



Regional Telecommunications Review 2018



Submission by the Indigenous Remote
Communications Association

August 2018

About the Indigenous Remote Communications Association

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA, soon to be re-branded as First Nations Media Australia) is the peak body for Indigenous media and communications. It was founded in 2001 as the peak body for remote Indigenous media and communications and since 2016 has transitioned to be the national peak body for First Nations broadcasting, media and communications.

IRCA represents up to 105 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS), 33 additional licensed retransmission sites across Australia, 8 Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs), 28 urban and regional First Nations radio services, 2 national TV services as well as print and online media providers. IRCA also advocates for the digital inclusion needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

About the First Nations broadcasting and media sector

First Nations broadcasters are not-for-profit community organisations providing a primary and essential service to their communities. The sector:

- Comprises:
 - Radio services able to reach around 320,000 First Nations people, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous communities, or approximately 47% of the First Nations population.
 - Sixteen (16) First Nations radio services rebroadcast through the VAST service to around 180 terrestrial rebroadcast sites.
 - A regional satellite TV service reaching 240,000 remote households and a free to air national TV service.
 - Over 230 radio broadcast sites across Australia.
- Is a multimillion dollar industry with over 35 First Nations community owned and managed not-for-profit media organisations.
- Has capacity to deliver all government messaging to our communities.
- Is the most relevant and appropriate service with the highest listenership, community engagement and local ownership of all media services.
- Is delivered in the first language of many remote peoples.
- In remote communities, is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media services.

About this submission

This submission is made by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) based on consultation through the Broadband for the Bush Forum and Indigenous Focus Day. We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of all who attended these events in 2017 and 2018 and contributed views and ideas that have helped inform this response.

Given the diversity of Indigenous Australia, this submission does not purport to represent the views or concerns of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As such, the IRCA submission should not be taken to displace the more locally specific individual submissions from any of its membership or constituency.

IRCA supports the submission made to this Review by the Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA), of which IRCA is a key founding member and contributor to that submission. This submission is supplementary to the B4BA submission, and is a general response to those areas within the review of direct relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

IRCA also supports the key recommendations in the submissions by ACCAN, the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance and the Northern Territory Government.

IRCA is happy to provide further documentation in support of this submission upon request. We look forward to the outcomes of this review.

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1. The gap in Indigenous digital inclusion

While there have been improvements in the last three years in telecommunications access in many parts of remote Australia through the introduction of the nbn Skymuster satellite, the Mobile Black Spots program, State co-investment programs, and the Community Phones Program, these infrastructure projects only go partway to delivering digital inclusion in remote and regional Australia. There are still many gaps and, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the digital inclusion gap is widening and access to key services is reducing as service delivery is increasingly moving online.

As new telecommunications infrastructure has been rolled out, there has been a lack of much-needed digital inclusion strategies delivered to ensure remote and regional Australians have the skills and support to fully benefit from these services. Much more needs to be done to address the issues of limited community access facilities, last-mile distribution (WiFi etc), affordability for people on low incomes, low digital literacy, impacts of cyber-safety issues and online fraud, and accessibility of online services for people with limited English/text literacy or disabilities.

IRCA groups these obstacles to digital inclusion under four key headings- Availability, Affordability, Awareness, Appropriateness. These align closely with the findings of the 2013 Telstra research into digital inclusion, which identified 5 key barriers to digital inclusion: 1) Infrastructure (network reach); 2) Hardware in the home; 3) Affordability (of equipment and services); 4) Propensity (including awareness and relevance); and 5) Appropriate web services (need for user-friendly interfaces, especially for people with limited English and text literacy). Targeted strategies are needed to address all obstacles to effectively achieve digital inclusion.

IRCA argues that telecommunications access is now an essential service and that digital inclusion is a human right. This is of particular importance for people living in remote Indigenous communities where there is limited direct access to services. Without affordable telecommunications access and digital inclusion, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to continue to live, learn, work, establish businesses and access essential services in their cultural homelands throughout remote Australia.

We know that the Australian government understands the need for improved access to communications for remote and Indigenous people. This is evidenced by the Australian Government investment in NBN and the Mobile Black Spots program. These programs, along with the learning from previous RTR reports, the Productivity Commission's review of the Universal Services Obligation, and the Mobile Roaming review all clearly point to the fact that the competitive market model (even if subsidised) is unlikely to provide further communications infrastructure and services in remote Australia.

Clearly government funded solutions are needed to fill the gaps, with current funding for communications services through the NBN rollout, Mobile Black Spots program, Universal

Service Obligation contracts, Developing the North, Regional Development Australia, Indigenous affairs, digital literacy programs, as well as State and Territory programs. However, without a cohesive policy guiding these funding activities, the projects are ad-hoc with little coordination or complementarity. A coherent and holistic policy approach is needed that is specific to the contextual needs of remote and Indigenous Australia.

Effective communications is essential to the ongoing viability of remote Indigenous communities. In the rapid transition to e-government and online service delivery and retail, communications reduces the tyranny of distance by providing remote people with access to services that urban populations take for granted (e.g. banking, health, education, libraries, news, entertainment, shopping). Effective communications expand the opportunities for Indigenous social and economic development, enterprise, employment and connection to the broader economy. It enables dispersed families to remain connected and Australia's unique Indigenous culture and languages to continue and develop.

2. Support for B4BA call for a Remote Telecommunications Policy

IRCA supports the key recommendation in the Broadband for the Bush Alliance response to this Review calling for a dedicated Remote Telecommunications Policy and Strategy (RTPS). This would help to provide a framework for consulting, planning, delivering and monitoring appropriate telecommunications infrastructure and digital inclusion programs in remote Australia. This policy and strategy would ensure a coordinated approach is taken to improving mobile expansion, last-mile distribution, access facilities, digital literacy, skills development, technical support, cost-sharing mechanisms, and development of culturally relevant content and applications.

An RTPS would enable consideration of the specific and contextual factors associated with remote areas of Australia, such as sparse and dispersed populations, market failure, climatic and geographic factors, costs of installation and maintenance, and the need for USO-style subsidisation to ensure affordable and equitable access to services available to other Australians.

Rather than a triennial progress report, a Remote Telecommunications Policy and Strategy would set out a project timeframe to meet key performance indicators against key criteria around Access, Affordability and Digital Ability. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation would help to identify priority areas and targeted solutions. The current investment in communications equity programs- the USO, the Mobile Black Spots program, Regional Development programs, Co-investment schemes, and so on- could be used in a more strategic and coordinated way to ensure all remote consumers had access to affordable communications. Additionally, the provision of unmetered access to key online government services, banking, library services, education resources and so on would reduce the barriers to living remotely.

3. Call for an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy

There are about 130,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in over 1,100 discrete communities across remote Australia, with the employment to population ratio averaging about 45%. Half of this population is under 24 years old. Over 30% of remote and very remote Indigenous households still have no access to Internet, with the majority of these still without basic telephony services. Remote Indigenous people have most to gain from being connected to address the widening digital divide.

Remote Indigenous people remain the most digitally excluded part of the Australian population and this is unlikely to change with current infrastructure planning and policy. Indigenous Australians have been recognised to have a significant gap in digital inclusion compared with the broader Australian population within the Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017 (7% gap¹).

It is well known that this gap is much greater for remote Indigenous Australians², where geographic isolation, cost of infrastructure rollouts and socioeconomic disadvantage exacerbate the digital divide. However there is currently inadequate data collection to measure the full extent of this gap nationally, making it difficult to monitor progress. Without such data and targeted programs to address the gaps, Federal and State governments will need to continue to deliver essential services face to face reducing significantly any cost benefits that can be gained from digital.

An Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy is needed to ensure this gap does not further widen for remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and essential services. Currently there are very limited strategies in place to address this growing issue³.

A key recommendation from the 2017 Broadband for the Bush Indigenous Focus Day was that Indigenous Digital Inclusion be adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as a key performance measure within the Closing the Gap framework. Consequently IRCA wrote letters to all COAG members urging this be considered as part of the Closing the Gap Framework Review, with 17 Indigenous and stakeholder organisations as signatories⁴.

¹ Figure sourced from Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E, 2017, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra. <http://apo.org.au/node/97751>. Viewed 8/8/2017

² The Northern Territory Homelands and Outstations Assets and Access Review (CAT, 2016) surveyed 401 Indigenous Homelands and Outstations in the NT (population 10,000). Only 20% had mobile phone network access and 37% communities had access to the internet. However, in 80% of the communities with access, only a single internet access point was available.

³ The Remote Indigenous IT Activity program, managed by DPMC from 2015/16-17/18, received only \$2.3million per annum, compared with the \$50 million Digital inclusion program for Senior Australians.

⁴ See copy of letter at broadbandforthebush.com.au/forum-2017/

The letters argued that digital inclusion is a critical enabler for reduction of all other CtG measures including health, education, social inclusion, governance, compliance with government regulations and ability to participate in employment and economic improvements. The letters outlined a strategy with a range of targeted programs to reduce the gap along with data collection to measure outcomes of these programs. The proposed 6-part Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy was resoundingly supported at the 2018 Indigenous Focus Day held in Darwin in June 2018.

The Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy addresses the provision of appropriate, accessible and affordable Internet access to vital online government services such as MyGov in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. More generally, the proposal addresses the opportunities provided by Internet access, including access to jobs sites, educational resources, online learning, e-commerce sites, online banking, and the potential for establishing online businesses. Without Indigenous digital inclusion, Australian and State governments will need to continue to deliver these essential services face to face.

The Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy proposal has six components:

1. Data collection to measure whether remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members have broadband available to them with the minimal requirements in terms of access, availability, affordability and digital literacy in order to access online services.
2. Prioritisation of the roll-out of broadband services, including mobile coverage, to identified remote Indigenous communities that do not have minimal community-wide online access.
3. Provision of public Internet access to the identified communities through community WiFi and LTE systems.
4. Implementation of unmetered access to all online government services (including MyGov), banking, education, employment, justice and health services.
5. Roll-out of a culturally and language appropriate digital literacy program for remote community members.
6. A Community Digital Mentors program to provide meaningful community-based jobs in remote communities to support digital engagement, literacy and support via a peer learning model.

Digital inclusion models such as the inDigiMOB Digital Mentors project (delivered by IRCA in 13 NT communities, Telstra funded) are worth looking at to replicate and learn from as they allow communities to decide what is of value to them in developing digital literacy, provide culturally appropriate delivery models and resources, and provide local employment and skill sharing. This increases local ownership and greater sustainability and impact.

Details of the Strategy elements can be found in the letter on the Broadband for the Bush Alliance website (see ref. 4 above).

4. Addressing Affordability

Equivalent levels of affordable access are the key to reducing the digital divide and closing the gap on Indigenous disparity. The latest Closing the Gap figures highlight the need to address the underlying issue of poverty in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, especially remote communities, that is contributing to delays in reaching Closing the Gap targets. Poverty is a key factor in differential health and education outcomes for vulnerable social and demographic groups. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience disproportionately higher rates of unemployment, financial stress and homelessness⁵. Centrelink is a vital safety net for this reason. Yet many people are unable to access online or phone-based Centrelink services, resulting in breaches and further loss of income.

IRCA's Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy proposal includes a specific practical aim of preventing reporting breaches occasioned by lack of access to MyGov. This practical aim is about maintaining the minimum financial resources critical for engagement in education as well as health services access and adequate housing arrangements. With many essential services now moving online, the proposal also addresses the need for affordable connectivity and digital skills to access other services such as telehealth, weather, video-judicial hearings/compliance and emergency information as well as online education, employment, banking, shopping and library services.

The 2015 *Dropping off the Edge*⁶ report notes that low family income is a central factor in shaping individual and family life opportunities, with research evidence indicating that family income is interwoven with the influence of other forms of disadvantage (p.6). The report includes lack of Internet access as one of 22 forms of disadvantage (pp.7-8).

The 2018 research report *Falling Through the Net: The Digital Divide in WA*, by Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, found 26 per cent of the state's lowest income earners did not have access to the internet in 2016-17, compared to 99 per cent of high income earners who did⁷. The report found that as digital connectivity was becoming a necessity, but the cost of services is causing 'digital stress' for lower income earners, with the poorest 40 per cent of households spending more than 10 per cent of their budget on digital services like internet connections and devices. The report author Professor Duncan called for

⁵ The ABS 2014-2015 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey indicates an employment rate at only 46% nationally and 35.6% in remote areas for persons over 15 years of age, compared to 64.3% for non-Indigenous people. 28.9% of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people reported having run out of money for basic living expenses in the 12 months prior to the survey. Another 29.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally report having experienced homelessness, compared to the non-Indigenous rate of 13.1%.
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4714.02014-15?OpenDocument>.

⁶ Vinson, T and Rawsthorne, M (2015). *Dropping off the Edge: persistent communal disadvantage in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services/Catholic Social Services Australia. Viewed at http://k46cs13u1432b9asz49wnhcx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/0001_dote_2015.pdf

⁷ https://www.smh.com.au/national/western-australia/digital-divide-one-in-four-of-wa-s-poorest-don-t-access-the-internet-20180802-p4zv7w.html?utm_source=newsletter_235&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=webnews444

training programs to improve digital literacy and providing alternative arrangements to ensure everyone had access to government services online. He argued that a 'whole of state' digital strategy was needed for WA, coordinated across all levels of government with support from the education, industry and community sectors.

While digital inclusion programs are more challenging and costly to deliver in remote Australia, there is every reason to be optimistic about the potential for an Indigenous Digital Literacy program to be successful. The *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017* report makes the observation that the results of its study suggest "that digital inclusion programs specifically for Indigenous Australians may be beneficial as their digital choices are different from other groups. Moreover, the fact that Indigenous Australians have a positive attitude to technology suggests these programs may have a high rate of success."⁸ Researchers have consistently found that where mobile and internet access is established, remote people are rapid adopters (Brady & Dyson 2009; Kral 2010, Telstra 2013).

5. Access to appropriate infrastructure

For many remote Indigenous people, a home telephone or mobile telephone service is the highest priority to enable unmediated communications with services and social networks across vast remote regions. Yet, after over 20 years of the USO, 5 RTR reviews and numerous other programs, over 30% of remote Indigenous people are still without access to basic home telephony.

At the present time, a very large proportion of small to medium sized remote Indigenous communities⁹ are reliant on a single means of telecommunications access, or have no access at all. Typically, where provided this is a single payphone or community phone, connected to the PSTN via HCRC microwave link or satellite link respectively. The *Homelands Review* (2015/2016 data) found that around 80% of the approximately 400 occupied outstations/homelands in the NT i.e. 320 outstation/homelands did not have access to reliable mobile coverage, so all of the 320 outstations plus a number of minor communities (population between 50 and 200 approximately) without mobile coverage are in this 'single means of access' category¹⁰. In total only 20% had mobile compared to approximately 81% of the broader Australian population. A similar situation exists in the Kimberley and North Queensland.

The NT Government submission to the RTR 2018 argues that "Aboriginal Australians have low digital inclusion rates, exacerbating disadvantage - more work needs to be done to identify mobile phone and broadband data models that suit the cultural and economic

⁸ Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E, 2017, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra, p18. <http://apo.org.au/node/97751>. Viewed 8/8/2017

⁹ In the categories formally defined as outstation/homeland or minor community

¹⁰ The Northern Territory Homelands and Outstations Assets and Access Review (CAT, 2016) www.icat.org.au Centre for Appropriate Technology. Alice Springs. 2016

needs of remote Aboriginal Australians.” The NT Government’s response also highlights the lack of appropriate infrastructure:

Currently, there are 21 remote communities with no mobile phone service, 33 with no fixed internet service and 37 connected to the NBN via unreliable or unsuitable satellite services. ” (NT Government 2018)

Expanded telephony access is not being addressed by the NBN and the need for retaining payphones is being reviewed under changes being considered in the shift to a Universal Services Guarantee. It is critical that the provision, operation and maintenance of basic telephony services, including payphones, be continued in remote Indigenous communities, at least until a reliable and well-proven future solution be found. Even where there are mobile services available, payphones are still used by those without a mobile phone or credit.

Currently the mix of telecommunications services in remote communities includes USO payphones, satellite community phones, landline community phones, ADSL, mobile coverage, WiFi hotspots, small cell mobile coverage and in some NT sites mobile phone hotspots. Additionally, the existing tariff benefits that apply to some existing community phones, such as extended zone tariffing and free calls on satellite community phones, should be continued.

As the previous RTIRCs identified (and numerous other reviews, e.g. Telstra 2013), expanded mobile access is the primary area of demand for remote Australia. The huge unmet demand has been identified by the audit undertaken by Department of Communications in 2014 prior to the Mobile Black Spots Program (MBSP). IRCA welcomes the continuation of the MBSP program but notes that the lack of fibre optic and limitations of the program to areas of sustainable market demand have limited the possibility of many remote communities receiving mobile services under this program.

Further, the NBN satellites have to date not been designed to support backhaul of mobile (this may change in 2019). More needs to be done, including expansion of terrestrial networks and scalable equipment (e.g. small cell technology) to reduce capital and operational costs for increased mobile coverage and sustainability.

Terrestrial broadband delivery (via fibre optic or microwave) is needed, rather than satellite backhaul delivery, for remote areas with high data use in order to provide sufficient data and speeds, reduce latency and congestion, improve reliability, and address infrastructure deficits. Terrestrial backhaul is particularly important in northern Australia where communities can be cut off for up to 5 months of the year due to monsoonal weather. During critical periods of cyclones and storms satellite-delivered communication needed to receive emergency information (by internet, radio or TV) are often unavailable due to rain fade. Ka Band satellite services (i.e. NBN Skymuster) are especially susceptible to rain fade, and can therefore be unavailable under heavy rainfall conditions when most needed.

IRCA urges NBN to begin a progressive terrestrial network expansion program across remote Australia during the 15 year lifetime of the LTSS. The existing legacy fibre networks in remote areas (many installed through previous government-funded broadband programs) should be leveraged for expansion of NBN terrestrial broadband into remote areas currently serviced by satellite, particularly to reduce congestion in areas/spot beams with high data use.

IRCA urges a whole-of-community (or region) approach to identify the high-demand consumers and applications which enables prioritisation, cost-sharing through aggregated use, and tailored solutions to reduce the risk of congestion and ensure ongoing performance. Partnership approaches are needed to address specific needs of communities and regions, with State/territory governments, local government and regional agencies as active partners in further extending the reach and outcomes of the NBN. The current Network Extension program puts the whole cost to the consumer instead of a shared cost approach.

6. Conclusion

This review provides a key opportunity to address a structural and skills issue that is impacting on the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to firstly, engage with Internet delivered services and resources that enhance employment and educational opportunities and secondly, ensure access to government (MyGov) services and safety nets, especially in remote areas.

IRCA makes the following key points:

- **IRCA supports the Broadband for the Bush Alliance’s call for a dedicated Remote Telecommunications Policy and Strategy (RTPS)**
- **Despite improvements in telecommunications infrastructure, the gap in digital inclusion is widening for people in remote Indigenous communities**
- **An Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy is needed to address this gap, with the following 6 key elements:**
 - **Data collection to fill data gaps and monitor progress**
 - **Roll-out of broadband services, including mobile coverage, to priority remote communities**
 - **Public Internet access through community WiFi and LTE systems**
 - **Unmetered access to online government services, banking etc**
 - **Culturally and language appropriate digital literacy programs**
 - **Community Digital Mentors program**
- **Delivery of a variation on the Mobile Black Spots Program to target remote areas where there is market failure**
- **NBN to begin a progressive terrestrial network expansion program across remote Australia to reduce satellite congestion, rain fade and to meet increasing demand by heavy users**