



ABORIGINAL RESOURCE & DEVELOPMENT  
SERVICES INC.

ABN 24 609 472 742

PO Box 1671

Nhulunbuy NT 0881

Web: [www.ards.com.au](http://www.ards.com.au)

Phone: 08 8987 3910

Fax: 08 8987 3912

Email: [nhulun@ards.com.au](mailto:nhulun@ards.com.au)

***BACKING INDIGENOUS ABILITY***

Due to time constraints, this response to *Backing Indigenous Ability* Discussion Paper will be very short and focused on the relevant issues as we see them in north-east Arnhem Land. Please excuse us for such a rushed response we hope it presents the points in a clear enough way.

The main issue that we will respond to is in relation to the level of Internet access. This is because the standard of telephone services in our region is quite good and the population is well catered for. That is not to say that there are not some homeland centres that do not have a phone service, but in general phones services and the access to them is not a major issue in the Yolŋu region north-east Arnhem Land.

The major issue for the region is still the level of media access to information in a language that the people can understand. Many of the homeland centres still do not have even a basic radio service in language. Also many Yolŋu people in the region have to travel up to four hours by road to access services – banking etc. and other services. Others pay anything up to \$700 for an aircraft charter so they can come to Nhulunbuy – just to do their banking! Phone banking is not used because of language issues relating to the instructions on the phone. A few Yolŋu people do use Internet banking both in some major communities and in at least 2 of the more than 90 Yolŋu homeland centres in north-east Arnhem Land.

The Internet could offer opportunities for communication, education, banking and business development. However there are also many problems associated with the Internet. Those problems include almost no current level of technical service available for this type of technology throughout the vast Yolŋu region of north-east Arnhem Land (over 37,000 sq km; which includes the six major communities of Yirrkala, Gunyajarra, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak, Ramingining and Milingimbi) and over 90 homeland centres. Even those communities around the mining town of Nhulunbuy experience major difficulties accessing computer technology services at a reasonable cost. Also, at Yirrkala it is almost impossible to obtain a 'Broadband' service as the cable to the town from the Nhulunbuy exchange can not carry an ADSL signal and, because it is part of the Nhulunbuy exchange, satellite Internet costs are horrendous for both business and the general public.

***Q7 Are hub communities the appropriate location for implementing public access Internet facilities? If so, how best can hub communities be prioritized as appropriate locations for new Internet access?***

Hub communities would be one approach to the issue of access to the Internet for Yolŋu people; however most of the major communities have virtually no computer support services. Therefore *any* Internet rollout to Indigenous communities needs to have a large component built in for support services. Once this difficulty is addressed there are also many problems associated with Internet facility rollout, if not done properly. They include;

1. If it is done in communities without a coordinated training and participation program for the adult population then this could be the greatest waste of government money we have ever witnessed. This is further addressed at (3) below.
2. At the moment there is almost no content on the Internet that the various language regions can access because of the very low level of English literacy (For example, the

literacy level of the Yolŋu people is only something like 7%). So it ends up being things like computer games and the AFL website that would become the main use of this technology. The quality of this and other easily accessible content is at times very questionable especially with the large number of Yolŋu youth emulating the black American gangs just from the use of video and television. This could well lead to a *greater escalation of violence and outrage* aimed at Aboriginal women and children, because this is *exactly* what these games etc. promote.

3. However there is another danger if the technology is not controlled by adults in the community. Due to the nature of the equipment and the fact that it is new technology for many people in Indigenous communities, it will immediately fall into the hands of younger people and older adults will continue to find the technology strange and alien. So it is likely the younger people on the community will have almost sole use of the equipment and therefore have easy access to a massive amount of hard-core pornographic material that invades the web. This material is predatory and without the responsible adults of the community having any knowledge about how to control it and/or get rid of it, this technology could present itself as *the most destructive force* of the dominant culture “culture” that inflicts itself on the Indigenous community. It will lead to an even greater escalation of violence and dysfunction than what is being witnessed at present.

However unless steps are taken before the technology is introduced to make sure that it is the adults of the community that access and control the equipment, then it is unlikely that even a few adults will be able to assume any form of control over this technology. Even though some Yolngu adults are waiting for the service to be able to use the Internet for online banking and the like. This point has also been highlighted by John Anderson,

former Deputy Prime Minister, and others as a current problem in Indigenous communities across Australia.

ARDS is talking to Yolŋu leaders about the development of an Intranet system where the advantages of this technology can be maximized without destroying the very fabric of Yolngu families, clans and communities.

***Q11 Are there more innovative models of delivering Internet access to Indigenous communities?***

### **Language Region Intranet System**

Traditionally Aboriginal people divided their geographic regions up into language regions where one or two main languages were known across the whole region; even when many other smaller languages were known within that same region. Across the NT you can easily identify these different language regions today. Some regions are prefixing language regions and some are suffixing language regions. The Yolŋu languages of north-east Arnhem Land form a suffixing language region; but Groote Eylandt and Numbulwar must be excluded as the languages these communities speak are prefixing languages. It makes good educational sense to carry out development work within these language regions so that delivery and training cost efficiencies can be achieved. Within this north-east Arnhem Land Yolŋu language region there are approximately 7,000 Yolŋu people. There are also about another 1,000 Yolŋu Matha speakers in Darwin.

From our research and intimate knowledge of this region (over the last 30 years) ARDS believe that a language region based Intranet system would best meet the chronic

information and access need of the Yolŋu people of this region. It would allow the best delivery and the most efficient use of government dollars, by a country mile, in the deployment of monies aimed at providing Indigenous community access to Internet/Intranet across the NT.

Community champions like ARDS, who have a long corporate knowledge and association with a region, with government backing, could develop an Intranet system which could create chat rooms between the people in homelands and communities, provide good educational content development, schooling for all-age groups; maths and English-learning materials as well as providing secure access to bank sites and other useful Internet material.

It is understood that the Inuit people of Canada have already developed such a service and it is working very well.

This Intranet system could also connect to other indigenous Intranet systems across Australia and the world which would encourage the development of material worldwide; material which provides answers to health issues as well as facilitating the development of employment and industry.

This type of development by an organization like ARDS would meet *all the key principals* in 3.2.1 and key elements in 3.3. It would also bring the positive advantages of the Internet without the need of already overworked and overtired community leadership having to be fast tracked into learning another very foreign new technology – faster than the savvy youth who then have no checks and balances of what the new technology offers..

Those non-government organisations that take on the role of developing these regional Intranet systems would also then have the responsibilities to liaise and identify needs within particular communities with these regions as per Q8 and Q9. The providers of the regional Intranet services would also assume the responsibilities raised in Q10.

**Q23** *Are community champions an appropriate way to engage the community and assist them in using telecommunications technology? For what size of community would a community champion be appropriate? Would every Indigenous community with a phone, Internet or videoconferencing facility need access to a local champion?*

A community champion would be a very good way to move in the area of access to the Internet in Yolŋu communities in north-east Arnhem Land. Community champions, following the lead of community leaders, would deal with the installation, implementation, training and technological issues between a very new and underused technology and the Yolŋu communities.

We believe for the community champions concept to work well then it too should be done on the basis of language regions. For the Yolŋu in north-east Arnhem Land this allows for many more efficiencies to be built in. Yes the community champion could act as a bridge between the communities that have almost no knowledge of these new technologies and the telecommunications capabilities of the Internet and VOIP etc. For example, at the moment Yolŋu people have massive problems maintaining phone services because they know little of the charging rates and how phone billing system works. This may seem trivial to some, but if people still do not have the full story and a complete picture of something that they

have been dealing with for over 20 years – then the same pitfalls await the introduction of Internet technology. Especially when you add in the uncertainty people have with things like credit cards and the possibility for running up massive debts when a credit card is used on non-secure Internet sites. Each community definitely needs a community champion.

The recognition of a community champion for each region would tie together a whole range of effective workable efficiencies if done within language regions. That is each language region would have a regional community champion. Their role would include promoting a range of media services with access to new technologies, training and support medical services. This would be a good way to overcome the severe isolation now experienced by many Indigenous people, and would give them real access to information, and services.

***Q27 What models of delivering increased culturally appropriate content to the Internet could be introduced under Backing Indigenous Ability?***

To date, there is only a very small amount of culturally appropriate content (CAC) on the Internet for Aboriginal people who speak English as a second, fifth or sixth language. This is a hard reality for English first language speakers to really appreciate. But if one is to try accessing information from a German or Japanese website, then one experiences the difficulty that some *literate* Yolŋu people experience with this technology. Then when we need to remember that less than 7% of Yolŋu people have any form of reading ability then the problem is massive as only a few of these people have real English literacy skills. The rollout of broadband and other Internet infrastructure into Indigenous communities must go hand in hand with the development of media content in their language and be developed in a way that even lets illiterate people find their way into learning and other materials.

In the area of culturally appropriate media content, ARDS has decided to start with where the people are. By this we mean that as there is an illiteracy rate of over 90% then ARDS has started with radio – the spoken word – as the first media delivery method. The deployment of the Yolŋu Radio service has opened up other electronic media to the Yolŋu population. It has allowed people to be introduced to the possibility of culturally appropriate training material on the Internet. For example, when health workers ring ARDS and ask for training material in language about different diseases, we can now point them to the ARDS website where they have on demand access to many audio programs around different diseases and sicknesses. They have been very excited about this. Visit [www.ards.com.au/hear\\_programs.htm](http://www.ards.com.au/hear_programs.htm)

The Yolŋu leaders in ARDS have been pushing ARDS to carry out this role for many years now. It is the only model that is both sustainable and workable. It proves that culturally appropriate content development for the Internet is not only possible now but can reach illiterate people.

If non-government organisations like ARDS were to be funded to continue the development of content there are many advantages to it. ARDS would like to use our already developed skill in carrying out successful education with Yolŋu people to create resources like a complete audio dictionary; from English into Yolngu Matha (the indigenous language of north-east Arnhem Land). Other material like how to read and write their own language and especially English could be developed. Maths games for adults and children where the people can learn how to calculate money transactions and the values of different denominations of money. Online video presentations explaining current diseases and illnesses could be expanded and delivered through this media. All this builds on a positive

electronic media learning experience that is grounded for Yolŋu in being able to initially access radio (through Yolŋu Radio) and then go on to use other media for their learning and education needs.

At present we know that our radio education material is being used in schools by both Yolŋu and Balanda teachers. As we have already said, Yolŋu health workers have discovered that radio programs are available online and are using this audio educational material to learn whole subject areas on demand. Developing this type of content and then expanding it to include written Internet content provides a resource that could be used by schools, individuals, adults and interpreters. Yolngu people want to learn a whole range of things about the world around them and ARDS is using a scaffolding method of content provision as an effective way of providing education and information in the people's language.

**Q28**            *How could a grant or funding model to encourage development of culturally appropriate content be structured? What are the benefits and the risks of the models?*

As tooling up for this type of work can absorb significant financial and staff resources, especially in the training and equipping of staff in language work, then to be successful it demands a *long term commitment*. Put simply - short term content developments are a great waste of money.

ARDS has much experience and a long commitment to the use of the people's language as the most effective educational tool. Our 30 years of experience has shown that the development of good quality resources (content) in language take time, research, testing of

the material, checking again of the material and then it is probably ready for use. This means that the production of content and its development is a long term process. Otherwise, a lot of money can be spent for little content, most of which will probably not be of a sufficient standard to be effective. The funding should be based on a term of *at least* an initial three years recurrent funding.

Funding models of a lesser time frame in the end mean less value for money as the necessary ground work is not able to be completed to a satisfactory level. ARDS, due to its background in this type of work, would be able to cope with a shorter funding timeframe *but* ultimately any service provider will be constrained by funding of less than three years concurrent funding.

One-off funding grants given to media developers that have no or little cross-language and cross-cultural educational skills and background is a complete waste of money and resources. Million of dollars have been spent on nationally focused material that has done nothing because it has never met the needs of any one group of people. Content development must be developed from the grass roots up, then it can shared and retooled into language for other language groups to use. Some material we have seen is so culturally inappropriate it would be better if the money had never been spent in the first place as it is culturally offensive and delivers the incorrect information.

Long term funding in a specific region allows best use of funds as this work can then be shared with other language regions for mutual benefit. The risks in this model are few.

**Q29**            *Will the ability to digitally record and archive culturally significant material encourage usage of Internet services?*

If done according to strict cultural guidelines, it could. However, it must be done by organisations that have this cultural understanding. In recent times, a number of organisations have attempted to do this work. Unfortunately, because of their lack of understanding of the cultural sensitivities in relation to ownership and usage of audio material, many traditional Aboriginal people have become very suspicious of any audio recording and archiving. Other organisations have digitized audio and destroyed sound files because the people doing the digitalization did not understand the language used on the material and therefore they did not realize they were destroying the quality of the recording and also its material.

However the Yolŋu Radio experience has proved that Indigenous people will access audio on the Internet provided it is what they want and in a language that they understand. As stated in the response to question 28 – this access of audio on the Internet leads to additional use of the Internet for other content, provided that the content is available and also that it is culturally appropriate and exists in language.

**Q30**

***What funding approaches could be adopted to encourage the recording and archiving material under Backing Indigenous Ability?***

As mentioned earlier, the long term view also needs to be taken in regard to the recording and archiving of indigenous audio material. This is because any organisation that starts to undertake such work must have a long and effective history in cultural sensitivity around these issues. The organisation will need to have demonstrated a very good understanding of language and have a very good standing in the target community of having a good approach to working with the people themselves.

As a Aboriginal organisation with a long corporate history in this area, particularly with the Yolŋu people, ARDS is one such organization and has been undertaking unfunded recording and archiving for a number of years and many Yolŋu people and clans have asked us to do much more. However we have been hindered due to a lack of funds and resources to carry out this important work. This work needs to go hand in hand with the Yolŋu people's own development of Internet content. Content that firstly is designed for radio and then other online material later.

Whilst organisations such as IATSI have provided such services in the past, an intimate knowledge of the language is needed in handling this material and that is where the people are best to do it themselves in their own organisations such as ARDS. Organisations like IATSI can then be used as an offsite storage facility of important material.

Minimum three year recurrent funding is the only real way to develop expert teams to carry out and maintain its important work. The ongoing funding past the initial period (often only one or two years) is imperative. This would encourage organisations to think and plan long

term for the recording and archiving of such material and create some real jobs for indigenous people on an ongoing basis. However any funding at all will move this crucial work forward before many of the current elders, who have asked for this service, are lost for ever along with their wealth of knowledge.

## **Summary**

It has been said that ‘no man is an island’. It is also true for any community or cultural group that services of any kind can not be provided in isolation. So must be the approach to telecommunications for our remote Indigenous communities.

The recognition of regional community champions based on the already know language regions will allow the integration of telecommunications services into Indigenous communities in an orderly and efficient fashion. This will facilitate the engagement of the community in using the new technology and allow the response the community’s need for culturally appropriate and relevant online content to be developed in language.

This has been the approach that ARDS has taken by establishing the Yolŋu Radio service as an effective media service in its own right, yet one that provides that stepping stone to other online content in language for the Indigenous population of a whole region. This model needs to be used to not only be operationally effective but save costs in the delivery of telecommunications services throughout a whole region for a whole Indigenous cultural group.