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# Well-connected Indigenous kids keen to tap new ways to save lives

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# Well-connected Indigenous kids keen to tap new ways to save lives

## Abstract

Tony Abbott is spending this week in North-East Arnhem Land, part of his long-held hope "to be not just the Prime Minister but the Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs". We asked our experts: what stories does the PM need to hear while he's in the Top End?

Two things are part of the everyday reality of life for many Australian kids, teens and 20-somethings. One is their avid use of social media to connect with friends and share their feelings via status updates, spending hours glued to their mobile phones. But, sadly, too often the other everyday reality is self-harm and suicide.

More than anyone else, that's particularly true for Indigenous Australians. Young Indigenous Australians are enthusiastic users of social media, spending about 20% more time on social media than other Australians their age. Tragically, they also live with a far higher risk of youth suicide.

Suicide rates in Indigenous communities have been increasing over the past few decades. In some communities the suicide rates are among the highest in the world – with most of those deaths being young people under 29.

While there can be downsides to social media, such as the potential for kids to be bullied or subject to racist abuse, my research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Identity and Community Online highlights the potential for social media to provide a strong sense of community and support for young people. As one participant in my research says: "We can't undervalue these sorts of virtual communities that we set up." Through posting their thoughts and feelings, or directly reaching out to others, participants said they felt supported by their online network.

## Keywords

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A still from the Australian Communications and Media Authority's award-winning Be Deadly Online campaign. ACMAcybersmart/YouTube

*Tony Abbott [is spending this week in North-East Arnhem Land](#), part of his [long-held hope](#) "to be not just the Prime Minister but the Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs". We asked our experts: what stories does the PM need to hear while he's in the Top End?*

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A video from the Australian Communications and Media Authority's Be Deadly Online campaign, which won a 2014 World Media Festival award in Germany this year.

# Chatting on Facebook and Divas

My research has also found that [Facebook is the most popular site](#) among Aboriginal people and groups. In remote communities, [more than 60% of the population is on Facebook](#). Other networks such as [Divas Chat](#) – a Telstra-backed social network, which is free on prepaid Telstra mobiles – [are also popular](#), particularly in remote locations.

Access to the Telstra 3G mobile network in remote Australia has resulted in a rise of creativity and connection. [Indigenous youth use digital technologies and social media](#) for a wide range of social and cultural activities: everything from uploading their latest multimedia productions, to commenting on each other's photos, updating their status, keeping in touch, and discussing family and community business.

Social media is transforming the way we communicate with each other and the way in which we are connected to other people at a local, regional, national and global level. Certainly for Indigenous people in remote areas, Facebook and other social networks provide a site of connection to others and allow users to maintain contact across both vast distances and time, increasing social connectivity.

# Tackling isolation and suicide risks

Given that isolation is a multiplier of suicide risk, I wasn't surprised to find in my national research project that the topic of suicide, self-harm and social network sites has been consistently raised. As one of my research participants said about the potential for social media support:

Part of suicide, from what I understand, is the feelings of isolation. So there's an opportunity for people to feel slightly less isolated. Or for a call for help to be answered, information about where to get help can be disseminated through social media, and really, really quickly.

Youth suicide in the Northern Territory is 3.5 times the national average and young Aboriginal men are the highest risk group. There is also an alarming rise in the rate of suicide by young girls and women.

But suicide in Indigenous communities isn't isolated to the Northern Territory. Nation-wide, the suicide rate in Indigenous communities is estimated to be 40% higher than the rate of non-Indigenous suicide. This is nothing short of an epidemic.

Between 2001 and 2010, there were 996 Indigenous suicide deaths across Australia, and for every suicide there are hundreds of attempted suicides. Thousands of Indigenous Australians are hospitalised every year due to self-harm.

Little wonder that experts such as Aboriginal mental health and suicide prevention advisory group co-chair Professor Pat Dudgeon describe it as an "escalating tragedy". Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda says suicide is an "epidemic … devastating families and communities across the Top End of Australia".

## Tapping into social media for support and strength

Reducing suicide and suicidal behaviour among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is now a public health priority for all Australian governments.

Indigenous participants in my research project were asked whether or not they thought social media could be a platform for people to seek support. The consensus so far has been that support through social media should not replace personal contact, but that it could supplement it.

Some participants said that social media might be a less daunting way for users to find support and reach out when in need. It was also described as offering an alternative outlet for users' feelings and thoughts, circumventing some of the social barriers to requesting help. This suggests social media might encourage users to seek support in situations where they would not have otherwise done so.

Having said that, some people also expressed concerns about social media's ability to create supportive environments. Among the biggest worries was the potential for negativity, bullying and racism on social media. One participant suggested "you could drive someone to suicide on Twitter". The other concern related to its effectiveness as constituting a replacement of physical contact.

A video from the Australian Communications and Media Authority's Be Deadly Online campaign, which won a 2014 World Media Festival award in Germany earlier this year.

# Using technology for support

If you ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids and young adults if they'd be willing to give up social media – even if it meant avoiding the risks of being bullied or copping racist abuse online – most would say no way. As one of my participants explained, "there would be a sense of loss. Most definitely … it would be a big part of me that just wouldn't be there."

Sadly, many young Indigenous people do experience bullying, negativity and racism in their lives. And that does real harm: a recent study found that among Aboriginal people aged 16-20 years living in the Northern Territory, the experience of racism was associated with anxiety, depression and suicide risk.

Based on my research, I believe we need to develop more programs that teach young people ways to deal with bullying and racism, no matter whether it happens to them in person or via social media.

Additionally, more research is needed in Australia to determine whether suicide risk could be monitored through posts on social media or whether social media can offer a platform for suicide prevention programs.

To keep up with the popularity of social media it would be good to see training for suicide prevention specifically for the virtual world. A great example of this type of work is happening at the University of Queensland. Led by Indigenous Health director Dr Maree Coombs, they are creating a smartphone app aimed at connecting at-risk youth with service providers in an attempt to prevent Indigenous youth suicide.

Importantly, it's part of a broader training program connecting health providers, community members, peers, school leaders and mentors. The smartphone app and social media will be part of putting that training program into action. Rather than indiscriminately adapting non-Indigenous models of suicide prevention, the way the app is being developed is a good example of the approach needed: consultative, collaborative and culturally based.

# What you can do in the meantime

While apps and other new initiatives are important, participants in my research said they are already using a number of strategies to reach out and help others.

After identifying people in their online network at risk of self-harm, several participants suggested they would (or have previously) "inbox" the person (that is, send them a private, direct message) to see if they were all right, ensure they felt supported, and pass on information for further help.

Alternatively, participants said they would sometimes contact friends or family, either through social media or otherwise, to develop a support network and decide how to proceed.

Most participants stated they would be very interested in educational programs that assisted social media users with identifying people at risk and strategies to intervene.

*\* For support in a crisis, please call [Lifeline Australia](#) on **13 11 14** – a 24-hour, confidential service available from landlines, payphones or mobiles. If your life or anyone else's is in immediate danger, call 000.*

*You can also get the [Lifeline Tool Kit for suicide prevention information for Indigenous people here](#).*