

CAYLUS submission  
ACCC Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry

In the last five years a series of rolling disasters across the nation (bushfires and floods) have made the fragility of communications infrastructure glaringly obvious, particularly in regional and remote regions. This fragility means that just when it is needed most, communications are knocked out, putting lives at risk.

Also, most communications technologies are geared towards an urban market, where the density of consumers and businesses make investments in communications infrastructure profitable. However, in remote regions this market-based view of communications becomes a fatal flaw, as reliable and robust communications – and affordable access – are essential services and need to be recognized as such. Reliable, robust communications are a crucial part of community safety and wellbeing.

*Remote Aboriginal communities*

Remote Aboriginal communities have been the last to benefit from improvements in communications technologies. Up until around 30 years ago, CB radio links were the way that people who worked in bush communities communicated with each other. Telephone and fax came later, then in the last 20 years or so, wireless technology, mobile telephone and the internet have taken over as the main methods for communication.

The rapid advancement in communications tech has widened and exacerbated an already significant gap between availability and access to services in remote Australia. Mobile phone services have been slow to reach remote communities, with some communities in the region still without access. The downsides of remote mobile services are that they use satellite backhaul (slow, insufficiently robust, suffer from contention issues), and are very expensive for the user. Thus, the poorest people in Australia have the fewest options, and are often forced to use the most expensive data and telephone services.

A recent example of both the fragility and essential nature of reliable and robust communications:

- During the 2022 floods in remote Central Australia, a community North-East of Alice Springs was cut off for close to three weeks. Their communications infrastructure went down almost immediately, no phones, no mobile service, no internet, and the airstrips and roads were too flooded for anyone to travel to or from the community. One night the clinic had an acute care patient and a woman giving birth at the clinic, and had no way of contacting a tele-health service for advice and support. They did not have enough staff to manage both the acute care patient and the birth, and just had to hope that the birth would go OK. A nurse was out in the pouring rain at 2 am with a satellite phone in the hopes that she would be able to contact someone to advise them on patient care. Rain and cloud cover made this difficult, as they strongly affect satellite signal.

- In the wider community, no-one could buy food in the store, as they were all on Basics cards and the eftpos terminals did not work. No-one could contact family to let them know how vulnerable family members were, or to check on whether family that were travelling had managed to reach their destination safely. This is just one example of a frequently occurring scenario in remote regions.

Public – and free – WIFI hotspots are often the only digital access in remote communities, as there is not the financial capacity to pay for or manage their own connectivity. Cheap mobile phones are the device of choice, and there is little to no choice of provider, with Telstra dominating mobile phone service provision.

### *Poverty and communications access*

The deepest poverty in Australia is found in the Northern Territory, along with the highest prevalence of children at greatest risk of social exclusion.

The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) report ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage based on the Census of Population and Housing. The three Local Government Areas (LGAs) covering remote Central Australia (Barkly LGA, Central Desert LGA and MacDonnell LGA) all rank in the bottom percentile of all LGAs in Australia according to the 2016 SEIFA report (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

According to data from the 2013/14 census, close to 50% of remote Aboriginal community people of working age (16 to 64) receive no income. No job, no Centrelink payments. This percentage has probably risen, partly due to increasingly punitive measures applied by Centrelink, such as scrapping the remote area exemption, where people who lived in remote communities only had to report to Centrelink every 3 months. Lack of access to Centrelink and other agencies ostensibly responsible for social support is a major reason for the systematic impoverishment of remote Aboriginal people and communities.

There has been a simultaneous push from government and other agencies and services to limit access to their services to on-line only, further disadvantaging people with poor access to communications. Waiting on the phone (paying for your own data) to talk to Centrelink while the device goes flat, or the call is dropped (millions of calls to Centrelink go unanswered every year), is a disheartening and frustrating experience, and many people give up, seeking support from impoverished family rather than go through the humiliating experience of trying to negotiate the obstacle course of poor quality and inadequate communications.

### *Town camps*

Examples of market driven thinking:

- Barely 2 km from the Alice Springs CBD, Hidden Valley (Ewyenper Atwatye) town camp has a Skymuster WIFI hotspot at their community centre. Hidden Valley is tucked into rocky hills, so does not have line of sight for accessing wireless broadband from any of the towers around town. Mobile telephony is patchy and

unreliable. Trying to stream football matches or other live content, making mobile or video calls, or watching YouTube is a haphazard business at best.

- Fibre runs past the road that goes to Ewyenper Atwatye, a few hundred meters from the camp. When enquiries were made about a terrestrial connection to the camp, Telstra said that there would not be enough people and households in the camp to make it worth their while to put a landline service in to Ewyenper Awatye, even though they are mandated to do so under the Universal Service Obligation (USO). Meanwhile, some of the nearby suburbs are being upgraded to FTTP. This was clearly a market driven decision.
- 12.5kms from the Alice Springs CBD, Karnte town camp is poorly served by their Skymuster Wi-Fi hotspot, the only service available. The nearest bus stop into town to shop and access services is a 2km walk away. If you are old, caring for young children, or cannot physically do the walk in the extreme temperatures of Central Australia, accessing services is very difficult, and is exacerbated by the poor-quality communications.

Many of the remote Aboriginal communities in the region are likewise poorly served by the communications networks they do have access to. Skymuster is often the only option as there is little to no investment in robust and reliable terrestrial services or strategies. Indeed, some remote community Wi-Fi hotspots have suffered a downgrade in their service, due to Telstra's withdrawal of support for ADSL services, and their replacement by the vastly slower and more limited data availability of Skymuster.

Even though there is mobile broadband infrastructure in many of these communities the communities were given no option other than Skymuster. The small cell mobile infrastructure in remote communities generally use geostationary Aussat satellites for backhaul, so many of them are not sufficiently robust for Wi-Fi hotspot backhaul.

### *The Shell Game*

NBN and Telstra each hold the other responsible for faults and gaps in services. This leads to a seemingly endless loop of referrals to the other service, or worse, to a clunky website, to get help with connectivity issues. Ostensibly, NBN are responsible for data, and Telstra for telephony. Despite public phones being a Telstra responsibility, these have begun to disappear from some locations. The public phone at Trucking Yards town camp was removed, and camp residents were told there was one 400 metres away – across the road from another town camp. This puts people in harm's way, as if there is an incident or health crisis, they have to leave their home (and children), walk or run to the phone, take their chances with running into drunks or hostile groups, and hope the phone is working.

### *The Market Model*

As previously noted, the market model for communications infrastructure and communications is not fit for purpose in remote regions. The market model has not produced better outcomes, products and services through market competition, as few

people have the income and residence stability to be able to even work out what the best deal might be, let alone access it. Mostly, people have cheap mobile phones, and use pre-paid data, as this is the most manageable way for them to access communications. Also, the most expensive.

Lack of access to effective and reliable communications forms a key part of the poverty trap that ensnares Aboriginal people and families.

*Things to consider: proposed solutions*

- Discounted - and generous - data plans for remote community WiFi hotspots
- Sharing of communications infrastructure between providers. Current arrangements perpetuate monopolistic practices, with Telstra being the only viable option for many remote communities.
- Improved design and robustness of remote community telecommunications, with a range of options for consideration, and the capacity to provide good quality on-line services such as telehealth, remote education, and access to services.