

**SUBMISSION No. 1**  
**Inquiry into Cyber-safety for Indigenous Australians**



23 May 2013

The Secretary  
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety  
R1-109 Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

[jfcc@aph.gov.au](mailto:jfcc@aph.gov.au)

ACCAN thanks the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety for the opportunity to contribute to its inquiry into issues surrounding cyber-safety for Indigenous Australians.

Through our engagement with our Indigenous membership, we are aware that cyber-safety is a concerning issue for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In March, ACCAN held an Indigenous consultation workshop in Alice Springs, in which cyber-bullying was raised as a key issue.

ACCAN notes the Committee's focus on cyber-bullying, and encourages a broader investigation into Indigenous cyber-safety. While cyber-bullying is indeed a concerning issue for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, cyber-safety incorporates a wide range of issues, including protecting sensitive cultural information and online financial security. Of particular importance is the need to raise awareness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on the implications of misguided internet use.

Please find below our response to the terms of reference.

**i. The nature and prevalence of cyber-bullying and other risks and threats, in particular via social and networking sites and mobile phones, amongst Indigenous Australians**

As is the case in wider Australia, cyber-bullying is an increasingly prevalent issue in Indigenous communities.<sup>1</sup> The advent of the smartphone, which provides easy and regular access to social media sites, contributes greatly to the increase in cyber-bullying.

Indigenous Australians, particularly those in remote communities, are a lot less likely to have fixed-line services in the home.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that mobile phones, where coverage is available, are the preferred communications device for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>3</sup> This strongly suggests that most cyber-bullying in the Indigenous community is likely to occur through the use of mobile phones.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rebgetz L, *The fight against cyber bullying in remote Aboriginal communities*, ABC News, 17 August 2012, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-17/the-fight-against-cyber-bullying-in-remote/4206910>>.

<sup>2</sup> Brady & Dyson, *Report to the Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire Council on Mobile Technology in the Bloomfield River Valley*, 2009, p13.

<sup>3</sup> Indigenous Remote Communications Association, *IRCA Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2011-12*, p5.

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 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’.<sup>4</sup>

The ability to convene large numbers of people virtually or physically through mobile communications can have serious implications in any community. In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities,<sup>5</sup> lateral violence is a concerning issue. The nature of cyber-bullying, in that it usually occurs between peers, means issues that cause lateral violence in communities can be exacerbated online.

**ii. Whether and how these risks and threats differ in rural and remote Indigenous communities**

A particular difference that may be found in rural and remote Indigenous communities is the cultural and community context of cyber-bullying, and the ways in which cyber-bullying can be resolved. Cyber-bullying in rural and remote communities may be directly related to an ongoing family or language group conflict, and can impact the whole community.<sup>6</sup> Community involvement to resolve cyber-bullying is more likely in rural and remote communities; for example, the Council of Elders and Respected Persons in Tennant Creek introduced a ‘cyber cop’ program to address cyber-bullying. This is a community identified mechanism for addressing a complex issue, which is an effective way to minimise the risks and threats of cyber-bullying.<sup>7</sup>

For rural and remote Indigenous communities, relatively low penetration of ICT means a lack of familiarity and confidence.<sup>8</sup> A lack of digital literacy and understanding of the internet presents potential risks and threats for rural and remote Indigenous Australians, both in exposure to cyber-bullying and engaging with misunderstood online activity.

**iii. The impact and implications of cyber-bullying and other risks and threats on access and use of information and communication technologies by Indigenous Australians**

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

---

<sup>4</sup> Evidence collected during ACCAN Indigenous consultation workshop.

<sup>5</sup> Lateral violence is violence by members of a community directed at other members of that community, particularly when the community is an oppressed or minority community who members are already faced with violence from outside the community. Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social justice report 2011*, October 2011, chapter 2, <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/chapter-2-lateral-violence-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-communities-social>>.

<sup>6</sup> Rebgetz L, *The fight against cyber bullying in remote Aboriginal communities*, ABC News, 17 August 2012, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-17/the-fight-against-cyber-bullying-in-remote/4206910>>.

<sup>7</sup> Evidence collected during ACCAN Indigenous consultation workshop.

<sup>8</sup> Home Internet for Remote Indigenous Communities: A consumer research report by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, the Centre for Appropriate Technology and the Central Land Council, 2011, pp53-54.

may be harassed or have racist comments left about them, and may force people to abandon the use of information and communications technology.<sup>9</sup>

For those victims that are targeted by people they know from within their community the effects can be even more damaging. Cyber-bullying is relatively widespread these days and can lead to high levels of despair for victims. Cyber-bullying may force victims to retreat from information and communication technologies altogether, which can have negative impacts on education, employment and social development.

**iv. Ways to support Indigenous communities, including rural and remote Indigenous communities, to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying and other risks and threats**

1. Empowering communities and individuals to take action against cyber-bullying and cyber-crime should be a priority. There is often a lack of awareness and familiarity surrounding ICT in Indigenous communities, particularly in remote communities where ICT adoption is relatively new. Supporting Indigenous communities to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying should be done in a way that is appropriate to individual communities or regions.
2. It is important to recognise, as mentioned previously, the cultural context in which cyber-bullying may be taking place. Assisting communities to address cyber-bullying through a community developed process will help ensure resolutions are culturally appropriate and understood by the community.
3. Consideration should be given to culturally appropriate education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to foster an understanding that racial hatred and vilification in the online social media environment are unacceptable, and should not be tolerated.<sup>10</sup> Indigenous people must be confident to express their cultural identity online, and active steps should be taken to demonstrate they are protected against racial discrimination under the Racial Discrimination Act.
4. Sensitive cultural information is often restricted within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with only certain groups, such as men, afforded access. In this respect it is important that community members, such as elders, are aware of what others are putting online. ACCAN recommends supporting communities in developing guidelines for what is culturally appropriate behaviour online, and suggest a formal process for developing such guidelines be considered.
5. Most importantly, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of cyber-bullying should be done in close partnership with communities. Community identified solutions to prevent and resolve cyber-bullying should be highly regarded and supported wherever possible.

Michael Charlton  
ACCAN Indigenous Policy Officer

---

<sup>9</sup> Comment made by interviewee on *Think B4 U Click*, a cyber-bullying project by Women's Legal Service NSW produced through ACCAN grants scheme.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/know-your-rights-racial-discrimination-and-vilification>