

# Connecting in the Gulf: Digital Inclusion for Indigenous Families Living on Mornington Island Research Project

## WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This project aimed to explore how Aboriginal families living in a remote Aboriginal community on Mornington Island experience digital inclusion. Using yarning, an Indigenous research method, and show and yarn photography, families spoke about how they use mobile phones and the internet for employment, education, Centrelink, banking and other activities.

## WHO DID THE RESEARCH?

Dr Jessa Rogers, Dr Amber Marshall, Dr Kim Osman, Dr Thu Pham, Prof Michael Dezuanni (QUT) and Prof Hurriyet Babacan (JCU) were the Research Team. Dr Jessa Rogers (Aboriginal researcher - Wiradjuri) and Dr Amber Marshall (non-Indigenous researcher) conducted the yarns on Mornington Island. In total, three trips were made to Mornington Island by the research team across 2022.



## WHAT DID MORNINGTON ISLAND FAMILIES SAY THEY NEED?

- Reliable, affordable and faster internet options for families living on Mornington Island to access digital opportunities, employment, education, and essential services such as banking, online shopping, and MyGov services.
- Increased, reliable phone reception and coverage, essential for activities on Country outside the town of Gununa, for calling for help in emergencies, and when travelling on sea and land. Recent outages have continued for several days.
- Affordable devices, including computers, laptops, desktop computers, and digital training freely available and delivered in ways that suit community needs, to educate community on online safety, and allow full participation in online activities, to manage health, to increase educational opportunities, to open up business opportunities/cultural activities, to follow news and media, and connect with family, friends, and others.
- Mornington Island has embraced social media, particularly Facebook which is often used for positive community activities, including sharing historical and contemporary photographs, and to connect those affected by removals and displacement, since the dormitories operated on Mornington Island. More opportunities to work with digital photographs and archives were seen as exciting. Residents would like the option of an Indigenous Knowledge Centre or similar in town to share family history.



## WHAT DID INDIGENOUS FAMILIES ON MORNINGTON ISLAND TELL YOU ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES OF DIGITAL INCLUSION?

- The main **digital infrastructure** that connect Mornington Island residents are: NBN SkyMuster broadband satellite (Activ8me), **Telstra 4G Mobile**, NBN Community Wi-fi, Outstation phone units, and less often, satellite phones.. Previously, other forms of voice connectivity including UHF radio were used. satellite phones.
- Mornington Island has a small but highly interconnected network of **social infrastructure organisations**, providing a range of services including Mornington Shire Council, Bynoe (who administer Centrelink), Mission Australia, Save the Children/ 54 Reasons, Australia Post, Gidgee Health, Mornington Island State School (caters for students up to year 6, but also accepts students up to year 10 on campus), Mirndiyan Gununa Art Centre, and Junkari Laka Justice Centre.
- Mobility challenges prevent residents from accessing services that are used face to face. For example, the one shop on the island is some distance from most residents' homes and often a car is needed. This has led to young people borrowing Elders' ATM cards to assist with things such as grocery shopping on the island.
- There is some level of digital training and support to community members to use digital technologies and online sites to do essential tasks however, devices and connections are often **unavailable owing to technical issues**; also **not enough devices and human resources** to adequately help people get online. Bandwidth and 4g network congestion make simple online tasks impossible at some times of day
- **Family and community experiences of digital inclusion:**
  - **Safety and connection:** Travelling out of Gununa township, for cultural activities was seen as dangerous, especially for Elders and those with frail health due to limited phone reception and coverage in more remote regions – they cannot call for help in emergencies. The lack of mobile coverage on traditional homelands was described as a barrier to youth and Elder engagement in activities on Country.
  - **Low uptake of free community Wi-fi:** Free community wi-fi has been installed next to the one shop and near the corrections office in town. Free Wi-Fi was seen by those we spoke to for young people. The location and small range of the wi-fi prevents those with mobility issues/those without a car that have health issues, and, is in an open space that is affected by weather (it is often very hot, and rainy). The free Wi-Fi location increases the chance of people encountering others they may not want to see, reasons like domestic violence and police orders and family issues.
  - **Reliance on handheld devices, hotspotting and prepaid services:** Almost all families we spoke with were connecting to the internet solely through **mobile phones** – **prepaid data** being the main source of data for the entire household. Families of large and small sizes were sharing data from \$30 recharge credits (multiple each month) through hotspotting, for browsing, banking, Centrelink/Abstudy, and in the case of children and young people, gaming and YouTube. Often, children use and expend their parents' or grandparents' mobile data without them fully understanding how much data each activity takes/costs.
  - **Digital humbugging:** hotspot/data and online banking humbugging is prevalent and places demands on some family members, through both sharing of devices and data, and sometimes the use of online banking to transfer funds both with and without permission. Digital humbugging was spoken about as leaving people without money for necessities such as food.