



## Hitnet - Digital Transformations in Remote Australia

By Thomas Dick, Helen Travers and Julie Gibson

*"Hardware solutions" are often treated with suspicion in communication for development and social change circles, especially where and when context is footnoted. Countless studies have found that some ICT for development projects have raised serious questions about sustainability especially when interventions have given minimal consideration to contextual issues, such as language, culture, renovation and repair, as well as financial and business viability. Some well-meaning initiatives come to mind, for example, the and One Laptop Per Child Project the Hole-in-the-Wall computer kiosks in India, or the Rural Information Centres in Africa.*

*An innovative social enterprise is however demonstrating that supported by adequate consideration for local needs and context, hardware solutions could become a reality. In this article, Thomas Dick, Helen Travers and Julie Gibson discuss how Hitnet, a remote Australian communication for development organisation, is building the smart digital ecosystems needed to reach and engage even the most marginalized. Hitnet co-designs and innovates with remote Indigenous communities to develop technologies that are robust, beneficial and user-friendly.*

Photo: Nickeema Williams (L) showing some youth how to use the Hitnet Hub in Manoora Community Centre. Photo credits: Beth Jennings

From its humble beginnings in 2002, Hitnet has installed a network of almost 100 touchscreen kiosks - 'Hitnet Hubs' - in remote Indigenous communities around the country. Each Hub provides a vast array of health and wellbeing media content co-created or produced with, or by, indigenous media organisations. And the demand for Hitnet Hubs and content is growing. Hitnet has recently reinvested its profits back into the business, allowing it to evolve and scale-up in 2017.

The platform now has new software, hardware, network solutions and a server, marking 2016 as a year of significant change. Additionally, Hitnet's national network has expanded its reach and undergone significant renewal. Hitnet Hubs in far north Queensland's Cape York Peninsula, some of which dated back to 2004, received a much-needed upgrade. Hitnet proudly partnered with Queensland Health Torres, and Cape Hospital and Health Service, to upgrade eight of these old Hubs, and to install a new unit on Saibai Island in the Torres Strait. Queensland Health also supported the upgrade of the Hub at Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and installed a new Hub at Woorabinda Hospital in Central Queensland. Bega Garbiringu Health Service in Kalgoorlie, another long-standing Hitnet customer, also opted to upgrade their old model.

Hitnet's purpose is to co-create a platform for knowledge exchange to build vibrant, inclusive communities. By 2021, Hitnet aims to be improving the lives of one million people daily. The company is taking a long-term structural approach by developing and nurturing creative partnerships with like-minded media producers to create a comprehensive and sophisticated product for the Hitnet Hubs.

In November 2016, Hitnet participated in the Remote Indigenous Media Festival at Yirrkala, East Arnhem Land. As a result of the festival, the company's primary strategy is now to develop partnerships with Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs), which have a complementary mandate to produce media in Indigenous languages, featuring people from the local communities.

Earlier in 2016, the University of Melbourne launched a research report on Hitnet's operational model. The report fully supported Hitnet's model and innovation trajectory. This independent assessment has strengthened the evidence-base for Hitnet's work, which is important for those communities who are interested in our suite of services.

Hitnet is dedicated to working with people to co-create the information that empowers them to make healthy life choices. Some of our recent projects are showcased below.

### **Lifestyle tips**

Connect 'n' Grow is an organisation that redesigns educational pathways for young Indigenous people wanting to forge a career in health and human services. A key part of their work involves providing students with health literacy that can be taken back to their communities. After meeting Managing Director, Mike Gleadow, we saw the opportunity to expand the reach of their health videos, which were produced with young people from local communities. The young people's videos encourage other kids to 'say no to smokes' and to 'think positive'. The videos also reinforce the ideas that 'alcohol is good for nothing' and that 'germs spread'. Supporting the country's future Indigenous health workforce in this way means a lot to us.

### **Smoking**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have three times the smoking rate of other Australians. The Commonwealth Government's Don't Make Smokes Your Story campaign aims to change this. It tells the inspiring story of Ted, a mid-thirties Aboriginal and South Sea Islander man who decided to quit smoking to make sure he'd be around to look after his kids. A series of engaging stories highlight the dangers of smoking, the reasons for quitting, and the tools and support available to help people 'stay off the smokes'. We were able to add value to the national campaign by delivering the stories in an interactive for-

mat to remote communities across the network. We are further supporting the campaign by making the My Quit Buddy and Quit for You, Quit for Two smoking apps freely available via Hitnet wi-fi.

### **Diabetes**

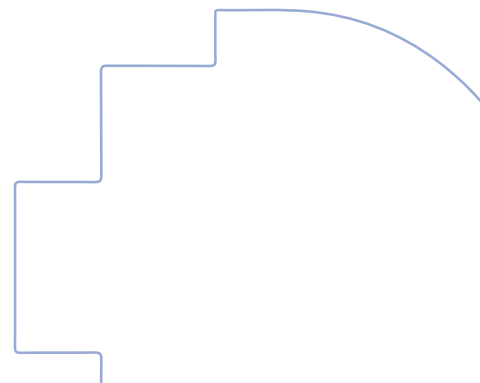
In 2015, we worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals and consumers in Cairns and Melbourne to produce The Diabetes Story. The creative project translated the complicated story of diabetes from medical-speak to people-speak. It's out there now on the national network of Hubs, as well as in DVD form, and is being well used. In addition, in 2016 we adapted the interactive module and made it suitable for use on mobile phones, which means that the story is now getting out to more people than ever before. The Diabetes Story app enables people to better manage their own diabetes at home, by providing them with short videos and information based on best practice.

### **Lung cancer**

Commissioned by Cancer Australia, we collaborated with Global Vision Media to produce a series of four, short videos about a patient's lung-cancer journey. These videos formed part of an online-training course for health workers called Lung Cancer in Our Mob. Hitnet's role was to engage Aboriginal Health Workers to help script and act in the videos, and to ensure cultural safety throughout the production. The stories for the video scripts were based on first-hand knowledge and experiences, so that they would resonate with other health workers. Our expectations were exceeded when the lead acting role was taken up by a strong Koori woman who was not only a health worker, but a lung-cancer survivor. She really enjoyed bringing her cultural and real-life experience to the production, and along with us, took great pride in the finished resource.

And...

Tackling issues relevant to young people and their families means that financial literacy and mental health were important inclusions on our platform. As part of Hitnet's newly-built Money Channel, we distributed three Money Smart videos produced by ASIC, and three catchy animations by iTalk Library, across the network.



## Eidsvold Launch

Hitnet was pleased to join a group of school kids to launch the Hitnet Hub in Eidsvold, a small town in the North Burnett region west of Bundaberg, Queensland. Bridges Health and Community Care purchased the Hub for the community, with Zona Hussey-Smith of Stepping Black the driving force behind its implementation. Zona also championed the community engagement and cultural support for the project. Nickeema Williams, Hitnet's Community Connector, spent time with the school kids learning about their issues and the ways in which art and multimedia can be used to engage users and keep culture strong.

## Broadmeadows Children's Court

Following the launch of the Hitnet Hub at Melbourne Children's Court in 2015, Broadmeadows Children's Court, in a northern fringe suburb of Melbourne, also purchased a Hub and installed it in their new, purposebuilt centre. The Hub is perfectly positioned in the new Court waiting area so visitors can interact with it. On a recent visit, Julie spoke with the local security person who spends all day in the waiting area. She understood the dynamics of the centre and said the Hub is in a great location. She often encourages visitors to use it. "It's been a Godsend," Julie said. "At first people wonder what it is and then I watch them and I can see, as they drill down into the stories, they become more and more involved. It's a really useful tool."

## Blackstone

The Hitnet Hub in Papulankutja, or Blackstone as it is colloquially known, is definitely one of the most remote Hub sites in the country. Papulankutja is located north of the Blackstone Ranges in remote Central Australia. Its residents belong to both the Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara language groups. Hitnet has been able to sustain the latest technology in this challenging environment thanks to the help of the wonderful staff at Blackstone Health Clinic, part of the Ngaantatjarra Health Service. For example, when a recent PC problem required swift action, a health clinic staff member removed the PC and put it on the next mail plane to Alice Springs, where Head Office co-ordinated with Hitnet and their technical team in Melbourne to replace it for a new unit. It was a real team effort that saw the Hub being returned to service within a couple of weeks.

Hitnet is now prototyping a gutsy outdoor Hub that can withstand rain, heat, and dust, runs on battery power, and can generate a Wi-Fi hotspot. Its roll out will really boost Hitnet's capacity to deliver technology and accessible knowledge to the hardest to reach. So too will the recent upgrade of our ageing network of Hubs in Cape York and the Torres.

Knowing our digital infrastructure is up-to-speed with the latest technology, including Wi-Fi capability, means Hitnet can offer greater opportunities to partner with remote communities to innovate around their use of mobile phones.



**Young people in the Manoora Community Centre working on some local productions with Hitnet Community Connector, Nickeema Williams**  
Photo credit: Beth Jennings

*Thomas Dick is Digital Content Manager for Hitnet. He has recently submitted his PhD through Southern Cross University.*

*Email tom@hitnet.com.au. Helen Travers is a Director and Founder of Hitnet who has been co-creating knowledge with Indigenous communities around Australia for almost two decades.*

*Email helen@hitnet.com.au. Julie Gibson is CEO and Founder of Hitnet. She has a Masters in Business & Technology from UNSW (AGSM). Email julie@hitnet.com.au.*

Young people in Milingimbi Island familiarising themselves with the interactive functionality of the Hitnet Hub

Photo credit: Lowitja Conference



Hitnet's Digital Content Manager, Tom Dick, demonstrating that over 100 Hitnet Hubs are located in rural and remote communities across Australia.

Photo credit: Lowitja Conference



Dancers from North Queensland looking at the co-created content on the Hitnet Hub in Pormpuraaw. Photo Credit: Hitnet