**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.

**Sky Camp**  
In some Aboriginal cultures, when someone passes away, their name and image should not be spoken or seen, let alone shared online. In this episode we discuss the topic of death, and how customs surrounding death are being challenged by social media and internet use.

In this episode you heard from:  
Dennis Charles  
Djalu  
Dhapanbal Yunupingu  
Ishmael Marika  
Kumanjayi Katakarinja  
Veronica Lynch Kngwarraye

Music by [DRMNGNW](#).

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.
Veronica:
When it’s our family and we see a picture of our brother or somebody and our children have put his face up there then we see who’s posted it, then we tell them – oh, you can’t put your uncle’s face like that. Because my son did that, I said you can’t put his face up like that. You know? Even if you are remembering his day today that he has passed on, but to see his face on Facebook is not good. And I told him and he got it down, and also my friend she lost her son through an accident, and she put his face on the screen as well, and I told her the same thing, you know, sis, you can’t do that because our law and our ways says that his father’s side of the family will see his picture on Facebook and say why are you doing that, you know? You just lost your son, your son just passed away, and we can’t see his face on Facebook. And they put it down. But there’s not so many images, it’s always asked for, you know? Authority is given.

Tyson:
Welcome to Disconnect, a podcast about the internet in remote Aboriginal communities.

My name’s Tyson Yunkaporta. I belong to the Appalech clan from Western Cape York.

Ellie:
I’m Ellie Rennie, I research how people use the internet.

During the making of this series, a number of people told us that when someone passes away, their name and image should not be shared on Facebook or other online sites. You first heard from Veronica, who we’ve also heard from in other episodes of this podcast.

Some years ago, now, I was working on a project where we gave computers to families in three outstations. Tragically, there was a car accident near one community, and a number of people died. At that point, an entire family stopped using their computer. I raised this with Tyson and this was his response.

Tyson:
That online space is seen as a place, almost. Because the custom is that the places, the places a person has occupied during their life, once they have passed away those places need to be warmed, you know, with smoke, they need to be cleaned, they need to be left, to sit for a certain period of time and then reopened again, those places. And that could be a place in the bush, beach, it could be a street. Usually an entire
house would need to be vacated in this way and cleaned in that way. That’s really interesting to me.

Particularly the name of the person is very powerful and that’s what we need to really explore here. It’s the power of names, words and images.

Ellie:
In this episode we discuss the topic of death, in particular how customs surrounding death are being challenged by social media and internet use.

Tyson:
So, we really need to understand the power of names, words and images in this reality. These are very powerful things and I guess if you, if you look at the cosmology of universe with the sky camp and earth camp are mirroring each other. And the sky camp is that realm of spirit and the intangible, the abstract, that kind of dreaming side. And the earth and people that’s your tangible reality. But these two are in constant communication with each other so where you have your story places or sacred sites, those are sites of overlap between those two worlds, constant overlap which is why you need to be careful when you enter those places and follow all the right protocols. They can make you sick.

Those sites of overlap they can also occur through ritual, through ceremony, but also through the intentional use of metaphors. The most powerful metaphors are words and images. Names are very powerful because a name it’s a metaphor, the name is not the person, but the name is patterned from that person. That name represents that person. It’s the metaphor that goes across between the worlds, that calls that person’s spirit.

You can say the wrong thing in your mundane reality every day and that can have the same effect as a curse or a blessing because it’s creating a communication between those two worlds and it goes in a feedback loop between the two worlds.

It changes the reality. It can make rain, it can cause accidents, illness, can cause trouble, can cause bad feeling, you know, because there is a shift in that spirit.

So, what does this mean for cyberspace? What does this mean for digital technologies? A place that’s not really a place, but a place that’s being seen in culture as a place. It’s being responded to as a place. But
where is it? Because is that part of the spirit world? Is it a wrong place?
And it’s hard to know.

Ellie:
An Aboriginal media organisation based in Arnhem Land, ARDS,
produced some radio programs on this topic. Most of the interviews
were in Yolngu Matha, one of the languages from the region, but one
interview was in English. This is artist Ishmael Marika.

Ishmael:
Before, in early days, it’s social media, but it’s not the social media. It’s
people passing messages to the other communities. They have to make
the message stick on the stick and pass it on to the man that can run
far, or send the white clay to pass the message, ‘there is a ceremony
happening’, ‘there is a funeral’, or ‘there is an initiation ceremony’, or
men’s business. They send the white clay. That’s the past, you know?
Early days. Maybe eighteenth century. Early days. Before the Facebook.
Yeah.

It’s very different because Yolngu, some Yolngu, put deceased people
on the Facebook and other people not happy by people putting photos
on Facebook because that’s public. You have to wait a couple of years
until the family says it’s okay to put it on Facebook or any video or even
the names, deceased names, you can’t say their names. You have to
wait for another couple of years until the family says yep, you’re
allowed to say their names. And that’s in the law here. In Yolngu.

But Facebook, and media site, it’s different because that’s not our law,
it’s outsider social media.

Ellie:
Here’s Dhapanbal Yunupingu is recalling the death of Dr Yunupingu.

Dhapanbal:
When the old man passed away, the next day it was, like crazy, you
know? Everyone was talking about him on Facebook. And we got a little
bit upset, all the family. We understand his work, that he was really
well known around Australia, and around the world. That’s fine for non-
Indigenous people, you know? But in Yolngu ways, that’s wrong,
because we’ve got our own law. Usually when someone passes away,
that’s when our families gather together and hear the news the right
way, through the clap sticks and clan song lines. That’s our law. We
don’t go straight to facebook and put the name of the deceased up
online. So that time, the old man passed away, our elder, our feelings
were hurt because some people did post his name online which was wrong. That was a painful time. We understand his work and that he’s well known. He worked all around Australia and represented us all around the world. He toured his music around the world to promote our law and culture, and ways of life, and that our laws are still strong and active today. But so many people still did not understand the appropriate process and posted his name on Facebook.

Tyson:
There’s a quote from the transcripts here from Djalu.

Ellie:
Djalu is a senior elder of Gaalpu, a clan group from North Eastern Arnhem Land.

Tyson:
And he really sets out and lays down his law first around those two sisters, olive python, rock all of these things, all of those places, he lays out that law and how it’s patterned in the land and in his practice. But then he asserts: “I don’t want young people to put my stories and my picture on Facebook. It interferes with real life. You young people could get yourselves into trouble. You could lose your identity to English. You take what is not yours, you place yourselves above the law, even though our kinship laws exist for life and marriage”.

This is really interesting because he is asserting that people placing these stories on the internet are placing themselves above the law, the law of the land, his law that he holds. He does not want his stories and picture on the internet and this is the part that really strikes a chord with me. When he says the words that this “interferes with real life”. So, there’s that real life there, that tangible reality, earth side, that tangible reality which is the real life the mundane. Um, these things in this cyberspace, in this kind of false shadow sky camp that’s been created, this digital void, placing, you know, items from the law the traditional law, story, image, names, placing these things in that realm is interfering with real life, it’s interfering with the reality here. Yeah. Potentially in really destructive ways.

Ellie:
Elsewhere in this series we’ve heard from a woman from Yuendumu, a community about 300 k’s northwest of Alice Springs.

Kumanjayi:
My name is Kumanjayi Katakaringa. I live at Yuendumu community.
Ellie:
Kumanjayi is not the first name she was born with. It’s an avoidance name. She is using it because someone else in her community or kinship network who had the same first name passed away and that name therefore cannot be spoken.

Kumanjayi:
And putting pics or little clips about that person that passed away. But sometimes when I saw, long time, when I saw my nephew.

Ellie:
Kumanjayi tells a story of how it can be hard for people who want to share stories of their loved ones on Facebook. She has to monitor her list of friends, so she can be respectful of the wishes of their families.

Kumanjayi:
When I am on Facebook, I really slowly look at my friend list because I have a lot of friend list from everywhere as well, every languages.

Ellie:
For her it’s easier if families control what is posted.

Kumanjayi:
I see all those ones, not about bad things, but I come into those little pics that comes, and they solve those problems themselves culturally and they always solve their problems, because they see their own family putting the pics of their family or brothers and sisters, that’s better. If wrong people do that they get into argument.

Tyson:
This is not a new problem, it was a problem right from the start of the moving image, and even photographs. That’s always been a problem we’ve had to find ways around. And you see the sort of slack policy solutions that people put in place, which don’t work. No one’s figured out how to deal with this on television for example. So, they just put a disclaimer up at the start: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are advised, you know that the following program may contain images of deceased people.

They don’t give any details about what community, what families are involved in that or anything like this, so that people are able to filter, it’s just basically a blanket disclaimer at the start. So, basically, if that was of any use to us at all, if we were using that, it means we would
never see any media involving Indigenous people at all, we’d have to shut it off as soon as we saw the disclaimer. Which nobody does. It’s a little bit like the terms and conditions that you have to click yes, I’ve read this, before you use anything online. Nobody actually reads that. You’re just basically indemnifying the people who are providing the content against any kind of accountability.

This is the same. It doesn’t work.

Ellie:
As this is a problem given rise to by technology, I wondered whether there’s a technological approach that might deal with this.

Tyson:
I mean, it’s there already. It’s just not being used for our benefit. They are able to tailor, not two google searches are the same for a different person. You know? They’re able to tailor things to your algorithm, they’re able to filter content, to advertise things to your profile. The technology is there, it’s just not available to us. I guess if we were able to open that up and people and communities were able to tailor their own algorithms to their needs and update these as needed. So, if you were able to put the name of a deceased person into that app or add it to the list, or a community added it to a list that they were all subscribing to, all that content is filtered now. I think that’s quite doable.

There is an app right now I’ve heard of where you can just subscribe and click on the lists that are in line with your ideology or your triggers or the things that you don’t want to see or hear, there might be a political viewpoint you don’t like so you can click that and there’s a list that someone has already made of you of all the hundreds of thousands of people on Twitter who think like that and they’re immediately blocked.

Ellie:
Here’s Dennis Charles from Yuendumu, who we also met in other episodes of this podcast.

Dennis:
I just came across one person, not one person, I just came across a person, he was posting someone who had passed away. Like, younger, maybe older, it wasn’t that long ago, maybe. And, he was told not to post the deceased pictures. He was told not to post it. And he was getting messages from posters... they were posting comments to take
the photo off, and he got upset and he would swear... Like, you know using inappropriate words on his posts, comments, telling them, they don’t want me to do this and that. You know. Telling them peoples off...
And, you know, he was telling himself that he missed the person who he or she missed the person that they lost, and he couldn’t take it, you know? He was just... Some people just yeah... He got really angry and he didn’t want to take the things off... he got really angry and he had to take it out and in his own word he had to just say... inappropriate words to his posts. Yeah.

Tyson:
I believe this not just a religion. This cosmology is not just a religion. It’s the reality. And I strongly believe that it’s the reality for everyone, because I see it mirrored in culture around the world. We’re always talking about this interaction between heaven and earth. Every culture and every religion has that. I think the idea that non-Indigenous people have nothing, and that these things, these names and images do not affect them, I don’t think that’s right. So, I did hear a story about a phenomenon that started on a reality tv show, the Kardashians or something like that. And they were taking these images of their enemies, people they didn’t like, and they were putting them in the freezer, like this little curse they were doing. All these teenagers, all around the world were doing the same thing and there was even a name for it, they called it ‘freezing people’. And they were taking the photographs and putting them in the freezer, and those people would have bad luck, or get sick.

I think this is something that everybody understands on some level, it’s not just an Indigenous thing I think it’s a human thing. We have memorial pages on the internet all the time for people who have passed away. People calling out their names in grief, people going through unhelpful new stages of grief like denial and bargaining and things while they are wailing out the names of these people and putting all their objects and images up around the place. I think you talk to a lot of old people now they say it’s really thick – the ghosts that are around now – the unresting ghosts all around the world. You know? I think it’s these images calling to them.

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.

Music by DRMNGNW.

Telstra is funding the project as an action within their Reconciliation Action Plan 2018–2021.

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 the Indigenous Remote Communications Association or IRCA) is the national peak body for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media industry.