

Growing the Indigenous Australian internet

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When I first began documenting Indigenous participation in the internet in Australia, I considered the following to be a pertinent summary:

Participation in online services by Indigenous Australians is currently very limited. The rate of individual computer ownership is extremely low and private access to internet services is minimally represented within this. A few community organisations and individuals have opened accounts with commercial Internet Service Providers and a small number of these have established a World Wide Web presence. The major representations of Indigenous Australian peoples in online services remain as the objects of specific areas of research interest for universities and other institutions, or in the commercial sphere. [Hobson, J R (1997a) Strategies for Building an Indigenous Australian Cybercommunity: The KooriNet Project. Paper presented at the 1997 Fulbright Symposium: Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World, July 24-27, Darwin. <http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au/fulbright.html>]

Since that time it seems that almost everything has changed, and nothing has really changed at all.

Sure there are a lot more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander websites these days, many of them of great significance. The WWW Resource Directory at KooriNet now documents over 400; a substantial advance on the 150 or so we estimated to exist at the time of our original survey [Hobson, J R (1997b) *Where are all the Aboriginal Home Pages? The Current Indigenous Australian Presence on the WWW*. Paper presented at the Fifth International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference, 1-4 October 1997, Alice Springs. <http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au/lern/>]. Sites blossom into existence and fade out with such frequency lately that it can prove difficult to keep up. And the balance is shifting. It is more often the case that community people are creating an Indigenous internet pres-

ence themselves, even in the commercial sphere. Witness the growth in Indigenous e-commerce as Aboriginal artists, performers and retailers promote themselves on the web. There are clearly more Indigenous Australians just surfing the internet as well. More and more e-mail circulating through KooriNet is originating from Indigenous correspondents every day.

But the core of those early observations does appear substantially unchanged. Indigenous Australians accessing the internet largely still rely on their place of work or study to provide that access, and remain a minority within the Indigenous population themselves. Online Indigenous households are as rare a phenomenon as ever. There are really very few organisations and even fewer individuals that have established a web presence, and the majority of substantial websites continue to talk about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the third person. You are still reading a non-Indigenous 'expert' writing about it.

The reasons for this lack of significant advance are also still the same and based in a clear and over-riding lack of equity of access. The internet in Australia is largely the province of the middle class and the educated, and the cities. It is inherently elitist. And, while it remains so and the status of Indigenous Australians remains unchanged, so will their participation in it. Many Indigenous organisations and people are also operating in a crisis environment; both in terms of what they are trying to achieve and the availability of funds they have to operate. In such a context, and with the knowledge that their peer audience remains quite limited, there is little incentive for them to shift scarce resources to the apparent luxury of exploring the new medium.

These kinds of observations were responsible for the genesis of KooriNet in 1995 and persist in its continuing development. By documenting the Indigenous internet and assisting community to participate in it we have attempted to support its growth, well beyond any simple goal of making our own site look bigger.

KooriNet has built and/or hosts sites for over a dozen community organisa-

tions and members free-of-charge. We host numerous e-mail mailing lists with over 1200 subscribers, some of which have become the de facto news service for their respective audiences. We have implemented and maintained the Indigenous Australian WWW Resource Directory to document the developing texture and dimension of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander internet. We have responded to community requests by implementing the only true Indigenous Australian search engine; BlackTracka. And we still let local community members use our computer room. But, in the best tradition of Australian universities, there are still no allocated staff or resources for the project. It is just another thing we do in our spare time.

If we can do it, maybe you can lend a hand as well. Invite your local Indigenous communities to use your organisation's facilities. Even if it is just for a day, you could at least give people the opportunity to experience the internet for the first time and a chance to assess its relevance to their lives. As well as issuing open invitations, why not set up some semi-structured sessions where there will be a focus on exploring Indigenous resources? Many ISP accounts allow for multiple e-mail addresses. Why not offer one to a local Indigenous organisation and set up an arrangement for them to be able to access that account on a regular basis? If you have the skills to build a webpage how about offering your services as a favour to a local organisation and create a site for them or, better still, teach them how, or even learn together? If you can not host it on your server there are lots of free hosts that take sites in exchange for advertising space. And there is always KooriNet.

Yes, it might take a bit out of an already overstretched budget. You might have to do a little 'creative accounting'. But, if it has a fruitful outcome in bringing people into contact with information and information technology, isn't that what we are here for? Even if it does give you a few headaches and heartaches (and it will), at least you will know you are helping things grow!

KooriNet can be found at <http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au/> and can be contacted at koorinet@mail.koori.usyd.edu.au ■