'Keeping Intouchable'

A community report on the use of mobile phones and social networking by young Aboriginal people in Victoria.
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Terminology

In this community report the word ‘Aboriginal’ is used to refer to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island descent. The term ‘Indigenous’ is only used specifically in reference to organisations, existing documents or policies that use the term and where information derived from those sources.

While Aboriginal people in southeast Australia often identify as Koori’s, this report uses the word ‘Aboriginal’ in acknowledgement of the diversity of participants who are living in Victoria, but whose Aboriginal heritage is outside Victoria.

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Research Team

Mr Philip Morrissey (Academic Coordinator AIS program) began the process by forming a multidisciplinary research team from across The University of Melbourne. Dr Fran Edmonds coordinated the research project and the team. The research team consisted of:

- Mr Philip Morrissey: Academic Coordinator, AIS, School of Culture and Communication
- Dr Fran Edmonds: Research Fellow AIS (2011-June 2012), currently Research Fellow in the Research Unit for Public Culture, School of Culture and Communication
- Ms Christel Rachinger: Research Assistant, AIS, School of Culture and Communication
- Dr Jenny Waycott: Research Fellow, Department of Computing and Information Systems, Melbourne School of Engineering
- Dr Odette Kelada: Lecturer, AIS, School of Culture and Communication
- Dr Rachel Nordlinger: Senior Lecturer in Linguistics, School of Language and Linguistics

Major Project Contributors

The researchers would like to thank the following people for their contribution to the project: Kimba Thompson, Sistagirl Productions; Vaso Elifsiniotis, Victorian Aboriginal Education Authority, Inc.; The Koorie Heritage Trust; Dixon Patten, Graphic Designer; Lea Volpe, Reservoir District Secondary College (RDSC); Leigh Saunders, Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services (BWAYS); the project’s Reference Group (all of whom are named in the report), the Wannik Unit at Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and James Atkinson, Koorie Engagement Coordinator, Northern Metropolitan Region (DEECD). As well, assistance from IBES, particularly their Communications Manager, Adam Lodders, was greatly appreciated; and also Murrup Barak, Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development, UoM, for providing the venue for the report’s launch. Finally, the researchers extend their thanks to all the young people whose stories have been a major contribution to the project. We thank the RDSC students: Ciolla, Kyle, Jae, Jordan, Brandon, Emma, Jazz; and from BWAYS: Patrick, Liam, Dalton and Joshua.
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## Glossary

**Digital literacy:** Digital literacy is the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, and analyse information using digital technology. It involves a working knowledge and understanding of current high-technology, encompassing all digital devices, such as computer hardware, software, the Internet, and cell phones. Digitally literate people can communicate and work more efficiently with these tools. Digital literacy is concerned with learning how to effectively find, use, create, and communicate information while using digital technologies. It is not just about being literate at using a computer.

**E-learning:** E-learning, or electronically supported learning, is essentially the computer and network-enabled transfer of skills and knowledge. E-learning applications and processes include Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual education opportunities and digital collaboration. Content is delivered via the Internet, intranet/extranet, audio or video tape, satellite TV, and CD-ROM. It can be self-paced or instructor-led and includes media in the form of text, image, animation, streaming video and audio.

**Information Communication Technology (ICT):** Information Communication Technology (ICT) describes the unification of communication technology such as telephones, computers, software and audio-visual systems in order to enable the user to create, receive and share information. It broadly encompasses terms such as digital technology, new media and new technology. This report focuses mainly on the benefits of mobile phones as ‘new technology’ with specific affordances that today enable the uptake of digital and interactive media.

**New Media:** ‘New media’ describes the democratisation of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content.

**New technology:** ‘New technology’ has been adopted as a consistent way of describing the rapidly changing nature of ICT in general. This also acknowledges the specific capacity of digital devices to enable new forms of communication.¹

**Social Networking Sites (SNS):** SNS are internet based sites or platforms that facilitate social relations and the building of social networks, based on real-life connections, shared interests, communities or common backgrounds. They are usually individual-centred services that provide interaction through email or instant messaging, which include sites such as Facebook, Myspace and Youtube.

**Web 2.0:** Web 2.0 describes web-based platforms that allow users to actively share information, generate content, collaborate and interact with each other, in contrast to passively viewing web content. Web 2.0 platforms can be accessed from computer and mobile technologies and include social networking sites, video sharing sites and blogs.

The definitions for the glossary terms were sourced from Wikipedia.² As a collaborative website, Wikipedia provides the most comprehensive and current definitions for technological terms and may be referred to for further information.
About the Project

By working with young Aboriginal people in Victoria, this study aimed to understand how mobile phones and online social networking could improve their educational outcomes. Aboriginal people are among the highest users of mobile phones in Victoria, demonstrating the importance of new technology to maintain social networks.³

The majority of Aboriginal people in Victoria are under the age of 25 and many own or have access to mobile phones. The increasing rate of mobile phone ownership among young people can be attributed to the growing affordability, compactness and portability of these devices.⁵ Furthermore, Web 2.0 technologies now enable mobile phones to perform online functions, which are similar to those that were previously the domain of computers.⁶ Web 2.0 technologies allow people to become more socially connected, enabling individuals to create, access and contribute to websites such as online social media (these include social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter), personal web logs (blogging), online audio recordings (podcasts) and online video recordings (vodcasts), web searching tools (e.g. Google) and photographic creations.⁷ Web 2.0 technologies are recognised for their creative capacity to provide a wealth of educational opportunities, enabling more flexible learning to occur.

Yet, despite the increase in mobile technology among youth to creatively maintain online and offline social connections, there has been little exploration of the potential for mobile phones to improve the educational outcomes of young Aboriginal people in Victoria.

As Aboriginal youth struggle to attain equivalent education levels compared to non-Indigenous youth, this project finds that the inclusion of mobile phones in schools to encourage flexible learning could enhance opportunities for Aboriginal youth to complete year 12, potentially improving their chances of entering higher education or post-secondary school training. This would contribute to their ability to succeed in the mainstream economy, and ultimately increase opportunities to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

By understanding the important role of mobile phones and social media in the lives of young people, this report explores the creative capacity of new technology to achieve better educational outcomes for Aboriginal young people.

Young Aboriginal people in Victoria aged between 12-24 years of age were therefore asked to participate in this pilot research project. Their opinions and ideas about how they use mobile phones and social media have contributed significantly to understanding the impact of new technology and new media on their everyday experiences and on the way they would like to include their experiences of new technology in their education.

Ethics Approvals

In May 2011 ethics approval was granted from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee for the AIS to conduct research with young Aboriginal people aged 12-24 years of age about how and why they used mobile phones. In June 2011 permission to conduct research in a high school in Melbourne was also approved by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, Vic.).
Collaborating with the Aboriginal Community: Listening, Learning, Doing

Working with the Aboriginal community has been essential to ensuring the completion and success of this project. A collaborative approach has also enabled an Aboriginal youth perspective to be central to the findings of this project. Establishing a collaborative methodology from the beginning involved bringing together as many people as possible who work with young Aboriginal people. It included those with expertise in new media, art, digital technology and in education, as well as others interested in the social, emotional and cultural aspects of engaging with new technologies. Importantly, it also included the young people themselves.

Collaborative research relies on establishing trustworthy links with the community involved in the research. This means that people are involved in the project, and participate and contribute to the project's design and overall outcomes.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

In this project we used a range of research methods that informed the outcomes of the project. These included:

- Conducting a literature search to find information about young people and mobile phones.
- Forming an Aboriginal Reference Group.
- Talking to and recording conversations with young Aboriginal people.
- Analysing the conversations through typed up transcripts so that key themes could be identified by thematic analysis.

Reference Group

By forming a Reference Group with members from the Victorian Aboriginal community, the researchers gained advice about working with young Aboriginal people. Youth perspectives were also a project priority, and the Reference Group were essential in providing information about the best approaches for engaging young people in the project, as well as advising on community and cultural protocols.

Reference Group meetings were integral to the project. These provided a forum for discussions and feedback about the project. The Reference Group assisted the researchers with ideas about:

- Recruiting participants to the project
- Incentives for participants involved in the discussion groups (this consisted of each participant receiving a mobile phone credit voucher).
- Official channels for recruiting participants, including liaising with the appropriate Koori education authorities and Aboriginal organisations involved with youth programs.
- The types of themes and questions that should be focused on in the group discussion (see Appendix for details).
- The most appropriate language to use in the Plain Language Statement to participants and their parents.

The Reference Group were also vital to ensuring the project was known about within their networks and the Aboriginal community generally.

The reference group were:

- Shannon Faulkhead, academic researcher, Trust and Technology project, Monash Indigenous Centre, Monash University.
- Peter Waples-Crow, independent artist and team leader sexual health program, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO).
- Dixon Patten, graphic designer and former curator Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT).
- Trevor Pearce, former manager Koorie Webwise project, KHT.
- Vaso Elefsiniotis, Policy and Research Officer, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI).
- Neville Atkinson, Wurreker Unit Manager, VAEAI.
- Kimba Thompson, multimedia artist/curator and manager of Sistagirl Productions and Blak Dot Gallery, Brunswick, Melbourne.
In collaborative projects it is not always easy for everyone to come together for meetings or events. However, the Reference Group were kept informed of the project’s progression. People were able to comment and contribute any information they thought necessary throughout the course of the project via email or phone calls to the researchers.

**Reservoir District Secondary College (RDSC)**

Following recommendations from James Atkinson (the Koorie Engagement Coordinator, Wannik Unit, Northern Metropolitan Region, DEECD), RDSC was identified and contacted as a potential site to recruit young Aboriginal people aged 12-17 years. Lea Volpe, the school’s Vice-Principal was essential to the coordination of the students and in ensuring that parental consent forms were distributed and returned. Lea also provided support during the focus-group discussion with students and continues to be a vital link between the school and the researchers involved in the project. Reservoir District Secondary College is in the Inner Northern Region of Melbourne. In this region there are approximately 600 Indigenous young people enrolled in secondary schools, RDSC has among the largest population of Indigenous students in Victoria.

In 2012 there are 53 Aboriginal students at RDSC, 5 students are completing Year 12, three of the Year 12 students are completing the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and 2 students are completing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

**Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services (BWAYS)**

BWAYS in Thornbury provides services for young Aboriginal people who have experienced homelessness, are at risk of entering the youth justice system and who have been disengaged from education, training and employment. BWAYS is managed by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited (VACSAL) and operates to ensure that young Aboriginal people are given opportunities to enhance their connections with their families, schools and communities in ways that support Aboriginal culture. These include advocacy and support, intervention and prevention programs and linkages with Aboriginal community agencies in collaboration with the government and non-government sector.

Following recommendations from Reference Group members, Jan Muir as the CEO of BWAYS in 2011, was approached by the researchers late that year and provided with a description of the project. Jan’s initial enthusiasm was key to the project being accepted by BWAYS. The current CEO, Leigh Saunders, has been pivotal to the recruitment of young men, aged 18-24, who have participated in the mobile phone project. Leigh continues to provide ongoing support for the project.
Centring the youth voice

Two groups of Aboriginal young people, 4 young men from BWAYS (18-24 years) and 7 RDSC students (4 male, 3 female, aged 12-17 years), contributed to separate small group discussions in March 2012. Their stories about mobile phones and online social networking sites were audio-recorded. These discussions, which are also referred to as interviews in this report, centre young Aboriginal voices in the project. Their opinions have been pivotal in determining the project's findings. This information contributes to understanding the way urban-based Aboriginal youth are engaging with new technology and how the rapid rise in the use of technology can benefit education outcomes for Aboriginal young people in Victoria. While many of their opinions coincide with findings from other research projects about young people and new technology, the information in this report provides specific details that highlight these young Aboriginal people's concerns, as well as their cultural perspectives. This is important, as there is a significant gap in research about urban-based Aboriginal youth and new technology.

While some studies discuss the impact of new technology on Aboriginal youth in remote communities, the lack of research in relation to urban-based Aboriginal young people limits understandings of the diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures and specifically Indigenous youth culture. This occurrence has also been observed with respect to the film and media industry, where commentators have reported that there are a disproportionate number of studies, Government reports and commentaries dedicated to media produced by Indigenous people in remote areas. As with the film industry, for those using new technology as a means of communication and self-representation, this has the effect of defining Indigenous culture and identity as a binary between the remote ‘authentic’ north and the urbanised ‘inauthentic’ south, rather than considering the distinct characteristics that allow young people to portray their Aboriginality through their use of new technology (such as mobile phones) and Social Networking Sites (SNS) in ways that are important to them.
The stories from young people in this project represent their opinions about how and why they use mobile phones. In order to ensure that the stories remain accessible to the reader, contextualisation of some of the participant's comments are contained in square brackets e.g. [……].

Section 1: Creating and Educating with New Technology

Introduction: Staying in ‘the loop’

For all the young people in this project mobile phones were essential to their everyday lives. Here are some of the comments the BWAYS participants provided when asked how they would feel if they didn’t have a mobile phone.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
[If I lost my mobile phone I’d feel] lost. Absolutely heart broken… I’d be shattered [laughter from everyone].

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Have a teary.
Get another one as soon as possible…

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
It’s just you’re out of the loop. You don’t know who’s called you.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
And you just start thinking whose texts am I gonna receive, [but] you can’t look at it.

While these comments provided a light-hearted response to the question, they indicate the high level of attachment Aboriginal young people have to their mobile phones, including an emotional one. In this report, although young people’s responses indicate the central role of mobile phones as interactive communication devices, they also acknowledged their limited experiences with new technology as a tool for creative and alternative approaches to learning. This limited use of new technology for learning contrasts with the daily use of mobile phones to facilitate social connections with family, friends and peers. For young Aboriginal people new technology enables creative engagement and provides a means for negotiating and developing their identities, asserting and affirming their Aboriginality within an urban environment. From the perspective of the participants, their stories confirm that mobile phones are essential for keeping them in ‘the loop’.

Mobile phones and the ‘net generation’: challenging the ‘digital divide’

Young people’s interaction with technology has led to suggestions by researchers that today’s youth are the ‘net generation’. This generation, who have grown-up in a digital culture, were considered to be young people born between 1980-1994. However, that age group were born prior to the widespread advent of convergent media technologies, such as mobile phones that are Web 2.0 compatible. Previous studies indicate that while many from that age group were familiar with technology from a young age, they also displayed limited understanding of how technology could be used for e-learning. One of the older participants from BWAYS explained it this way:

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
Back when I first started high school, it was, you had to learn it. But now it’s more common knowledge. It’s just known. You’re not really taught.

Studies also discuss the lack of access to technology by those from low socio-economic groups, marginalised communities, and those from remote and regional communities. Limited access to and confidence in using digital technology, whether for educational, economic or social purposes, has been termed the ‘digital divide’.

Access and availability to appropriate formal education that enables students to build confidence in and knowledge of new technologies, including digital literacy, was an issue for many of the project’s older participants from BWAYS. While this older group are increasingly confident in their use of technology, they
also comment on the difficulties they experienced in learning about digital technology in school. One participant’s comments further highlight the ‘digital divide’ – as he did not have access to new technology at home.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Yeah, I was a late bloomer. I didn’t know how to use any of that [ICT]. Now… I know a lot about it.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Once a week at least [we had access to computers at school, I didn’t have one at home], but I didn’t really know how to use them that well. So when I was in there I wasn’t really learning everything I should have been learning. If I had all my IT (Informational Technology) classes that I’ve taken in my life, I’d be a genius, or I’d be wicked on a computer, but I never really paid enough attention.

The limitations in learning that these participants experienced at high school resonate with the experiences of other young Aboriginal people as reported by the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC). While a recent VIYAC report canvassed a much broader range of Indigenous education issues, the report highlights the personal experiences of Indigenous youth in Victoria (in particular schools), as characterised by a lack of appropriate support for these students. The report emphasises the need to ensure teachers have adequate knowledge of Australian Indigenous cultures so that they can better understand Indigenous students, their backgrounds and educational needs. This includes recognition of the advantages of new technology that support flexible learning environments, which encourage both informal and formal approaches to learning.22

From the perspective of the BWAYS participants their education in digital literacy at school was limited by the fact that they were Aboriginal. They explain:

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
I reckon technology would help us. Personally, I was in a whole Aboriginal class in Shepparton… We were like, I don’t know I can’t explain it now… Like technology wasn’t our strong point. Other classes might have been using computers and that, but we were pretty simple.

Other participants, who went to school interstate also agreed, emphasising that they were more involved in the technical and manual subjects rather than those related to learning about and with online resources.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
[We were] more hands on.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
[We did] like art, MDT (Materials, Design and Technology), that kind of stuff [rather than working with ICT].

The high school experiences of the young men from BWAYS, reflects recent evidence that shows that discrimination continues to be problematic within educational settings for Aboriginal students. The young men’s comments are a reminder of the importance of implementing e-learning environments that are supportive and inclusive of a range of approaches, which encourage young people to feel proud to be Aboriginal, including those that ‘combat racism through community education programs’.23 Capturing the creative potential of mobile phones, especially for young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, including Aboriginal youth, has the capacity to provide alternative approaches to learning, enhance the mental health and wellbeing of marginalised youth and bridge the ‘digital divide’.24

All of the young people interviewed for this project owned mobile phones and were able to access the Internet via these devices. The increasing ownership of mobile phones by young people potentially advances e-learning opportunities and is reducing the impact of the ‘digital divide’. For example the
participants acknowledge that:

Male: 16 (RDSC)
…what you can do on the phone you can do on the computer.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
Yeah. A lot of mobile phones can do anything that a computer can do, so it’s like a hand held computer…

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Yeah. A mini computer in your hand.

While the increased capacity for online connections via mobile phones is evident in the way young people stay in touch socially (for example via SNS or texting), in the current study high-school aged participants did not see the benefits of mobile phones in their everyday education, despite the Web 2.0 capabilities of these devices to assist their learning. The Reservoir District Secondary College cohort could not imagine using mobile phones for educational purposes, identifying texting and online access as potential distractions, rather than something that enhanced creative learning.

Male: 17 (RDSC)
[At this school] you’re not allowed to have your phone in class. You’re not allowed to have it in the corridor… It’s only allowed to be visible outside.

Interviewer: Do you think that mobiles should be included in education programs?

Male: 16 (RDSC)
It’s not relevant.

Male: 17 (RDSC)
And you won’t pay attention to the teacher. Like everyone does in this school.

Female: 15 (RDSC)
Yeah. Like, you don’t really need it when it comes to learning… I reckon it’d distract you, ‘cos you’d have your phone with you all the time in class and you probably wouldn’t do all your work. You’d probably just go on Facebook or something… everyone would be smarter I reckon [without the internet].

The BWAYS participants also reflected on the restrictions applied to mobile phone use when they were at school, indicating that little has changed in the perception of mobile phones as educational tools, despite the rapid changes in mobile technology and its potential for developing digital literacy inside and outside the classroom.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Normally you were not allowed to have them out or anything at my school… If it rang or something they’d just tell you to put it on silent, tell you to put it away. You’re not even supposed to have it in class, but y’know, you get caught texting or something it’d get taken off you for the rest of the day or something.

Although mobile phones are essential in all of the participant’s everyday lives, their comments indicate a frustration in their effective use of mobile phones for furthering their education and improving their communication skills.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Just the fact that you’re spending more time on the phone. You’re not even doing anything, y’know, on your phone. Not communicating.
Male: 19 (BWAYS)

... I mean, it's just so hard because a lot of people don't use phones for education. They can, but most people it's purely for social...

These responses emphasise continuing negative perceptions of the capacity of mobile phones to advance the blending of formal and informal learning. While general access to digital technology has improved (compared with the older cohort's experiences of technology at high-school), it seems that the potential for mobile phones as learning tools has yet to be fully harnessed for education purposes. This indicates that the 'digital divide' is becoming less of a challenge than reducing the impact of the 'participation gap', where a need exists to assist young Aboriginal people to expand their skills and knowledge of digital media and understandings of new technology.

Culturally inclusive education: new literacy and the creative potential of digital storytelling

New technologies can support and initiate student-centred learning experiences. Portable technologies, such as mobile phones potentially enable students to contribute their life experiences to the school curriculum and can enrich and challenge formal curriculum content. For example, when a small number of Indigenous students from two schools in the Northern Territory were provided with mobile camera phones and asked to provide images of their everyday encounters, the students were able to engage in digital storytelling narratives. Digital storytelling provides an interactive means (which includes the use of images, videos and podcasts) for Indigenous students to explore, and transfer information to others from their own perspectives.

Learning through experiences, such as digital storytelling, demonstrates how mobile technologies can support personalised learning, especially in developing new ways of communicating and interpreting information. These new methods of communication are often referred to as 'new literacy' and differ from conventional literacy (for example print media or analogue, i.e. non-interactive media), by supporting communication in many different ways, including through images, vodcasts (videos) and podcasts (audio recordings). For Indigenous students, projects that support personalised learning through digital storytelling provide a rationale for designing flexible, culturally inclusive school curricula that allows teachers and students to contribute to ‘building knowledge and increasing cultural understanding’.

The participants in this project are already using images, videos and messaging on Facebook to create and share their ideas. These are often specifically intended for family and friends. However, sometimes the messages are relevant to a broader audience. For instance a young female participant from Reservoir District Secondary College commented on a number of videos she has made and posted on her Facebook page.

Female: 15 (RDSC)

I only have three [videos on Facebook]...
One's about bullying... It’s just like... ‘cos people put up videos of their own opinion and, yeah, that’s what I did with bullying. And, [there is another one about] attention seeking people on [my Facebook page]...

Another of this participant’s Facebook videos, which she did not have an opportunity to talk about, but generously allowed us to look at through her Facebook page, comments on the differences between African-Americans and Aboriginal people. While her video is humorous it also attests to her ability to produce media content determined by her for posting on her Facebook site, and to use this new media to deliver a poignant message that cautions against stereotyping all Black people as the same. At the end she asks people to either ‘like’ or ‘comment’ on her recording, displaying a willingness to have others interact with her opinions.
This participant’s Facebook page reveals her intelligence and her friendly personality, but also her connections to her Aboriginal community and her strong identity as a young Aboriginal person. While some of the images and postings provide insight into her thoughts about bullying behaviours and strategies for dealing with them, there are also many photos of family and friends, which are updated regularly, including specific images that support her Aboriginality, such as the Aboriginal flag and links to Aboriginal community events. There are also online links to Aboriginal organisations, sports teams and artwork, as well as posted messages that reveal conversations with others, including her personal thoughts and images that highlight her concerns and interests.

The large numbers of written posts by this young woman (i.e. Facebook messages and comments) also display a strong grasp of online (or text) slang, revealing new forms of written communication. These provide another example of the way young people are participating in and developing new literacies through their daily interactions online. These new forms of highly personalised written communications, often consisting of shortened and abbreviated words, as well as visual and audio postings, adequately convey the user’s message to their intended audience.

Facebook sites (as in the example above) highlight how young people are already using the Internet to participate in creative and informal learning experiences, which they frequently access through their mobile phones. Alternatively, more structured, formal approaches using mobile devices are also being incorporated as flexible learning tools in educational settings. One of the BWAYS participants discussed his experience as a tertiary student who participates in e-learning via his mobile phone.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)

I like my phone because it’s good for resources for university and stuff. Good for researching. I can download like actual psychology ‘apps’ and stuff like that…

At university we’ve got tele tutes. So we actually do phone classes. Like we ring up, put in a certain PIN and it could be 20 students and the one lecturer and we’re all there doing a class over the phone. So they’re getting further and further in aiding education.

The diversity of mobile technology encourages young people to engage in self-directed learning. This enables the learner to control when and how they learn. For researchers who have worked with young Indigenous people in remote Australia, they also suggest that learner-centred approaches, (i.e. those initiated by people themselves), will promote more effective learning outcomes. Projects involving new technology and Aboriginal communities have successfully enhanced cultural activities, including knowledge exchange, social and kinship networks and cultural activities. Others have supported the preservation of language and cultural knowledge, Indigenous history and knowledge-archiving projects, as well as e-commerce activities initiated by Indigenous arts centres, including young Aboriginal employment in arts and cultural centres and in media and music production.29

While these projects are specific to the needs of remote area Aboriginal Australians, they also resonate with Victorian Aboriginal education organisations that aim to build pathways to a culturally inclusive education system. Their general recommendations endorse strategies to improve the Aboriginal community’s confidence in education and training by working with the communities to meet their needs.30
Building competence in media literacy: innovative approaches to communicating

As discussed above, research supports the rapid uptake of new technologies by young Aboriginal people. Activities such as sharing written text and developing skills in visual or audio production provide avenues for supporting new literacy, as well as building competency in media literacy. Media literacy provides a means for understanding and critically analysing the messages people receive and create through new media. Media and new literacy skills enable individuals to produce, evaluate and share content, as well as manage online connections themselves.

The vast reach of digital communication has seen Aboriginal youth become firmly embedded in ‘global youth culture’. As the anthropologist Inge Kral suggests, young Aboriginal people’s use of technology is implicated in new forms of cultural production and in changing cultural practices, especially in their use of oral and written language. For instance, Kral’s research with Aboriginal youth from Central Australia emphasises the ‘inventive short cuts’ that they are adopting in their texting. By combining English and Aboriginal languages, using innovative spelling and symbols (e.g. ‘emoticons’, such as smiley :-)), their texts are reminiscent of graffiti tags. These mark a contemporary tradition of youth culture in remote Indigenous communities, as the texts represent insider knowledge and signify ‘belongingness’.

In the southeast digital media, especially access to mobile phones is also increasing young Aboriginal people’s capacity to play with words, create innovative approaches to getting their messages across, as well as critically assert their place within youth culture through their ability to participate in and interpret each other’s digital messages.

However, there can be drawbacks as the participants discuss below in relation to the less personal nature of digital communication, as well as the impact of new technology on their capacity to write clearly and grammatically. Researchers have observed shifts in how people communicate via digital technology, as vast quantities of information are now generated and dispersed at high speed, changing the nature of reading and writing. Some researchers have also raised their concerns about the way this could potentially impact on our ability to share information more broadly, including the linguist Naomi Baron, who asks: ‘could it be that the more we write online, the worse writers we become?’ The discussion among the BWAYS participants supports these concerns and reflects their self-awareness in changes to the way they communicate and their reliance on new technology.

Well that’s what I mean [about communication], it’s just about being personal. I’m pretty sure we’ve done alright without all this technology.
Male: 20 (BWAYS)
That’s the thing. People don’t write these days. Y’know back in the days when we were way younger, we used to write letters and that to our friends.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
And now it’s emails or…

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Yeah. You’d talk to someone or write them a letter.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
It’d take a week or two weeks to get there. Now it’s just like, bang, straight there.

Interviewer: Has your grammar, your writing, has it improved?

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Mine’s probably worse. ‘Cos a lot of the time I’m writing, like when I’m at work… I’ll write my way and I’m like, oh what am I doing. I put like ‘2B’ instead of ‘to be’. Like actually doing the number two.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
I reckon it has helped me with my grammar. Since I started using a computer in primary school, like, that spell check thing. You go through, write a whole three-page story or something and come back to it and just press spell check and all your words are corrected to how they’re meant to be. So then you kind of get the grasp of how to spell certain words and stuff that you didn’t know how to spell before.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
And also… the phone does it to you. Depends on what mode you’re on. It’ll correct you as you go, correct your grammar.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
The only problem is you’ve got to have some idea of how to spell.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Yeah sometimes it won’t come up, it’s like that was wrong, and you have to keep doing it till it comes up…

I RECKON IT HAS HELPED ME WITH MY GRAMMAR... SO THEN YOU KIND OF GET THE GRASP OF HOW TO SPELL CERTAIN WORDS AND STUFF THAT YOU DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO SPELL BEFORE.
Section 2: Young Aboriginal People as Online Experts

Face-to-Face vs Online communication

Although young people are increasingly capable of using new technology to communicate and search for information, it is important not to overstate their competency in digital literacy. While the participants in this study were confident using the Internet to access online information, their knowledge of the diversity of new technology and online resources was constrained by a number of factors, including limitations in imagining the creative potential of mobile phones for educational purposes and to critically use a broad range of websites for research. Although participants expressed confidence in their ability to navigate websites, especially those that enabled them to download resources for free, in general ‘surfing the web’ was restricted to Facebook, YouTube and Google, suggesting a need for outsider support to expand their digital literacy.

However, online learning was viewed by participants as the education medium of the future, with most preferring to ‘Google it’ (a term now used to describe online searching).

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
I mainly do just Facebook and I go to a thing called WapNEXT. It’s like you can download games, music, stuff like that for free.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Google. Just ‘cos you can find out any single thing you want to know.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Mine’s just Facebook and YouTube, yeah, and Google…

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
Yeah, just Google it…
Plus, like the information that you’re receiving, you’re getting more confident by gaining knowledge about things you didn’t know before… you’re more confident because you know more.

The younger participants provided similar statements:

Male: 17 (RDSC)
So you can go on the internet and look up on Google or something, look up a website that tells all what you need to know.

Male: 16 (RDSC)
… just Google does it all.

Female: 15 (RDSC)
… I know what to do on a phone or a computer and… I stick to a couple of sites and that’s it.

For many of the participants peer-based learning was a way to improve their knowledge and skills in digital literacy. Peer-based learning has been reported as ‘a key characteristic of the way in which young people direct their own learning outside formal learning environments’ However, there are still few opportunities available that provide for this behavior in the formal learning context. A participant from BWAYS explains his experiences of how peer learning works for him.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
…it’s already happening you know. You ask… the bloke next to you… just for a bit of information. Everybody just helps out… That’s what I’m saying, like, Facebook, there’s more about everything. Yeah like, you just learn.

As with peer learning, many of the participants expressed a need to have teachers and others assist them when technological issues arose, to support them in navigating different websites for research and in understanding and interpreting the data they retrieve.
Male: 19 (BWAYS)
So, what if you don’t understand y’know? I’ve tried learning online and it’s just so hard. I need someone to help me…. Step by step, if [someone could] show you, that would probably be a lot easier than being in a classroom. But… you can’t get that one on one time with a teacher, what every student probably needs.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Yeah that’s what he’s saying, y’know like, you see and learn.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
It depends what kind of a learner you are. Like I said, I wanna see something then I can do it. I can’t just look at it and pick it up…

*Interviewer: Would you prefer to learn just straight from the website, or do you think it’s necessary to have a bit of both? A bit of face to face....*

Male: 17 (RDSC)
Yeah, [both] ‘cos then the teacher can show you how...

Male: 16 (RDSC)
Yeah, like if you don’t know how to access a website, you can get your teacher to show you how to do it.

Female: 15 (RDSC)
Because your friend might not know.

In relation to face-to-face contact, the older cohort was adamant that there were definite advantages in communicating directly with someone in person. Their experiences of communicating via texting on mobile phones or through SNS have increased their awareness of the limitations of technology to enable the human-touch to be transferable online.39

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
You don’t really connect. No one really connects enough on Facebook… [It’s] less personal I guess. Y’know, back in the day you’d go see someone and have a conversation… Now you can just call ‘em up. People text across the room…. Obviously it’s better face-to-face… Connecting [online] y’know, you can have a laugh, but you can’t connect…

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Say you’re talking to your girlfriend, you can’t hold her right there and then. You’re talking to her over the phone.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
That’s all technology’s doing is making it easier to connect [on one level] with someone without talking to ’em face to face.

While there is recognition of the advantages of face-to-face contact, alternatively the participants were ambivalent in their acceptance of teachers as always capable of assisting them in their online learning. One participant expressed concerns that he would be viewed as ‘dumb’ if he had difficulties with his work. Both groups suggested that there were more advantages going online to find out things, rather than relying on a teacher. This is expressed here in this discussion.

Male: 13 (RDSC)
You learn more from a computer.

Male: 16 (RDSC)
‘Cos the teacher might not explain it properly.

Male: 13 (RDSC)
They think you might be dumb.
Male: 17 (RDSC)
A computer, [is better] ‘cos a teacher might not know everything about that one thing that you want to know.

The older cohort agree:

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
I reckon eventually… there’ll be no teachers…
I’m pretty straightforward with a computer. I don't know how to make a website or anything, but it’s pretty straightforward…
You learn, you pick it up… [But] there's a lot I don't know….

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
[Google] is the biggest teacher… It can find anything for you.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
But it’s like, more what you want to know, kind of thing these days. When you want to find out how this works and stuff...

‘Fortuitous Searching’
The intuitive capabilities of search engines such as Google, which assist young people to ‘mess around’ and randomly explore information online, promotes ‘fortuitous searching’. As researchers from Berkeley, California explain, this process is ‘different to the way young people are taught to research and review information in texts at school’. By ‘messing around’, these activities assist with the development of personal interests and in self-directed learning, which falls outside traditional learning frameworks. For instance, it supports the creative production of individual sites by youth, providing opportunities to enhance personal profiles through links to other sites, to include photographs, videos, music and text, and enables broad searching of specific topics, increasing confidence in exploring their interests. This is described here:

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Just like, you know if there's an article that everyone's talking about, for example… like NRL player’s coming over to the AFL or something… And it’s like, what? And you'll obviously Google it, read a couple of different articles… get the scoop. So… when we have discussions [it's] like, ‘well I've read it in this article that y'know…’ it’s just a lot easier.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
It educates you at the same time, because like, you did other things that you've never actually done before. Just say… it's your first time getting a house and stuff, you just go on a website lookin' for houses. And it’s just a real spin-out learning new things.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Yeah, that's… the way we learn it's so much easier, like.
Male: 19 (BWAYS)

Instead of going on, like, how to learn, how to do this, you can go on YouTube… there’s anything on YouTube and they’ll show you a video. Instead of going asking, they’ll show you. You can just see it on the Internet.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)

There’s more show and tell these days.

The generation gap: young people as experts and ‘digital immigrants’

As the young men from BWAYS reveal, by ‘messing around’ online they are enhancing their knowledge, ‘developing voices and identities as media creators’. They are becoming experts in using technology for their specific needs. However, as the younger generation are increasingly adept at managing and manipulating technology through their everyday use, this sometimes contrasts with the ability of teachers and older adults to utilise new technology to its full potential.

Some commentators have used the term ‘digital immigrants’ to describe people, such as teachers and parents, who did not grow up with digital technology and who have only recently engaged with it as an information communication tool. Although researchers have challenged this notion, asserting that the idea of the ‘digital immigrant’ is less relevant today than it was 10-12 years ago, it appears to resonate with this BWAYS participant’s comments about the ‘digital disconnect’ between his generation and his mother’s knowledge of digital technology.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)

It’s like you’re born and you know it. So, you grow up with it, you get to know it kind of thing… So, you’re not intimidated… Well my Mum, she’s intimidated by technology itself. She thinks we’re going a bit over and above. But, yeah just being well informed and just being able to see the advances that are happening in the world all at your computer screen…

Here, the lack of confidence of the older generation with new technology contrasts with young people’s familiarity with it and is perhaps an indication of the ‘digital divide’. As previously discussed this was more prevalent among marginalised communities prior to the advent of small, accessible mobile devices. While the participants recognise the benefits of face-to-face interaction to enhance their learning and support their social and emotional wellbeing, they also want to share their knowledge of digital media with their parents. The conversation below is an example of the young men’s confidence in their own expertise with new media, which supports a ‘sense of self as one who is knowledgeable’.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)

Parents and that these days, they don’t even know what’s going on.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)

My Dad still don’t know how to text.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)

My Mum’s just started recently as well.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)

It took me six months to teach my Mum how to send text messages.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)

But the funniest thing about it, they’re all starting to learn to do Facebook and stuff.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)

My Mum’s on Facey now. Like, she comments on my profile.
Male: 24 (BWAYS)
I told my Mum if she got a Facebook, I’m sorry, I couldn’t have her as a friend. …

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
‘Cos parents are being parents still, even on Facebook, but you’ve got to embrace it sometimes, the stuff they say… Like posting on your wall and all your other friends can see it and stuff.

This discussion provides another example of the use of technology for social purposes, such as texting and SNS to maintain family networks. The increasing use of technology for social reasons provides a model for learning and engagement that ‘looks to everyday social practice’ to inform a range of educational initiatives. Social practices provide alternative ideas for the way new technology can be used to promote media literacy and new literacy in the online world.

**New technology and cultural knowledge**

While the internet, social media and mobile phone usage are transforming the way families keep in touch, there is little information available for young Aboriginal people in Victoria about the implications this has on the dissemination, support and protection of cultural knowledge, particularly the effects new technology has on the transmission of cultural information across the generations. For instance, the Reference Group for this project was concerned about the filming of sorry business without the appropriate permissions. They suggested teaching cultural protocols about what should go online, as well as what is culturally appropriate to share with the wider community.

Despite their concerns, the Reference Group also supports findings from other research that acknowledges the multivariable benefits of technology, including the capacity of SNS to reinforce culture and pride in Aboriginality, to allow people to instantly connect with each other, and to find information. They also endorse the increasing control Aboriginal people have over their representation through social media.

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PLUS, LIKE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU’RE RECEIVING, YOU’RE GETTING MORE CONFIDENT BY GAINING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THINGS YOU DIDN’T KNOW BEFORE… YOU’RE MORE CONFIDENT BECAUSE YOU KNOW MORE.
Section 3: Social Connections and Identity formation

Building social connections through social media

The educational benefits of new technology highlights the possibilities of using mobile phones to enhance alternative approaches to learning. In this section the participants discuss the benefits of Facebook (the main SNS used by all the participants) for maintaining connections with their families and friends. Their discussions support the findings of other research, which indicates that for teenagers and young people SNS are significant for negotiating friendships, for providing pathways to assist them when facing big decisions and in maintaining personal social networks. Their discussions also reveal how the creation and exchange of user-generated content on Facebook enables them to reinforce and initiate relationships, build confidence in their identities, negotiate their place in society, and control and manage social media as a resource for navigating online environments, including determining what is and is not appropriate behaviour.

Family connections

In the Aboriginal community, social connections are sustained through cultural and kinship ties, and are increasingly enhanced by online social media. Although comments from the participants in this project indicate that a ‘digital disconnect’ affects the older generations’ use of new technology, recently through greater access to mobile phones, Aboriginal communities are fostering digital connections with their immediate and extended family networks.

The automatic links enabled by SNS also facilitate opportunities to become connected to people with similar interests and backgrounds around the world. These broad and instantaneous connections indicate the extensive reach of social media. For instance, the online friends and family connections already established by many of the participants in this project means that being accepted as a ‘friend’ on Facebook will provide wide-ranging links to other Aboriginal people from across the social network. For the participants in this project, they all had extended family networks outside Melbourne and all used social media to stay connected. The RDSC participants spoke about their SNS connections this way:

Female: 15 (RDSC)
‘Cos you might have family that you’re not near.

Male: 17 (RDSC)
That live in the bush.

Male: 16 (RDSC)
And like something might happen to ‘em and you can find out.

Male: 17 (RDSC)
You’re not gonna know, unless they put it on Facebook.

Female: 15 (RDSC)
Um, my cousin in Queensland informed me with a few things that I didn’t know, but yeah.

The BWAYS participants had similar responses:

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
I have family all over Australia. So it’s a good way to keep in contact. Check in with everyone.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Just making sure that you know that everyone’s alright and that you can keep in contact with them. And always know how they’re doing and how they are.

Maintaining and determining family connections via SNS provides opportunities to contend with some of the ongoing detrimental effects of colonisation. These include the devastation caused by the widespread dispossession of people from traditional lands (their Country), loss of language and ceremonial practices and the removal of children from their families, with the intention of assimilating them with the ‘white’
community. This dispersal of kinship networks also contributed to the breaking down of cultural knowledge and cultural identity.\textsuperscript{53}

In the southeast, particularly in Victoria, where policies of assimilation were enacted earlier than elsewhere, many in the Aboriginal community continue to struggle to reclaim and assert their cultural connections and identity. Research indicates that for Aboriginal people knowing who you are and your place in the community ‘can have a powerful impact on outcomes for children and young people, and promotion of culture is a key factor in building resilience in families and young people.’\textsuperscript{54}

Reclaiming and asserting family connections is a significant aspect in affirming and reinforcing one’s Aboriginality. SNS are providing support networks for young people, giving them a self-determined space to connect with others from the Aboriginal community, to share their problems, to discuss issues that are affecting them and to seek advice. For example the conversation below, in relation to connecting with family, reveals how SNS can provide ‘a sense of community and belonging… giving them the ability to successfully adapt to change and stressful events.’\textsuperscript{55}

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
I guess whatever happens in your life you can put it up… If you’ve been through a hard time you can put it up… let people know.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
And you meet other family you don’t even know about and stuff like that too. You know, like, your family will introduce you to someone and you’ll be like, oh yeah, this person, and bang, it’s like you get more connected into your family.

For young Aboriginal people, staying connected with immediate and extended family is also consistent in a broader sense with other research that supports the benefits of social connections through SNS to reinforce young people’s mental health and wellbeing.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Friends: ‘keeping intouchable’}

Just as communication between families is supported through social media, the participants were also adamant that SNS were significant in reinforcing their friendships in a tangible environment created by them. For many of the younger cohort in this project, their online friendship networks were with their offline school friends (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal). As this participant commented, they use Facebook ‘because we like keeping “intouchable”. We like our friends’ (Male 16: RDSC).

Young people generally use Facebook to ‘hang out’ with each other online, providing access to a space that is autonomous and private, and is primarily defined by their friends and peers.\textsuperscript{57} Whereas once young people’s communication with friends outside of school was limited to a household’s landline phone and often ‘shared and regulated by parents’, today young people are able to develop a sense of independence and explore relationships, including intimate ones in a space determined by them.\textsuperscript{58} The idea of Facebook as a friendly space and as an alternative venue for staying connected is revealed in the following discussion.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
[You can] associate with friends.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
See what everyone’s doin’, how they are.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Everyone’s in the one spot, kinda thing, you know.
Male: 19 (BWAYS)
Yeah, it’s like having all your friends in one room.

Researchers from the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (YAW-CRC) also recognise that SNS play a critical role in addressing barriers young people may have in finding and maintaining positive social relationships offline. For instance SNS assist young people who are ‘experiencing marginalisation to identify potential supportive connections in their local community’. The researchers also note that studies ‘have demonstrated the way Facebook helped young people with lower levels of social skills develop friendships online that then translated offline’. For the BWAYS participants the convergence of their online and offline worlds supports this research, where their social media interactions with friends assist in developing their social skills and understandings of others, which are transferable in their offline relationships.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Yeah. Exactly.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
You can tell if they’re shy or whatever. Not really, but you know what I mean, just like a rough idea.

Building supportive Facebook relationships that enable broad social connections within and outside the Aboriginal community provides a resource for young people to identify strongly with their culture. Social media can enhance social connections, a vital contributor to social inclusion. This has the potential to advance young Aboriginal people’s public identity and for them to benefit from and contribute to mainstream society, including participation in education and employment opportunities. For example, some of the BWAYS participants, when asked about the benefits of mobile phones and SNS for them, suggested the following:

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
Better communication with, like, employers being able to contact you.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Especially when you go looking for a job too, you know…. That benefits me anyways.

**Cyber-safety: producing and consuming online material safely**

In this project the participants discussed how SNS are providing a space for them to reinforce their relationships with their friends and families. Their comments reveal the benefits of the participatory nature of the digital environment, where the interactive capacity of new technology allows them to consume and produce online content. Some commentators have used the term ‘produsers’ to explain young people’s active engagement in the consumption and production of new media. As discussed previously, the RDSC participant’s production and posting of vodcasts on her Facebook page, which is primarily aimed at her family, friends and peer networks, is an example of the way a ‘participatory media environment enables young people to engage in creative content production, empowering them with new means of creating and sustaining connections with others’.

For young people, according to the digital ethnographer danah boyd, this active consumption and production of material online, is connected to ‘friendship-driven’ practices and is not separate to their offline world. For instance, some of the RDSC participants commented on the Facebook videos made by the girl in their cohort, before she had an opportunity to mention them herself. They had been viewed online by a number of the RDSC students, provoking conversations and indicating that the issues discussed in the videos had gained the attention of her online peer networks.
The ‘always-on’ nature of social media, gives young people the opportunity to remain constantly connected with their peer-networks. This also enables the formation of ‘new kinds of social arrangements’, where content can be uploaded and accessed at any time. However, the increasing level of content sharing, now available across multiple networks, presents new challenges. These concern cyber-bullying, breaches of privacy and predation and require that young people are aware of these risks. This includes understanding ways of managing and creating online content to assist their cyber-safety. Promoting media literacy in relation to the risks can encourage responsible online behaviour.

As argued by researchers at YAW-CRC, providing adults with opportunities to learn about the levels of online risks will also assist in reducing the disproportionate anxieties about online risky behaviours and encourage older people to understand the ways young people navigate these online environments safely. These approaches support findings which agree that: online risks are not radically different in nature or scope than the risks minors have long faced offline, minors who are most at risk in the offline world continue to be most at risk online.

Young people are controlling their online worlds indicating that they are alert to the risks of inappropriate behaviours, managing and filtering unwanted messages, deleting others. They are also determining the differences between acceptable and unacceptable jokes and pranks online and in the process learning important social cues from each other.

For instance the following discussions reveal that participants understood the importance of maintaining their privacy and protecting their online identities. They were aware when someone had ‘hacked’ into their mobile phone or SNS account in an attempt to upload ‘funny’ information without permission. Both cohorts acknowledged that this only happened if they were careless and did not log off from their Facebook page on a computer (at school for instance), or if they left their mobile phone lying around without setting their PIN (Personal Identification Number) to protect it from unwanted users. Most participants rationalised that these were more of a ‘prank’ or a ‘joke’ rather than something harmful. However, they were also aware that pranks could lead to breaches of privacy, resulting in unwelcome messages or images being sent. The young men from BWAYS were also adamant that it was difficult to replicate someone else’s ‘voice’ online, as everyone had their own distinctive way of revealing themselves. It was therefore possible to tell from the content if a Facebook post was from the owner of that page.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
I’ve been hacked like someone’s gotten into my phone and got on my Facebook and put up a status. Nothing bad, just being funny and stuff.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
A lot of people do that.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Yeah, a lot of people do that just for the fun of it.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
Yeah, nothing major.

Male: 18 (BWAYS)
Just like a prank kinda thing.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
It’s your fault for leaving [your Facebook page] on.

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
Yeah it is too. Cos you just get up on your Facebook and you’re like, what? I can’t remember writing that. And everybody’s just laughin’ at ya…

… Mostly your friends do it to you now, but if it’s someone else it’s a different story.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
I suppose, yeah, if it’s just some random person who’s picked up your phone and hacked you, you wouldn’t be too happy…
Male: 20 (BWAYS)
But people know how you talk too on Facebook, they know if it's you or not. You're not going to write up something stupid (about yourself).

Online lateral violence and racism: managing inappropriate behaviour

Although behaviours such as playing pranks or hacking into friend's mobile phones were mostly considered to be 'jokes', the participants also discussed offensive posts generated online. While the young people in this study were discerning about how to manage and control unwanted material sent to their SNS, it remains concerning that all of the participants in this project had experienced negative and racist online content. This supports evidence from a recent study that shows that racism continues as 'a substantial issue in the everyday lives of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people.'

Of particular concern to the Aboriginal community is online lateral violence. This was discussed by the Reference Group and BWAYS participants and reflects experiences offline, where lateral violence occurs on many levels and across various settings within the Aboriginal community. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda explains that it is related to the effects of colonisation and is often the result of disadvantage, discrimination and oppression, and that it arises from working within a society that is not designed for our way of doing things. The Aboriginal rights activist Richard Frankland describes it as a 'process of harmful behaviours that [Aboriginal people] do to each other collectively as part of an oppressed group...'

The intimidating content that participants were confronted with took the form of racist comments from outsiders, and offensive rumours and gossip generated from within the community (lateral violence). Participants had various strategies for controlling these inappropriate online behaviours. These included ignoring the perpetrators or bombarding the perpetrator's site with messages in retaliation.

In the conversation with BWAYS participants, they discussed their experiences of online lateral violence. The fact that the perpetrator's identity remains hidden indicates to the participants that people will say things online that they wouldn't enact or say face-to-face, it enables the perpetrator to remain anonymous. Where lateral violence is concerned, given the small size of the Aboriginal community and its close networks, anonymity is difficult to maintain, especially as the content of messages provides clues to the identity of the perpetrator.

The following conversation reveals the BWAYS participants' experiences of intimidating material generated by some from within the Aboriginal community, as well as racist online sites posted by outsiders. It also reveals the behaviours and strategies these young people are devising to protect themselves against these acts of discrimination.

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
There's a profile on Facebook that's just been deleted it was called Tassie Troll. Trolling is like, in the urban dictionary trolling means causing a disturbance... online. So, you get on the internet, you put up a status on Facebook that's gonna evoke a response from someone... That's what trolling is about. And this person had dedicated, I don't know how sad their life is, but they'd dedicated their life to trolling on Facebook. So they'd just put up like racist status' and stuff like that. Stupid shit.

Male: 19 (BWAYS)
There's a page, what is it, like 'The Truth Be Said' or something. Someone obviously from the community and they just write all rumours. And like I've known people, there's been some about me, just rumours within the community. So it's obviously someone you know, but they keep it under wraps... cos the rumours you hear y'know are around town...
Male: 19 (BWAYS)
That’s what I mean. Some people know who it is cos they’re like, that’s a good one. And it’s like, they obviously know who it is. They never have their picture or anything so their identity’s hidden

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
You see a lot of bigotry. Just people who just have no idea and they’re just set in their ways, maybe the way they were brought up to act towards Aboriginal people. And they just get on there and promote bigotry, that’s pretty much it… I usually respond to like, both parties, like, I usually say it’s just people’s ways, people are bigoted sometimes and that’s just the way it is. And then to the people who are getting so defensive I just say, this is what they want, there’s no use in giving them a response, because this is what they are looking for you to do...

Male: 20 (BWAYS)
It depends how you take it, hey...

Male: 24 (BWAYS)
Take it with a grain of salt, because y’know, whether it’s true or not, whether it’s about you or anything like that, take it with a grain of salt. Because they don’t know you, you know you...

Unfortunately, racist and intimidating online behaviours are something that young Aboriginal people are confronted with on a regular basis. In response to the potential for cyber-bullying and to encourage young Aboriginals to participate in safe online behaviour, the Koorie Heritage Trust’s WebWise project is working with young Aboriginal people to develop understandings about dealing with racist comments, ensuring privacy settings are safe and determining strategies for enhancing connections among Aboriginal communities via the Internet. The WebWise project is also working towards developing a model for ‘peer-to-peer education and training, and building parent capacity, knowledge and confidence [of new technology] in order to support young people in online environments.”

I GUESS WHATEVER HAPPENS IN YOUR LIFE YOU CAN PUT IT UP... IF YOU’VE BEEN THROUGH A HARD TIME YOU CAN PUT IT UP... LET PEOPLE KNOW.
The stories here highlight the competency of young Aboriginal people in Victoria to use new technology and new media for social and informal educational purposes. In this project mobile phones were found to provide young people with opportunities for knowledge improvement, enhancing communication skills and to act as tools for engaging in a range of social practices. These online social practices also have the potential to be developed in association with young Aboriginal people’s educational outcomes, including improving their knowledge of digital literacy. Online activities via mobile phones included creating, sharing and researching information with friends and peers across a range of media. However, despite the increasing rise in the uptake and availability of digital technology via mobile phones, which is challenging the ‘digital divide’, young Aboriginal people’s everyday use of mobile phones and social media, is not yet fully utilised in educational settings. This applies especially to blending informal and formal approaches to learning to improve young people’s understandings of media and digital literacy.

This project also found that advancing young people’s knowledge of new technology and encouraging participation in online learning also relies on increasing teachers’ and parents’ digital competency. Intergenerational digital literacy supports the development of young people’s communication skills and improves opportunities for young people to integrate their online everyday activities with flexible learning programs. Furthermore, for young Aboriginal people, support for educational programs that are wide ranging and inclusive of content that encourages pride in their culture, including intergenerational online communication, will reinforce understandings of and respect for Aboriginal cultural protocols and assist in the transference of cultural knowledge within and outside the Aboriginal community via the Internet. Significantly, new technology is providing Aboriginal people with the means of determining representations of themselves and their culture, as well as encouraging young people to negotiate their sense of self and enhance their wellbeing within the broad expanse of globalised youth culture.
Focus groups held with high school students and young adults were run as group discussions, which evolved around key themes. These themes included:

- Mobile phone ownership and frequency of use, including:
  - benefits and drawbacks of mobile phone use
- Restrictions and control over phone use, including:
  - economic issues
  - management of contacts and communications
- Social implications, including:
  - privacy, trust, identity formation and global citizenship
- Broader social networks, friends, family and community connections, including:
  - social and educational opportunities
- Education in formal and informal learning environments, including:
  - online vs face-to-face learning
  - creative opportunities available online

While these key themes guided the line of questioning, the semi-structured nature of the group discussions enabled information to emerge from conversations between individuals in the focus groups.
Keeping Intouchable


2. For more comprehensive definitions use the glossary terms as search terms in Wikipedia. For example see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_technology>.


22. VIYAC 2011, op. cit.


31. See Wikipedia.
34. ibid., p. 12.
37. See Kennedy 2009, op. cit.; Walsh 2011, op. cit.
40. ibid., p. 55.
41. ibid., p.244.
44. See, for example, Kennedy 2009, op. cit.
45. Collin 2011, op. cit., p. 3.
48. Minutes from Reference Group meeting no. 3, October 2011, in possession of Fran Edmonds.
52. Collin 2011, op. cit., p. 3.
54. DEECD 2010c, op. cit.
57. See Ito 2010, op. cit.
63. See boyd, d. 2010, op. cit.
67. See boyd, d. 2010, op. cit.
69. Minutes from Reference Group meeting no. 3, October 2011, in possession of Fran Edmonds.
71. For further information go to: <http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/News+%26+Features/News/View+all/ViewPage.action?repositoryName=&siteNodeId=2270&CurrentFolderID=2911&itemId=15776&Disclaimer=youthcentral>