

July 19<sup>th</sup> 2024

First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

Digital Inclusion Section

Communications Infrastructure Division

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

GPO Box 594

CANBERRA ACT 2601



**RE: A Roadmap for First Nations digital inclusion discussion paper**

Dear First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group,

First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap. We commend the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group (FNDIAG) for its commitment to addressing digital inclusion challenges within First Nations communities and congratulate the recent recognition of the recommendations of the FNDIAG's *Initial Report* within May 2024 Budget Measures, including \$18 million over three years for the development of a First Nations Digital Mentoring network.

*First Nations Media Australia acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders past and present.*

**First Nations Media Australia**

FNMA is the peak body for First Nations media and communications, facilitating an essential voice for people through community-led programming. Our purpose is empowering Australia's First Nations people through our culturally connected media industry. FNMA's membership and supporters include First Nations and non-First Nations organisations and individuals who work in, or alongside, the community-controlled media industry as broadcasters, freelance journalists, photographers, filmmakers, and allies. Our sector advocacy and remit of work are guided by our 10\* Calls to Action:

- #1 Reform Broadcasting Act for First Nations Broadcasting.
- #2 Increase in Operational and Employment Funding.
- #3 Expand Live and Local Radio Programs.
- #4 Strengthen First Nations News Services.
- #5 Expand Training and Career Pathway Programs.
- #6 Upgrade Infrastructure and Digital Networks.

#7 Recognise First Nations Broadcasters as the Preferred Channel for Government Messaging

#8 Preserve Archives.

#9 Establish an Annual Content Production Fund.

#10 Improve Access to Digital Services\*.

\*FNMA membership elected to include *Improve Access to Digital Services* as a tenth Call to Action in April 2024.

As part of its industry leadership role, FNMA seeks to ensure First Nations communities have access to information required to make informed decisions, including access to public resources necessary to provide timely and information relevant to them. This facilitates these communities being able to make informed decisions about their own lives.

FNMA is grounded in the key principles of First Nations self-empowerment and self-determination, equity, and equality. These principles guide all its initiatives and efforts to enhance the digital and media capabilities of First Nations communities. Self-empowerment and self-determination are fostered by providing the tools, training, and resources necessary for First Nations peoples to tell their own stories, manage their own media, and build digital literacy from within their communities. Equity ensures that FNMA's programs are accessible and tailored to meet the diverse needs of all communities, recognising and addressing the unique challenges faced by urban, metropolitan, regional and remote groups. Equality is pursued by advocating for fair representation, equal opportunities, and the elimination of systemic barriers that hinder First Nations peoples' participation in the digital and media landscapes. Together, these principles ensure that FNMA's work not only uplifts individual communities but also contributes to a broader movement towards justice and inclusion for all First Nations peoples.

FNMA firmly believes that digital inclusion should empower First Nations peoples to fully benefit from the digital economy, should they choose to engage with it: providing access to adequate training, resources and support alongside connection and hardware, enables First Nations individuals and communities to leverage technology for economic empowerment in a safe and informed way. This includes opportunities for remote work, digital entrepreneurship, access to online markets, and the ability to develop and share culturally relevant content on global platforms. This approach ensures that digital inclusion is not just about access, but also enhancing the overall well-being and self-determination of First Nations peoples through meaningful participation and the ability to harness digital opportunities for socio-economic growth, 'on-country' telehealth and education, and government services.

### **First Nations Media Australia's submission to the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group**

FNMA strongly supports the focus in the FNDIAG's *Initial Report* on developing adequate baseline data for First Nations digital inclusion in Australia and suggests that multiple Closing the Gap outcomes may be positively impacted through the Budget Measures supporting the FNDIAG's recommendations recently announced by the Australian government. Recent data on Closing the Gap Target 17 reveals significant challenges and modest progress toward equal digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by 2026. This is concerning given the critical role of digital access in improving health, education, and employment

outcomes. Despite improvements in internet access and digital literacy programs, significant disparities persist due to limited infrastructure, higher costs, and lower digital literacy rates.

The "Mapping the Digital Gap" project (RMIT 2022) has revealed stark disparities between First Nations and non-Indigenous populations' digital inclusion, highlighting the need for targeted initiatives and sustainable funding. The project underscores the importance of addressing issues such as inadequate infrastructure, high internet costs, and lack of culturally relevant digital education to enable full participation in the digital economy and access to essential services.

FNMA deeply supports the FNDIAG's emphasis on improving access to digital infrastructure, enhancing digital skills, and ensuring culturally relevant digital content. These components are vital for empowering First Nations communities and enabling them to fully participate in the digital economy.

This submission will focus on 1) the sustainability of the First Nations media and broadcasting sector; 2) a network of digital mentors; and 3) First Nations broadcasting and media sector's pipeline of employment and skill development.

## **1. The Sustainability of the First Nations Media and Broadcasting Sector**

First Nations Media Australia's 2024 Pre-Budget submission delineated how, given the soaring cost of living and consumer price index (CPI), 'real' funding levels for the Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program (IBMP) have deteriorated significantly since 2013-14 (Appendix A). Adequate and sustainable funding is necessary to ensure that First Nations broadcasters can continue their important work - current funding levels continue to be insufficient to sustain and grow this essential sector. Without sufficient funding, these broadcasters face significant ongoing challenges in maintaining their operations and delivering high-quality content, and current funding levels remain insufficient to:

- meet station demand for grants
- meet growing community need for services
- support efficient, multi-year grant-making
- respond to technological, social, environmental and economic trends
- support investment to build station resilience, support innovation, enhance the sector's community impact and deliver a better return on investment to taxpayers
- achieve social and economic outcomes desired by stations as well as community and government stakeholders

Operational investment needs a skilled workforce to achieve desired outcomes. Feedback from FNMA's sectoral engagement, particularly at Converge 2023, echoes the 2019 *Strong Voices Stronger Communities* strategy. Attendees highlighted the urgent need for investment in culturally appropriate employment programs, such as traineeships and professional development pathways in (including but not limited to) management and governance; training [train-the-trainer]; project management; production; and IT services.

An adequately funded and sustainable employment pipeline in the First Nations media/communications sector is critical to delivering information and entertainment services to the First Nations communities across Australia. The need for significant and immediate investment in First Nations' communication and media sectoral employment, operations, training and career pathways is further emphasised within the Community Broadcasting

Associations of Australia's (CBAA) Roadmap 2023, which lists both 'Funding provided addresses need for adequate employment of First Nations broadcasting and media services' and 'Expand training and career pathway programs allowing community broadcasters to acquire new skills that open employment opportunities, increase digital literacy and civic participation, especially for the First Nations broadcasting and media sector' as points two and three under the top priority of 'Growing our Capability' (p.23). Opportunities to leverage other policy and funding mechanisms for digital mentoring training as a 'pipeline' into employment in the wider Media and Communications sector(s) are briefly discussed in Part Three (3) of this submission.

## **2. May 2024 Budget Measure: A Network of Digital Mentors - \$18M [2024/25-2027/28]**

inDigiMOB is an FNMA flagship program delivered partnership with Telstra dedicated to enhancing digital literacy among First Nations communities through a culturally responsive framework. The inDigiMOB program has a strong track record of delivering impactful digital mentoring to First Nations communities. Utilising a framework across 6 learning domains (Appendix B), this initiative provides tailored digital literacy training that respects cultural values and community perspectives. InDigiMOB mentors offer hands-on support, from basic digital skills to advanced media production techniques, fostering technological proficiency within culturally appropriate frameworks. This not only enhances digital inclusion but also amplifies community voices and preserves Indigenous cultures through modern platforms. inDigiMOB's programs bridge the digital divide by boosting digital skills and confidence through one-on-one assistance and group workshops. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern technology, InDigiMOB empowers First Nations peoples to share their stories, access essential services, and engage in the digital economy, ensuring digital inclusion efforts are relevant, sustainable, and rooted in the cultural context of each community.

It is critical to recognise that digital inclusion – and the broader digital economy is vast and diverse, encompassing a wide range of industries, technologies, skills and skill-levels. From e-commerce and digital media to cybersecurity and software development, the opportunities within this economy are immense, and a national network of mentors must be capable of assisting First Nations peoples, organisations and communities across the spectrum of digital literacy and the digital economy. While basic skills are critical for individual safety online, it is important this network of mentors have experience and expertise across the digital landscape and not be limited to 'entry level' skills development.

In 2023, the FNDIAG proposed to Minister Rowlands that inDigiMOB's model be used as the basis for a hub-and-spoke approach to enhance digital literacy and inclusion among First Nations communities. This model involves establishing central hubs in key regional locations to provide comprehensive digital skills training and support. These hubs will extend their reach to smaller, remote communities—the spokes—through a network of trained local mentors. By leveraging local knowledge and leadership, this approach ensures tailored, culturally relevant digital education and support, enabling even the most remote communities to access and benefit from digital technologies. This not only fosters greater digital inclusion but also empowers First Nations peoples to lead and sustain their own digital advancement and develop locally relevant training pathways.

The need for a centralised suite of training and delivery curriculum and resources, coupled with on-the-ground wrap-around support for First Nations digital mentors, is crucial for

advancing digital inclusion efforts effectively. Centralising training resources ensures consistency and quality in the delivery of digital literacy programs across diverse First Nations communities. It allows for the development of standardised curricula that can be adapted to local contexts while maintaining cultural relevance. Providing on-the-ground wrap-around support ensures that digital mentors receive ongoing guidance, resources, training and professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and effectiveness. This dual approach not only strengthens the capacity of digital mentors but also fosters sustainable community-led digital empowerment initiatives for First Nations peoples to more fully participate in the digital economy.

Based on its experience with InDigiMOB, FNMA proposes the following principles in the development of a national network of First Nations Digital Mentors:

1. **Metro to Remote – a National Network:** A national network of First Nations digital mentors is crucial as it ensures both urban and remote communities receive equal access to tailored digital literacy and inclusion programs, addressing unique local needs while promoting widespread technological empowerment.
2. **Community-Driven Solutions:** It is essential that digital inclusion initiatives are designed and implemented with direct input from First Nations communities. Empowering local communities to drive these projects, and establishing ongoing Communities of Practice, will ensure that the solutions are culturally appropriate and address the unique needs of each community or location.
3. **Sustainable Funding Models:** Ensuring long-term success requires sustainable funding models. We urge the Advisory Group to consider policy drivers and funding mechanisms such as the vocational skills and training funding to provide opportunities for ongoing employment and skills programs, allowing for continuous development and maintenance across the job families of the media and communications sector workforce.
4. **Focus on Digital Literacy:** Enhancing digital literacy is crucial. We recommend expanding digital skills training programs, particularly those tailored to the needs of different age groups, and demographic factors within First Nations communities. Collaborating with local media organisations, such as FNMA's membership, can help in identifying local need and developing and delivering these programs effectively.
5. **Cultural Preservation and Promotion:** Digital inclusion efforts should also aim to preserve and promote First Nations cultures and languages. Supporting the creation and dissemination of culturally relevant digital content will help in maintaining cultural heritage and fostering a strong sense of identity among First Nations peoples.
6. **Evaluation and Adaptation:** Regular evaluation of digital inclusion initiatives is necessary to ensure they meet their objectives. Establishing a framework for continuous feedback and adaptation will allow for the refinement of strategies and better alignment with community needs.

### **3. Digital Mentoring as Pipeline of Employment within First Nations Broadcasting and Media sector**

First Nations media organisations are proficient in engaging and recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, providing employment opportunities in local communities.

However, currently, training opportunities are not matched with ongoing and sustainable employment opportunities throughout the sector, and across job-families.

The Australian Government recently announced a comprehensive skills and training package aimed at addressing workforce shortages and boosting economic recovery. This package includes significant investments in vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeships, and upskilling programs. Key initiatives feature expanded funding for TAFE and other training providers, increased support for apprenticeships through wage subsidies, and targeted skills development programs in high-demand sectors such as technology, healthcare, and construction. The package also emphasises the importance of inclusion, with dedicated funding to support training for First Nations people, women, and those in regional and remote areas.

Utilising current policy and funding drivers, such as vocational and skills training funding, is essential for establishing a sustainable pipeline of employment opportunities in digital mentoring and inclusion for First Nations people. By aligning these resources with targeted digital literacy and mentoring programs, further pathways can be created for First Nations individuals to develop valuable skills, gain meaningful employment, and contribute to their communities' digital empowerment. This strategic approach not only addresses the immediate need for increased digital inclusion but also fosters long-term socio-economic benefits, enabling First Nations communities to thrive in an increasingly digital world. Leveraging these funding opportunities ensures that digital mentoring initiatives are well-supported, scalable, and capable of making a lasting impact on closing the digital divide.

FNMA once again thanks the Advisory Group for its ongoing work and looks forward to continued collaboration to advance digital inclusion for First Nations communities.

Thank you for your dedication to this important cause.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Wally Tallis', is written over a horizontal line.

Walter Tallis  
A/CEO  
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## Appendix A

### IBMP Nominal vs Real Funding 2014/15-2022/23

Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Program (IBMP)				
Year	CPI	Nominal Funding	Real Funding (14-15\$)	Nominal funding if 14-15 real funding was maintained
2013-14	3.1			
2014-15	1.6	\$21,817,306	\$21,817,306	\$21,817,306
2015-16	1.1	\$21,007,195	\$20,776,116	\$22,059,966
2016-17	1.9	\$21,007,195	\$20,376,979	\$22,492,068
2017-18	2.0	\$21,788,448	\$20,699,026	\$22,965,585
2018-19	1.5	\$21,068,448	\$19,698,999	\$23,334,017
2019-20	-0.4	\$21,068,448	\$19,783,273	\$23,234,618
2020-21	3.9	\$20,466,077	\$18,419,469	\$24,241,451
2021-22	6	\$21,097,335	\$17,721,761	\$25,972,983
2022-23	5.9	\$21,562,588	\$16,840,381	\$27,935,091
2023-24 (Estimate)	3.3	\$21,562,588	\$16,128,816	\$29,167,521
2024-25	2.8	\$38,000,000	\$29,260,000	\$30,301,814
2025-26	2.5	\$39,275,168	\$29,260,000	\$31,391,807
2026-27	2.5	\$39,809,524	\$29,260,000	\$32,563,143

Figure One: IBMP Nominal vs Real Funding 2014/15-2022/23

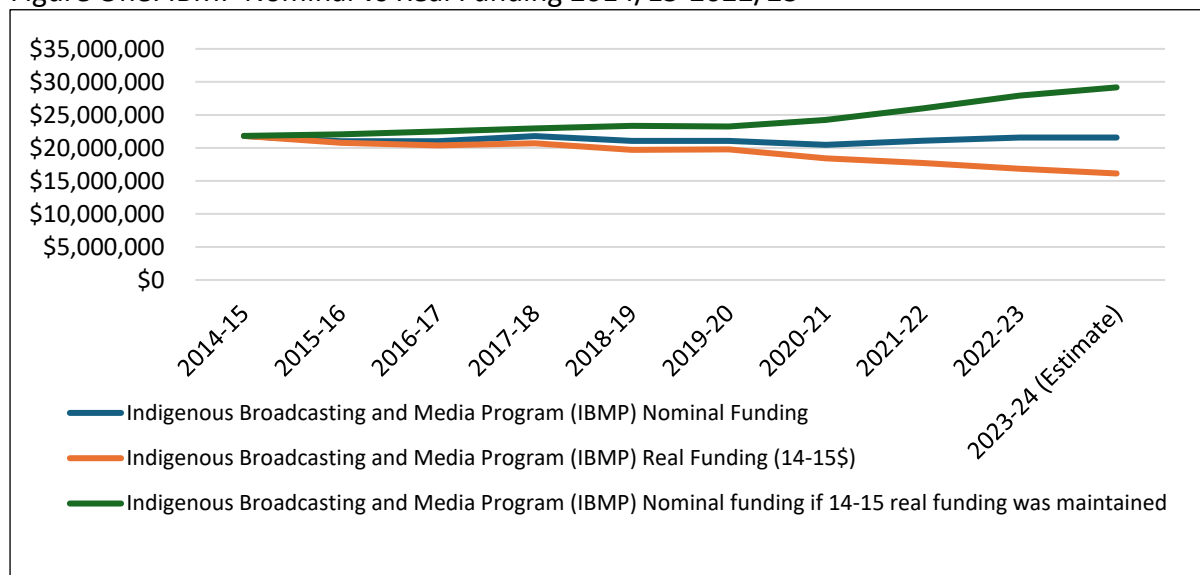


Table and Figure One above demonstrate the real-world decline in sector funding for First Nations Media and Communications. Simultaneously, expectations, responsibilities and cost-of-living expenses for these organisations continue to increase. Without sustainable and significant operational funding increase, First Nations broadcasting, communications and media organisations will continue to struggle.

## APPENDIX B

# inDigiMOB

**inDigiMOB – a partnership between First Nations Media Australia and Telstra**

**inDigiMOB** collaborates with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, and organisations to build skills and knowledge in using digital technologies, safely, creatively and with purpose.

inDigiMOB can **support your projects, activities, and aspirations**, and do this by embedding the practice of core digital skills and knowledge each step of the way.

We tailor our activities to your needs, connect with you through face-to-face workshops and support you in using online platforms like Zoom, MS Teams or Google Meet so we can link in to provide ongoing guidance.



To find out more, contact us:

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