

CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN YOUTH LINK UP SERVICE (CAYLUS)

Submission to:

Productivity Commission's Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation inquiry

CAYLUS has assisted with the establishment and ongoing operation of internet wifi hotspots in 16 remote Aboriginal communities and two town camps in the southern region of the Northern Territory over the last five years. We have worked in partnership with agencies such as NBNCo, Easyweb Digital, NT Libraries (RIPIA program), MacDonnell Regional Council, Central Desert Regional Council and Barkly Regional Council, community youth programs and learning centres. There is a high and increasing demand in remote Aboriginal communities for access to internet-based resources, as there is often no other local option for accessing goods and services.

Quality of services available

Ten of these communities have satellite internet services. Satellite services in the region are of very poor quality (high contention rates, latency issues etc.) and bandwidth availability is very limited. CAYLUS worked with NBNCo to implement quality of service testing in five satellite internet communities which confirmed what we had heard anecdotally from community residents. Slow service speeds and high contention rates meant that web pages would time out before they could load, Skype and VOIP services were unusable, and even YouTube clips (at the lowest resolution possible) buffered endlessly.

The telecommunications infrastructure in the region is in very poor condition in many places, for example, Santa Teresa (80kms east of Alice Springs) and Hidden Valley town camp in Alice Springs. Santa Teresa has poor quality 3G connectivity which is unable to support a public wifi hotspot, has no capacity for an ADSL service to be connected, so their only option may be a Skymuster satellite service. Hidden Valley town camp (2kms from Alice Springs CBD) has poor quality analogue phone lines, no ADSL availability, and poor quality unreliable 3G depending on where you are in the camp. Amoonguna (16kms from Alice Springs CBD) and Karnte town camp (9kms from Alice Springs CBD) are on the edge of the 3G zone, and have very poor connectivity.

NBNCo made Public Interest Premises plans available to the public wifi hotspots in remote communities, which exempted them from the peak/off-peak data availability split that NBNCo Fair Usage Policy required of their providers, but this did not address service quality issues. NBNCo also trialled a web-enhanced modem at two other satellite sites, which improved the service speeds.

Three sites have 3G services, and three others have access to ADSL. The sites with ADSL services have fast, stable and affordable internet services available, while those with 3G services have poor quality and very expensive data. Sites with 3G availability were excluded from eligibility for satellite services until Skymuster services became available (none of the communities in this region have Skymuster services yet), so had no alternative to purchasing very expensive 3G data from Telstra. Skymuster services are allegedly faster than the older ABG and ISS services, but are also more expensive, with a two tier price structure, the more expensive option being the faster of the two.

Community management of public wifi hotspots

We have found that a crucial strategy for public wifi hotspots is community input into management of wifi availability and content filtering. There are culturally specific factors to connectivity and particularly mobile telephony and data services that impact strongly on levels of risk, and on community and personal safety in remote Aboriginal communities. For the public wifi hotspots, this management capacity is provided via a router that automates the times the wifi is available, levels of content filtering (moderate setting excludes searches for porn, hate sites and on-line gambling sites), and applies a daily download limit.

Mobile phone services in remote communities are problematic because they cannot be content filtered, or managed by the community, there is no choice of provider, and Telstra's third party providers such as AirG and Divas Chat are perfect enablers for trolling and bullying due to the app allowing user anonymity. It is far too easy to unwittingly subscribe to a paid third party provider, devices and sim cards are shared (not always willingly), so people may be unaware that they are being charged for a "premium" service, or that they have been subscribed. There is no awareness of any industry regulation of third party providers, consumer protections, or methods for unsubscribing from sites such as AirG.

Managed and funded public wifi hotspots in remote Aboriginal communities are crucial as part of a communications strategy and safety net. Market failure in the region means that there is an ongoing role for government in supporting access to good quality connectivity, particularly in light of the role of the Digital Transformation Office in shifting access to government services to on line only. The scope of the USO needs to be expanded so there is flexibility and a range of options for remote communities that includes affordable telephony, internet and data services.

Minimum levels of telecommunications services?

In remote Aboriginal communities, southern NT region.

- Public phones
- Public wifi internet hotspots, community input into management (hours of operation, content filtering, daily download limits etc.).
- Public wifi hotspots to be funded and supported by USO and/or Digital Transformation Office.
- Free (unmetered) access to government websites and other essential services such as banking, health services, and emergency services at public wifi hotspots and via public phones and mobile services (including pre paid data).
- Effective and timely consultations with communities prior to installation of mobile phone telephony re management options.
- AirG, Divas Chat and other third party providers to be dropped from Telstra prepaid data. Young Aboriginal people in remote regions are the most at risk group in Australia, with very high rates of suicide, self-harm and substance misuse, and social media sites such as these exacerbate risk by enabling trolling and abuse, including sexual abuse and soliciting of minors.

Connectivity in remote Aboriginal communities:

- Telstra are a monopoly provider in remote regions. They have a financial imperative to maximise earnings from their services, which can be at odds with the community and personal safety concerns of Aboriginal people living in remote communities.
- government intervention and support is needed for communications in remote Aboriginal communities. They are not commercially competitive or lucrative environments, so cannot rely on market forces to ensure stability, quality and affordability of services.
- wifi internet connectivity has become an essential service, as there is less and less in the way of direct service delivery available for remote Aboriginal communities. The Federal government's plans to further reduce direct service delivery and make access to government services primarily via internet (Digital Transformation Office) makes it imperative that there is good quality, affordable access to internet services across remote regions. Remote internet and telephony services could be supported/underwritten by government savings made on direct service delivery, or by strategic re-direction of USO resources.
- the poor quality of internet services and access in remote regions has meant that VOIP services have been largely unavailable or unusable. Improvements in connectivity and service quality will provide welcome access to VOIP, Skype, and other forms of internet enabled communications.
- very important that access to government and other essential services is free. There is a very high proportion of remote Aboriginal community populations that are classified as Not In Labour Force (NILF), meaning they are not only unemployed but are receiving no social benefits either. In the Sandover region the NILF population is about 34%. In other regions it

can be close to 50%. This population are dependent on family for their living, further impoverishing already very poor remote Aboriginal populations.

- part of the reason for there being such a high NILF population in remote Aboriginal communities are the difficulties of meeting the reporting requirements for accessing benefits. Poor quality and scarce internet connectivity in remote regions contributes to this, as does poor literacy in English, and the humiliating difficulties of negotiating and maintaining access to benefits.

- there is a powerful need for an alternative to travelling into regional centres from remote communities in order to access services. Such travel is difficult and expensive, with large distances, high fuel costs, few choices of places to stay, considerable risks (easy access to alcohol and other substances, high degree of humbug etc.) and scarce access to transport. Affordable and managed connectivity would achieve this, and would reduce the considerable disadvantages suffered by remote Aboriginal populations.

Community Safety and Connectivity

- Connectivity in remote Aboriginal communities is an essential service, supporting access to services that are not available any other way, plus providing opportunities for self-directed learning, on-line marketing of local products and services, and engagement with the wider world.

- Connectivity also creates risk, anxieties and opportunities for conflict. These risks are not unique to Aboriginal communities, but are exacerbated by social and cultural factors that are specifically Aboriginal. Cultural law is based on relatedness and kinship. Perceived threats to social capital are extremely serious, as that relatedness is the primary source of emotional and physical support for remote Aboriginal populations. There are culturally specific forms of conflict and interaction such as “humbugging”, “jealousing” and “shame”, which do not have a direct equivalent in non-Aboriginal cultures.

- In communities with public wifi hotspots, there is the capacity for communities to manage hours of operation, content filtering, and daily download limits. These settings are applied via a router, and are automated to reduce humbug for community staff and to allow access to net-based services without requiring the computer room or community office to be open or staffed. Many communities do not want the wifi on during school hours or overnight, as this causes too much disruption to family and community life. Content filtering filters out searches for pornography, hate sites, and on-line gambling sites, and can also be set to exclude social media. This has been used to good effect when on-line teasing and bullying has led to an escalation of conflict in or between families and communities, as Facebook or other social media sites can be blocked for a period of time (long enough for things to settle down or conflict to be resolved) before access is restored.

- Mobile connectivity and telephony is problematic in remote Aboriginal communities, as it is not able to be managed in the same way a community wifi hotspot is managed. 3G and 4G mobile data cannot be content filtered, is available 24/7, and is very expensive.

- Third party providers such as AirG (includes Divas Chat) that are part of Telstra prepaid data packages are very problematic, as they allow anonymity, providing ample opportunity for untraceable and offensive mischief. AirG is the site that many people identify as presenting the biggest threat to community and family safety, as there are a rising proportion of family and community fights that start on social media.

- As well as the anonymity of AirG (and Divas Chat), there are also their dubious trade practices. There is a common perception that AirG is free, because it can still be used during a 15 day “grace” period once the phone credit has run out. AirG actually costs \$1 per day, and subscribing to AirG can be done by anyone who happens to have the phone at the time. There is a high degree of device sharing among Aboriginal people and families, and a high rate of turnover, with new phones and simcards being acquired on a regular basis. Even though AirG can be used once phone credit has run out, AirG deducts subscription costs from the next lot of phone credit that is purchased, thus turning a prepaid into a postpaid service.

- There are two short movies on the CAYLUS website Computer Rooms page that are recommended viewing. One is called Remote Satellite Connectivity, and is interviews with people in Ikuntji about poor quality satellite connectivity. The other is Community Management of Wifi Hotspots and is interviews with people in Atitjere about issues with social media and an explanation of how community management is implemented.

- Access to social media and internet based resources has many positive aspects, enabling people to monitor the mental and physical health of their family and friends, stay in touch when they are travelling, access resources, develop useful skills, and to affirm and extend family networks.