

Solomon Lecture 2023

'The Story of Seisia – How access to information in remote Indigenous communities can help to solve complex problems'

Ms Kim
Skubris

Well, good morning everybody, and welcome on this glorious Brisbane day. My name is Kim Skubris, and it's my absolute pleasure to welcome you, as we acknowledge the International Access Information Day, and also of course, be here to hear this year's Solomon Lecture.

It's interesting, as a journalist, and I'm based in Brisbane, but travel the world, that we're often called, jack of all trade, master of none. But what I do love about this role, is that I'm never quite sure what I'm about to hear, and needless to say, after 30-odd years as a broadcast journalist, storytelling is my passion, and I've since built my own business around it, and today, I promise, you are going to hear some amazing stories.

I'm a very, very proud Brissie local. I live here with my three children aged 12, 15 and 52. And, and I, I'm very, very proud to be here today, working closely with the Office of Information, and I'm very, very humbled to be invited to play this role today. I can't wait for you to meet Talei, and I can't wait for you to meet the panellists. I think my challenge today is actually reining us all in, because we're gonna all wanna chat, but I promise I'm my grandfather's grandchild. He was an Air Force guru, and he taught me how to be very respectful of time. So, I promise today, we will keep on time. I'm getting a few nods, yes, we will do that.

I certainly would like to welcome information commissioners, ombudsmen, and also our team members from all over Australia, welcome. I'm used to being able to do hybrid now, thanks to Covid, so welcome to everyone who is joining us from around Australia.

We would sincerely invite you to switch your phones to silent, so you can just be immersed in this next hour and half, and look, those of you who know my hosting style, I'm not going to insult your intelligence, if you can't find the loo, dare I say, go and have another shot of coffee, or just come and see me privately, okay? So, I'm not going to do any of that, and waste your time.

I would now love to introduce to you, our Welcome to Country performer, and

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather, the Turrbal and Yaggera people, and pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. I was saying to Christopher, I have the absolute pleasure of knowing his Aunty, Songwoman Maroochy, who is an extraordinary human, and I would now like to introduce Christopher, and while he makes himself up to the stage, to do him justice, if you would, acknowledge the fact that I'd just like to read this out. It's an, Christopher is an emerging Aboriginal leader who lives in Brisbane, who is linked to the Turrbal people through bloodline connection and kinship ties. He has a strong connection to his people and culture, and this morning, he's delivering Welcome to Country on behalf, and with the blessing of, his Aunty Turrbal Elder, Songwoman Maroochy. Please welcome, Christopher.

Christopher Wow, she's really good, eh? I'm a bit nervous now. But, yeah. I'm doing the
Tosh Welcome to Country on behalf of my Aunty Maroochy, in the Turrbal
Dawson language, we say, [Turrbal language spoken] Meeanjjin, that means, welcome
to Brisbane. So, I welcome youse all here today, in the Turrbal language.

Also, I'd like to welcome any Indigenous Torres Strait Islander, Elders, and people here today as well. A special welcome to youse. And, I'm going to do a little talk about the Turrbal people, and a little bit of history and storytelling about the nation, and what they've gone through.

So, the Turrbal people now, today, there's not many of them left, but I'll tell you why. Because in the 1800s, 1830s to be precise, you know, we had a lot of healers, bush doctors, medicine men and chiefs back in the day, and there was one Chief, his name was Daki-Yakka, he was actually the Chief of Turrbal in 1830s, and he was actually a healer, and he was anglicised to the Duke of York for being the Chief, and the Turrbal people were numbered in thousands in 1820s and that, and fast forward 40 years, 1861, Tom Petrie, he was actually the founding family of Brisbane at the time, and he reported the figure from thousands to just five, at a select committee, in 1861, and the Turrbal people still exist today because Daki-Yaka, his daughter, Kulkarawa, she fled the genocide that took place here, in Turrbal. She sought her refuge in the Gubbi Gubbi nation, and I believe that's Aunty Maroochy, and she's, her mob are the direct di- descendants of Kulkarawa.

So, that's a little bit of history about the Turrbal people. I know it's a bit sad,

but like, this, that truth's telling, storytelling, about what happened back then. So, if you ever get the chance to meet Aunty Maroochy and that, you know she's a well-respected Elder. As you can tell, a lot of people have met her before, she's, yeah, I'm very privileged to get up here and speak on her behalf.

So, welcome again, and I'm gonna sing youse a blessing song, a welcome song, as well. This song's called Gari Gynda Narmi, it comes from the Glubi-Gubbi Gubbi and the Wakka Wakka people, and I'd also like to just pay my respects to all the Elders around that taught me growing up, my culture. There's a lot of Elders in the community. I pay my respects to them, as well. You know, I've got Elders that taught me from Quandamooka, Turrbal, Yaggera, and all over, even down south and up north, so I- I like to pay my respects and acknowledge them, as well.

So, this song here, I'm going to sing for youse, yeah? Sounds good?

Oh yeah, can everyone say, Meeanjin?

[Meeanjin]

Meeanjin. And that's what we call Brisbane, so. It means the place of water lilies, yeah.

[Gari Gynda Narmi performed by Christopher Tosh Dawson]

Thank you.

So, yeah, I just want to say welcome again, [Turrbal language spoken] Meeanjin, and thank you for having me coming out here today, and all the best work for you, too, Sis. I've heard a lot about ya, and keep up the good work, hey? Thank you.

Ms Kim
Skubris

Well, I'll say, right back at you Christopher. That's a very hard act to follow. Thank you for your welcome, and for your blessing, and please pass on to your Aunty my sincere hello. Thank you so much. Please put your hands together again for Christopher Tosh Dawson.

It was interesting when I was asked to play this role today, I don't know how many of you believe in karma, or things happen for a reason, but I was told, no, Kim, we didn't actually realise that you were on that board. But I have two passions, apart from storytelling and my family, and that is children and

education. And a few years, I was honoured with the request to join the Board of Lighthouse International, which is a Queensland-based organisation that is absolutely passionate about digitising education for youth around Queensland, Papua New Guinea, and now around Australia.

So, when I started to read what today's Solomon lecture was about, and then of course, what our wonderful panellists were going to chat about, I rang Steve, and I said, are you kidding me? Is, this - did you know about this? He said, no, Scoobs, didn't know that, sorry Scooby. Scoobs is my nickname. No, we didn't, we didn't know that. But I'm absolutely thrilled that this morning we will be looking at digitising information, the importance of access to information, and how it improves peoples lives. And on that note, I would love to welcome to the stage, and for you to join me in welcoming acting Information Commissioner, Stephanie Winson. Thank you so much, Stephanie.

Ms
Stephanie
Wilson

Good morning, everyone. Before I start, I just want to, on behalf of the Office of the Information Commissioner, acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here, and in our audience, as the first Australians, and I respect deeply their connection to the land, waters and seas of Queensland and the Torres Strait Island. I wish to pay my respects to the Elders, past and present.

It's my privilege today to welcome you all to the first session that I'm attending of the Solomon Lecture 2023. It marks our celebration of the International Access to Information Day, which is a UNESCO International Day, and it is celebrated worldwide, on the 28th of September, every year.

The International Access to Information Day theme worldwide is the importance of on- the online space, for access to information. And as Kim has already indicated, information commissioners and ombudsmen around the country are celebrating this week, and are having events of this nature. So, I do encourage you to go to our website and have a look at the details, and encourage you to join us in celebrating this event with them.

Our theme in Queensland, however, is a little bit different. Digital inclusion, connecting people to information. So, there was a connection to that international theme, but this theme draws attention to the fact that digital technology is now the new frontier for information access. However, for it to

be successful, it does need to be inclusive.

Information, as you all might know, is power. And when you give access to information, you empower people. Access to information is also a fundamental human right, recognised internationally. The Queensland Parliament made a very clear commitment to all Queenslanders in 2009 when it passed the Right to Information Act, noting amongst other things, that it recognises the following: openness in government enhances accountability, it improves public administration, and it allows open discussion on public affairs.

Public trust in government, as we all know as well, is crucial to a healthy democracy, and transparency through access to information fosters such transparency and trust. In that context, I wanted to just talk to you very briefly about the worldwide digital transformation, which we will hear from our panel, and certainly from our speakers today. It certainly has revolutionised the way in which information is collected, accessed, and shared. The benefits of this transformation are very well documented. Most of you in the audience will no doubt know about that. But we also know that the deployment of digital technology by government can actually have adverse impacts on communities and individuals. The 2023 Australian Digital Index, Inclusion Index, highlights that there remain significant gaps, and there is a digital divide in our community that disproportionately affects some Australians, such as First Nations Peoples. And that brings me to today's lecture.

The Solomon Lecture is an annual event aimed not only at raising awareness to access to information, but also to engender a thought-provoking discussion, and hopefully stimulate that discussion through the presentations we'll hear this morning. We always seek to invite keynote speakers who might provide a different and new perspective on an issue relating to access to information, and in that respect, I'm delighted that Talei Elu has accepted our invitation to do the keynote address today. I think she's going to provide us with a very real insight into the opportunities and challenges that the digital space offers to First Nations communities, particularly those that are remote. The keynote address that she will give will be followed by a panel discussion, as you all know, and this promises to explore those issues from a diverse group of perspectives, and hopefully involve a rich discussion.

I wish to thank all of our speakers today for making the time to come and attend. I'm really privileged that you're here. And finally, I wish to thank the audience. You, here in the audience now, and online, for attending today. I also want to acknowledge the Honourable Peter Russo, our member of Parliament, for making the time to come and attend the session today. I encourage you to participate in this dialogue, and I hope you have a good morning. Thank you very much.

Ms Kim
Skubris

Thank you so much, Stephanie. As you shared, information empowers people. Information empowers community, and from our wonderful speaker today, who is as inspiring as she is humble, we are going to hear a remarkable story about her community, Seisia. Talei, while I invite you to make your way up onstage, I'd like to share a little bit about Talei, who decided to focus her enthusiasm for her Torres Strait culture, after six years working for the Federal Government. As many of you would be aware, she is our Queensland Young Australian of the Year, and is a Saibai Koedal woman from the Torres Strait, known as a crocodile woman. I hope I have done the pronunciation, I have checked. With a surname like Skubris, I'm a stickler for pronunciation. And, she'll be chatting with us today about her community of Seisia, in Cape York. She used her government experience, knack for media creation, and community organisation skills to start initiatives that have had such an extraordinarily positive effect in Seisia.

Since returning home during the pandemic, Talei has worked with the Australian Electoral Commission to enrol and educate more Indigenous people about the importance of voting. She also arranged for local women to receive free feminine hygiene products, baby necessities, and beauty and self-care items. And on top of all that, you are a very busy woman, she started Seisia Sport and Rec, a free sports equipment hire initiative for youth, among many other initiatives. Please make Talei feel welcome. Thank you so much.

Ms Talei Elu

Morning, everyone. [Indigenous language spoken], I would first like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the country on which we meet today, the Turrbal and Yaggera people, the caretakers of this beautiful country. I acknowledge the Elders, past and present, and acknowledge that their lands were never ceded, and are always sacred. And, Christopher, where are you in the crowd. Has he, has he gone? No? Oh. He's, he's gone, but I do

thank him for that beautiful welcome to country and that rich storytelling.

In my language, we say [Indigenous language spoken]. Which means, that when I walk on your country, I do so with the same care and respect that I do my own. I would like to acknowledge also, the oth- the other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the room, and watching online today, and also to my fellow panellists. Thank you to the Office of the Information Commissioner for inviting me to speak today, and of course thank Dr David Solomon for the legacy he's left, and Stephanie, also. Oh, sorry, I'm a bit nervous.

It's truly a pleasure to have been invited to speak to you all today. My name is Talei, and I'm a Saibai Koedal woman from Seisia community in Cape York. Saibai is one of the northern-most islands in Australia. From the sea wall, you can actually see Papua New Guinea, from across about four kilometres of ocean. Koedal means crocodile, and this is my [unintelligible – "(ui)"], my totem. Saibai-Koedal is my father's clan, and we have a rich tapestry of relationships across the clans of Saibai. My identity also spans across the, to the Pacific, as my mother hails from the small, but mighty nation of Fiji, where I have familial connections to Verevere, Namoli, and Navua(?) villages.

I wanted to start this lecture by telling you about my home, Seisia, and provide some history and context of this community. To tell you about the members of the community, who are integral to the stories that I'm about to tell, who have harnessed information to make our community better.

The story starts on Saibai. After a season of salt water inundation damaged crops and fresh water supply on the island in the 1940s, a contingent of Saibai islanders made the long voyage across the straits to Cape York on the Australian mainland in 1947. They were led by Chief Bamaga Ginau, and settled first at Mutee Head, near the mouth of the Jardine River. They moved more inland and established a settlement they named Bamaga. In 1948, a year after the first Saibai migration, other families made this voyage from Saibai, and settled some few kilometres away from Bamaga, at a place called Red Island Point. This movement was led by my grandfather, and his brothers and cousins. Red Island Point would later be renamed after the boat they sailed across in, Seisia, an acronym for the names of my

grandfather, grandfather's father, and his brothers. Sagaukaz, Elu, Ibuai, Sunai, Isua and Aken. The community members of both Seisia and Bamaga are descendants of these pioneering families. Seisia itself is a s- coastal community, situated on Aboriginal land, on the red dust country of Cape York. It faces north-west to the azure blue waters of the Torres Strait, and just 40 kilometres south of Pajinka, the very northern-most point of the Australian continent. We are one of five communities in a region known as the Northern Peninsula Area, or NPA for short. The NPA region also includes three Aboriginal communities. Injinoo, Umagico, and New Mapoon. These are our neighbouring communities.

In Seisia, we have a whopping 12 streets, and our community has 70 houses. We have a service station, a few commercial buildings, a local butcher, a tourist campground, and a supermarket where out the front, you'll see four-wheel drives, quad bikes, utes, kids' bikes, and horses in the parking lot. A pair of thongs will be near the entranceway of the shop, and likely a few adventurous and hungry community dogs are finding shade under the hot, from the hot sun, under the building shade. The edges of our roads are lined with coconuts, and the bitumen is stained from the red dust. In the mornings, you'll be waken by the sounds of palm cockatoos, or (ui) pigeons, depending on what time of year. During the day, while you're at work, you're constantly worried about if the wild horses have bro- broken into the yard again, to eat your banana trees. During an evening on the beach, you're looking out at the ocean, into the islands beyond, mainly to appreciate the beautiful sunset, but to also scan to see if the two local crocs are lying in wait for an opportune moment.

Family is integral in Seisia. Every one of your neighbours is in some way family. Hot scones may be delivered to you at lunch by your niece. An Auntie will babysit the sisters' and brothers' cousins' kids over the weekend, that's usually me. A nephew may pop by to clean your car, thank goodness, and mow the lawn. Elders will drop by each other's homes for long yarns, accompanied by tea made by a young family member. This is what my home is like. It sounds beautiful, right? It is a beautiful place to live, but it's also a tough place to live. It's a community like many other remote communities, Indigenous communities in Queensland. It has been subject to generations of social policies made for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, since

colonisation. Policies often made in Canberra, or in Brisbane. Policies that have spanned and changed with different leaders, agendas, and governments. Policies, that at times, have failed to understand culture, spirituality, law, and relationships.

This history of policy has left us with a dynamic, layered and complex ecosystem of social, economic, health, technological, and environmental issues, and today, we experience a plethora of these issues, and we also experience the ongoing effects of past social and economic exclusion. This is the context in which I'm speaking about for Seisia.

In terms of infrastructure, Seisia and other communities in our region, across Cape York and Torres Strait, are at the mercy of poor essential infrastructure and recurring outages across energy, water and telecommunications. In terms of energy, for the last couple of months, Seisia and other communities have had to put up with rolling weekly planned power outages. In Seisia, this occurs every Wednesday for us, for five hours of the workday. There'll often be many unplanned outages throughout the year, too. One occurring only yesterday for four hours, we also expect more in wet season, but also just to give you context of how difficult it can be, there is a remote polling going on at Injinoo today, and there is a power outage, so it's affecting our ability to vote on the Indigenous Voice referendum.

So, it, it affects a lot, and we expect more in wet season, thanks to increasingly intense storm surges. Consider the damage to whitegoods and households, and household power, over time, in a region that has challenges with the cost and shipping of freight for large goods, as well as high cost of living. And the high cost of living was the pre-cursor to why we started the initiative around supporting women and girls to get the free feminine hygiene products. Consider the time lost for businesses, personal study, or organising your household when your power is out, every Wednesday.

In terms of water, water outages and water pressure issues have been common also in the past. We've had various water restrictions for a number of years with the previous water provider, and at present we are still on boiled water notice, and have been for the last year. After many years of poor service, a new provider has stepped in, and is working with locals, and employing them to prepare our region and population for resilient and reliant

service for the future, thank goodness.

In terms of services though, we do not have a bank, no childcare centre, no youth centre, no access to tertiary opportunities, for no physical place exists, or we're, or we're unable to access it digitally. We have no public transportation, no hospital that can treat major injury or chronic illness, no palliative care, no space for business and enterprise, and not enough homes to house us. For context, next door for instance, at one point, we had in a four-bedroom house, 13 people living there.

The story of our critical enabling infrastructure, that our community's perhaps best well-known for, is for our telecom's infrastructure, or lack thereof. The NPA and much of Cape York only have one provider for our cell service, Telstra, and much of Seisia's still on 3G, with 4G available in the first row of houses in the community nearest to the beachfront. Our telecommunications coverage is poor, but also telecom outages are common across the year, and again, more so during wet season.

You may have read that Seisia secured a \$1.09 million Telstra tower to fix our telecommunications issues. What instigated our community lobbying to secure this tower, was an unfortunate situation. A call by, a triple zero call by a resident to call an ambulance was fraught with struggle, was fraught with a struggle of remaining connected. The caller needed to have their hand outstretched from the balcony of their home, in the direction of the beach, to then relay messages from the triple zero operator to someone who was stationed in the doorway of the house, to then relay the instructions from the triple zero operator to the person who was beside the bed of an Elder, experiencing breathing difficulties. This was in 2021, and I'll speak more on that shortly.

The implications of these essential services outage, outages, mean businesses lose trading days, as their systems can't operate without being powered or being online. Transactions halt. Government and health services that are becoming increasing more available online and only on online, can't be accessed by parents or carers. Frozen and refrigerated food is lost during power outages, affecting food security for community households for the week, and they are left waiting for the next barge of groceries to arrive from Cairns to Seisia, after a three-day voyage by sea.

Carers and families looking after elders, who have medical devices that need power, make plans to travel to our small local community hospital, where there is a backup generator. This is our reality.

I was reflecting on this, and I actually think there hasn't been a month in my time living back home in Seisia, where we've had all three essential services operating without an outage of some sort. So, consider these issues and outages, and the implications on the liveability of community members. Consider how it may restrict or impede your access to information and services. Sorry, I'm gonna need some water. This is a, it's a long one.

I mentioned earlier, the case study that activated us into lobbying for a tower. To be clear, the community had called for better telc- telecommunications many times over the years. Many State and Federal departments had visited the MPA, and travelled to Seisia, and knew of the cell's coverage issue, the low bandwidth issues, especially when they had to, you know, host consultations and workshops fro- on issues ranging from housing, policing, healthcare, doing censuses, and voting. Despite knowing of the issue, policy makers, decision makers and elected politicians in Canberra, Brisbane and Cairns hadn't moved into action for us, and despite telecommunications being the responsibility of the Commonwealth, responsible departments, neither of the responsible departments, nor Telstra, had fought to get quality infrastructure for us. So, I sent an email, and I cc'd everyone.

It was only after a series of emails to Ministers, highlighting who and what was accountable, and utilising former networks, work networks in Canberra, that we started to get some traction on the issue. Now, just think about that for a moment. Despite community members verbally sharing the struggles of poor connectivity, and cell reception to leaders and bureaucrats over years, if not decades, despite many service providers and public servants knowing of the issue, what ended up moving us into action, was an email from someone who understood the bureaucratic system, and the various departments re- remit of responsibility, and could articulate the issue in English, via email, which needed to be sent from another community. To me, this revealed a few things.

Simply having information, or access to information on an issue, did not instigate change. It was only when we started to identify who was

accountable and responsible, that we got traction. I wonder why that is the case. It revealed to me how a bureaucratic system needed to be engaged with on their terms, to solve an issue that we were experiencing. It revealed that the adage of, it's about who you know, was very much true. What followed the email was a series of meetings, and worked on by community members, to understand the issue, its implications, and to find a way forward to solve our issue. My contacts in Canberra helped me pull together the National Indigenous Australians Agency, which I formerly worked, Telstra, NBN, the Department of Infrastructure, and only then did other stakeholders join in. Torres Strait Regional Authority, Queensland Ambulance Service, Local Council. By that point, progress on our issue was being routinely followed up, by email, from State and Federal politicians, and their staff.

In Seisia, the community banded together, and worked. We had mothers creating and filling in surveys on cell reception in different parts of the community. We had business owners sharing how poor reception and constant outages would impact their trading. We had residents sharing their experience when trying to call triple zero, and paramedics providing case study after case study of when lives were on the line, and poor reception slowed their ability to provide care.

I'll just share an example of what I remember being the most impactful story from the paramedics, was that, so, within Seisia, its very poor reception, and some medical procedures that paramedics can do, need the, the go-ahead from a medical director in Cairns, and they were c- they were trying to get in contact with the medical director, they couldn't because of the poor reception. They couldn't send images of what was going on, and so they had to drive out of community, to another community in Bamaga, to be able to send images, to make the call, wasting critical time in terms of delivering care, to then come back to the patient, to then administer the procedure. So, that's a very real example of how it can affect, it's, that it is a life and death situation for some.

It was months of work. Emails, calls, highlighting the struggle across regional media, and social media, and it was very much a community effort. Our work would halt when we had power outages, and telecoms outages. The worst telecom outage during this period of trying to problem-solve with the community was 11 days. So, 11 days without internet, 11 days you cannot

trade, 11 days of having kids who can't access the internet, or YouTube, or TikTok, so that would've b- that was a struggle for parents, which I heard a lot about.

Social issues and factors meant that some volunteers could not engage fully, at times. Our ability to work on a solution was impeded by the many structural issues that surround us. At the meeting table, most government stakeholders could tell us of the statistics of poor digital inclusion in remote areas, they could share with us Closing the Gap Target 17, and regurgitate information shared in report after report, and review after review, but none lived through the struggle of these statistics, and how the interaction of other issues compounded the struggles. When we shared, when we shared our lived experience of how poor telecommunications affected us, some were shocked.

Despite the struggle, we built up our community knowledge base on this issue, and invited community members to assist in any way, depending on their capacity. At each meeting, we became more well-informed of the processes and the grants in place that could support us, including the grant Telstra applied for on our behalf, the Regional Connectivity Grant. But again, the onus of work was on us to secure letters of support, to keep the pressure on the right politicians, and to make sure our project was signed off.

The other thing about the Regional Connectivity Program Grant is that it's a competitive grant, so that means there is only so much in the bucket for funding for critical infrastructure, like telecommunications, and unfortunately, that leaves us in an environment where we have to compete for critical infrastructure with other communities, which is something that I've raised concerns with, with the Department of Infrastructure, repeatedly. I don't think it's fair that communities need to compete for that kind of infrastructure. I think it's a basic right. I wanted to make clear, enough people knew of our telecommunications issues, and these people had the information, time, and capacity to help a remote community like ours. Where they failed us, was being bold enough to use that information for action.

Something that I don't think is talked about much, when it comes to information, is the dynamic of power and the inequity in who or what is able to hold or access information. In the meetings early on in the piece, there

was an inequitable distribution of information, in regards to a solution for our issue. More information, resources and control were available at ease to those who were in departments, which had legislative responsibility to address the issue, instead of with the community that was experiencing it. Since those meetings in 2021, we have secured a \$1.9 million dollar tower, 1.09 sorry. I wonder what 1.9 would've given us. With an agreement between Telstra and the Federal Government signed, authorising the build of one that would support over 560 devices in Seisia and our neighbouring community, New Mapoon. The tower is set to be completed in April next year.

Be careful what you wish for. We worked really hard to secure this tower, and while it is a positive thing broadly, that our communities will be more digitally active, and included, and be able to access more services and information, it will have implications for the digital life of Seisia. More people online, more often, may mean more instances of online bullying. Those complex and compounding social issues I mentioned before, can present themselves online. Kids post videos of fights, and establish what is known as fight pages on Instagram. Online bullying on Facebook in our contents-context is rampant. It is harsh, and threats of physical violence have been known to be shared openly, and sometimes it can lead to actual physical violence.

The question now for us, is how can we make ourselves a more digitally respectful, and digitally resilient community, before this tower goes up in April? How can we reduce the social harm of being digitally included? How can we work with our community to prepare ourselves well? I think we already have a good template to work with from our community experience with Covid. I'm sorry. I'll share with you when, when Covid first hit our communities, the kind of context in which we had to operate to problem-solve a different issue that came up.

So, Covid hit us in early 2020. At the time, there was so much unknown, and anxiety, and I was working in the Federal Department of Indigenous Affairs, and during this time, we were trying to figure out how to help remote communities best prepare for Covid. So, I was invited to sit down with senior policy makers to give regional context on the Northern Peninsula area, and what might be effective strategies to help. I gave as much context and

knowledge as I could. I provided insight into the colonial and religious history of the region, and how that was spreading, and how that was playing out in the spread of misinformation about Covid and the vaccines. I shared information about the inadequate access to higher education over decades, and the implication that had on residents' ability to assess and critique information that was in English. I spoke of the poor telecommunications infrastructure, and how that restricted the flow of information, being unable to download, download large data files like PDF health packs that were designed to assist people to get through Covid. I assessed there was an under-utilisation of key community figures like Elders, Elders, religious leaders, clan leaders, and local heroes to share messaging on Covid.

Despite the advice I'd given, what followed in terms of policy and support for communities nationally, was in my opinion, a very light touch approach to the problem at hand, and I knew it wouldn't be effective, or helpful, for my own community. I realised then, that someone in Canberra could never care for my home the way we do, they would never fight as hard as we would, to protect our residents, or to solve the issues we experience. And, in that moment of clarity and concern, I decided to leave Canberra, and return home to Seisia. I wanted to ensure I could give as much as possible on the ground to prepare my own community to be more resilient against Covid. In three months at home, I shared various Covid messages. I took an active approach to addressing misinformation, that was shared on social media, by commenting on others' social media posts, asking where information was from? Was it current, reliable? Was it from an authority? What was its purpose?

I then enlisted the help of young people around my own community, tagging them in reliable posts with information, and building the confidence for others to respectively critiq- critique information. One thing I would often comment on my social media post was that it's easy to hit a re-share button out of fear and anxiety, and therefore raise community anxiety, than it was to look into an, look into the source. I'm trying to give you, like, an example of some of the, the posts from around 2020 that were being shared online, you know, all the conspiracy theory posts. I do remember one really distinctly, and I don't know why it sticks so much, but it was a post that said, the blood of Christ is my hand sanitiser, which was very, you know, in terms of that religious

context that I was talking about, that's very intense, right? I didn't critique that one at all, I just kind of, observed it. But these were the kinds of things being shared online in NPA.

We are a small region, with a relatively small population, so engaging with individuals, for the benefit of the community, worked really well for us. This investment in people, and taking the time to familiarise more young social media users with the principles of assessing online information, would serve our community well into the future. In amongst all that, we filmed Elders sharing messages in our language, Kala Kawa Ya, and in Creole. They shared messages on my fellow residents should get vaccinated. We had young parents, and a host of community members sharing their vaccination pictures, and slowly but surely, getting members of their households more comfortable and familiar with the vaccine.

Residents of our community were well-informed. Not just on Covid and its effects, but on how to assess information, and we became a much more resilient, and we became much more resilient to the misinformation, and sensational claims out there. When the vaccinations became available in our region, most other communities were hesitant to take it, leading to a waste of vaccines that were transported to the region. Yet, Seisia embraced it. We were the highest vaccinated community, and not just the NPA, but all of Cape York. We had 71 percent of our community members getting their first dose in the only two-day window of the vaccination vix- visit. This, despite poor internet, and poor internet access, and low levels of digital literacy. Other communities in the NPA were sitting at around the 40 percent mark.

For the next few months, we continued to lead the region in vaccinations, and being the highest double-vaccinated community. The hysteria on vaccines and Covid had somewhat passed, but the scourge of misinformation remained prevalent across the region. And in terms of, I guess, digital literacy, we can see this playing out as well with the Indigenous Voice, and the misinformation that's being shared around it, especially in remote areas as well.

I wanted to share this case study, as it's one of the first times our community really came together to address a collective issue, before we started lobbying for a tower. It taught us the complexity of navigating a health system that

privileged information being in English. It showed us, sorry, it revealed just how much poor digital literacy can have on our health outcomes. It showed us how health messaging and broader communication strategies needed to be tailored for regional community context, in order to be effective. It also taught us that despite decades of digital exclusion, digital literacy and addressing misinformation, in relation to a particular issue, is not hard to tackle at all, so long as we are the ones addressing it, and creating the resources for it. It taught us we could do this ourselves, if only we were given the opportunity, and the control, to be able to.

This example tells me that in the next few months, and in the lead up of the completion of our tower build, we will be able to find a way to become more resilient against misinformation, sensational claims, social harm that users experience online, and online bullying. We've started something in Seisia. We are solving issues in our way, and it is working. These last few years of moving out of government and back to community has taught me that the greatest change on issues will not be made by those who fly in and fly out, certainly not those who are in Brisbane, or Canberra. It'll be made by those who live the issues, experience it day in, and day out. Being well-informed on not just the issue, but of the bureaucratic systems and structures who are responsible for the issue, that is the hard part. We look forward to finding ways to engage with various departments as our community seeks to problem-solve our issues in relation to housing, energy, online safety, and health as well. Thank you.

Ms Kim
Skubris

Talei, I'm sure I can speak on behalf of everybody. Thank you so much for sharing some of your story of Seisia, and I couldn't help but think of one of my favourite sayings by Theodore Roosevelt. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, and I'm sure you left all the hearts in this room knowing just how extraordinary your heart is, and your drive for your community, and I'm very excited to, I was trying to stop you walking off the stage, because I'm going to enj- welcome you back on the stage. But, thank you so much for sharing some of the story of Seisia, and again, as I'm sure I can speak on behalf of everybody, that I can't wait to see the next chapter, and wish you all the very best for the installation, and the final instalment of the tower in April, but also the fact that you've empowered people on the ground to drive their future, and not be beholden to those that

fly in and out. So, thank you so much. Can we please put our hands together, again, for Talei Elu.

I would love to welcome you back onstage to join by Chris and Zala and Michael. I'll jump onto this chair so we're not playing tennis, looking like this with all of you. But I'd love to invite all our panellists onstage, and while I, while I do invite you all to come up, I will share a little bit about each of our wonderful panellists today.

Professor Michael Dezuanni undertakes research about digital media, literacies, and learning in home, school and community contexts. He is currently the Program Leader for Digital Inclusion and Participation for QUT's Digital Media Research Centre, which produces world-leading research for creative, inclusive, and fair digital media environment. He's also an accomplished author and advisor on numerous committees, and is Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre for Excellence for the Digital Child, with a focus on digital literacy and learning at school, the use of digital literacy and learning at home, in the classroom, and across rural and regional Australia, and in low-income families, and is also studying the use of screen content in formal and informal learning.

Chatur Zale is the CEO of Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council. He was born in a small village in India, and migrated to Australia in 20- 2006 to pursue higher studies in Brisbane. He's happily married, with two children. Zala joined the Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council in 2011 as Chief Accountant, and was passionate about bringing real change in the First Nation community of Cherbourg, by providing better liveability through improvements to housing, sustainable infrastructure, and more meaningful jobs. And, Zala was awarded Manager of the Year in 2021, congratulations Zala, by Local Government Manager Australia for his outstanding leadership work with Cherbourg Council.

And certainly, na- last but not least, Chris McLaren who is the Chief Customer and Digital Officer for Queensland Government Customer and Digital Group. Its focus is on driving Queensland's digital economy, delivering better citizen-centric services, and optimising Queensland Government's investment and use of technology. Chris is a globally experienced senior executive, with a successful 25-year track record,

specialising in digi- in digital enablement, I won't say that live on air Chris, transformation, customer experience and operations improvement and technology. Could you please make all our panellists feel welcome today? Thank you so much.

Where to start? I watched all of your heads nodding away during Talei's wonderful keynote. I might start, Zala, with you. I noticed you fervently nodding there, when we heard about Seisia's story. Were you relating to much of it for your chapter in the Cherbourg story?

Mr Chatur
Zala

Thank you, Kim. Firstly, Talei, your story is, was so inspirational, I think. No, I, it's, it's great, absolutely you know, I can connect the story of Seisia with Cherbourg. In 2000 and, last Census, we were the second most disadvantaged community in Australia, you know, so, and I was part of the Council, and I thought, gee this is not acceptable for my community. And since then, the journey of Cherbourg has been outstanding, you know. They're creating local jobs in our community. Before I go to Cherbourg, who don't know in the audience where Cherbourg is, Cherbourg is 200 km north-west of Brisbane. We have another 17 Indigenous community in Queensland, definitely one in south-west Queensland, you know, so, just to your question Kim, absolutely I feel it, Talei's story with Seisia, with Cherbourg. But Cherbourg has come a long way in the last few years, you know, so, I will share those stories later, you know.

Ms Kim
Skubris

Certainly, no problem at all. Michael, could you please share a little bit about, we were talking before the event about your research, and that you're coming to the tail end of it. I understand three of the six communities, albeit maybe seven now, you were explaining to me, are in Queensland. Can you explain to us a little bit about the findings, and what you've seen as the information divide, when low-income families don't have access to digi- digital education?

Professor
Michael
Dezuanni

Yeah, sure, thanks Kim. And so, the research we've been doing has been taking place in seven communities around the country, so this has been with low-income families, and I guess just for context, we know that the Digital Inclusion Index, for instance, shows that there are particular groups that are disadvantaged when it comes to digital inclusion, so absolutely, people living remotely, First Nations Australians, people with disab- living with disability, but certainly low-income families as well.

And so, in this research project, we really wanted to get a, a much better understanding of the daily lived experiences of, of living on a low income, and what that means for digital inclusion, and just for, for further context, I suppose, we know that about 30 percent of Australians are mobile only, and don't have a br- a home broadband connection. We know that about ten percent of families have either no internet connection at all, or a very, very precarious internet connection. So, for instance, they might have a, a mobile phone with, you know, pre-paid data that runs out during the month, for instance. So, you know, there are significant numbers of Australians who have very, very poor connectivity, and this then obviously means that those families are struggling with access to information, whether it be government information or health information, right through to just very localised community information.

So, one of the things that we've seen in our project is that particularly in regional areas, Facebook has kind of become the default place that you go for local community information. We've seen lots of local newspapers, for instance, close up shop and they've been replaced by Facebook. And so, if you don't have that access, you don't know what's going on, on Facebook, or maybe the information is, you, maybe you are on Facebook, but you know, you don't have access to the right kind of ac- information there on Facebook, because the algorithm isn't sending you local information. So, there are, there are all sorts of layers when it comes to accessing information, and the ways in which digital inclusion gets in the way of that.

Ms Kim Skubris Chris, you're listening to th- we, we heard some quite startling and frank examples from Talei, as far as, even life and death examples about access to information, access to connectivity. How are you addressing this, and how do you prioritise? Because, obviously when we're hearing life and death, I'm sure I can speak on behalf of everyone, I sat there thinking, what if that was my loved one? What if I had to reach my hand out to get, you know, it's not acceptable.

Mr Chris McLaren Yep. Yeah, I, I would agree. Unfortunately the stories shared by Talei are all too common across Queensland. So, we're the most geographically distributed state in Australia. Two and a half times the size of Texas, about 5.4 million people, and by our analysis we would describe, we've probably got about 700,000 people who are on the outside looking in, as it comes to

the digital economy, and that, that doesn't necessarily mean they don't have connectivity, it could be they can't afford connectivity, it could be they don't have connectivity awareness and even how to get connected, you know, they don't have a device. A variety for reasons, but you know, one of the root causes is an absence of connectivity, and we've got 16, you know, discrete First Nations communities in Queensland. As Zala said, they tend to be the most disadvantaged, full stop. I think in the last survey across all Queensland communities, the bottom ten across the country, six were in Queensland, four were in Northern Territory, and all six were, First Nations Communities. And they all face incredible challenges across the board, but digital inclusion is one of the, one of the biggest ones.

And as a matter, matter of fact about this time last year, I was actually coming out of a trip I did to Woorabinda, and I'd, I, just, what I observed was completely unacceptable, and we did a, a First Nations, we called it an audit, we don't use that word anymore, because it's a bit of a trigger word for some people, but we literally went boots on the ground, I've actually got some of my team here that did that, over three months. Because we wanted to get a first-hand experience of the reality of what's happening on the ground, and we looked at infrastructure, we looked at inclusion, and we looked at economy, and we just formed an incredible body of knowledge from that work, and bo- bottom line, mobile connectivity was poor, resilience was poor, fixed line connectivity was, was poor. Probably no surprises to the community members, and, you know, but that, that has informed a variety of things that we're doing, I'd say both tactically, and, and more strategically. So, there's, there's a few things that I can, I'll point out.

One is, we obviously participate in Regional Connectivity Program Number 2. I'm checking on whether we contributed to the, the Seisia, that might've been before my time, but in, in Connectivity Number, Regional Connectivity Program Number Two, we contributed about \$10 million in State funds. We got about \$50 million worth of infrastructure across 15 locations. Obviously, these are Commonwealth programs. I'd say now we've got our, we've really got our act together, so we've got a commitment of \$120 million dollars under the State's Digital Economy Strategy, which we are co-investing with carriers, and with the Commonwealth, and we want to get some sort of similar return.

I can't really talk too much about RCP 3 because that's live, I, we don't

control the process, but I can just say, we're working really, really hard to get the State's fair share, and we are disproportionately over-indexing on our First Nations communities. I can say that without any hesitation. So, that's one thing that we're, we're doing. And then we're also looking at shorter term solutions, particularly using Starlink. I think we've got great success in Cherbourg using Starlink, which I'm sure Zala will talk about, for the digital service centre that we've established up there, in partnership with Cherbourg Shire Council. We're doing something in, similar in Palm Island.

And so, we're r- we're, we're deploying a range of programs, I- I'm conscious I'm talking a lot here, but we're doing a lot of things with devices, making it easier for First Nations people to get connected to a persistent mobile connection. So, we're running a really amazing trial up in Arakoon, because, you know, access is a problem, but getting online is a problem.

So, a lot of First Nations people, they don't have typical forms of identification. They don't have a driver's licence, they don't have a birth certificate. So, if you approach Telstra and say, I want a post-paid account, you, you can't do it. So, we've, we've worked with an amazing company called Better Life Mobile up in Arakoon, where they're used to dealing with people who don't have traditional forms of ID, and we're getting them a persistent connection, same phone number, so we can use multi-factor authentication, they can get a proper smart phone, give them access to proper services, and they get about twice as much data for about half the price. So, it's a, it's a win-win. So, I've got oodles and oodles of stories, you know. We're on, on, on the journey and happy to share more about those, those stories.

Ms Kim
Skubris

Chris, it all sounds extremely positive, and actually being customised to the communities. I'm just curious, Talei, when you said it very respectfully, when a journalist says respectful, anything but's about to come out of my mouth, but I'm saying, respectfully. You said about on the ground, we are driving what we need for change for the better, not those in Brisbane and Canberra. Listening to Chris, and this sounds incredibly positive, and it is customised to the community, they're listening to the community. Do you think they're hitting the mark? Do, and, and I said, not trying to put you in an awkward position, it's more that, just based on what you just shared in your, in your share with us, listening to all these amazing initiatives that Chris is sharing,

are they on the money?

Ms Talei Elu Ooh, all right. How do I tactfully approach this? A couple of things. I would one, want to know how you're engaging with communities? Is it you going to them, or is it them coming to you? Because there is a, there is a distinct difference between a community knowing about an initiative, and being able to approach said provider or department about something, which we had done, and then there's also departments trying to approach communities. There is, there's a power dynamic in that, right, so what I find, what I have found in relation to the, the tower was that, like I said, despite us, despite many people knowing about our issue, it, it took an email, and what, what I didn't really get to in, in that story was that email highlighted accountability. When other people were cc'd into that email, like where we had approached, you know, Telstra separately, but when Telstra was cc'd into an email with the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, with the Minister for the Department of Infrastructure, then, then we got traction, then we got movement.

It, there is this dynamic where once people realise that they are being watched on how accountable they are to communities, there is action on it, and I think that's inequitable, but, like, to, to that point, like, in terms of communities being able to, like, initiate things themselves, when we had the initial kind of spate of emails, there was all these links sent to us. All these little, you know, blurbs of what the RCP was, and other, you know, blurbs of different grants that were available, philanthropic grants and things like that. Simply providing a blurb and a link, that's providing information, sure, but in terms of allowing engagement, proper real engagement, that's something entirely different. Those two things are two different things. Providing and allowing access to information is not strategically engaging people to use that information.

So, you know, in terms of the process of how you share the information with, you know, what you're doing, I'd be curious to know about that, because, like, to, to understand how that works and how community is actively involving in, in getting that information, 'cause for us, you know, we were sent links, and that's great, you know, links to a webpage you can't really open is a bit of a struggle, but once, once we started to get enough information about who was responsible for what, and who had, you know, the powers to do X, Y, and Z, that, that's when we, we were well informed about the structure that was in

place. 'Cause often, more for us, it's about understanding the system, and the structure, as opposed to the issue itself. Everybody knows about the issue, about digital inclusion in remote communities. That's a, you know, in this day and age a lot of departments and people know about that. What they don't know, is how to go about solving it, and that really comes from the community. Because only the community will be able to tell you what they really need.

For us, it was cell service. You know, we could go without internet for a few days, but if we wanted to make a triple zero call, that was a priority. You know, now we're getting into solutions around Wi-Fi in, Wi-Fi at homes and, you know, getting more funds into the community so people with pre-paid mobiles can get more time on their phones, but for us, the priority was cell service for, what, I think it was 60 or so houses, could not pick up the phone and call someone, call triple zero, if they needed to. And what I spoke about, with the compounding issues of health, high rates of diabetes are, rheumatic heart disease, dementia, asthma, health was our priority. But, calling triple zero was the priority, and that's what we aimed to solve, and you know, we have done. But, in terms of, yeah, engagement, we really needed to drive that. Nothing was offered to us in terms of solution-making. Information, sure, but information to engage with a solution, is quite different.

Ms Kim Skubris Thank you, Talei. Chris, would you like to, just on how, how are...

Mr Chris McLaren Yeah.

Ms Kim Skubris ...and, and then I'd love to know, Zala, how you've brought your community...

Mr Chatur Zala Yes.

Ms Kim Skubris ...on the journey. Chris?

Mr Chris McLaren Yeah, so I- so, I've been in the role for 18 months, so anything before that, obviously I can't comment too much on, but so, in terms of our community engagement, we- we're on country. I mean, I've got First Nations digital

advisors, they're, they're in the group. Myself, you know, I've been to Cherbourg many times, I've been to Woorabinda, I've been to Palm Island, I've been to Arakoon, I, I get out there as much as I can. I'm a big believer in getting out there and meeting with the community leaders and understanding what the reality is. Actually, as soon as I finish here, I'm to the airport, I'm headed up to Palm Island for some exciting things that we're doing up there, but, look, I, we've got a long way to go, no doubt about it. I would say, from a State standpoint, I'm accountable.

The carriers, I, I'd personally think, without getting into a long debate around telecommunication settings within Australia, I personally do not think they're right, at the moment. I've r- myself and the Minister raised this at the recent regional connectivity round table. We're building a ten-year Queensland digital infrastructure plan, which we hope to release early next year. We will have a specific component of that plan dedicated to First Nations communities, because we realise the importance of that, and that's helping us come up with a laser focus, integrated planning approach, to ensure that we've got the right digital infrastructure, fixed and mobile, in our First Nations communities. That's kind of commitment number one, we're, we're doing that.

Commitment number two, the \$120 million that we've got, we've commit, we're committing, a minimum of \$20 million of that will go to First Nations communities. I, I actually think its going to be more like \$30 million, and we will take the burden, within my group, of co-ordinating between the carriers, and the Commonwealth, to run the RCP processes. That's my commitment, again, and we're, we're, I think we're the most organised that we've ever been before, and I get constant feedback from the Commonwealth and carriers that we're incredibly organised, my team, many of them, many of them, not here now. We've got an incredibly detailed view of where the greatest area of, areas of needs are across the, across the State, and a laser view on First Nations.

And then, the third piece is deploying tactical solutions. I mean, I ca- I can't say too much, but you know we're going to having more to say about this, but you know, we're going to be doing some exciting things with Starlink, to give us, because even if, if we signed a contract today with the Commonwealth, and with the carrier, and with the community, it's like, two years before we

actually get that terrestrial infrastructure on the ground, so we're looking at, we've, we've, we've got some exciting things coming with Starlink to bridge that gap, to get connectivity into, and this, again, this will focus specifically on our 16 discrete communities, including Cherbourg, including MPA, including Torres, including Palm, et cetera, et cetera.

Ms Kim Skubris Zala, tell us about that, because Chris has mentioned Starlink. Tell us about your experience, and how you've brought the community on the journey.

Mr Chatur Zala Thanks, Kim. Before I share the Cherbourg story, I need to acknowledge that the remote communities in Queensland, like Seisia, Lockhart River, (ui) Kowanyama, they don't have the good connectivity, so I need to acknowledge that before I share a story on Cherbourg you know. Now, Cherbourg, as I said, we are south-east Queensland, so we are very lucky in that area, you know. We got the, the, the broad, NBN tower in community. We're just putting a 5G tower in Cherbourg, so you can see the connectivity is very good in Cherbourg, you know. And as Chris said, the department has played a, a, we worked with partners with department to make those things happen in Cherbourg. I come back to the positive story of digital economy in Cherbourg, I think that's a key, you know.

In Cherbourg, when I said we were the, the second, or, you know the worst community in Australia. It wasn't, we weren't happy, you know, and we thought, what we gonna do? So, the meaningful local jobs in Indigenous community is the key for change. You know, you can speak whatever you want. Unless you don't create those meaningful local jobs in your community, things not gonna change. Like, people won't be able to afford the broadband even if you've got broadband in your community, you know. And, okay, I spoke with community, I spoke with councils, and we all agreed that we need to create more local jobs. We thought, how do it we do it? We cant just do the same things and expect different results. We can't just do work, parks, garden and create more jobs, you know.

And that's where I think the call centre was the game changer in my community. I think we were the first Indigenous community in Australia to start a call centre. So, we had good connectivity with the department, I think we had our first contact with Fujitsu. That was started with ten jobs. And I'm talking about the jobs with the people, well they were the first jobs. I had

young mothers who never worked in their life, you know. So, even right now, we've got 30 jobs in our call centre, which is Fujitsu, Telstra, and Adobe(?), the senator(?) of the private firm, you know.

So, what do, what, the messages that, how do you use that digital space? Yeah, we can use the social media and you, you make a phone call, that's, that's a basic requirement, you know. But we see it as an opportunity to get into local jobs, and that's making a huge difference in my community at the moment, you know. We have a recycling plant in Cherbourg at the moment. One of the best recycling plant in Queensland, you know, where we, we take recycling stuff from the whole South Burnett and North Burnett area. We have 30 local jobs in our recycling plant. We have AI technology in our recycling plant, you know. I have the, we are the first Indigenous council to be on cloud-based technology. So, the message is that we have, we taken technology in a, and digital things, as a part of our culture in Cherbourg, and I'm, I'm, I'm quite, I'll be biased if I say that we are the leading Indigenous community in Queensland at the moment....

Ms Kim
Skubris Oh, go for it Zala, you can just...

Mr Chatur
Zala ...when it comes to (ui)...

Ms Kim
Skubris ...speak that, that's fine. We'll just, we'll put that on the record...

Mr Chatur
Zala Yeah.

Ms Kim
Skubris ... that's absolutely fine.

Mr Chatur
Zala But you know, as, as, as, as, I get, I get your story. I think the remoteness is the, probably the challenge of the, I've, I've heard the story from the Mayor of Lockhart River, who is good, good friends with me, and I knew when they had a cyclone, the mayor was in, their, like their roof was taken off. There was no connectivity, so there are challenges in the remote community. Cherbourg is leading the way in that space, and I think as a First Nation community, I think we need to explore the digital space to create meaningful jobs in our

community. Absolutely connectivity, your social media, your message is the key, to communicate to people, but I think we need to create more jobs, to make those community a better place, you know.

Ms Kim
Skubris
Good luck to you, Zala, I love it. I love your passion. Michael, listening to Zala's story here, talking about, it's no good having broadband, if locals don't have a job to then pay for it. What are the ripple effects youse have, you've observed in your research to, for communities that are digitally excluded?

Professor
Michael
Dezuanni
So, I, Kim, I think that one of the, one of the pieces of the conversation that we really need to have here, and focus on, is digital ability and skills, because much of the conversation today has been about connectivity, obviously necessarily, but what happens once you're connected, and digital ability absolutely emerged through our research as, a- as being an area that needs more support. We were, I think somewhat surprised to see that across the seven communities, at least that we're working in, there's, there really are no digital ability programs for families, for school-aged children, for teenagers transitioning into work or to higher education, or for parents who are struggling to parent in the digital age. You know, there, we see very little evidence of that actually at the community level. Most digital ability programs to date have been for, for seniors, for instance, for over 65's, who we know are also an excluded group, but you know, I think we need to do more education at the community level.

And also, you know, with regard to digital citizenship for instance, and online safety, that is absolutely an area that we need to be doing more about. We know that the model for this in schools is still to have the one-off visit from the, you know, the cyber security or e-safety person who comes to the school to give a lecture, you know, on assembly to the students, and then they disappear again. So, we need to be doing a lot more to support teachers, for instance, and we need to be doing, we need to be developing curriculum that assists students to develop these digital abilities for digital citizenship and ethical online participation. You know, the Australian curm- curriculum points to this and provides the opportunity, but there are not really that many resources available yet, to support teachers with that work. So, yeah, I think there's some really emerging areas that we need to be focussing a lot more on.

Ms Kim Skubris Chris, is that on your radar?

Mr Chris McLaren Yeah. Again, I'd say there's a few, a few different angles that we're coming at this. So, we've built a digital pre-employment program. We actually developed it at Cherbourg. This is a 12-week program that we run quite often for people who've never had a job before, certainly they've never had a digital job, and we run them through that 12-week program, and get them ready to, to have a digital job on country. So as, as Zala said, I, I would actually say that it's probably the first on country digital service centre in the world. I love to say that, and I'm waiting for somebody to prove me wrong. Certainly, within Queensland, and absolutely within Australia, a, it's ground breaking. We've got 20 people, and just the amazing role models and leaders that blossom, it's, it's literally the, the caterpillar, caterpillar turning into a butterfly there, and they're taking digital jobs, and we've taken that digital training program now to Palm Island. I'm actually travelling there today to congratulate the first cohort of graduates who have come through that program. That's one thing that we're focussing on.

Second one is partnership with Lighthouse. So, we're doing 2000, initially 2000 laptops that we're getting delivered into, through schools, to help kids get a, you know, get digitally incorporated into their education. When they receive that laptop, it's their laptop, they own it. They get some basic onboarding training, how to use the computer, how to be safe online. They get some digital tools that they can utilise, that don't require internet access if they don't have internet access at home, and the, the team has just been all up through the Cape. I think we've done a thousand so far, and then we'll be, you know, we'll get to 2000 and then it's kind of, what, what next?

And then, probably the other thing I'm thinking, or we're thinking about is, you know, I would agree, there's n- there's not really, you know, one of our observations when we did the audit was th- you know, there's not these, these programs to help with digital ability, but there's nowhere for people to go. Let's say I learned some skills, how do I actually go, wh- you know where could I go in community to prote- practice my skills, learn something new? So, that's another thing that we're, we're still early on thinking about this stuff, and we consult really actively with community, because we want to make sure, every community's unique, we want, we want community to have things

that they think is community appropriate for them. But that's, that's a, something that we're starting to think about at the moment, and then we're also partnering with State Library to uplift our Indigenous knowledge centres in, in each of these communities, as well.

Ms Kim Skubris It's fantastic and I know I can speak on behalf of Lighthouse, we're so grateful for the support you're giving us, it's, it's really exciting times at the moment. Talei, you mentioned in your share that you, it's a double-edged sword, you know, you're welcoming, obviously that's how you're welcoming digital inclusion, but you're also concerned as well. Where do you believe the education is critical for Seisia, and other c- rote- remote communities like yours?

Ms Talei Elu Education in terms of digital abilities?

Ms Kim Skubris Yes.

Ms Talei Elu It's a complex one, because, you know this is, the online bullying and social issues, intergenerational social issues, play a very big part on this. So, you have a community that's about to become more online, also dealing with intergenerational trauma issues with domestic violence and just compounding issues generally, and you know, stress, and generally these things come out on Facebook, or other social media platforms, and it, not just harms the family, but it can harm an entire community. I think, you know, it's got to be a multi-pronged approach. It, it, you've got to look at the social issue as well as the digital ability issue, and try and, I guess, create an educational resource package around trying to address both, you know.

I worked, when I was doing with indigenous media, we had a, this campaign called Stop it at the Start, which was about informing parents and households about how to stop disrespectful behaviour towards women and girls in the household, and how that then translates to online bullying, and you know, men disrespecting women online, as well. So, you got to look at, the, it's not just about the digital ability, it's about the social issues that are around many remote Indigenous communities, because of, you know, all the past policies that have been put in place that leave an impact.

So, I don't know what the answer is, but it certainly, you know, what Chris was saying around every community is different, the, even in Seisia, you know, our history is very different to the history of a community that is just

down the road from us. New Mapoon, for instance, Old Mapoon on the west coast of Cape York had a very harsh history in the 1960's. A mining company burnt down those houses in that community, and forced migration of those residents to Cape York, to New Mapoon, which is only five kilometres away from us. So, the community dynamics are incredibly different, and despite the distance of communities, that community, what happens there, impacts on us.

For instance, we've had a really tough fire season. I'm part of the local RFS, and a lot of the kids from that community have been lighting fires around, around the region. You know, for whatever reason, there's the social trauma associated with that community, but it affects us, you know. Damage to life and property, due to social issues that started in the 1960s affecting us, and you know, an education piece around fire safety, and educating parents on how to ensure that their kids don't light fires, or, you know, being more aware of those issues, is, is something that we need to be conscious of, in, in terms of like, digital ability, we try and share messages online to reach parents about, you know, educate your kids about the dangers of starting fires, so we don't have to experience yet another issue on top of, on top of things. So, you've got to look at, holistically what's happening, in a region, in a community, before you start looking at digital ability, as well.

Ms Kim
Skubris

I think we're, we're looking at navigating two areas here, as well. We're looking at telecommunications connectivity, and then we're looking at digital inclusion. Michael, you're probably in a position looking more broadly, because you've looked at communities across Australia. Dare I say, people inherently don't like change. Have you experienced push back from communities that have said you know what, I'm not necessarily talking about connectivity from a life and death telecommunications side, but from the digital side, Talei mentioned there, it is a double-edged sword. Have you come across any communities that have said, you know what? We don't want it, we, we, we're really concerned about this, and the impact it's going to have on our, on our locals.

Professor
Michael
Dezuanni

I think in our project, not so much from a whole community perspective, but certainly from individual families, absolutely and mostly with regard to concerns about online safety, and bullying, and so on, right? So, what we tend to find is that those families who are less connected, who have less

confidence with, with digital technologies are also the same families that are quite concerned about what it means to be online, and therefore are hesitant to get online, perhaps? I mean, having said that, I think it's also true to say that you know, almost universally in our project, all of the parents and carers were very keen for their children not to be left behind.

You know, they very much see that digital technologies are the way of the future, that actually there's not much avoiding the fact that our future will be digital, and if we have digital by default for instance, as part of government services, as part of employment, as part of education, that these are all reasons why it's, it's absolutely necessary to be connected, so that you're not left behind. So, I would actually say that was the kind of stronger voice that came through in the project, but, but yes, there is this hesitancy still, and families are absolutely, you know, I think one of the key learnings from the project was that parents need support. You know, parents and carers need those opportunities to learn how to be better digital parents, in that sense.

Ms Kim Skubris I always like to hand over to our, the wonderful panel to have the last word, not me. Chris, I'll start with you. Would you like to leave our audience with one key, key thought?

Mr Chris McLaren Yeah, I might, might come at it from a different angle. I, I'm very lucky, I consider myself privileged that I get to travel to these communities and learn about their history, and things that have gone on, and I think that's information that everybody, every Queenslander should have some understanding. Talei just kind of glossed over a little bit, why is there a New Mapoon? Well, because the government burned down the Old Mapoon, and that wasn't that long ago. And, on one hand it kind of breaks your heart, but you got to know this stuff. I, I go to Cherbourg, Cherbourg's 200 kilometres away here. Amazing people there, and I've been to the Ration Shed, and the stories that you hear about mums and dads being separated from their kids, and punishment, locked up, fenced in, I think the last permit to leave Cherbourg was issued in 1986. Up until that point, you know, residents weren't allowed to leave. Palm Island, you know, some of the stories.

Palm Island was basically a penal colony. You know, they were told how to operate. There was a bell that told them when to wake up. You weren't allowed to speak the language, we eradicated the culture. So, if I kind of flip

it around in terms of right to information, I think, I think that's, that's the sort of information that I think we should all educate ourselves on, because I don't think we know enough about really what happened to our First Nations people since colonisation.

Ms Kim
Skubris

Thank you, Chris. Thank you for your observations, as well. Zala?

Mr Chatur
Zala

Thank you, Kim. I think the, for us as a First Nations community, I think we need to embrace the inner western end, and digitally include them in our community. As we know, that First Nations people lost really one their country. We know they are remote, you know. So, things like your telehealth, you're creating more local jobs through the inner west and then technology's going to be very, very important in the future, you know. So, I think the, for me, message is very clear, inner west and then the digital technology are the future for our c- for our community. We are behind, you know, but there's, I do admit, there, that we have a long way to catch up, you know, and I think, I strongly believe the story of Cherbourg again, other community like Chris at Palm Island, they g- they want to start a call centre with Telstra now, you know. So, I'm really looking forward that this space, the new space that world is moving into, you know.

We can see that, we s- we learned from Covid you know, that you can do any job, doesn't, if you have good connectivity, you can work from those communities, so I can't wait for my people in my community working for the company based in Sydney, all over world, you know. I don't want to name it at the moment. So, I see the greater future, and I think we need to join this journey of digital inclusion inner west(?) to make our community the better place to live, so I'm truly looking forward to this space in future here now, yeah.

Ms Kim
Skubris

We'll watch this space for sure, Zala. Michael?

Professor
Michael
Dezuanni

Yeah, so Kim, I'm going to leave you with the tagline that's emerged from our project. Dr Kim Osman, who's in the audience here, and myself, you know, when we boiled down the findings from our research project, we decided that, that digital inclusion is everybody's business, actually. That it has be a whole government, whole of government effort. You know, it can't belong to just

one department. It has to be at all levels of government, Federal, State and, and Local Government, and it has to be across organisations and agencies within a community, so that, you know, schools need to work with community centres and libraries, and so on. We can't just say that, you know, digital inclusion is, is the job of the library to take care of, or, you know, this community centre over here to take care of. It, it really is everybody's business, because everybody is impacted by it.

Ms Kim
Skubris

And the last word?

Ms Talei Elu

Completely agree with what everyone has said before. I'm not sure what to say as the last word. I'm just, I'm really excited to see where my community goes in the next, you know, 10, 20, 30 years from now. I think, yeah, we've definitely started something. We've, we're, we're trying to figure out how to solve problems in the way that suits us, and identify problems and create solutions that suit us.

So, I'm, yeah, I'm, been seeing over the last few years how individuals have stepped up, how they've built on their knowledge, how they're engaging with systems of government, or if it's media, and it's just really heart-warming to see community members that I have known and grown up with, being about to, you know, become more knowledgeable about these things, and then therefore be able to attack these issues straight up. So, yeah. I think it's, I just really can't wait to see what the future holds for Seisia, and I'm sure we'll do some impressive things. Maybe take over Cherbourg as the most innovative community in Queensland. But, I'm very inspired by, you know, what everyone's done respectively, today, so yeah. It's been an experience.

Ms Kim
Skubris

I think you'll have a battle on your hands with Zala here. We'll watch this space afterwards with a coffee. Could you please put your hands together for Talei, Michael, Zala and Chris.

I'd just like to say, thank you so much for joining us today, for your insights, and your inspiring stories, and I do wish you all the very best for the next chapter of yours. This brings to a close our Solomon Lecture for 2023. We thank you all for attending today, and I'm sure that you'll join me again in thanking our wonderful panellists, including Talei with your wonderful share today, and I know everyone will be staying behind, if you'd like to ask any questions of our panel as well.

I'd like to, on a personal note, thank our wonderful audio-visual team as well, for having my back today, and for the staff at the edge, as well. Thank you so much everyone for attending, and thank you on a personal note, for warmly welcoming me today as well. Thank you, so much, and safe journeys.