

Digital Ethnography Research Centre

Disconnect

The internet, as shaped by the world's oldest living culture.

From RMIT University with contributions from First Nations Media Australia. Produced in partnership with Telstra.

Killswitch

When you live in a place with mobile phone reception you can switch off your device, but the network stays on. But what if you wanted the whole thing switched off? In some remote Australian communities, it can be.

In this episode you heard from:

Dennis Charles

Kumanjayi Katarinja

Jenny McFarland, [CAYLUS](#)

Daniel Sacchero, [Easyweb Digital](#)

Jonathan Daw, [First Nations Media Australia](#)

Music prior to credits: Native Tongue performed by [Mojo Juju](#). Licensed courtesy Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The [inDigiMOB](#) program worked with us on this episode. [inDigiMOB](#) is a partnership between First Nations Media Australia and Telstra.

[First Nations Media Australia](#) (formerly known as Indigenous Remote Communications Association or IRCA) is the national peak body for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media industry.

Soft sculpture of tin can telephone by [Rhonda Sharpe, Yarrenyty Arltere Artists](#). Image design by Pam Koger.

Dennis:

Yeah just hunting around and there's no mobile phone... Can you tell me the question again?

Jonathan:

Yeah. Just tell us about a time when you were happy you had no internet.

Dennis:

I time when I was happy... I used to just play around with my friends. You'd get to go hunting... ah, you know, you'd get to cook the kangaroo... you know, do whatever you want! And learn how it's cooked. Just anything. And, playing around with friends, going for a walk... It's just the moments were happy, that, when there was no phone.

Ellie:

When you live in a place with mobile reception you can switch off your device, but the network stays on. But what if - and for me this is a big what if - I just wanted the whole thing switched off? In some remote Australian remote communities, it can be.

Remote communities without mobile reception will sometimes have public WIFI. Unlike the mobile networks we're tapping into in the city, WIFI is relatively easy to control... You just flick a switch.

Because of that, community members are faced with some difficult choices.

Where should the public WIFI be located?

Should it always be on, or is it better to limit use to certain times of the day?

What happens if someone uses the WIFI to stir up trouble?

And who decides what to do if that happens?

In this episode we are going to hear from two people who live in a community about 300 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, called Yuendumu.

This is Dennis Charles.

Dennis:

Yeah. In Yuendumu, a couple of hundred people who live here. There's a school, church, and a couple of stores. Probably three stores.

Ellie:

And Kumanjayi Katakarinja

Kumanjayi:

Yuendumu is probably a big place in our... Tanami region. It's an umbrella for those other communities.

Ellie:

We will also hear from two people who install and manage WIFI networks in remote communities.

This is Disconnect, a podcast about the internet in remote Aboriginal communities.

My name is Ellie Rennie. I research how people use the internet.

Tyson:

And my name is Tyson Yunkaporta, Aplech fella from Western Cape York. I also do research on Aboriginal language, cognition and social change.

Ellie:

The public WIFI hotspots you get in communities are typically funded by government or a local organisation. Those who do the technical set-up and management of these systems get to see first-hand how communities are using them.

Jenny:

Okay. I'm Jenny McFarland. I work at CAYLUS - Central Australian Youth Link Up Service - and I'm a community development worker.

Ellie:

Jenny had this to say about the difference between having mobile reception and having public WIFI.

Jenny:

One of the great things about the public WIFI hotspots is that you can set up a router system that (a) filters the content so people can't get hold of the really nasty stuff, and also you can turn it off.

Actually, there was one story I heard from a remote community where one old man got so fed up with the trouble that was caused by the mobile phone tower he went and chopped it down! That was in Western Australia somewhere, I think.

Most communities, when I was helping NT Libraries set up these WIFI hotspots, most communities said, 'we want it to go off at 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock at night, we don't want people up all night stalking each other on Facebook, or whatever they were doing'... and some communities said 'we don't want it on during school hours because we don't want the distraction, we want the kids to go to school'. One community has even said 'we don't want it on on Sundays, because that's family day'.

Ellie:

What was the set up?

Tyson:

The provocation. Either benevolent or not?

Ellie:

I don't think I used the word benevolent. I said social control.

Tyson:

Right, social control.

Ellie:

When I hear what Jenny's describing there, it makes me think about internet differently. So, where you have places where there's mobile reception it's almost a utility, and you can choose to use it or not, but that's up to you. It's a thing that you personally can't turn on or off at the source, you just decide when and how you use it individually. Whereas WIFI can be controlled, because you can decide at that local point what times it's going to be on, or even, for instance, who pays or whether it's filtered. So, in some respects it's a technology that enables social control.

Tyson:

It does. Cause to some extent you're able to control where different demographics in a community, where different sections of a community go at different times, when you're offering that WIFI. So back up home, for example, the council was putting on free WIFI out the front of the council building and putting tables and chairs where people would come and access that. There were also a lot of

surveillance cameras there in that spot. A lot of young men going to that spot and using that place there and at different times different people going to safely access that.

Ellie:

And while decisions around whether to be connected are made in community, the technology making the WIFI work is managed elsewhere. I spoke to Easyweb Digital, a company that runs around 60 networks in remote areas.

Why don't you say your name, and where you work?

Daniel:

Sure. My name is Daniel Sacchero and I work for Easyweb Digital.

Ellie:

Last time I spoke to you, when I went into your offices, you showed me a system that enables Easyweb to manage Wi-Fi remotely.

Daniel:

Yes.

Ellie:

As in if a community decides that they don't want it for a while –

Daniel:

Sure.

Ellie:

That you can switch it off. How does that work and what does that do?

Daniel:

Well it's highly technical, very complex, and actually works by word of mouth. So, when we get a call from the community, and we know, we got in the database some people that are authorised to make this call, they tell us that there is some trouble and they want to turn off the system, and we turn it off. Then, when we get a call back saying, it's all good now you can turn it on, we turn it on.

Within the community, there is certain people that are our contacts for the system, and the communities have requested that in our customer database that there is a few people that can make that call.

Ellie:

So, the communities requested this service, and... or someone felt it was necessary?

Daniel:

Yes.

Ellie:

Why do you think that they wanted that ability to turn it off?

Daniel:

There was some history of fights in the community about Facebook use and the people who were actually connected to Facebook using that public Wi-Fi. So, they saw a way of de-escalating the situation by turning off the connection.

Ellie:

This is Dennis Charles from Yuendumu. We met him at the start of the episode.

Dennis:

Yeah. Facebook's been changing a lot of things. There are people talking about each other, they come, they meet up they just fight somewhere else. It brings big problem. And, Facebook is like one word can change it into like big violence. Like in a real world, like in real life. If you say something, like, one word to another person right now and they could be like a fight right now. Fighting right now. People who would be posting another people's photo and it's unexpected when someone, you know, gets to your page and they see what is on your page, like, that's not right. And you know? There's argue... kind of, about the posting of the photo. Please get out... get that photo out or... It's just lot of things.

Ellie:

This is the kind of thing that might cause someone to want to turn the WIFI off.

Daniel:

So, I'm not going to argue with people in the community if that is the correct decision or not, I just... if there is a person in the community that can make that decision and they want to enforce it, we are happy to oblige.

Ellie:

And does that happen very often?

Daniel:

No. I only know of twice that might happen, it's not very common.

Ellie:

Yeah. But it gives them that assurance that if they wanted to, they could turn it off.

Daniel:

That's correct, yes.

Ellie:

And from my perspective, as someone who doesn't live somewhere where an elder can turn off the internet, it feels like it would have to be a pretty drastic situation for someone to make the phone call.

Tyson:

Um, and you'd would also have to question, like, whether it would actually help. You know, when literacy was introduced into the community, you almost straight away got people writing nasty things up on walls. You know, such and such is a big red such and such, and all the girls in this town are big such and suches, and all that. That caused fights, you know? Lots of big fights, but nobody went around and collected up everybody's pens and paper and said no more writing... 'None of ya's can read or write for six months!' You know, that's just... it's not a solution, and I think this is exactly the same. Yeah.

it's a bit of a knee jerk reaction and knee jerk solution. This idea that we've got to have this punitive measure, this control measure... You know, where we can hit a switch and the internet's off and then somehow all the problems that that's caused go away, and then we'll turn it back on. We're just basically... It's not like just rebooting something and it's going to run better. That's a bit of a false idea.

Ellie:

However, turning off the internet, even for just a few hours a day, can be a reminder that people need to be mindful of how they use social media. Here's Jenny again.

Jenny:

So, that community control makes people feel much safer about negotiating those sorts of internet and social media in particular spaces because there's been a lot of issues with fighting. Family fights that have sort of arrived on people's doorstep that have been sparked on

platforms like AirG and that take people completely by surprise, they've got no idea that you know that cousin from Community X is fighting with that cousin from Community Y. And then, suddenly, there's a whole mob turned up, ready to fight them, and nobody knows why. This is not manageable. You know, back before social media and mobile phones were a thing, then, all those disputes, people would know they were brewing, and they could proactively head them off before they actually started to become an issue and provoke, you know, sort of any form of hostilities.

Ellie:

There are also technical reasons why turning off WIFI is seen as the best option.

I think this next bit is where...

Daniel:

And Facebook is one...

In one particular community, some people were concerned about Facebook use. We implement some content filtering and content management. Facebook is one that it's almost impossible to filter out.

Ellie:

Why's that?

Daniel:

It's the way that they implement their services. And if you have technology like the one that we use, we use CISCO Umbrella which is a DNS lookup type service. Facebook is constantly changing where their content is served for. So super hard to manage that.

Ellie:

I just... The geeky part of me found that really interesting, that the filters don't work on Facebook, because it's constantly moving its location on the internet. That's my non-technical way of describing what I think he said. Which is why they would then see the ability to turn off the WIFI as the only way to deal with Facebook as opposed to filtering it, which is what, you know, every universities or schools or whomever would do if there was a particular website that they don't think is appropriate in that context. But in this case, it has to be an on or off response because of the way that these platforms move across the internet.

Tyson:

There are so many issues with Facebook. You know, it's been taken up wholeheartedly as part of our culture. It's part of everybody's identity now in the Aboriginal community. Facebook, it's a cultural thing. It's adopted and there's this completely unproblematised approach to it that everybody's taking. People aren't considering the data mining that's going on, the safety issues that are happening, the surveillance that happens through Facebook. So, you see in Hawaii and in New Zealand people are talking a lot about data sovereignty now and they're doing education, but this is coming out of the community, it's not a government program. You know, people are talking data sovereignty and protecting their images, their language, and all these things online. And it becomes something that the community gathers around and polices communally.

Ellie:

The ability to control infrastructure is not that far removed from the ability to control your data or identity online. I put it to Tyson that the ability to switch off the internet might also be considered a form of sovereignty, as in controlling how you choose to live.

Tyson:

I don't think so because it's concentrating that power into the hands of a few people in the community and these aren't going to be people that the community nominates, they'll be people who are selected by outsiders, you know, who conform to certain agendas or ideologies and, you know, say the things that people want them to say, um, in most cases. But, it's, no it's not our way to have power concentrated in the hands of a few people who decide to switch everything off. It's also taking away the agency of the users. And a user or a learner who has no agency is not somebody who's going to grow, it's not somebody who's going to learn to manage their own behaviour if they've got somebody else standing off at a distance who can shut down their behaviour at any time. How are they going to be able to make choices, and learn, take on new information? No, it needs to be a whole of community um conversation that goes on, and almost a bit of a movement in the community around pride and protection of culture and of identity.

Ellie:

There are also all sorts of practical issues around this idea of switching off the internet. Like, timing.

Tyson:

Yeah, so when my niece goes down to the store and she just out of the blue gets punched in the face because someone says, 'oh, you were talking to my boyfriend on Facebook', but then later she finds out that someone has hacked her account and sort of stirred that up, yeah, she had no indication that was coming. So, yeah, that is an issue. But the idea that that can be resolved by shutting it down after the fact? If you can't see it coming what's the good of a kill switch? You know, fair enough if there's some kind of chatter, I don't know, if you've some kind of central intelligence agency run by the Elders and they're going, 'we're getting a lot of chatter now, someone's going to start a fight, let's shut it down', um, that would be great but that's not possible.

It's just the idea that, just, shutting the gate after the horse has bolted. It's like, everyone's fighting! Everyone's left their phones at home cause they're out fighting anyway, it's like, let's shut that down now! I mean, I just hate this technology and I wish there was no phone towers. I wish we weren't doing this, I wish we weren't doing this podcast. I hate the whole thing. I hate the whole thing. But the idea of someone controlling it and shutting it down with some kind of weird punitive measure that they're pretending is pre-emptive, that they're able to keep everyone safe, it's just a false narrative, it's a false story. This is the reality and it's got risks and it's got benefits. And you need to be putting your energy into mitigating the risks and establishing a community of practice around the use of devices, you know, that is grounded in cultural integrity. And as you see happening in different communities, particularly in New Zealand. There are people who are moderating, approaching people and talking to them about posts they've made, you should take that down, and are you aware that that image can be seen by everybody. So, you've got this thing kind of happening, face to face in real time in communities. Moderation with people actually walking around and speaking to people to their face about it and doing stuff like that. And that's the kind of movement, grassroots movement, that needs to happen to mitigate these, because you need a lot of minds working together on something, you need all the users to be working together communally...

Ellie:

That's exactly what Kumanjayi Katarinja from Yuendumu, I think, does...Let's see if I can find her.

Kumanjayi:

Every time they are always on WIFI, I always say when somebody is putting wrong stories, I say don't put any wrong stories on my

Facebook, because... No abusements. Be friends and be friendly. And, um, we are all human beings.

Tyson:

Well, this is my understanding, and I'll have to do it really simply, in a simplistic way, of what happens to your spirit through technology. I think, there's enough research out there that shows that it appeals to the narcissism in people, and the ego in people. You know? This idea of constructing this identity online and becoming this identity and of the persona being a part of your psyche, the part of your psychological makeup that sort of takes over and that comes to the fore. And in our culture, that's your shadow spirit. So that's the part of your spirit that is very egotistical, very narcissistic, and it's, it's where all your attachments are. You know? And how you're attracted to images of yourself, and, ah, to your own name and all of these things. So that's why you can't have an image of a person after they've passed away, and you can't say their name after they've passed away, because it attracts that shadow spirit.

It's just this dark, oily thing that's full of longing and wants to attach itself to familiar places.

You know? In a lot of cases you have to shut down entire places, you'll shut down a house, sometimes you will shut down an entire street or a whole region of coastline that no one can go to for six months because that shadow spirit keeps going back to the places, images, sounds that it's attached to. And what happens is when you're focused on your own images that you're putting up all the time, this online persona that you are creating of yourself, and this digital self that's just floating out there in space, it's, um, it's a real thing. And it becomes part of your shadow spirit. And you focus on it so much and spend so much time on it that things go out of balance. Cause there are at least three other parts of your spirit. There's your higher self, and your ancestral spirit and your living spirit and all these things need to be in balance. Those spirits need to be in balance. And when they're in balance then your shadow spirit becomes a stable ego that drives you to act in perfect ways in the world. You know, without it you wouldn't act at all, you would just be sitting on your butt. You know, it's a good thing, the shadow spirit, it's the thing that drives you to act upon the world. Um, in perfect ways, when it's in balance with the rest of your spirit.

What I found as soon as I got that mobile phone and started doing that, this came profoundly out of balance that this shadow spirit part of me, for want of a better word. There's words in language for it. But this part

of my spirit, it grew larger than the rest of me. And it's somehow, kinda... I don't know if it split or it just extended into this digital world where it just kind of grew like a cancer and I found it completely tripped me up. And, you know, there were a lot of bad psychological effects and, ah, relational effects. You know, my relationship with country changed, my relationship with family and people changed. And I became sick, you know, profoundly sick. And I've had to struggle um really strongly to try and start bringing that back into balance. And it is very difficult. But it's about paying attention to the signals you get, and the signs and messages. And um staying in touch with the ones that keep you on track. And being very limited with what you do on the phone.

And people talk about wrong story. Don't put wrong story on Facebook. We also need to look at the metanarratives and look at the wrong stories. The assumptions and grand narratives that are going on here as well. You know? Young people having internet access and sitting up all night fawning over their images and the images of their friends and doing god knows what, that's wrong story.

Jonathan:

That's all. Was there anything else you'd like to say? About the internet, phones, Facebook?

Dennis:

When there's no phone, life is... you can see everything is clear. You can see far distance, everywhere. Without no phone.

I think I'm getting too much addicted... for my phone. Like, there's Facebook, YouTube, everything, other things... I have to go on. And it's making me, like... busy...one little phone's got everything in it.

Yeah, it's just... phone is problem. Like, technology is problem. But when you had the phone box, that was good in those days. But now it's like... I don't know... Everybody is getting too much technology and they can get too much excess.

Yeah. Make your life clear. Better than darker. Make it brighter not darker, it'll be disaster in your life. More happening to me probably. Yeah, I see too much dark on my phone.

Ellie:

We'd like to thank the Elders of the regions we travelled to in the creation of this podcast and during the research that underpins it.

Disconnect is produced by RMIT University, led by myself Ellie Rennie, Indigo Holcombe-James and Tyson Yunkaporta with producer James Milsom.

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