally produced information, another consideration is the use of digital technologies and tools for our *production* of information and resources by Aboriginal people. One writer draws attention to this, stating:

> Digital disadvantage constrains Indigenous capacity to utilise the Internet as a tool for unmediated global publishing and interactive communication – critical for a diversity of needs such as disseminating Indigenous perspectives, challenging mainstream misrepresentations of Indigeneity, forming global political alliances, maintaining community relationships, and engaging in e-commerce and cultural production … [15]

Using Digital for Culture

The production of information by our communities includes the very significant Aboriginal cultural production sector, which embraces arts (including visual and fine arts), entertainment, tourism related activities, and Aboriginal media – all of which are increasingly using digital based platforms and outlets.

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[15] Ibid.

The promotion of, and sharing of our rich and diverse Aboriginal cultures is a vitally important part of our community's lives, where this is appropriate and in accordance with our ethics and protocols. This is important for reaffirming our identity and cultural rights. An example of this is in the tourism sector. One study for example has examined the use of digital technologies for cultural interpretation through the sharing of knowledge in tourism at Pine Creek in the Northern Territory.[16] That study showed that:

> … by combining both traditional and modern means of sharing knowledges, digital tourism products can empower local Indigenous communities involved in tourism and educate locals and tourists to conserve such knowledges for the long term. However, digital products of local culture can only be sustainable if all stakeholders involved in the tourism product development have an understanding of how to use the platform and have access to knowledge.[17]

This example again shows the need, as we argue throughout this submission, to ensure that our communities are empowered in all aspects of digital use, to maintain ownership and control over it, and to have the capacity, skill and abilities to effectively engage with these technologies.

Youth, Aged, and Gender Issues

The integration of digital technologies must have proper regard to the specificities of place, location, language, family and kin group, and to the diversity within our communities, attending to the complex cultural dynamics of age, youth, and gender. Some research, for example, has shown that in remote communities, women tend to be higher users of digital technologies. These researchers noted the use of digital technologies by women:

> It raises the possibility, however, that locating computers and internet access within household space might lead to stronger association of digital technology with a female-coded domain and technical activities, with positive flow-on effects in facilitating greater ICT usage by women and children. This is a significant benefit of providing ICT access on a household basis, extending women's educational and creative opportunities, as well as assisting with the practical aspects of their lives. Overall, the unintentional age and gender biases associated with the location of computers and internet access in both the outstation trial and the PCR indicate the need to consider Aboriginal cultural norms and behavior in regard to gender, age and avoidance relationships in providing ICT infrastructure and arrangements, as well as training and technical support, to facilitate equality of access in remote Aboriginal communities.[18]

That research has important implications for the ways in which digital technologies are introduced into communities, and further supports our argument for the need to understand the complexities of community.

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[16] Gabrielle McGinnis, Mark Harvey & Tamara Young (2020) Indigenous Knowledge Sharing in Northern Australia: Engaging Digital Technology for Cultural Interpretation, *Tourism Planning & Development*, 17:1, 96-125.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Rennie, Ellie, Eleanor Hogan, Robin Gregory, Andrew Crouch, Alyson Wright, and Julian Thomas, *Internet on the Outstation: The Digital Divide and Remote Aboriginal Communities*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2016, p. 141

It is often noted in the wider society that young people can tend to be adept and at ease in taking up and using new technologies, including digital. This has also been the case for some Aboriginal people, as is shown in many examples. One study for example has explored the way that young Aboriginal people have readily taken to using digitally based technologies in everyday life. That study showed that these young peoples' take up of the digital medium has its basis in a long-established use of earlier, pre-digital technologies such as DVDs, TV and video in Aboriginal communities. As Kral has concluded:

> The research findings described above indicate that when young people have access to resources and activities are tied to meaningful community projects they are engaging as the mediators and facilitators of digital literacy in collaborative, participatory, intergenerational activities.[19]

This reaffirms the view we take in this submission, that to ensure effective and appropriate engagement by our communities with the digital domain, community based mediators, or facilitators are best placed to take the lead; and it is likely that young people will step up for these critical roles.

In regard to digital take up by older people, there are many facets to this. Although older people may not have the same degree of skills to effectively use digital technologies as the younger ones, one important aspect of use by older people has to do with cultural issues. One study has shown how older people among Walpiri community have are using old films and recordings to assist in cultural revival. The use of these old films and videos is being taken up in the digital space, including by the Aboriginal media and broadcasting sector. As the research states:

> Older people have adopted the use of new technology as it preserves culture by telling traditional stories and using language. Old recordings/films have been used to revive ceremonies such as the Walpiri fire ceremony. Elders in other remote communities, which have not previously used BRACS video, are now actively asking for cultural material to be recorded.[20]

Education, Training and Learning in Aboriginal Communities

Another facet of our communities' lives that is becoming increasingly reliant on the digital domain is education and training. Here too, we point to the vitally important need to ensure that digital based approaches are designed and tailored to the specifics of place, community, culture and family. On-line education, while offering many benefits, can also be problematic. It must be appropriately delivered, taking fully into account our diverse language and cultural situations. It must be relevant to our specific needs and contexts. If these factors are not acknowledged and incorporated into online learning and training, we risk being further disadvantaged in the digital divide.[21]

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[19] Inge Kral, 'Plugged in: Remote Australian Indigenous Youth and Digital Culture', CAEPR Working Paper 69/2010, p. 14.

[20] Lydia Buchtmann, 'Digital songlines', pp. 68-69.

[21] Anthony, Sarah G., and Michael S. Keating. "The difficulties of online learning for Indigenous Australian students living in remote communities–it's an issue of access." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 16, no. 2 (2013).

Rural Health Delivery

Restrictions on our access to digitally based health poses yet another potential problem with barriers that still need to be examined and addressed, especially in remote communities. A study carried out in the NT has highlighted some of the barriers to the effective take up of telehealth services by Aboriginal people:

> It was found there were a number of barriers to telehealth uptake at the national level: Lack of adequate internet; consumers not being aware of, or knowing how, to access telehealth; lack of access to clinicians providing telehealth services; lack of Medicare item numbers for telehealth and the lack of resourcing at the patient end. The research indicated there needs to be investment into telecommunications infrastructure, public education about telehealth, an increase in Medicare telehealth item numbers and resourcing for primary health care services to support telehealth expansion particularly in rural, regional and remote areas.[22]

These barriers go across the whole range of issues to be adequately remedied if the digital divide is to be properly closed.

Using Digital in Community and Family

A key concern is the ways in which digital technologies and services are introduced into our communities and used by them. The issues here are the intersections between the new technologies and the communities, and the dynamics between the private and personal lives of people in communities and the sharing and community based spheres of activity. The introduction of digital technologies into these existing dynamics calls for close attention, in order to fully understand the best ways to ensure a smooth mapping, or integration of the technologies and services into communities' existing ways of living and being.

The integration of digital technologies into our communities must also pay close attention to the specifics of society such as youth, gender and the aged. One study has examined this issue in terms of the tensions between privacy, and what it denotes as 'relatedness', which has to do with the cultural norms of social and community behaviour, and how this manifests with the sharing of facilities such as community phones and Internet stations.[23]

Closure of face-to-face outlets

Another consequence of the growing use of digital ways of doing things, with implications for communities' needs for sociability, is the 'closure of face-to-face outlets, as government and the private sector increasingly shift to online service delivery'.[24] A growing reliance on Internet and on-line based access to, delivery and use of all these services is problematic for many of our communities for whom literacy is constrained by the fact that English is likely

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[22] Miss Marianne ST CLAIR, and Mr David MURTAGH ,Barriers to Telehealth Uptake in Rural, Regional, Remote Australia: What Can Be Done to Expand Telehealth Access in Remote Areas? p. 174.

[23] Ellie Rennie, Tyson Yunkaporta, and Indigo Holcombe-James, 'Privacy Versus Relatedness: Managing Device Use in Australia's Remote Aboriginal Communities', *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018), 1291–1309.

[24] Samaras, p. 87.

to be a third, or fourth language, and for whom interactions with humans, rather than with technology is important for sociability, wellbeing and community resilience.

The closure of shopfront services such as banks, post offices and stores also has consequences for privacy and safety, which we address below.

Threats to Language

We have mentioned in this submission our concerns about the top-down, dominant use of English by designers, planners and providers of digital technologies and services. Many of our Aboriginal languages are already facing threat, and the maintenance of these is vital to our self-determination and identity. Research has drawn attention to the added threats to our languages that are posed by the digital divide:

> Indigenous people in remote Australia face many dilemmas in relation to the status and vitality of their languages and communication ecologies. Cultural leaders want to maintain endangered heritage languages, yet this concern is balanced against an awareness that English competency is a necessary life skill. Remote Indigenous groups must also negotiate the effect of globalized media on language and cultural practices. While public policy seeks to bridge the digital divide in remote Australia, little attention has been paid to the dominance of English in the new digital environment and the potential impact that increased English language activities may have on endangered Indigenous languages.[25]

Below, we mention some positive initiatives that are being carried out in relation to language maintenance and recognition of the diversity of our languages.

Safety and Security for Aboriginal Communities

In the contexts of the complex dynamics between the individual and the community discussed above, we draw attention to the critical issues of privacy, and community safety.

Cybersecurity

With the rapid growth of digital based technologies, there is an increasing awareness of, and concern about the security aspects associated with online uses. Under the broad label of 'cybersecurity' this is a potentially significant issue particularly for many of our communities who may already experience disadvantages, and be vulnerable in terms of poor, or misleading information about the digital domain. The issues range across those such as privacy breaches, lack of control or autonomy over information and digital technologies and services, and threats to our communities' online security and safety overall. [26] The potential for distorted information, or misinformation are also elements of cybersecurity and safety.

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[25] Carew, Margaret, Green, Jennifer, Inge Kral, Rachel Nordlinger, and Ruth Singer, 'Getting in Touch: Language and Digital Inclusion in Australian Indigenous Communities', *Language, Documentation and Conservation* 9 (2015): 307-323.

[26] Rennie, E., T. Yunkaporta & I. Holcombe-James (2018). *Cyber Safety in Remote Aboriginal Communities: Final Report*. Melbourne: Digital Ethnography Research Centre, RMIT University.

Another area for consideration in this space is the whole question of data sovereignty, that is, the need to ensure that we retain control over all aspects of data access and use in the digital domain.

Also in regard to security and safety, is some people's preference to use on site banks rather than key cards carried with them, for fears of safety and security. If banking centres close, then this will place extra reliance on carrying cards.

Some Community-Based Digital Projects and Initiatives

We outline some projects and initiatives being developed, trialled and/or implemented in communities in Central Australia to show where there might be gaps, challenges, and lessons that can be learnt in regard to access to a digital environment..

Language Project

Earlier in this submission we drew attention to the question of maintaining our diverse Aboriginal languages, in the context of ensuring the appropriateness of the digital domain to our communities. To address the issue of language, a project called 'Getting in Touch' has been developed, that is a collaborative initiative between linguists, Indigenous language speakers and software developers in Central Australia. This project 'aims to explore how app design can promote digital inclusion on the one hand while also meeting Indigenous community goals of maintaining language and cultural practices on the other'.[27]

Other language initiatives illustrate the importance of ensuring our languages are maintained and used across all our activities. For example, supported by Aboriginal Interpreter Services, the CLC currently uses oral recordings of our Code of Conduct in our Council meetings. We also produce publications in language, such as *Native Title Story*.

Other community based uses of digital technologies are focused in areas such as Learning Centres, Community Labs and Knowledge Centres.

Other Initiatives

In yet another initiative, free Wi Fi is being delivered, in negotiation with communities via the NBN. It has so far been delivered to over fifty Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. This project aims to support the Closing the Gap Recommendation (No. 17), that by 2026, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have equal levels of digital inclusion. Although we are clearly pleased to encourage the delivery of free Wi Fi to our communities, we are concerned to ensure that there will be no 'hidden', or ongoing costs in regard to the delivery of this service, including in support for infrastructure maintenance.

Other community-based initiatives include the Willowra Learning Centre, managed through Batchelor College, which includes a community-funded building facility, as well as the central role of the Aboriginal media and broadcasting sector (such as CAAMA, and PAW Media for our communities, for which the digital domain is crucial.

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[27] Carew, Margaret, Green, Jennifer, Inge Kral, Rachel Nordlinger, and Ruth Singer, 'Getting in Touch: Language and Digital Inclusion in Australian Indigenous Communities', *Language, Documentation and Conservation* 9 (2015): 310.

In another on Country development using digital, a specialised digital App is in development, called PBCmob – Prescribed Bodies Corporate in the southern Northern Territory App. This is a digital application that can be available on all devices that will facilitate access for Aboriginal people in Central Australia to resources about native title, governance and corporation management, education and support services. The App will be tailored to the specific needs of our communities. The development of this App will have particular regard to critical security and community safety concerns, including data and intellectual property, cybersecurity, and monitoring and evaluation.

inDigiMOB

Another initiative is inDigiMOB, a digital based program trialled in some communities and Town Camps in Central Australia, designed to improve digital inclusion for people living in these localities. This program, introduced in 2016, was evaluated in 2019 and again in 2020; and has also been assessed in other reports and papers. inDigiMOB engages a model using local 'Digital Mentors', who facilitate the transfer of essential digital skills and knowledge to community members. Evaluation of inDigiMOB has shown that some of the outcomes from the trials include 'employability skills, essential access to technology, and basic literacy, as well as maintaining language and culture, which are supported through organisational structures and relationships'.[28]

The evaluation of inDigiMOB after its third year, 'suggested that Digital Inclusion should incorporate inclusive community driven processes, include support for skill development and advocacy, should involve content creation, be intergenerational and address the downsides of access (such as concerns for cybersafety)'.

A 2016 assessment report of inDigiMOB also drew attention to the need for community control, stating that 'inDigiMOB strengthens local ownership and leadership with local community members by means of the activities, and with local service providers in the delivery of the program itself'.[29]. That Report also observed:

> The training coordinator role being embedded in the local partner organisation contributes to the local partner organisation contributes to the sustainability of inDigiMOB financially, builds on existing capacity and resources available, and enables further corporate knowledge to be kept locally.[30]

This is a significant aspect to consider in the context of our recommendations in this submission, for community-based mediators and facilitators in our engagement with providers and designers of digital technologies, services and innovations.

Lessons from Community-Based Initiatives

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[28] John Guenther, Ben Smede and Metta Young, 'Digital inclusion in central Australia: what is it and what makes it different?, pp.

[29] Indigenous Remote Communications Association IRCA, inDigiMOB Formative Evaluation Program Report, 2016, p. 50

[30] Ibid.

The evaluations and outcomes of inDigiMOB and other community based initiatives highlight aspects of digital inclusion that are critical for our communities, especially the more remote ones. These include:

- Need for community ownership of digital technologies, services and resources;

- Need for a community and family, place centred approach;

- The value of having individuals in communities who can take on roles such as leaders, facilitators, mediators, and mentors in engagement with external providers of digital technologies, services and infrastructure; and

- Need for flexibility in the way that digital resources are introduced, accessed and used in communities.

The importance of these technologies being adopted, and 'owned' by Aboriginal communities cannot be underestimated.

Digital Ability

A very critical concern in the digital divide is in regard to the capacity, skills and knowledge of digital technologies that are required in order to be able to access and use these effectively, appropriately and safely. This goes to the important matters of ensuring that our communities are adequately skilled and trained in the new and emerging digital technologies, including in the increasing complexity of converging technologies.

Appropriateness in Embedding New Digital Technologies in Aboriginal Communities

Above all, we emphasise in this submission that it is vital to ensure the design, planning, and implementation of new and emerging digital technologies for use by our communities is appropriate to our cultural needs. We have pointed to the problems in the centralised rollout of digital technologies, and the dominance of the English language in this. At a deeper, structural level, the digital domain is embedded in Western values and norms. However, as some research has shown, digitally based Internet and information and communication technologies can be taken up by Aboriginal communities in ways that are appropriate to our cultures and ways of doing things. One example conducted by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) was an Indigenous Participation in Information Technology Project, carried out in the early 2000s, showed that Aboriginal people had adopted digital technologies across a range of purposes that can in fact be aligned with cultural values. One example is the use of digitally based information systems for cultural maintenance. This includes multimedia archives, electronic storage of data, photos, artworks, and other materials. The Ara Irititja Archive, managed by Anangu people is one example. Other examples are language learning, protection of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (which can include community online databases), and Indigenous e-commerce.[31] The successful take up by Warlpiri people of new digitally based technologies, for the Aboriginal media and

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[31] Laurel Evelyn Dyson, 'Cultural Issues In The Adoption Of Information And Communication Technologies By Indigenous Australians', In *F. Sudweeks and C. Ess (eds). Proceedings Cultural Attitudes Towards Communication and Technology 2004, Murdoch University, Australia, 58-71.*

broadcasting sector also illustrates the potential for culturally relevant, community led adoption of these technologies.[32]

Other research, in collaboration with the CLC, has explored some of the challenges and complexities in Central Australia, with regard to the take up and use of digital technologies, including for cultural purposes, such as the sharing and storage of cultural knowledge. In that research, Vaarzon-Morel, Barwick and Green have considered the diverse situations, including community dynamics, and infrastructure, that must be taken into account in considering the use of digital technologies.[33]

These examples support our contention in this submission, that integrating digital technologies in Aboriginal communities can be achieved if this is driven by our people, and is managed in appropriate ways that respect and align with our cultural values, norms and ethics and protocols.

Conclusions

In this submission we have outlined some of the ways that the increasingly digital based landscape, with new and emerging innovations in technology, infrastructure, and ways of engaging with these, poses significant challenges for our communities. The digital era has resulted in increased disadvantage, creating a divide between those who have ease of access to, and use of digital technologies, and those, such as many Indigenous people, who are left out and disadvantaged. Our submission describes some of the issues and challenges facing our communities in the digital landscape, with a particular focus on these as they are evident at the level of the local community and family. We have outlined some of the emerging data regarding the different issues that pertain to the take up of digital technology by youth and by women; and we have also referred to some other, perhaps less considered aspects of data use and needs by our communities in regard to the maintenance of our culture. This is about the need for data for all the various aspects of cultural access, use and protection. Our artists, for example, who represent such a crucial part of community life and wellbeing, are increasingly looking to data based technologies to facilitate their access to much needed art markets and agents. Data used for registers and storage for our cultural collections is another important consideration, and is particularly important for the more remote communities. An example is their need to access, and to participate in decision-making regarding our peoples' cultural materials and collections held by museums, libraries, archives and galleries, universities and research organisations. Organisations are increasingly turning to digital technologies for these materials and collections, including online access and control of them.

Related to these aspects is the very important question of data sovereignty, an issue that is vital to the expression of our peoples' rights to self-determination. Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests in ownership, control, and rights in decision-making in regard to data use and access is crucial to our wellbeing and identity.

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[32] Lydia Buchtmann, 'Digital songlines: The use of modern communication technology by an Aboriginal community in remote Australia', *Prometheus,* Vol. 18, No. 1, 2000, pp. 59-74.

[33] Petronella Vaarzon-Morel, Linda Barwick, and Jennifer Green, 'Sharing and storing digital cultural records in Central Australian Indigenous communities', *New Media & Society* 2021, Vol. 23(4) 692– 714.

Another important consideration has to do with the safety and security of our community. This goes to questions about cyber security, which is a growing concern in the context of increased data needs and use, especially in the Covid-19 situation.

Finally, in the ongoing rollout of data based technologies, services and infrastructure, we are concerned about the relatively little attention that is being given to ensuring this is carried out in a way that attends to the key questions of language, differential education levels, and different demographics and socio-economic situations. The data based landscape is generally a monolithic and mono cultural one, that is designed, implemented, and distributed centrally from government and corporate departments and entities located in major capital and regional cities. We call attention in this submission to the need for far greater attention to be given to the impacts of digital technology at micro-levels of community, family and individuals. It is in this context that our central recommendation is to establish engagement processes, where community-based mediators, mentors or and facilitators have key roles in ensuring that digital technologies and services are introduced in appropriate and culturally relevant ways.