Digital Ethnography Research Centre

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

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

Emoji Bosses
There are many ways to preserve language. We trace the story of Australia's first Indigenous emoji project, which is bringing Indigenous culture and the Arrernte language onto your smartphone. In the process we encounter emoji's bosses and find out why it is so hard to add a new emoji to the set.

In this episode you heard from:

Joel Liddle Perrurle, Indigemoji
Caddie Brain, Indigemoji
Dr Kate Miltner, University of Edinburgh
Graham Wilfred Jr, inDigiMOB

Music prior to credits: Blackfellas by Nooky, licensed courtesy of Australian Broadcasting Corporation

The inDigiMOB program worked with us on this episode. inDigiMOB is a partnership between First Nations Media Australia and Telstra.
First Nations Media Australia is the national peak body for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media industry.

There is a Māori emoji set too. Check out Emotiki developed by Te Puia in Rotorua, NZ.

Soft sculpture of tin can telephone by Rhonda Sharpe, Yarrenyty Arltere Artists. Image design by Pam Koger.

Joel Liddle: I happened to be sort of randomly cruising along. I was actually in my car, texting, illegally I guess, you know as you do, and I did a post on Twitter. I sent an emoji and I always think in the digital space and text and the internet and all that we should be using our own languages first. Especially when communicating with each other.

So I just went back home and I just did this random post. I didn't know that anyone would ever see it or I didn't expect anyone to really take notice of it. But I think I did about ten emojis and I put the Arrernte name for the feelings and emotions and different things. People just started sharing it. And I think I got a few thousand shares and likes and it went pretty crazy.

Music enters

Tyson: I'm Tyson Yunkaporta

Ellie: And I'm Ellie Rennie

Tyson: and this is Disconnect, a podcast about the internet in remote Indigenous communities in Australia.

Joel Liddle: My name is Joel Liddle Perrurle. I'm an Arrernte man from Alice Springs and I have family all over central Australia.

Most of my interest is in not just preserving languages, but also making sure that, you know, every Aboriginal person and non-Aboriginal person that wants to learn within this region can learn a language, and learn their language. I think it's critical that every single person actually has access to learning and they have access to resources. And so that's the angle I come from. And you know, that's because that's what all those older folks have instructed me to say (laughs).

So, when I'm sat with these older people and they have taught me language and stuff, I've been really lucky to have some really good mentors. They always say things to me like, you know, we developed these dictionaries and these resources four or five decades ago so that you young people can learn and read and write. And so now we want you to use them.

Tyson: The digital world is good at replicating the physical world in many ways. One of which is creating barriers to inclusion and diversity. Emojis are a perfect example of that.

Joel: I just think that it's a case of, we need to advocate now, in this generation, for everyone to be speaking their language and be bilingual and bicultural in this region. So that's the angle I come at it from.

Ellie: I'm going to send you something Tyson

Tyson: I tell you if you send me something weird that blows up my phone I'm going to get wild over you (Tyson's phone beeps).

Ellie and Tyson: (laughs)

Tyson: That's sweet

Ellie: What is it?

Tyson: Got the Aboriginal flag on a handprint. Look full disclosure I've never used emojis before.

Ellie: Ok. So that hand that I sent you, with the Aboriginal flag. There's also inside the app, some audio, the Arrernte word for that, which is this.

Indigemoji App: Illtye

Ellie: And then when I press on "English" it tells me that means "hand."

Tyson: Right

Ellie: So, shall we see what they had for "cup of tea." Here's the Arrernte

Indigemoji App: Irrwe urinpe

Ellie: So that's actually hot tea

Ellie and Tyson: (laughs)

Tyson: Nice. I might say "may chang" but then my spouse, it would be spelled K-A-P-A T-I, "Cuppa Tea."

Caddie Brain: Emojis are just totally fascinating in general. Linguists debate this but a lot of them argue that emojis actually are the fastest growing new language in the world.

Hi, I'm Caddie Brain. I am an Alice Springs based independent curator and producer and I produced the Indigemoji project with a big beautiful team.

Music re-enters

Caddie: People use them all day every day in their communication and a lot of young people only use emojis in fact, so I would probably say that I use emojis like an old person where I use different text and then will add an emoji on the end but a lot of young people use only emojis in their correspondence with each other. And so emojis are just a totally fascinating new way of communicating. But it became really apparent I suppose over the last few years that the way that

representation occurs within emoji, it's really only representing some cultures and some points of view.

Kate Miltner: I'm Kate Miltner. Uh, wait, sorry. Should I say doctor, is that annoying?

Ellie Rennie: Ah no I think say it, because it is a research podcast so that's fine.

Kate: OK hello. I'm Dr Kate Miltner and I am a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Edinburgh.

Tyson: And given this is a research podcast, we thought we should get an academic to define something everyone under the age of 16 knows already.

Kate: An emoji is a pictogram that is used to represent objects or emotions or States of being that are embedded into the Unicode code base and appear on our phones.

Caddie: More and more emoji have been working to address different types of diversity, inclusion and represent more cultures and more languages and more kind of people but when the project began was at a point where that was just really beginning. And so there was a huge amount of conversation happening around Australia about "why can't we have an Aboriginal flag emoji?" There had even been an application to have the Aboriginal flag included in the official emoji set but it was actually rejected because of two reasons as I understand it. One is that it doesn't have an official regional code, so it's not like an official country flag. And also, it didn't or failed to demonstrate widespread global usage. This kicked off huge discussions around Australia among different communities saying "why can't we have an Aboriginal flag emoji" and "why can't we have our own emoji sets."

Tyson: So the revolution was already underway when Joel and Caddie started thinking about emojis.

Caddie: So much work has been done in this space by different people around Australia. This project comes – I guess has flown out of the work of so many people including Noongar man Derek Nannup actually who put together a huge petition to see the Aboriginal flag included in emojis, in the official emoji set.

Tyson: This story starts with the moment of realisation we heard at the top of the episode - Joel Liddle's tweet.

Caddie: It was a tweet that came out that had a beautiful list of the standard Unicode emojis with Arrernte words beside them and the Internet could not get enough of this tweet. It was re-tweeted and favourited again and again and again and so Joel, alongside Veronica Dobson as well as Kathleen Wallace became, I suppose, the overarching

guiding – we called them emoji bosses, so they began to guide the process of developing an Arrernte emoji set here in central Australia.

Ben Smede: Emoji bosses. I like that. A bit more fun than you know… cultural advisors.

Caddie: That's right or reference group. (Laughs)

Music enters

Tyson: Arrernte is the language of the people of the same name in the area that centres around Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. There were no Indigenous emojis when the Indigemoji project started, so Caddie, Joel and the team set about putting together a workforce.

Caddie: And that's when we discovered the youth program at the Alice Springs Public Library. More and more young people were spending time at the Alice Springs Library a few years ago. And so a whole lot of youth workers and artists began getting together to spend time with these young people and engage them in the space. And this became the home for the Indigemoji project over that summer. We had seven weeks straight of workshops, they went seven days a week. It became this crazy, loud, fun, lots of laughing, drawing, creating kind of hub. We got a whole lot of local artists in the space and they were supported by the awesome inDigiMOB who helped them as digital mentors be in the space.

We began talking and saying who are some different people around town that might be available and might want to come in and have some incredible artistic skills. And Graham Wilfred Junior's name came up, and he's just the most supportive, beautiful, talented graphic designer who just brought so much heart to the project.

Graham Wilfred Jr: So my name is Graham Wilfred Junior. I'm actually a Yolngu person from Ngukurr community east of Arnhem Land.

Graham Wilfred Jr: The whole emoji project that I was working on with other graphic designers. I learned so much, like the language of each symbol. Got to meet the elders that were giving us permission to use this particular symbol, as in a coolabah, boomerang, the woomera, the goanna, the thorny devil and the desert rose.

Tyson: That's what this project was about - sharing knowledge, and using the sharing of knowledge as a way to protect and preserve it. Caddie says Indigemoji isn't going to be the last project to pursue that. So the team built into the emojis the bilingual aspect of the central Australian culture that we heard Joel talking about earlier.

Graham Wilfred Jr: We have the goanna in English and in Arrernte language. And it's also based towards letting people know to learn more about it and to inspire them, I guess.

Caddie: The emoji project is also just the beginning of all sorts of projects to come, I would say, that look at different ways of embedding the different languages of the world more equally into our digital platforms so that more and more people can use those platforms and feel as though their culture is included and their languages matter.

Music beat. Gear change.

Caddie: The official emoji set was designed in Japan in 1999 and it was developed for a certain mobile phone network to kind of bring emotion into what can be quite a cold sort of digital text and very quickly it gained popularity throughout Japan and then sort of flowed on throughout the world as people – it was just revealed a huge appetite for emoji as a different way of communicating online.

But, of course, because we all use different types of phones and different platforms something needed to connect that imagery across that and so the emojis were adopted by Unicode.

Kate: The Unicode consortium is a standards body governed by the international standards organization, so Unicode is used to make sure that all computers globally can talk to each other.

Tyson: Once again - that's Dr Kate Miltner.

Kate: I remember back in the day when if you had a PowerPoint, you couldn't open up a Windows PowerPoint on a Mac computer, you had to use whatever software was on Mac.

So basically if something is written in Unicode, any computer can understand it and open it. So it's about universality and sort of translatability across computing machines and environments.

Caddie: You can apply to have an emoji included in the official Unicode set but it has to meet really certain criteria and the main one is to demonstrate widespread usage across the globe.

Tyson: Widespread usage across the globe is not something that's easy to establish, especially for a language group that's one of a couple of hundred Indigenous language groups in Australia. And it's a big deal to be a part of the Unicode emoji set, because that means every mobile phone in the world can use your emoji set just by tapping it on the keyboard.

Beat

Tyson: In the course of the emoji summer of love at the Alice Springs library, many ideas for different Indigemojis were tried out. And one in particular stuck in Graham's memory.

Graham Wilfred Jr: One kid came in and said let's do the flag. The Aboriginal flag.

Caddie: Throughout the design process and the weeks of workshops it became really clear how important the Aboriginal flag was to young people in the space. They made all sorts of amazing emoji designs incorporating aspects of the Aboriginal flag including the Kwertare one which is – looks a bit like a crown which was wildly popular emoji that emerged in maybe the second or third week of workshops and, of course, at the moment the copyright for the Aboriginal flag is retained by its designer Harold Thomas and is at the moment licensed through a company called WAM Clothing which was a decision he made.

Tyson: Most listeners within Australia will know about this part of the story already - a contentious public debate over who should get to use or own the Aboriginal flag is ongoing as we upload this episode.

Caddie: In order to realise, I suppose, all these beautiful designs that the young people made that included the flag we approached WAM Clothing and asked permission to include the flag and a set of three others that were the most popular designs among the young artists into the set and they granted us permission to do so royalty free.

Tyson: It already sounds like an uphill battle to get an emoji approved and onto keyboards around the world, but Kate Miltner tells us that's not even the half of it.

Music changes gear

Tyson: Kate has done research into the racial inclusivity of emojis in the Unicode set. She says Unicode didn't want to take on the role of racial referee.

Kate: "It's not our job to do this. You know, like we are a standards body. We don't want to be seen to be getting involved with the very messy business of representation and that's it." So that was how the first emoji set ended up getting encoded the way that it did.

Tyson: And so, for a while there, and you maybe remember this - emojis were one colour.

Kate: People were very confused as to why the emoji looked like they did. There were several petitions that were created that were aimed at Apple in particular. There was one that was like "there are no black people, but we've got 12 different moon faces. Like why does the emoji that we have look like this? We want emoji that are more representative of the people who are using them," which was almost everyone at that point. So that was probably around 2013. Despite Unicode's reluctance to get involved with racial politics, they found that this was something that they really couldn't ignore anymore. So they

started to have discussions about how do they incorporate more racially diverse emoji within the set.

And so what ended up happening was, one of the things that I neglected to mention earlier is that Unicode was very invested in this idea that their standard was neutral. That it just operated in this neutral way, that it didn't have any politics and that is was just – it was universal, and it was neutral, and it didn't bend in any direction in terms of politics. Which, as anybody who studies technological systems knows, you can't avoid having politics. So in their desire to avoid any politics, they actually ended up taking a stance.

There is no such thing as neutrality when you're dealing with built systems. They do different things and they reflect the value systems and priorities of the people who create them.

Tyson: That was that kind of digital denial happening in that colour-blind racism expressing itself, in a way.

Kate: Yes. Exactly. What they ended up doing was they included – instead of just saying, "We're going to have these different skin tones," they decided to incorporate the Fitzpatrick scale, which is a six tone dermatological scale that's meant to measure skin pigment. And one is the lightest skin tone and six is the darkest. And so the whole idea that there was this scientific taxonomy that was being applied to emoji, it was seen to distance the issue of race because it was just talking about, "One is a light skin tone and six is a dark skin tone. And we're not getting involved with any race. It's dermatological science that we're dealing with here." But as other scholars have pointed out, this might not be – it might evade explicit characterisation but obviously, the skin tone and race are implicated in ways that you can't really separate.

So there were some people who raised the issue of, "Okay, so how are we going to do this, right? Are we going to have the darkest skin tone first, or are we going to have the lightest skin tone first?" And there was this whole debate about how is this categorisation going to happen. And they ended up getting into a really heated debate about whether this one engineer was creating a tempest in a teapot and basically introducing politics into something that is really apolitical – it's a standard, right. So basically, what ended up happening is with the – the majority of the Unicode members' insistence that they were working with the standard; the standard was neutral; it was apolitical; it ended up – by not acknowledging the politics of race, they ended up operating from the colour-blind racist standpoint, the idea that, "I don't see colour and race doesn't exist," et cetera, et cetera. So that's how that ended up working.

Ellie: I think that the research you did is so fascinating for the way that it exposes this assumption of technology as being neutral, and that people who create standards are doing so in this objective manner. And that there is some kind of constant agreement that we can all build

around and construct our society on, which is just completely false. And I love the fact that it was something as pictorial as emojis and something so seemingly fun and benign that became such a contested thing.

Kate: If you look at critical race theory, most critical race theorists would argue that race is not necessarily something that is biological. It does have connections to people's biology in the sense that if you have a darker skin tone, then your lived experience is going to be different than someone with a lighter skin tone. In the United States, for example, I would say probably most of the western world. But basically, that there is a relationship between race and technology that – racial difference is constructed in many different ways but it is often constructed by and through technology.

So if we think about the history of photography and how different skin tones have been represented, if we think about the way that race is represented within media and film, and now the way that race is represented within technology. Also, in terms of perceptions of technological expertise and skill are connected to racial identity. And also, race operates in very specific ways within the environments where technologies are produced. So if you think about – there all these different ways in which race connects to technology and operates as a form of power in and of itself.

Tyson: So the Unicode set has expanded and been made somewhat more diverse since it's inception, but many say it still has a way to go, and given it can only ever contain a finite number of emojis, maybe it always will? But that hasn't stopped movements to change it.

Kate: Over time different people have been like, well, I want different things. I would like, a taco or a dumpling. So there's a woman named Jennifer 8. Lee, who is now on the emoji subcommittee who basically she created this thing called the dumpling emoji project. And she basically was like "dumplings are pretty universal across world cuisines. Like why is there no dumpling emoji?" And so, you know, her involvement with the dumpling emoji project, and has been very…

Tyson: There's a dumpling emoji project?

Kate: Yes, yeah. I think its…

Tyson: There's a lot of hungry people who could use an actual dumpling.

Ellie: But she succeeded right, because there is a dumpling emoji. I use it all the time.

Tyson: So there's a dumpling emoji and there are many flags, but no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander flag. So we went straight to the top.

Or at least we tried to. We contacted Unicode and heard...
nothing. Here's Caddie Brain again.

Caddie: There's been a lot of success stories about including different types of emoji and growing diversity inclusivity within the emoji set and it's getting more diverse all the time but essentially when the Aboriginal flag was rejected it became clear that it wasn't an easy process and it can take 18 months or more to get together a really strong application to get a new emoji into the official set. It became clear to us that if we really wanted to, I suppose, make a set that represented central Australia we were going to have to do it ourselves and so the sticker set that we developed was our solution in the meantime.

Music enters

Caddie: So a sticker set does behave quite differently than the official emoji set. So that does limit some of its functionality at the moment. They just behave a little bit different when you use them on social media platforms or within your text messaging. We would love to see them included and adopted more broadly in these platforms but that would require Facebook or Instagram or Apple or Google to adopt the actual imagery of the Indigemoji set into their platforms which so far hasn't occurred.

There's been some good news since though. There is a boomerang emoji that is going to be incorporated into the official set that was co-designed with a teacher in Victoria which is Justin Stankovic. So bit by bit diversity and different sets of cultures are being represented in emoji.

Music break

Tyson: So instead of emojis in the keyboard that comes pre-packaged with your phone, Indigemojis become a sticker set in an app, that you can download for free right now, and it's deadly!

Caddie Brain: We launched the Indigemoji free app in November of 2019. But the project was just – it was just huge. There were over 40,000 downloads in the very first weekend of the app coming out. There was just an outpouring of love and support of people saying, "I've been looking for a set of emoji like this for so long and I'm so happy to have these on my phone and be able to use them."

Tyson: Here's emoji boss Joel Liddle again.

Joel Liddle: There's nine or so languages spoken around central Australia still today. And I want to see some real effort put into supporting those languages and especially those ones that are under pressure. I always think, you know, for every person that's not speaking or learning their language, then our languages are weakened. There's no reason that we shouldn't have people publishing in their own

language or doing books and blogs and YouTube and, and these sorts of things. News media, it should be all in language, subtitle with English if you need to. I'd be really keen to see projects like that evolve from something that Indigemoji started.

Song: Blackfellas by Nooky

Tyson: That song was:

"Blackfellas" by Nooky
From the Album Deadly Hearts 2
Courtesy ABC Music
Licensed by Australian Broadcasting Corporation

The Indigemoji team are keen to hear from other language groups in Australia who might like to make an emoji set of their own. You'll find links to download the Indigemoji app on Android or iOS in the show notes, or just search Indigemoji in the app store.

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

Disconnect is produced by RMIT University, led by Ellie Rennie, Indigo Holcombe-James and myself Tyson Yunkaporta. Our producer is James Milsom with production assistance from Campbell McNolty.

Ellie: Thanks to Sam Kininmonth for additional research assistance

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

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