

Don't let them get left behind:

Keeping up with
technology is the key
to online connectivity
in rural communities



Results from recent community relations research into telecommunications and internet usage in rural communities have come as a bit of a surprise.

Director of Regional Development and CEO of RDA Riverina, Rachel Whiting explains, "When we think of technology use in rural communities, we think lack of access in the form of mobile broadband blackspots and similar are holding people back from making the most of online connectivity.

However, my research shows that not being able to keep up with technology changes is actually what's hindering people's ability to connect to their community online."

Case study of Coolamon Shire,
Riverina, NSW

Rachel Whiting

Dissertation submitted for the degree
of Master of Communication at
Charles Sturt University.



Inability to keep up with technology changes, not internet connectivity, is keeping people from connecting online

About the Research

The 2018 research project, conducted by Rachel as part of her Master of Communication at Charles Sturt University, explored telecommunication and internet use in the Coolamon Shire of NSW and how it impacts community connectedness.

Using a series of interviews with five people who represented a cross section of community members in the Coolamon Shire, a unique collective case study emerged about this rural community's technology use and connectivity.

The five interviewees challenge some of the common stereotypes of people living in rural Australia. They are media savvy, educated and identify strongly with their community, having made the choice to live in the Coolamon Shire.

Their involvement in their community is built on their work and volunteer activities. They live in the villages and towns of the Shire and aren't farmers, so although they are connected to farming communities their views don't necessarily reflect the access and attitudes of people living in more rural settings.





People are choosing to disconnect from technology to improve their sense of wellbeing

How people are using technology in Coolamon Shire

Matthew

Matthew* is a millennial dad of two who checks his messages and emails first thing in the morning and last thing at night before sleep.

"I use apps to do the vast majority of my banking..."

Andrew

Andrew* is a tree changer who runs a tourist business with his family. He has made the personal choice to not to use technology and social media to its full capacity.

"I don't feel the need to network in that way..."

Karen

Karen* works from home in a family business and is well-connected to the community through social media, as well as through volunteering and her children's school and sporting commitments.

"I use the mobile phone all the time. Texting and ringing and receiving calls. And emails. I read a lot of articles on the phone."

Bec

Bec* moved to Coolamon Shire in 2017 and works in a nearby regional city. She uses Facebook and Instagram to connect to her community and promote the local area.

"I've had a few people contact me through Instagram..."

Tiffany

Tiffany* is retired but volunteers almost full-time. She organises a newspaper through a local primary school, is heavily involved in community projects and her family have set her up with What's App so that she can communicate with them instantly and inexpensively.

"Most of them [older community members] seem to have mobile phones now, but whether they're able to use them to the full extent, probably not..."



Without the right information, skills and support it can be just too hard to stay up to date with technology

Findings

This research makes it clear that the **Coolamon Shire community** is connected through the internet and telecommunications networks.

The reasons for this are a dichotomy; either people have a desire to disconnect or be less connected, or they have disadopted technology due to an inability to keep up.

Some of the key themes that emerged from the interviews included:

- Technology provides a way to connect to others and develop a sense of community,
- Non-digital communication is still important to make sure people without skills in technology aren't excluded,
- Social media is a way to connect with the community and is especially popular with millennials, and
- The local library is a hub of community connectedness.

The most surprising of the results, however, was that the biggest issue in this rural community isn't lack of network or technology availability, but lack of understanding about how best to use technology. While all the people interviewed were tech savvy themselves, they identified many elderly people in the community and others who had opted out

of technology in recent years who either didn't have the right information and skills to connect online or found it just too hard to stay up to date with technology.

Also interesting was the discovery that people are choosing to disconnect from technology to improve their sense of wellbeing and give them the space to focus on face-to-face connection with their family and community. One of the interviewees even said one of the reasons for their family's move to Coolamon Shire was to get away from the fast-paced and heavily technology based communicative life they had been living in Sydney.





Educating segments of the community on how to use communications technology will improve connectedness

Image:
Roni Kadmon-Jones

rdariverina.org.au

Implications

This research has implications well beyond **Coolamon Shire** as there are limited published reports or interviews with people in rural communities that investigate how technology is used for communication and connectedness.

There are lessons here for the practice of community relations about how to communicate to and partner with a rural community to best educate people on the use of technology.

Digital connectivity is a critical requirement for people to engage and participate effectively in society, but there are barriers that need to be overcome such as poverty, age and lack of skills. Education is key and this research gives some guidance to how to teach particular segments of the community to use communications technology to improve connectedness.

With the library being a significant hub for the community, it makes sense to bring technology education into that space in order to up-skill elderly members of the community or others who need to update their technology knowledge. As well as learning how to stay

connected, learning how to use government services and banking online is a crucial aspect of this education as these services are less and less available in rural areas.

It's also true that a community rich with connectivity is attractive to tree changers and tourists, so technology use has implications for the sustainability and economic growth of our rural communities.

There's also more work to be done in busting the stereotypes about country towns and their inhabitants. While this research found some people in the community needed help with technology use, the vast majority were tech savvy and use the internet for everything from work to entertainment, accessing services, keeping in touch with people, social media, networking and more.

For more information about the research, it's implications for community relations in regional communities and more, please contact Rachel on 0429 444 213 or ceo@rdariverina.org.au

Rachel Whiting is the Director of Regional Development and CEO of RDA Riverina, an organisation committed to developing and strengthening the regional communities of the Riverina. Rachel has also recently completed her Master of Communication at Charles Sturt University and her research paper "Accessibility of telecommunications and internet usage in a rural community and workplaces" is the basis for this article.