Regional Telecommunications Submission - EFA

As Australia's leading digital rights organisation for over 25 years, Electronic Frontiers Australia have expertise in three key policy areas relevant to this review, Internet Affordability, Access to Essential Services, and Net Neutrality. This submission addresses these areas.

Whilst most of us take high-speed Internet access for granted, there are millions of Australians disproportionately impacted by affordability, accessibility and equity issues.

The pandemic exposed and exasperated the digital divide in our country. More than 2.5 million don't have Internet access at all.

Disconnected and disadvantaged, these Australians are priced out of Internet access, cut off from necessary information and inconvenienced by an expedited pace of digitalisation which has neglected their needs.

Rural, remote and regional Australians are vulnerable. They need more help.

We must do more to close the digital divide in Australia. Affordable access that is sustainable, adequate and not short term must be a key priority.

INTERNET AFFORDABILITY

As reliance on the Internet increases, so does the need for Internet affordability.

Greater usage in regions often means greater costs. Internet options are limited in terms of retailer and technology choice. These increased costs mean that home Internet is not an option for many Australians.

With education, work and essential services moving online, households are relying on Internet services, and requiring more data. In regional areas and for people on low incomes, mobile Internet plans are often the only option for access and affordability. At times this can be an effective substitute, and it means one bill. However, increasing need can mean multiple data packs are purchased each month adding significantly to cost.

We recommend Australia's National Broadband Network implement a concessional broadband rate for low-income households to make internet access more affordable and improve digital inclusion.

People have been left behind in the pandemic as services, health, work, and education moved online. We recommend more be done to understand the impact in the regions on people who are low income, and on social service payments. This work should also look specifically at the experiences of people in remote and Indigenous communities. And look at the disparity from a technology point of view where satellite is the only Internet option.

Affordable Internet should be a basic right, to keep our nation informed, connected and safe.

ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Rapid digitalisation has moved many essential services online. But too many rural and remote communities experience slow Internet access, and at times none at all. Poor access increases digital exclusion, and in turn, social exclusion.

Without access to the Internet, employment options are reduced, people become medically and socially vulnerable and are held back from participating in society.

Uninterrupted and fast Internet should be a necessity not a luxury. Service providers, organisations and the government must join forces to improve network accessibility nationwide.

The move to online applications and policies that are punitive and surveillance based means that when telecommunications goes down vulnerable people are affected. This occurs for people on the Cashless Welfare Card where connectivity becomes unavailable, particularly when small town infrastructure is overwhelmed during holidays (for example), and people do not have the option of falling back to cash. Or where a lack of Internet access means that people can't login to Centrelink or job network portals and they have their payments suspended. We recommend this issue be further explored.

NET NEUTRALITY

Net neutrality means an open and fair Internet experience. It is needed to facilitate Internet access that is free from corporate interests. All data should be treated equally and telecommunications providers must be restricted from prioritising certain customers and data packets.

Electronic Frontiers Australia is opposed to any moves to block, slowdown, or charge for specific online content.