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Smartphones, the risks and rewards

Introduction

3.1 While cyber threats to Indigenous people are generally commensurate with those experienced by other members of the community, there are specific risks, and also some strengths, which arise out of the particular circumstances affecting many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders compared with other Australians.

3.2 As discussed in the previous chapter, Indigenous people's use of the internet is predicated extensively but not exclusively on the availability of services. Smartphones have emerged as the preferred online platform, given limited household internet connectivity and the life circumstances of many Indigenous Australians.

3.3 The Committee received evidence that cyber-safety threats have not yet materialised in shared internet facilities in remote regions but in larger communities and regional centres, where mobile phone coverage is possible, cyber-bullying is reported as an emergent concern.[1]

3.4 At hearings in Brisbane the Committee took the opportunity to investigate these developments with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their teachers. This chapter records their responses, supplemented by research and evidence taken in submissions.

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1 ARC Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI), *Submission 2*, pp. 1, 3, 5.

Mobile phones and cyber-safety

3.5   As for other young people in the community, mobile phones are a valuable communication tool for Indigenous youth who are enthusiastic adopters of the technology.[2]

3.6   Smartphones provide full internet connectivity, allowing for real-time online interaction through e-mail and social networking sites as well as the viewing, downloading and sharing of music, images and video material with other phones and computers. Research has suggested that this online interconnectivity can be hugely beneficial to disadvantaged or marginalised youth. Online interaction allows for those with lesser social skills to tap into potentially supportive networks and develop transferrable skills for offline engagement.[3]

3.7   For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people smartphone technologies can provide important links to family and community, especially where these have been fragmented by past policies or by the necessity of moving for schooling, training or work. At the same time, mobiles allow for a 24 hour cycle of cyber intrusions, which can lead to breaches of privacy and conflict both verbal and physical.[4]

3.8   The Australian Communications Consumer Advocacy Network (ACCAN), which has sponsored research on remote internet access,[5] notes in its submission:

> Research shows that mobile phones, where coverage is available, are the preferred communications device for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This strongly suggests that most cyber-bullying in the Indigenous community is likely to occur through the use of mobile phones.[6]

3.9   In 2010, the Committee's *Cyber-Safety and the Young* report recorded concerns from the Northern Territory (NT) Government about the increasing prevalence of bullying and 'sexting' via mobile phones, and its

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2   See previous chapter for detail.

3   P Collin, K Rahilly, I Richardson and A. Third, *The Benefits of Social Networking Services: a Literature Review,* Co-operative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing, Melbourne, 2011, p. 10.

4   Mrs Christine Hill, Principal, Southside Education, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, pp. 1–2.

5   CCI and Central Land Council (CLC), *Home Internet for Remote Indigenous Communities*, funded by Australian Communications Consumer Advocacy Network (ACCAN), 2011.

6   ACCAN, *Submission 1*, p. 1.

impact on Indigenous young people.[7] A survey in Western Australia also suggested that Indigenous youth are less likely to reveal that they have been the victimised.[8]

3.10   Within the time constraints of this inquiry, it was not feasible to conduct an adequate evaluation of these developments in rural or remote communities nor to consult key stakeholders and experts in the field. As a consequence, the Committee determined to conduct a limited survey among Indigenous secondary students in an urban environment, where mobile ownership is universal, to establish their concerns and priorities.

3.11   The Committee visited the traditional lands of the Gubbi Gubbi and the nations of the Turrbal and Ningy Ningy peoples in suburban Brisbane.[9] Evidence was taken in Sunnybank at Southside Education, a private college for socially disadvantaged girls, around 45 per cent of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.[10]

3.12   An informal roundtable discussion was also held with students and teachers at the Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School (known as the Murri School) in Acacia Ridge.

Cyber-bullying, grooming and racism

3.13   In Indigenous social circles high value is placed on avoiding a 'shame job', either as victim, perpetrator or observer in an embarrassing situation.[11] The Committee heard how the internet can act as a vector for online teasing prevalent in Indigenous cultures. The ACCAN submitted:

> Cyber-bullying amongst Indigenous Australians must be considered in its cultural context. In the Torres Strait, for example, social 'mocking', which is usually a light hearted comment

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7   Sexting involves the conveyance of sexually explicit or suggestive images or content via mobile, see Interim Committee report *Hire Wire Act: Cyber-Safety and Young*, June 2011, p. 96, and Northern Territory (NT) Government, *Submission 84*, p. 7.

8   Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, *Submission 54*.1, pp. 1–2, and see Interim Committee report *Hire Wire Act: Cyber-Safety and Young*, June 2011, Report, p. 111.

9   Guide to the Gubbi Gubbi Nation, <www.gubbigubbi.com/Gubbi_Gubbi_Traditional_ Custodians.pdf> and see Our Redcliffe, <www.cirp.org.au/index.php/our-redcliffe> and Extract of Speech, Maroochy Baramba, Tom Petrie Memorial -21 Sept 2010, Daki Budtcha <dakibudtcha.com.au/Turrbal/> viewed April 2013.

10   Mrs Christine Hill, Principal, Southside Education, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 2.

11   L de Plevitz, 'Systemic Racism: the Hidden Barrier to Educational Success for Indigenous School Students', *Australian Journal of Education*, vol. 51, 1, pp. 63–65.

directed at a friend or relative and easily understood in a face to face exchange, can become a more serious form of bullying when it occurs online. This is because while someone may 'mock' a friend or relative on their Facebook page and intend little harm, the ability of others to add a comment can lead to many people joining in the 'mocking'.[12]

3.14   Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mr Mick Gooda has referred to 'lateral violence', a term for violence and aggression within Indigenous communities and directed at its members, as 'the legacy of our dispossession and oppression'.[13] In the cyber context, 'teasing' becomes 'lateral violence': online shaming or cyber-bullying in the form of offensive rumours and gossip spread across Indigenous social networks.[14]

3.15   ACCAN advised that cyber-bullying between peers in Indigenous communities can induce high levels of despair.[15]

3.16   The Committee heard anecdotally at the Murri School that bullying is often 'generational', with victims at home becoming bullies at school and online. A young Murri man confirmed that some young people are reluctant to report bullying but neither can they move on from online attacks. In the end, this can lead to suicide. The youth urged the Committee to seek ways to address this cycle.[16]

Facebook to 'fightbook'

3.17   The Committee also learned that online abuse can lead to actual physical violence or risky person to person interactions. The CCI elaborated on the impact in remote communities where: 'mobile coverage tended to prioritise problems such as fights amongst young people "triggered by texts or posts on chat room sites"'.[17]

3.18   The CCI submission referred to the popularity of the Telstra platform Diva Chat which allows for cheap mobile phone interaction using a 3G network

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12   Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), *Submission 1*, p. 2.

13   Australian Human Rights Commission, *Changing the Conversation: Statement from Mick Gooda (2012 News)*, 2 February 2012, <www.humanrights.gov.au/news/stories/changing-conversation-statement-mick-gooda-2012-news> viewed May 2013.

14   F Edmonds *et al*, '*Keeping Intouchable': a Community Report*, Vic, 2012, p. 26.

15   ACCAN, *Submission 1*, pp. 2, 3.

16   Advice to the Committee, Informal discussion with students and teachers, Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School (the Murri School), Acacia Ridge, 7 May 2013 (no transcript).

17   Such as too much time spent watching Auststar TV etc., CCI, *Submission 2*, p. 5.

(95 cents a day unlimited usage). CCI notes the site has become known as the 'Indigenous Facebook', and has a reputation for promoting 'trash talk' and other forms of cyber-bullying across remote communities.[18]

3.19   At the Murri School, Principal Philomena Downey told the Committee that her term for Facebook is 'fightbook', given the frequent escalation of after-hours online conflict into school time dynamics.[19] Southside Education's Principal Christine Hill confirmed that, typically, weekend and other post school interactions via social networking sites leads to the fear of, or actual, verbal or physical abuse at school on Monday.[20]

3.20   Southside students Carmen, in year 11, and Karley, year 12, advised:

> Carmen: Facebook is involved in everyone's life, so if you have a problem you put it on there and then everyone just kind of goes on about it on Facebook.
>
> Karley: Yes, and everyone has to put their two cents in, which is where the conflict starts.[21]

3.21   Mrs Hill referred to the effect of online 'de-individuation', which depersonalises the sender and the recipient in these online exchanges.[22] She also noted that the frequent sharing of passwords allows for inflammatory posts to be made on other peoples' pages. She considered that students generally lack knowledge about privacy and other regulatory restraints and protections governing online engagement.[23]

Online grooming

3.22   Another concern at Southside was the vulnerability of the younger girls, in the grades eight to nine age group, to online grooming conducted by predators via smartphone and Facebook. Mrs Hill advised that, over the two years she has been at the school, she has reported the activities of a number of online predators to the (Queensland) Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services.[24]

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18   CCI, *Submission 2*, p. 6, and see Clare Rawlinson , 'Diva Chat',' Re-shaping Remote Communities', 105. 7, ABC Darwin, 5 January 2013, <www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/12/22/3396787.htm> viewed May 2013.

19   Informal discussion with students and teachers, the Murri School, 7 May 2013 (no transcript).

20   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, pp. 1, 2.

21   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 6.

22   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 3.

23   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 3.

24   Mrs Christine Hill, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, pp. 3–4.

3.23   The Committee also learned from the CCI submission of similar developments enabled by the Diva Chat platform in Central Australia, where non-Indigenous truck drivers and other itinerant workers solicit teenage Aboriginal girls via the site when passing through towns.[25]

Cyber racism

3.24   The Committee was concerned about the reported increase of cyber racism and its impacts on Indigenous wellbeing. The ACCAN stated:

> An important aspect of cyber-bullying for Indigenous Australians is racism. Racist comments and portrayals of Indigenous people that can be found on the internet can have a negative effect on Indigenous users. This can occur on sites such as Facebook and YouTube where Indigenous people may be harassed or have racist comments left about them, and may force people to abandon the use of information and communications technology.[26]

3.25   The recent *'Keeping Intouchable'* community report on smartphone use among Indigenous youth in Victoria found that online racism, along with 'lateral violence', was regularly experienced among the survey group. However, the young people also felt that the small size of Indigenous social networks could be protective, as cyber-bullies and other persecutors can easily be identified.[27]

3.26   At Southside Education, Indigenous students confirmed that 'Respect' is the mantra at the school but externally generated online racist material is prevalent, especially on Facebook. At the Murri School, the students also felt safe with their friends but said that racist content on Facebook is a problem. It was conjectured that mainstream students are more at risk of cyber-bullying, given the capacity for anonymous attacks.[28]

3.27   ACCAN suggested that education programs are required to raise awareness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the

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25   CCI, *Submission 2*, pp. 6–7.

26   ACCAN, *Submission 1*, pp. 2–3.

26   ACCAN, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

27   F Edmonds, C Rachinger, J Waycott, P Morrissey, O Kelada and R Nordlinger, *'Keeping Intouchable': a Community Report on the Use of Mobile Phones and Social Networking by Young Aboriginal People in Victoria*, Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society (IBES), University of Melbourne, Vic. 2012, pp. 24–26.

28   Carmen, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 3, Informal discussion with students, the Murri School, 7 May 2013 (no transcript).

protections afforded them under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, so they can be confident to express their cultural identities online.[29]

Cultural conflict and connection

3.28   Indigenous Australians are a unique and diverse peoples speaking many languages and belonging to many distinct cultural groups. At the same time, collectively:

> They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples…[30]

3.29   As noted above, it has been suggested that the incidence of lateral violence in Indigenous communities can be seen as a consequence of colonisation. However, this can also be read as an assertion of collective identity and even an extension of culturally accepted practice.

3.30   The concept of 'payback' is an aspect of customary law, where punishments are meted out according to the offence.[31] The CCI noted that the most threatening aspect of mobile technology and social networking platforms for cyber-bullying in remote Central Australian settlements is its 'potential to cross personal, social, cultural and geographical boundaries rapidly', inflaming existing conflicts.[32]

3.31   The CCI cited a case where paypack activities went viral during conflict between two camps in Yuendemu, after the death of a young man:

> Young women used mobile phones to send inflammatory messages, including altered photographs of deceased family members, via Telstra BigPond's Diva Chat platform to members of the other camp. The transmission of these messages led to further physical fighting between young men in the community…The use

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29   ACCAN, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

30   United Nations, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples* (Background Paper 2004), cited in D Jacobsen, 'Building Knowledge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Remote Tourism: Lessons from Comparable Tourism Initiatives around the World', *Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) Working Paper CW011*, Ninti One Limited, Alice Springs, 2013, p. 8.

31   'Tribal Punishment, Customary Law and Payback', Creative Spirits website <www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/law/tribal-punishment-customary-law-payback> viewed May 2013.

32   CCI, *Submission 2*, pp. 9–10.

of these identities and related images was highly disturbing to community members, as it violated Warlpiri cultural customs that prohibit using the name or viewing images of the dead. The situation was exacerbated when people from another community a couple of hundred kilometres away began to send bullying phone messages, crossing distances and boundaries that would not normally be so easily crossed. [33]

3.32   Despite such developments, the Committee also heard that mobile phones and Facebook contact can be a positive and protective mechanism, both socially and culturally, for Indigenous people. [34]

3.33   Principal Hill advised that a number of girls attending the school are effectively homeless, or 'couch surfing', and may lack food and clothing, but 99 per cent of them have a smartphone of their own. [35] The Committee was told that having a mobile provides a 'sense of safety'. In effect, these young people carry their 'house' in their pockets, with everything meaningful contained. [36]

3.34   Smartphones can also be culturally affirming. CCI research in remote communities found that while some Elders were fearful about the negative consequences of new and extended mobile coverage in remote communities, other senior women considered the phones to be good for physical safety, as well as for conducting urgent cultural matters such as sorry business. [37]

3.35   Southside Education students, some of whom had travelled far to attend the school, explained that Facebook enables them to keep in contact with their home and culture. It was also noted that some children had regained lost family connections though social networking. [38]

3.36   The Committee heard that the social networking site also allows students to sustain and practise traditional languages and dialects. [39] Year 11 student Carmen reported that she, for instance, communicates in Creole to her family in the Torres Strait. [40]

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33   CCI, *Submission 2*, p. 9.

34   Miss Williams, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 10.

35   Mrs Hill, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 2.

36   Discussion with students at the Murri School, 7 May 2013 (no transcript).

37   Based on HIP research in Papunya, CCI, HIP, *Submission 2*, p. 11.

38   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 10.

39   Karley and Carmen, *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, pp. 7, 9.

40   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 9.

3.37   Miss Nicole Williams, teacher and mentor at Southside Education, commented on the vitality of the online language environment:

> There is a web page I have seen where not only do they use Torres Strait Islander Creole but they use the shorthand text version of it. It is really fascinating how some people have adapted the technology to suit their needs.[41]

3.38   Miss Williams confirmed that while Facebook can be used destructively, the site allows students to consolidate their identity such as by sharing their experiences of racism, both on and offline, and to debate the issues.[42] She referred to occasions when online discussion had de-escalated intra-community conflict, following sensationalised media reportage.[43]

Cyber-safety initiatives

3.39   One of the key messages to the Committee was the need for appropriate educational approaches to be developed to address the particular circumstances of Indigenous people.

3.40   Most significant was the marked generational gap between mobile enabled and internet savvy youth, and family members at home who may be less familiar with internet functions or without internet access. Southside Education Principal Mrs Hill stated:

> For young people, technology is now part of their lives; we are not going to remove it from their lives. It is important for their benefit that their parents also have the capacity to access and utilise that technology, because usually it is through the family that young people receive guidance and learn what they should look out for and be careful about. For those reasons it is very important that we continue to work for equity in literacy and technology for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.[44]

3.41   One of the most concerning risks of mobile activity raised with the Committee was the likelihood of suicide, resulting from unaddressed cyber-bullying.

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41   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 9.
42   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 9.
43   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 5.
44   *Committee Hansard*, 7 May 2013, p. 10.

3.42   The Committee heard about a range of measures addressing Indigenous cyber-bullying under the Strong Choices Project, a joint initiative between the NT Justice Department, Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT), National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) and SkinnyFish, a musical and digital media production company.[45]

3.43   One of these measures was the 'Strong Choices' music video, featuring the Tiwi Island band B2M which started out in 2004–06 to address the outbreak of youth suicide on the islands. AMSANT's John Paterson explained:

> Most of our clinicians and Aboriginal health workers are saying that there are linkages to suicide and this texting, cyber-bullying texting, that's going on in communities at the moment. [46]

3.44   The video will be circulated via mobile messages across remote communities and in a broader national campaign by the AFP.[47]

3.45   As mentioned in the previous chapter, the CCI noted the importance of ensuring Elders and older people in remote communities are knowledgeable about ICT use and cyber-bullying so that they can provide leadership to youth about culturally appropriate online activities.[48]

3.46   The Committee referred to the introduction of 'chat room' monitors at Tennant Creek, which was also part of the Strong Choices Project,[49] and to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs' (FaHCSIA) Stronger Futures education program which addresses challenges posed by the availability of sexually explicit material, including mobile 'sexting', to traditional cultural values.[50]

3.47   Ms Eileen Deemal-Hall, who developed the Stronger Choices initiative for the NT Justice Department, referred to the importance of informing

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45   Funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), see CCI, *Submission 2*, p. 14.

46   *ABC News*, 'The Fight against Cyber-bullying in Remote Aboriginal Communities,' Transcript, <www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-17/the-fight-against-cyber-bullying-in-remote/4206910> viewed April 2013.

47   ABC News 'The Fight against Cyber-bullying in Remote Aboriginal Communities' <www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-17/the-fight-against-cyber-bullying-in-remote/4206910>

48   CCI, *Submission 2*, p. 14.

49   Although there is anecdotal evidence there had been a shift to Facebook to avoid detection. ACCAN Indigenous consultation workshop, *Submission 1*, p. 2, also cited CCI, HIP, *Submission 2*, p. 6.

50   See discussion in FaHCSIA, *Submission 3*, pp. 4–7.

remote users about internet protocols and security in culturally appropriate terms:

> The story we use…we call it Digital Footprints. When an Aboriginal person goes from their country, whether they are a Larrakia person, might come over to my country, you find ways to protect yourself. It's not like when you leave footprints in your own country, eventually rain washes away wind washes away... it stays there forever.[51]

Conclusion

3.48   The Committee notes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, with support of key government and community stakeholders, are proactive in developing cyber-safety initiatives in terms that are understood and embraced by their peoples.

3.49   The evidence taken has confirmed that there are strong protective mechanisms in Indigenous culture which can be leveraged to safeguard the vulnerable, including youth, from potential online harms. However, there are also reasons to believe that the rollout of new services into remote areas could exacerbate intercommunity conflict while diminishing community capacity to manage such developments.

3.50   In most cases, the benefits of smartphone connectivity for Indigenous Australians are otherwise obvious. Family and cultural connections can be kept up at a distance, which may lesson disincentives to take up work and schooling in other areas. Alternatively, the capacity to remain 'on country' and access services or set up a business becomes possible.

3.51   The Committee believes that a more detailed consideration of options to develop empowering and culturally appropriate education and other protective measures to address 'lateral violence', racism and other external threats to Indigenous people, young and old, would be beneficial.

3.52   The Committee also considers that a future inquiry could investigate the broader benefits of the digital economy to Indigenous Australians, while surveying any particular barriers and risks for delivery of health and other services or development of businesses online, particularly in regional and remote areas.

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51   Cited in Clare Rawlinson, '"Divas Chat", Re-shaping Remote Communities', 105. 7, ABC Darwin, 5 January 2013.