Shifting perceptions, shifting identities: Communication technologies and the altered social, cultural and linguistic ecology in a remote indigenous context

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While a digital divide remains evident in many remote Indigenous Australian communities, individual and collective information and communication technologies practices have developed in accordance with broadband, satellite or WiFi availability. This article examines the ways in which Indigenous youth in remote Australia are ‘coming of age’ in contexts where digitally-mediated social interaction is a taken-for-granted aspect of social practice, communication and learning. While there are many positive aspects to this rapid development, it can also lead to intergenerational tensions as young people explore new patterns of behaviour, and older people come to terms with new cultural challenges. Drawing on long-term ethnographic observations in Central Australia, the impact of technology and the shift in perceptions, communication modes, and social and cultural practice across the generations in the Western Desert region are traced.

Keywords: communication technologies, Western Desert Indigenous Australians, digital ethnography, social media

INTRODUCTION

Around the globe information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now so woven into the fabric of daily life that they have become an integral aspect of everyday practice. Yet, even in mainstream Western contexts, the pace of technological change may seem dizzying (Ito, Baumer, Bittanti, boyd, Cody, Herr-Stephenson et al. 2010). This transformation is intensified in the remote Indigenous Australian context where the encounter with modernity is within living memory. Despite low levels of personal computer ownership, and limited internet access in some remote communities (Rennie 2011), communication via mobile phones and social networking has rapidly become the norm for Indigenous youth who have access to the new telecommunications infrastructure at home or in school. Public access sites such as media organisations, youth centres, libraries and arts centres also provide spaces where youth, many with low levels of alphabetic literacy, can acquire technological expertise and engage in digital multimedia and music production, or cultural heritage projects. As well as...
opening up positive pathways, technology-mediated practices are, nonetheless, causing changes in social behaviour and these shifts are leading to intergenerational tensions.

Worldwide, anthropological studies are identifying enormous diversity in social patterns and dynamics in relation to communication technologies (Katz and Aakhus 2002; Horst and Miller 2012), with significant ethnographic research taking place in non-Western contexts (Horst and Miller 2006; Pertierra 2006; Miller 2011). By comparison, studies in Indigenous Australia have tended to address issues of access, affordability and usage of digital technologies (Brady and Dyson 2009; Rennie et al. 2010) rather than changing social practice in relation to communication technologies. Moreover, few studies have focused on youth and even fewer take a long-term perspective on change across the generations by considering the implications for language and social interaction.

I address this lacuna with an anthropological consideration of changes in social interaction and communication in response to the penetration of media and communications technologies, through a case study in remote Central Australia. I first provide a brief background to early contact with Anglo-Australian settler society in this region of the ‘Western Desert’, which is followed by an historical overview of the introduction of communication technologies. Second, I show how the recent shifts in telecommunications infrastructure need to be understood in relation to the broader social dynamics of this small Indigenous society. Importantly, the generational approach taken here sheds light on the experiences of a people whose everyday ‘life-worlds’ (Desjarlais and Throop 2011), perceptions and habitual modes of social interaction and communication have been altered by communication technologies (Moores 2009). This paper, and others presented in this volume (and at the Australian Anthropological Society 2012 conference), represent a much-needed anthropological perspective on what is going on in relation to information and communication technologies not only in Indigenous Australia, but more broadly.

THE NGAANYATJARRA AND FIRST CONTACT WITH THE WESTERN WORLD

This paper focuses on one Aboriginal group referred to collectively as ‘the Ngaanyatjarra’ (comprising Ngaanyatjarra, Ngaatjarra, Pitjantjarra and Aboriginal English speakers) located in eastern Western Australia in the Western Desert region known as the ‘Ngaanyatjarra Lands’, an area comprising approximately three per cent of mainland Australia fanning out from the South Australia and Northern Territory border (Fig. 1).

The Ngaanyatjarra remained relatively untouched by Western influences for longer than many other Aboriginal groups in Australia (Brooks 2011a). Prior to the establishment of a United Aborigines Mission at Warburton Ranges in 1934, whatever was known about other people and other worlds was known through stories from those who had ventured beyond their traditional ‘country’. Remoteness initially protected the Ngaanyatjarra. However, for the families who came into the mission from
the 1930s onwards, exposure to images of worlds other than their own penetrated slowly via Western-style schooling, alphabetic literacy in English (Kral 2012), and even film nights, as Maimie Butler (born in 1956) describes:

In the mission Friday night films at the school, everybody go there . . . Cowboy pictures . . . seeing them, what they doing, but when I grew up [I realised] “They only acting!” Some old people must have been sitting down thinking that’s true, mulerringkula (believing it)—but nobody never turn around and explain: “Wiya (no), acting!” (Interview 14/11/12)

It was not until the period between 1957 and 1964 that the Gunbarrel Highway and other tracks enabled improved access to the region, in particular to the newly-erected Giles Meteorological Station built to support the rocket testing program at Woomera in South Australia (Dousset 2002). This program precipitated the ‘clearing out’ (Davenport et al. 2005) of the last nomadic groups from the Western Desert and

Figure 1  Map of the Ngaanyatjarra region. Map by Brenda Thornley. © The Institute for Aboriginal Development.
their dispersal into missions and townships further west. Construction of the roads led to visits into the Ngaanyatjarra area by scientists, surveyors, anthropologists and mining exploration companies. A visit from a West Australian parliamentary delegation also threw the isolated mission into the media spotlight for the first time (McG-rath and Brooks 2010). It was around this time that the Ngaanyatjarra began to reconfigure their collective identity in relation to a broader sociocultural space, prompted by the realisation that the boundaries of the known world expanded way beyond anything previously conceptualised. Concomitantly, challenges to the traditional *status quo* accelerated, as did journeys west to the Eastern Goldfields (often by traversing some six hundred kilometres to the nearest township by foot). The ‘assimilation era’ of the 1960s saw the movement of a significant number of Ngaanyatjarra youth into training and employment in the Eastern Goldfields (Kral 2012). In the 1970s, with the closure of the mission and the introduction of a national policy of Indigenous ‘self-determination’, many of these young people returned to their traditional country to establish ‘outstations’ which later became permanent communities.

Today Ngaanyatjarra society remains relatively unique in that it still has a number of people from the ‘first contact’ generation comprising those who came into the mission as children from the 1940s, as well as the ‘last wave’ families who maintained a nomadic existence up to the 1960s. These cohorts recall first sighting ‘whitefellas’, motorcars and aeroplanes; first wearing clothes; first hearing voices other than their own on a pedal wireless; and first seeing images not only of themselves, but also of other kinds of people in photos and films. Importantly, they grew up in a time before digitally-mediated media and communication technologies and have witnessed the evolution of an utterly transformed communications landscape.

**THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN THE NGAANYATJARRA LANDS**

A pedal wireless using a high frequency (HF) radio communications system, initially set up for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, was used at Warburton Mission from the 1940s. As Daniel Featherstone describes (2011a,b), this was the earliest and only form of telecommunications connecting people at Warburton to the outside world for many decades, although an operator-connected HF ‘radio phone’ was in use from the 1970s. This system was remembered at nearby Docker River community (NT) where a green light signalled ‘that the line was free and a red light that it was busy’ and anyone could listen in to this public line (Elizabeth Ellis, pers. comm. February, 2013). Parallel to this development in telecommunications access, the 1970s and 80s saw the genesis of Aboriginal media and music broadcasting and production across the Central Desert region coupled with the growth, nationally, of Indigenous representation and identity through arts, music, media and performance (Dunbar-Hall 1997).

A so-called ‘telecommunications revolution’ (Hinkson 2005) ensued across Central Australia after the 1979 launch of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs, which was followed by the establishment of
the national AUSSAT satellite system in 1985. Through AUSSAT many remote communities were able to access broadcast television and radio for the first time. At the time observers saw the launch of AUSSAT and the introduction of TV as a challenge to remote Indigenous culture (Michaels 1986) and Western Desert people feared their language and culture would be lost. ¹ These concerns drove initiatives at Yuendumu and Ernabella where the ‘Warlpiri Media Association’ and ‘Ernabella Video and TV’ were established as local low-powered, unlicensed TV stations between 1982 and 1986. The Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) was established in 1987 in response to the introduction of mainstream TV via AUSSAT. ‘Irrunytju Media’ (now ‘Ngaanyatjarra Media’) was established in 1992 at Wingellina, a Ngaanyatjarra community, as one of the later BRACS initiatives. Through BRACS, equipment and training were provided for the production and local broadcast of radio and video services now being beamed from AUSSAT, thus providing remote communities with the capacity to choose whether to turn on locally produced media or mainstream media (Tafler 2005; Deger 2006; Rennie and Featherstone 2008).

Maimie Butler recalls how at this time Ngaanyatjarra people began bringing media technologies into the newly formed communities:

Slowly we were learning. We went school, came back when there was nothing there. So we moved out to our communities, store pakarnu [community stores were built] and we started ordering things, kutjupa, kutjupa, kutjupa (many different items) and we didn’t know, cassette, TV ... Those people who went for education, ninti (knowledgeable), they start talking for those things, Irrunytju Media came up from people who had gone over there, understanding and seeing. They came back and said: “Why can’t we have our own thing going?” And they put it and still going. (Interview 14/11/12)

Following on from the mid-1980s, remote Indigenous media organisations have established training programs, and promoted language, culture, music and stories, initially through analogue (and now digital), video, radio and multimedia production and broadcasting at annual media festivals and on Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) (Rennie and Featherstone 2008). Accordingly, young people have observed their elders participating in media practices.

It was not until 1987, as Featherstone (2011b) notes, that Telecom Australia set up the first telephony system in the Ngaanyatjarra region, enabling fax and basic dial-up internet access. By the mid-1990s this system had become overloaded and unable to meet the increasing demand. In late 2003 Telstra upgraded the telephony network to a more reliable and faster system. However, upgrades were not carried out to meet community demand for home phone lines. In response, a ‘Networking the Nation’-funded UHF radio network was installed in 2003. Soon the Ngaanyatjarra were using the two-way radio day and night, as their main form of communications. This ‘chatter channel’ proved a highly effective and affordable communications system. Unfortunately it lasted less than 3 years due to lack of funding for maintenance, including for repairs after repeater towers were damaged by camels! Thus most Ngaanyatjarra remained dependent on public pay phones for telephony communication (Fig. 2). In 2008 a
Telstra Next G mobile phone tower was erected at Warburton and in 2013 Telstra towers were rolled out to a further six Ngaanyatjarra communities.

Prior to 2002, the only internet access in the region, using expensive satellite services, was in schools, clinics and offices. Hence, control of the technology was primarily in the hands of non-Indigenous staff. In 2008 a fibre optic network was launched, which provided broadband communications. Following this, satellite broadband and last-mile WiFi transmission were provided to the six communities that had not initially received the fibre optic solution (Featherstone 2011b). Even where Next G mobile telephony is unavailable, WiFi ‘hot spots’ enable affordable community access to internet services. In 2008, the first of twelve community online media centres opened across the ‘Lands’. These media centres have provided access to informal ‘Learning Spaces’ (Kral and Schwab 2012) for youth to engage, develop skills, and create media by progressing from basic IT experimentation with Mac-based iLife software to video editing, DVD production, music recording and CD production using GarageBand software. In response, youth are showing themselves to be active content producers.

In summary, we can see that in the 1970s remote people moved rapidly from a pre-television world—where communication was still based substantially on face-to-face interaction involving a rich multimodal oral and gestural repertoire—to intensive exposure to broadcast television and a Western lifestyle (cf. Michaels 1986). Importantly, at this time people’s exposure to media was coupled not only with the opportunity to consume Western media, but also to create media that reflected their own linguistic and cultural heritage, and where the production and broadcasting of media was for communal purposes. Since then telecommunications, information technology and broadcast media have converged into a digital realm and become embedded in accessible mobile technologies. As access to telecommunications infrastructure and small mobile devices has improved, more individuated practices have emerged with people, predominantly young people, buying

Figure 2 Remote community public phone box, Ngaanyatjarra Lands 2012.
laptops, mobile phones and even iPads or Tablets. Young women especially are typically in ‘perpetual contact’ (Katz and Aakhus 2002) through Facebook on internet-enabled mobile phones. Mobile phones are also used as an affordable media storage tool for music, films and images, and for media creation, viewing/listening and content sharing via Bluetooth. Thus, new social practices have emerged and young people are appropriating new digital technologies for their own sociocultural processes and purposes (Kral 2011, 2012) (Fig. 3).

With the rollout of the National Broadband Network and the coming Digital TV Switchover, Ngaanyatjarra people will increasingly access television, online resources and social networking in English. Hence, the planned implementation of Direct-to-Home digital TV delivery is bound to have a major impact on Indigenous languages and culture across remote Australia. While this was a major issue when the AUSSAT satellite system was launched some thirty years ago, it is rarely considered under the current digital switchover policy (Featherstone 2011a). Consequently, future leisure and recreation activities for remote youth could well be conducted primarily in English, rather than the Indigenous mother tongue, which is a contributing factor in older people’s growing apprehension that language and culture loss is being accelerated by new communication technologies.

SHIFTING PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS: THE CULTURALLY-MEDIATED EFFECT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Western Desert Aboriginal society has been adopting and adapting social and cultural practices in response to the introduction of communication and media technologies since first contact. New ICTs are now speeding up an already accelerated modernity (Tomlinson 2007). In this context it is not only the effect of the speed of spatial mobility that is notable, but also the speed of temporal relocations, that is, the short distance

![Figure 3](image-url) iPads in communities, Ngaanyatjarra Lands 2012.
over generational spans. Where many in the older generation spent their formative years acquiring the values and practices of the traditional past, their grandchildren are now coming of age in the global digital era. Nevertheless, the cultural logic of Ngaanyatjarra sociality remains pivotal in shaping the nature of social interactions in this new technology-mediated space, as I set out henceforth.

Until recently the timespan for significant social and ceremonial events in the Western Desert was expansive but now, with the transition to the immediacy of phone communication and motor vehicle travel, the duration of events has dramatically condensed. This is most evident in the manner in which the temporality of funerals has altered. Older people recall the extensive events associated with funerals in the not-so-distant past whereby soon after someone had passed away, a wikarru (messenger) would locate relatives by identifying the smoke of their camp fires on the horizon. After relaying the sad news, the bereaved family may have waited for as long as a year for the final burial to allow kin time to traverse the vast distances by foot. During the intervening period the body was buried in a temporary grave, covered by logs, awaiting the ‘second funeral’ or mantaku (lit. for the ground). If kin wanted to return for this second funeral, they were alerted again by smoke signals or a messenger. Now the news can be relayed by phone in a day and the funeral may be completed within a couple of weeks with families quickly able to travel hundreds of kilometres by car from one community to another.

Funerals are, in fact, emblematic of the inter-relationship between technology and shifting practices and perceptions in contemporary life. Until the last decade mourning practices in the Ngaanyatjarra region included burning personal items belonging to the recently deceased and not saying their name or even using a word that may sound similar. Nowadays old people are confronted by youngsters not only retaining and displaying photos, but also saying or writing the name of the recently deceased. With the introduction of digital cameras, a surfeit of images of people has entered the public domain. This has taken place in a context where photography only recently enabled a form of cultural remembering that was previously unknown. As noted earlier, the advent of Aboriginal media organisations led to the production of locally-made videos broadcast via community media stations and, later, ICTV. In turn, new protocols developed: films containing images of the deceased were locked away in designated cupboards until a suitable period of mourning had elapsed. Ara Iritija, the community history digital database (Hughes and Dallwitz 2007), maintains this practice by having a category of ‘sorrow’ photos closed off until the family agrees to have them restored to public view. Western Desert people are further accommodating transformations by inserting digital images of deceased relatives into funeral texts and memorialising kin by posting heartfelt messages of grief and photos of loved ones on Facebook. Such rapid changes are nevertheless confronting. Even young people, familiar with this online world, express uncertainties regarding the apparent inability to delete lingering virtual profiles of the recently deceased. In one instance a young man expressed concern regarding his profile remaining on public view if he passed away: “I got to delete this facebook” he announced on Facebook. Despite such concerns, the
practices highlighted here also reveal Western Desert people’s capacity for adaptation and change in response to technology when introduced technologies are socially and culturally meaningful.

Around the world we are seeing how mobile telephony and social media are rapidly facilitating the emergence of altered social relations and new forms of ‘public performance’ (Katz and Aakhus 2002). Such ‘publicness’ is generating much attention with media commentators commonly reflecting on the ‘decline in privacy’ (Robards 2010: 19). How then do we interpret new forms of social interaction in the Western Desert cultural context where social interaction with non-kin and Western-style forms of public performance are recent phenomena?

Until relatively recently the social world of the Ngaanyatjarra rotated within predictable sociospatial parameters. In pre-contact times social interaction was primarily within the small family group or band (Brooks 2011a). Both strangers and the act of venturing into unknown territory were feared. In fact, the internal trust of this small kin-based society was counterbalanced by the external distrust of malikitja (strangers or persons from another place). Anthropologist Fred Myers (1986: 125) noted in the 1980s that in Western Desert society emotions such as ‘kurnta’ (Ngaa.) (glossed as shame, shyness, embarrassment or respect depending on the context), ‘constrained’ the way in which social action was organised. Kurnta was manifest in a tendency to avoid focusing on the individual person and a reluctance to stand out or step forward in the company of strangers. Over the generations the Ngaanyatjarra have, to a great extent, overcome their distrust of strangers and their sociocultural disposition to kurnta and the manner in which this propensity organises communicative practices.

Generationally differentiated arenas of social practice are changing the way in which Ngaanyatjarra and other remote youth are expressing themselves through their dress, gesture, visual symbolism and performative modes. This is creating a peer group identity that differs markedly from that of the older generation. Earlier generations were more bounded by the parameters of ceremonial performance, while successive generations have been observing and participating in an expanded range of performance events through the church, meetings, country and western music and sport, as well as media. Accordingly, a repertoire of Western-style communicative practices have been acquired, thus preparing people for moving into new forms of social and political engagement with diverse publics (Kral 2012). In tandem with recent exposure to TV, MTV, and now YouTube and Facebook, youth have also participated in radio, film-making, music and fashion parades, thereby acquiring new performance repertoires, genres and communication modes. In addition, youngsters are spending more time in the company of peer group cohorts and ‘intimate strangers’ (Heath 2012: 47): teachers, youth workers and so forth. Notably, such changes have prepared them for the publicness of the online world, including the creation of intimacy with an ever-widening network of ‘non-kin’ and the intensification of relationships with Facebook ‘friends’.
Nevertheless, despite new dispositions, Ngaanyatjarra youth remain deeply rooted in their own cultural schema; a schema connected to kin and country and the enduring relationship between place, identity and tjukurrpa (the ‘Dreaming’). Connection to the tjukurrpa provides a constant, often invisible, underpinning to the structuration of everyday life for most Ngaanyatjarra. Anthropologist David Brooks (2011b) suggests that all Ngaanyatjarra people share a world of meaning that basically derives from the tjukurrpa and young people have imbibed this world view from their elders and maintain an underlying cultural propensity for what he calls ‘tjukurrpa-thinking’. Accordingly, tjukurrpa-thinking is manifest in the way in which people interpret aspects of the world and conceive the links between people, country, events and phenomena where much of their habitual thinking about the world takes place through the lens of the tjukurrpa. Tjukurrpa-related storytelling and music remain key to the contemporary cultural identity and wellbeing of people. Through storytelling the older generation see in their mind’s eye the Ancestral Beings of the tjukurrpa travelling the land, and with deft gestures and hand signs they signal a corporeal connection with the mythological past. Likewise, storytelling socialises children into cultural understandings where the proper ways of behaving, imparting life skills and transmitting social relationship and kinship rules are modelled. Evident also is the manner in which young musicians draw on traditional narratives and reveal cultural meanings in songs about ‘looking after our sacred areas and waterholes and grandfather’s land’ (Kral and Schwab 2012: 87).

Despite the persistence of strong cultural continuities, some elders perceive that ‘everything changed’ after the 1970s when, as discussed above, new communication and media technologies were introduced. Some suggest that since then it is ‘new technology’ that has been showing young people ‘the other way forward’. They consider that youngsters are now all ‘watching TV, playing games, iPodpangka’: ‘You can’t tell them anything, they got their hair dyed, put a music on their ear and just walk along smart dressed up’, declares elder Dulcie Watson (Interview 8/11/12). Since 2008, ownership of small mobile media devices has increased exponentially, especially in the youth generation, and this has impacted on everyday social practice where, according to Maimie Butler, young people say:

“Too hot to run around for kuka (go hunting). I want to stay here in the cool, air-conditioning, play games, iPodpangka, look at the picture.” [But] we [our generation] want to sit down listen to inmatjarra (ceremonial dance and music) country and western, gospel. Young people won’t sit down there with you. They just say: “No action”, and they’re gone! It’s our yunntalpa, katja (daughters, sons), they got that iPod, iPad, computer, and their kids . . . Our age, we ngurrpa (not knowing), but we were the ones that introduced it, brought that in [in the 1970s and 1980s], but it’s on fire now! (Interview 14/11/12)

Furthermore, it is evident that young people are spending more time in contexts pivoting around technology and in peer-to-peer (rather than cross-generational) interactions. With fewer opportunities for social and cultural connection between the generations, the contexts for the acquisition of the traditional rules of appropriate social interaction and the concomitant speech styles are in decline.
I now turn to the manner in which linguistic anthropologists, drawing on the work of Dell Hymes, John Gumperz and Erving Goffman (Goffman 1956; Gumperz and Hymes 1972), have focused on the embeddedness of language in the lifeworlds of speech communities (Heath 1983; Schieffelin 1990; Duranti 1997). These scholars emphasise that language is the most visible feature of settings and events evident in the social life of societies around the world (Duranti 1992). Furthermore, Adam Kendon (1988, 1992) has drawn our attention to the significance of context in face-to-face interaction and the importance of sign and gesture in Indigenous Australian communicative practices.

In all societies communicative practices have patterned conventions: locally specific ways of speaking, communicating and representing meaning drawn from the mix of resources utilised by any one cultural group (Finnegan 2002). In Western Desert Aboriginal society, people traditionally utilised a rich multimodal communicative repertoire incorporating speech, song, sign language, silence, gesture and the graphic symbols evident in sand story narratives. Face-to-face interaction was the norm with subtle forms of direct and indirect communication and special respect speech styles utilised in secular and ceremonial contexts. In the past, face-to-face interactions tended to be visible and multimodal, and enacted within a ‘frame’ (Goffman 1974) of routine, habitual practice that was in harmony with a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Now the rules of social interaction are shifting and interaction is increasingly mediated by technology. ‘Relevant meaning-making practices’ (Goodwin 2000) that made sense in the past are now in a state of flux and in these new abstracted interactions the social restraints on language choice have been disturbed. The negative impact of new technology-mediated social interaction is most evident in public swearing and the abuse of individuals on ‘Diva Chat’ (aka ‘AirG’, a free mobile phone messaging service where message feeds, accessed via pre-paid credit with Telstra BigPond, are anonymous)—and, to a lesser extent, Facebook. In fact, accounts across remote Australia of so-called ‘cyber-bullying’ are on the rise (Hodson 2012: 5; also see Vaarzon-Morel this volume). In the following section I consider how such practices may not stand apart from the social, cultural and linguistic context in which they are embedded, but are in fact seeded in the norms of social interaction particular to remote Indigenous sociality (Figs 4 and 5).

In pre-contact times, social interaction in Western Desert society was culturally-mediated and ‘strongly rule-bound, complementary, concrete, sanctified, inter-locking and predictable’ (Brooks and Shaw 2003: 15). Kurnta (shame/respect) operated as a form of regulatory control over young people, as did the fear of sorcery and the authority of senior men. By contrast, the contemporary social world is perceived by older people as ‘open-ended, proliferating, seemingly rule-less and unpredictable’ (ibid). This is evident in social interactions where young people are not adhering to the expected rules of social interaction. Most significantly, they are not observing the
traditional in-law modes of respectful, distant social interaction and are even marrying ‘wrong way’, or ‘yinyurrpa way’ (i.e., to a person of the other generational moiety). The generational moiety division—tjirntulukultul(pa) (sun side) and ngumpalurrung-katja (shade side) is central to the ‘social and symbolic order’ of Ngaanyatjarra society. To marry ‘yinyurrpa way’ represents the worst violation of rules relating to marriage partners. Such ‘wrong way’ marriages ‘strain the rules of acceptability, particularly for the older generation’ (Brooks 2002: 39-41). The rules surrounding generational moiety interaction govern ceremonial activity and marriage practices have, until recently, been strictly enforced.

Nowadays they marry any way, different skin name. Long time nobody not allowed to go off the line. Yinyurrpa wiya. Gotta stick to the right skin . . . Before good old days, straight
way, rules, [now] married any way, fighting ... Policeman just come and say to us “What’s that got to do with you, they in love!” We say “Wiya (no), wrong way, that’s why they getting into trouble.” (DECRA20121106_DW+NG_WBR)

Technology-mediated social interaction further strains the rules of acceptability for the older generation with young women ‘looking for love’ through the phone or on Facebook, oftentimes by uploading provocative photos or ‘selfies’.

In the past a range of nuanced communication styles signalled respect. Indirect speech—*jitirrpa*(pa) or *kiti-kiti watjalku*—was the preferred norm in contexts requiring respectful or distant social interaction. Indirect speech employs subtle, highly metaphorical features and was used to deal with conflict in public, or utilised when individuals who stand in a constrained relationship needed to communicate with one another. Across the Western Desert indirect speech was integrated with non-verbal respectful behaviour, particularly between kin in ‘in-law’ relationships, inclusive of prohibitions on touching, passing of objects hand to hand, sitting together, visiting another’s camp, and looking directly at one another (Tonkinson 1978; Goddard 1992). As elders Dulcie Watson (born 1940) and Norma Giles (born 1952) explained, it used to be that:

they got to show a lot of respect, not to see one another. They can see one another from a long way, but not allowed to talk close up. That’s how it was . . . It’s different now. They sit down by the fire and eat one *mirrka* [the same meal], drink from one billy can . . . No respect! (DECRA20121106_DW+NG_WBR)

Direct speech or ‘straight talking’ is still seen by some Ngaanyatjarra as a linguistic transgression of the boundaries of normative social interaction. Elders describe how in the past language was ‘stronger’, whereas nowadays it is ‘*pawun-pawunpa*’ (weak) and they suggest that young people are ‘rude’ or ‘loud’, and ‘talk in a funny way’ (Maimie Butler, 14/11/12). In other words they talk too directly and have no respect. This is affirmed by a woman born in 1963: ‘young people just only using the simple, straight talk, you know, they just swear, swear, swear, growl, that’s all’ (F13, 1/11/12).

Growing tensions are playing out in growling and swearing on Diva Chat and Facebook interactions, as noted by a twenty year old woman:

Ever since I’ve been on Divas Chat it only cause trouble. I wish Divas Chat gets cut off. I mean it. Because somebody put a profile, photo of me up on fake profile and people just started swearing about me. (F12, 1/11/12)

Diva Chat is ‘burning like a big bushfire, we’re crying for that’ asserts a grandmother. Transgressions have included using names of the deceased as profiles, where people even ‘write about dead people and swear at them’ states a woman in her thirties (F01, 17/7/12). The anonymity and distance of Diva Chat (and sometimes Facebook) interaction is enabling a parallel sociality to develop where in the online world adolescents are talking ‘like adults’, growling and swearing ‘wrong way’, and even threatening their elders. However, when face-to-face interaction resumes, age-appropriate social restraint returns, and *kurnta* once again tends to constrain the manner in which
social action is organised. Nevertheless, the conflict between kin, initiated online, lingers on unresolved (Emily Ings, pers. comm. March, 2013).

In the past, public explosions of anger or frustration were a socially acceptable way of releasing tension in the Western Desert that enabled conflict between kin to be resolved (Myers 1988) generally through ritualised payback, spearfights or ‘yaarlpirri’. Yaarlpirri, or early morning talk, was a form of public oratory used extensively across the Western Desert to discuss issues, air grievances, disseminate information, or organise the day’s hunting and gathering (Goddard 1983; Liberman 1985). Now in the noisy, contemporary community environment, with cars driving in and out, and music and TV resounding in the background, yaarlpirri has faded as a rhetorical device for drawing attention to important matters or resolving conflict. As a fifty year old woman lamented:

\[\text{Yaarlpirri was really like in our heart, it’s missing out, because long time [ago] our tjamu (grandfathers) they used to talk yaarlpirri, it’s really missing, first [thing] in the morning ...They don’t talk like that young people, they just hang around all night. (F13, 1/11/12)}\]

Additionally, as a man born in 1972 into one the last of the desert dwelling families noted, through yaarlpirri ‘you were growling a mob, everyone could hear you letting it out’ (M01, 30/10/12). Nowadays kin-based grievances are typically not resolved in a public, socially-sanctioned manner, and indirect speech modes used to deal with conflict in public in the past are used less and less by youngsters. Furthermore, in the new technology-mediated interactions it is often not possible to see who is responsible for posting inflammatory messages and the conflict escalates in the telling of stories or ‘yarning’: that is, ‘the rumours around what is happening in that town and what’s happening in the next town, and it’s got out of hand’ (F16, 8/11/12).

I return now to the notion of the embeddedness of language in the lifeworlds of communities mentioned above, to explore how social action is constructed and understood through talk. This approach allows us to consider the social consequences when certain elements are stripped from the full ‘contextual configuration’ (Goodwin 2000) of social interaction. According to Erving Goffman (1964: 135), cultural rules establish how individuals are to conduct themselves. These normative patterns of behaviour are acquired in accordance with the social rules of the culture (Gumperz 1964: 139) and remain relatively invisible until challenged by new forms of social interaction.

As noted earlier, in Western Desert society interactions tended to be face-to-face. Nowadays, however, social interaction is increasingly mediated by technology. Charles Goodwin (2000: 1499) suggests that face-to-face communication represents an embodied participation framework constituted through mutual orientation between speaker and addressee where ‘talk and gesture mutually elaborate each other’. When face-to-face communication is replaced by private, often anonymous, textual communication in a technology-mediated environment, this ‘framework of embodied mutual orientation’ (Goodwin 2000: 1497) is altered and the historically-shaped structures that anchor social interaction are disturbed. Previously in Western Desert society the
reference points for the production of meaning and action in communication typically embraced a visible repertoire of semiotic modalities that included not only speech, but also gesture, sign, gaze and other haptic or kinaesthetic signals. In Diva Chat (and to a lesser extent on Facebook) individuals are performing actions through one modality only: written messages. In addition, the covert nature of this communicative context is exacerbating miscommunication and misinterpretation. Moreover, in this setting youth are often exhibiting a technological expertise impenetrable to the older generation. Hence, the gerontocratic norms of the past are undergoing a profound disturbance where the patterned habitual practice of elders exercising authority and exerting social control is under challenge. All these factors are coalescing in an environment where the socially sanctioned capacities for conflict resolution are not as evident as they once were.

'TECHNOLOGY YARNING': ORAL TO WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

As mentioned earlier, the 'two-way' radio or 'chatter channel' became a popular mode of communication in 2003, particularly for older people, perhaps because it amplified an existing oral communication style and acted as a form of 'publicly available discourse' (Liberman 1985: 4) redolent of yaarlpirri. Communal elements remained evident in the manner in which time was spent hanging around public pay phones to hear and relay the news of what was going on. While Facebook and Diva Chat may be mirroring the pre-existing cultural practice of broadcasting news to a local audience evident in ‘yarning’, many young people appear oblivious of just how public these channels are and who can witness their shout-outs, their public playing out of intimacy, grief, and anger. Furthermore, grievances now remain inscribed in the public space and retain a lingering permanency in the written mode:

Diva, well everybody can see that writing. Divas chat. Everybody can see that. Everybody been having a fight nearly every time. [italics added] (DECRA20121106_DW+NG_WBR)

These negative aspects notwithstanding, a positive dimension is evident in the evolution of altered communicative practices in response to the penetration of digital technologies. This is most apparent in the growing prevalence of written communication by and between youth in everyday, out of school life. Importantly, mirroring global trends (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011), many Ngaanyatjarra youth are exploring the creative generativity of multimodal forms of communication enabled by digital technologies through film-making and in image and text-based Facebook communication. The non-standard nature of Facebook chat has liberated the written mode, enabling text and symbols to be used in inventive ways. This is a context where there is no such thing as a mistake, and young people are embracing the ‘linguistic freedom’ (Lexander 2011: 440) and using non-standard orthographic and typographic forms and playful informal registers. Through graffiti youth are well-versed in tagging, word play and composing coded sequences of letters, and this tendency is being elaborated on the virtual Facebook wall. Even though the emergent discourse practices are heavily
weighted towards English, we are seeing further behaviour changes as the essentially social nature of communication favours the vernacular. Scholars in other arenas have also drawn attention to language shift and language choice in relation to new technologies even where literacy rates are low (Deumert and Masinyana 2008; De Bruijn et al. 2009; Vandeputte-Tavo 2013). In the ways identified above, Ngaanyatjarra youth are revealing the positive aspects of changing communication modes in response to new technologies and showing themselves to be adept at integrating new cultural forms (Fig. 6).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented findings from ethnographic research on communication technologies in one region of remote Indigenous Australia. I have shown how identities and perceptions have shifted across the generations in the Western Desert and how this shift is intertwined with the evolution of communication technologies in this setting. By tracing this evolution, I have shown that where access is provided, youth have shown themselves to be rapid adopters of new technologies and active content producers, just as the generation before them were adept at transforming early media technologies for their own social and cultural purposes. Through the artefacts of new media—laptops, digital cameras and mobile phones—many young people are embracing global digital youth culture and exploring the generativity of multimodal forms of communication, while simultaneously acting as agents for the recording and transmission of cultural memory in new forms. These positive elements notwithstanding, ICTs have been instrumental in catalysing shifts in the practice and perception of events across the generations, especially in contexts demanding new forms of public performance.

Significantly, I have also shed light on the unintended negative consequence of the proliferation of digital communication technologies in the Ngaanyatjarra context. In doing so I have addressed the nature of altered communication styles and the impact on social interaction and how this is playing out in technology-mediated interactions. By focusing on the embeddedness of language in the lifeworlds of this speech community, I have suggested that the manner in which youth in this context are coming of age is being altered by new technologies. That is, by adopting adult-like behaviours and stances in online contexts, youth are dislocating the routine, predictable frame of respectful interaction and challenging the authority of elders. Finally, while the debate surrounding the coming of the National Broadband Network in remote regions has centred primarily on infrastructure rollout (Rennie et al. 2010), this research draws
attention to the critical need to address the social, cultural and linguistic implications of new communication technologies in remote Indigenous Australia, including the need to develop context-specific approaches to cyber-bullying education in this context.

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NOTE

1 Ara Irititja database annotation: m 1090-3.

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