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The influence of ICT on Indigenous mobility

(Impacts of mobile and Internet technologies on mobility in remote communities)

THIS STUDY WILL INDICATE	*RESEARCH AIM*
➔ The types of information and communication technologies (ICTs), related devices (mobile phones, laptops etc.), functions and applications currently being used by Indigenous Australians living in remote communities in the Northern Territory. ➔ How ICTs are influencing temporary mobility into and out of remote communities, including changes in travel intensity, frequency, duration, patterns and purpose as well as composition of travel parties ➔ In which cases ICTs substitute (for example Internet banking) or generate travel ➔ The impacts of ICTs' usage on intensity, frequency and purposes of visits from non-Indigenous people like service deliverers or tourists in remote communities	*To identify how the adoption of new ICTs is influencing temporary mobility into and out of remote Australian Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.*

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BACKGROUND

ICT accessibility has for a long time been a major issue in remote Australia, in particular in Indigenous communities. Up until recently, availability and access in these remote places could be described at best as minimal. Programmes on all governmental levels worked and still work hard on improving the situation and as technology roll-out is proceeding, many NT communities are currently getting access to mobile telephony and Internet applications. Early research in Queensland suggests that, as soon access is provided, uptake rates amongst Indigenous Australians living in remote places are high (Dyson & Brady, 2009). This enhanced interaction with the global world will influence Indigenous cultures, aspirations and lifestyles.

For various reasons, one of the most interesting aspects of technology uptake by remote Indigenous residents is its potential to influence temporary mobility. Traditionally, Indigenous Australians have been a "culture of mobility". New ICTs, however, are known for modifying, substituting and generating travel in various cultures all over the world. This raises the question of whether ICTs will also have the power to influence mobility in the remote Indigenous Australian context or not. If yes, changes in mobility will necessarily have implications on future service delivery programs. In the NT, prior to this study, nothing was known about what influences technology is having and the outcomes of these for mobility.

To conduct this research, literature on Indigenous Australians travel and mobility prior to the access to new ICTs was observed to gain an understanding of motives for, and dimensions of, journeys, followed by a literature review on ICTs' potential influences on mobility. Issues of ICT adoption in the remote Indigenous context were analysed. Finally, research is being conducted in the field to get stories from Indigenous people in remote communities about what technologies they use, what functions they access and how this influences their lives, and particularly travels.

Academic literature in this context

There is frequent travel between remote settlements and urban centres. A range of research has documented the drivers and patterns of these. One of the most comprehensive studies was conducted by Memmott, Long & Thomson in 2006. It was found that kinship is a great driving force. Leisure, maintenance and work-related purposes were also identified to play a key role as travel motivators for residents of remote communities. Besides these internal motivators, escape of outside interference might give a reason for travelling as well (Prout & Yap, 2010). Distinctive with regards to demographics is that young adults were found to travel most frequently.

This generation also shows the highest uptake of new technologies. Research found that uptake is not limited to standard use either. Indigenous communities, where available, have adopted and adapted ICTs to support and protect cultural characteristics: Web 2.0 applications are being used as vehicle for transferring traditional knowledge to younger generations and for community development (Corbett, Singleton & Muir, 2009, p. 71-72). Multimedia archives are being deployed to store Indigenous knowledge; and traditional languages which are just spoken by a few people are being taught using talking books. E-commerce websites have been created by Indigenous artists to escape exploitation of middlemen (Dyson & Brady, 2004, p. 65-68) and young Indigenous artists escaped poverty and got famous worldwide by uploading a video on YouTube (ABC, 2007, npa). These are only examples on how ICTs have been adopted and adapted by Indigenous communities so far and future opportunities are even more numerous (Michael & Dunn, 2006).

PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

As academic literature suggests, Indigenous Australians living in remote communities are engaging intensively with new ICTs, once they are accessible in their remote places. This commitment, combined with increasing availability and manifold opportunities to participate in the global world, suggest that ICTs uptake will most likely change Indigenous Australians' mobility. As changes will affect service delivery programs and spatial planning and little is known on the topic to date, this research intends to provide an early informative basis for policy makers and planners.

Amongst all the cultural aspects that might change due to new ICT adoption, temporary mobility was chosen, because

(i) it is one of the most central aspects of Indigenous culture.
(ii) temporary mobility includes a fluid spatial component which matches the fluidity and borderless nature of technology use. Should trends of spatial movements develop first indicators might be found in changing temporary mobility.
(iii) it has not been surveyed at all so far, although changes in this cultural dimension would necessarily require adoptions in service delivery programmes.

The Northern Territory was chosen as location for this study because it is the jurisdiction which would be most highly affected by changes in the lifestyles of Indigenous Australians living in remote communities. Moreover, the progress of technology rollout is relatively advanced in this jurisdiction when compared to the remote North of Western Australia and Queensland where there is also a high Indigenous composition in the population.

METHODOLOGY

The research will involve in-depth interviews with Indigenous Australians living in remote communities in the Northern Territory during 2010 to get an insight into the usage of new ICTs for travel purposes in this cultural context. Participants will be asked to tell stories about their latest journeys, contact with friends and family, visits to events and favourite places, shopping and maintenance activities as well as about visitors in their home communities.

The targeted age group is young adults who use ICTs, and in particular mobile phone and Internet based programs. Other ICT users will also be in scope because they may be able to relay stories (the traditional means of communication for Indigenous people) about themselves and others in the community on the use of ICT and its impacts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Changes in the lifestyle of Indigenous Australians, living in remote and very remote places of Australia, from the adoption of new ICTs are likely. Moreover, changes in spatial behaviour will have wide-ranging impacts for service delivery policies and programs, as well as potential impacts on settlement characteristics and the demography of remote NT. Even minor changes in mobility behaviour can have major impacts on the small populations of remote communities such as those in the NT.

The study will examine how ICT uptake might change the temporary mobility behaviour of Indigenous

Australians living in remote communities in the near to medium term. Preliminary results will be published by the end of October 2010.

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