

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.

There's a Yagi on Your Roof

Access to phone and internet is not universal within Australia. In some places, just getting mobile phone service can be a logistical challenge. We follow the story of a family in Kwale Kwale, west of Alice Springs, as they try to get connected.

In this episode you heard from:

Rhonda Inkamala
Trudy Inkamala
Mark Sulikowski, Telstra
Michael Perez, Telstra

Music prior to credits: Around Here by Tia Gostelow, 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.

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

The Home Internet Project mentioned at the start of the episode involved an infrastructure component, which was run through the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) and funded by the Aboriginals Benefit Account. A research component accompanied the provision of internet, which was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage



Project (LP110200440). The research was a collaboration between CAT, the Central Land Council, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, and university researchers (based at Swinburne University of Technology at the time). A book about the project is available open access

here: <https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/no-19-internet-on-the-outstation-the-digital-divide-and-remote-aboriginal-communities/>

Rhonda: See that round shiny thing sticking out.

Ellie: Oh yeah that's the cocoon

Rhonda: That's the open cocoon where the moth come out

Conversation continues in background

Ellie Rennie (Voice Over): That's me and Rhonda Inkamala. Rhonda's showing me how to forage for witchety grubs near her community - Kwale Kwale - about 45 kilometers outside of Alice Springs. But this isn't why I've come.

Rhonda: I was interested in getting the internet going 'cuz then we could communicate with people through email. You know I don't want to get into Facebook or any social thing, because yeah it's just... I just don't want to go there.

Ellie (VO): I'm Ellie Rennie and this is Disconnect, a podcast about the internet in remote Australia. Between 2010 and 2015, I worked on a project with the Centre for Appropriate Technology in the Northern Territory. It involved putting computers and internet into homes in three small communities. One was Kwale Kwale, and that's how I met Rhonda and Trudy Inkamala. I want to share this story as it speaks to some of the problems of doing research in remote communities, particularly when you want to leave something of lasting benefit, but fail. It's also a story of inter-generational needs when it comes to communication technologies.

Music enters

Ellie (VO): I'm recording this some 5 years after the home internet project, and there's no wifi at Kwale Kwale now, but that's not where the connectivity limits stop. Rhonda and Trudy struggle to even get phone service.

Ellie: So you still don't get mobile reception at your place though?

Rhonda: I usually just put it near the TV and then I'll get reception

Ellie: So you can get some reception, Oh that's good.

Rhonda: Well we put it near the TV so a call can come in and then we try go out to the veranda and just find a little spot, "oh wait there I'm just finding a good spot."

Ellie: Has anyone got a telephone line at the moment there?

Trudy: We've got no phone

Ellie (VO): It's important for Trudy to have access to the outside world for lots of reasons - her health and safety being just one of them. But it's not that simple - even if mobile reception was easy to get at Kwale Kwale it could create bigger issues.

Rhonda: I have seen young people day and night locked in their room on the mobile. It's social media. You know, if mum goes to sleep, you can still see a light on. You know if you get up in the middle of the night or whatever you can still see the light on, the young people yeah they still.... It must be 24/7 for them.

Ellie (VO): So while it's kind of complicated, it seems like it's unanimous that the Kwale Kwale community need to be connected to the outside world, and Rhonda and Trudy have tasked me to try to help figure out how to make that possible. Enter Mark Sulikowski, from Telstra. It's a few months on from my visit to Kwale Kwale, and I've got Mark on speakerphone, standing with Rhonda at the school where she works in Alice Springs.

Ellie: Do you want to describe for Mark where you get phone signals at the moment or at all if you get them at all?

Rhonda: We have to, like from where we are, we have to either go up on a hill or go down to the main road, near the main road, so we can have a look at the towers that on the Macdonnell Ranges here in Alice. Those big towers. Yeah. So if we can see them, then we can get reception and ring up you know. If we if we find a little spot you know where? Where the little lines come up (laughs).

Music enters

Mark: Good, but there's no... if you're in your house or in the community like the shop or anything, you can't get any signal right?

Rhonda: Where we are, our town and shopping is Alice. So we live out on lots, on blocks.

Mark: Yeah and there's no signal at the blocks.

Rhonda: No, where we are in the house, nothing because there's hills, it's surrounded by the mountains and hills. And we're in a little valley.

Mark: Okay. Just writing all this down.

Ellie: So Rhonda, when I spoke to you, you said that there might be a spot in your house near the television.

Rhonda: When the TV was going, I used to put my mobile phone near the TV and it'll ring but you know, going outside sort of finding a little spot. Or leaving it there and answering the phone there and talking.

Mark: Yeah, so it might be interesting. So there might be like, there's probably a few options we could try, Rhonda.

To see what we could do, I think we could look at putting an antenna on your house, to see if we can grab the signal coming from the towers. And then inside your house, we put a little device that helps to make the signal stronger. So like if you had some signal near the TV, it must mean there is some signal coming to your house, even if it's very poor. So we could try that as one option - I can't promise anything. Or if you're getting the signal, like down by the main road. Do you have a car as well, or some of your family or friends have a car?

Rhonda: Yeah, we've got a car.

Mark: Because we've also got this, we've also got this like little small antenna that you put to the top of your car. And you have a little system inside. And it makes the mobile signal really strong inside the car. So it could be that you could find a spot in the community and you wouldn't have to drive so far. Maybe it's just a few meters away from your house. But there's a really strong signal. So there's two things we could try if you'd be interested.

Rhonda: Yeah, I'm very much interested (laughter)

Ellie (VO): We said goodbye to Mark with a sense of optimism - two options to try! But I did have a niggling feeling that our end goal - actually getting phone service - was something Rhonda and Trudy had told me they were wary of.

Ellie: When we spoke last time, you were a bit concerned about mobiles in the community, though. So this will only be a mobile phone solution. It's not a payphone.

Rhonda: No, that's a good one. Because then everybody, you know, get the prepaid things and pay for their own bills. Yeah.

Ellie: When they go out there we'll follow up and see how it all goes with you. Does that sound alright?

Rhonda: That's really good. Thank you Ellie.

Music enters

SFX - Phone rings

Michael: Hello Michael speaking?

Ellie (VO): It's now a few months on from my chat with Mark and you're hearing Michael who is the tech tasked to get Trudy and Rhonda connected.

Michael: My name's Michael Perez. I'm a remote installer for Telstra. I'm based in Alice Springs.

Ellie (VO): He's been out to Kwale Kwale and I've called him to find out what he...found out.

Ellie: And how long have you lived in Alice Springs for? Did you grow up there?

Michael: No, I've been there ten years now. Oh, twelve actually.

Ellie: That's a long time.

Michael: That is a long time, never left.

Ellie: Do you love it?

Michael: I love it. Yeah, it's home.

Ellie: So, um, I thought like a little place to start actually might be if I can quickly play you something that Rhonda said to me, I think this was a year or so ago when I went to see her. And I asked her if she had any internet at Kwale Kwale and this was her reply. I hope you can hear it.

Ellie (VO): I play Michael the clip you heard a few minutes ago - Rhonda telling me about the difficulty getting service at Kwale Kwale.

Ellie: So I thought this was rather strange that Rhonda said she could only get reception near the television. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Michael: Yeah, look, they're barely on the edge of mobile reception. And there's like a hill between her house and the tower. So yeah, as expected, it'd be very spotty where she gets reception or not. Outside towards the gap she'll get okay reception because I went there. It was alright but inside her house, yeah, just very few spots, you can get reception.

Ellie: So describe for me what you did when you got to Kwale Kwale.

Michael: First thing what I did was, actually assess if I can get reception because the Go Repeaters don't work if there's no reception to start with. If there was no reception to start with, then I'd set up the Yagi and hopefully get a bit out of that.

Ellie: The what?

Michael: Yeah, Yagi antenna.

Ellie: Okay, Yep.

Michael: So that basically just picks up any signal from the mobile tower. And then the T-Go boosts the signal inside the house. So the first thing I did was just to see if I can actually get reception, which outside I can. So I went ahead with the installation, assessed where the best place for the antenna would be mounted and confirmed with them if it's alright to place the antenna there.

Ellie (VO): OK! Kind of an unceremonious way to find out that our hard work has succeeded. This Yagi antenna device is up and Rhonda and Trudy have service! But then Michael goes on...

Michael: So you've been to Kwale Kwale right?

Ellie: Yeah. Many times.

Michael: There's, there's like five houses at the front. So they've got phone infrastructure there. And then between those five houses, and Rhonda's house, there's a small hill. So the people at the front would get better reception than her.

Ellie: So do you think, so the people at the front, they could use phones already?

Michael: I reckon so. Yeah. It's just Rhonda's house.

Ellie: So it's just Rhonda's house. Okay.

Michael: A funny story is, yeah, all the people that are at the front, they've got phone infrastructure. They've got cables underground there. It's running off what we call a SCAD. And then house seven, which is way further and more isolated than Rhonda's has a dedicated radio tower for that house. So it's only Rhonda's house that didn't have anything for phone.

Ellie: So when you say they have phone infrastructure, you mean there are phone lines?

Michael: Yes. Before the gate you'll see like a metal cabinet with a solar panel on it. So in that metal cabinet there's a device inside called a

SCAD, it generates a dial tone. But there's no cabling from that to Rhonda's house, which is a bit isolated from the rest of the houses.

Ellie: But say one of those houses at the front where Trudy lives for instance, she could get a phone, regular Telstra home phone connected already?

Michael: Should be, I mean, I haven't seen the cabling plan to see what houses have it. But um, the SCAD at the front indicates that you know, it is there. I'll have to go out and scope it, I don't know that that's what it's for.

Ellie: Right? Okay. No, I'm just really surprised. I didn't know that. But what's interesting is that they didn't know that either.

Ellie (VO): So a phone service was much closer to being available to Rhonda and Trudy than they knew. This gives Kwale Kwale this feeling of remoteness, and yet it's only half an hour from a big town. Most people on the east coast probably have a bigger commute to work than that.

But comparisons to the city aren't worth much. The situation faced by communities in the Northern Territory are a very different thing. They're just seen differently. As Michael kept talking, this became more and more evident.

Michael: When I actually got there, I asked them, have you thought about NBN? And just go through Wi Fi calling? And then they said, Yeah, they don't know how much a dish would cost. And also, there's a high chance of the dish being stolen when they're not home. So they didn't want to go that route anyway. So I think the next best thing was this to get data and phone to her house.

Ellie (VO): It turned out that Rhonda and Trudy could get a new phone line connected, but there would be costs involved in getting a trench dug from the cabinet to the house. There would also be a minimum monthly bill. Rhonda had said that it's easier for each house to have prepaid mobile phones but the option is there should they choose to take it up.

Just a note that since we started on this journey, Telstra has established a Regional Advisory Network that can help households like Rhonda's to choose the best connection for their circumstances.

Ellie: So do you mostly work with communities? Is that what you do?

Michael: I'm a bit of both. I've only been a remote technician for two years. Prior to that I've just been working in Alice Springs. But yeah, two years I've been around. And I've been to a lot of places, including WA, South Australia, we cover those.

Ellie: And what do you see the problems are with people trying to get phones in those communities?

Michael: It's just the infrastructure. That's not there. And sometimes our call centers can't verify the address. So we can't put a job in to see if we can get a phone to where you are.

So I think it's that barrier. But I think that's what Telstra's regional team is for. To bridge that gap.

Ellie: Yeah, so you can go out and just talk to people. So how did Rhonda react when it was up and running?

Michael: I was taken aback actually, her exact words were, "this is incredible. I can't believe it." Just the smile on her face. You know, she's really lovely. She's very warm, very friendly. And she just said, "it's amazing."

I thought it was really fulfilling when she said, "Oh, this is incredible, I can't believe it." I guess it just puts in perspective that, you know, sometimes we do meaningful, meaningful work.

Ellie: That's wonderful. Yeah, she is a fantastic person. And I'm so pleased that you were able to help her this time. It's great.

Michael: It was Mark, it was all Mark. He set the whole thing up.

Ellie: Yeah, but I can't imagine him getting up there on a flagpole.

Michael: Yeah that's true.

Ellie (VO): That song was:

"Around Here" by Tia Gostelow
From the Album Deadly Hearts 2
Courtesy ABC Music
Licensed by Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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

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

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