UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL INEQUALITY: RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Most of Australia has great internet, but many people still cannot access or use it. People who do not have internet access cannot use important tools for work, health, managing money, and speaking to friends and family.

Older adults, migrants with limited English, and people with low incomes are more likely to face digital exclusion.

This project looked at internet use and equality in the Carlton Housing Estate in Melbourne. It was carried out by the University of Melbourne and community partners from the Combined Agencies for Digital Inclusion (CADI) network. Researchers spoke to people who lived at the Carlton Housing Estate to find out about their experiences of internet use.

ACCESS

While more people have access to the internet today, people who live in housing estates are less likely to have access. People we spoke to connected to the internet on phones, tablets, and computers.

In the Carlton Housing Estate, most households had 3 or 4 phones, tablets, or computers. Some smaller households of 2 or 3 people had more devices than people. Most households of more than 6 had fewer than 4 devices. Some people had to buy more devices during lockdowns, so that everyone could work and study.

Most people used the internet every day. Only 3% of survey respondents did not use the internet at all. A lot of people found their internet connection unreliable. Mobile phone data was often the most reliable option.

When I'm not working, I prefer to use my data, rather than the home internet. It's just faster and easier for me. So do most people in my house…it's just things don't lag, it's just like if I have the data, I will just use the data, because I know I'm not going to have problems. (Interviewee 3)

Many families had to take turns to use the internet or the connection was bad.

Oh, [I have to get up] all the time [laughs]. All the time. It's tricky because when - especially when I'm on Zoom. I actually have to go out of my room and make an announcement to everyone to turn their Wi-Fi off, so I can attend the meeting… (Interviewee 2)

COST

More than half of the people we spoke to lived on very low incomes, so the cost of internet connection was a big issue. Even when people spent a lot of money on their internet, the connection was often bad, and fixing problems could cost a lot of money.

We've been going back and forth, but we finally got a new modem today. So, fingers crossed, it works again, but [the] last few weeks we haven't had the, best, um any internet connection at all. (Participant from focus group 3)

People found it hard to track the cost of internet, because of the fine print in contracts or changes in internet plans.

They just say this is, you know I don't understand what's going on. So confusion and being complicated is one of the things I found. It might not be that expensive, but in terms of how complicated…. and then they lose trust and I think. (Participant from focus group 2)

ABILITY

Most of the people we spoke to had good internet skills, but some did not. People with good skills could use the internet for everyday things and could fix problems for themselves.

Nearly all of the people we spoke to said that the internet gave them more control over their lives. However, most found it hard to learn and keep up with many of the new things on offer.

Problems with the internet meant that some people missed shifts at work or opportunities to start new jobs.

Many people used a phone to access the internet. Most used the internet to speak to others, but not many said they used internet dating or wrote a blog. Some people used the internet to learn English or used phone settings to use the internet in their own language.

> *Luckily he can use his phone purely in Vietnamese, even the setup of the phone was already in Vietnamese. They provide setup, setting and he reads the newspaper or other things mostly in Vietnamese. (Interviewee 4)*

Children and younger people often helped older people with the internet. Family and friends were often more helpful than people from internet companies.

IMPORTANT POINTS

- People learned ways to deal with bad internet connections and other problems. They also found help from friends, family, and others near them.
- Living in a housing estate with internet connections that were often bad meant that people needed skills to fix problems
- Bad internet connections made people miss out on work and education. They also encouraged people to spend money to try fix their connection and made it hard to enjoy the internet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Everyone should be able to get low cost, good internet and that is why we recommend that priority must be given to the development of not-for-profit alternatives that can be rolled out in places such as public housing estates where many people stand to benefit from more cost-effective options.
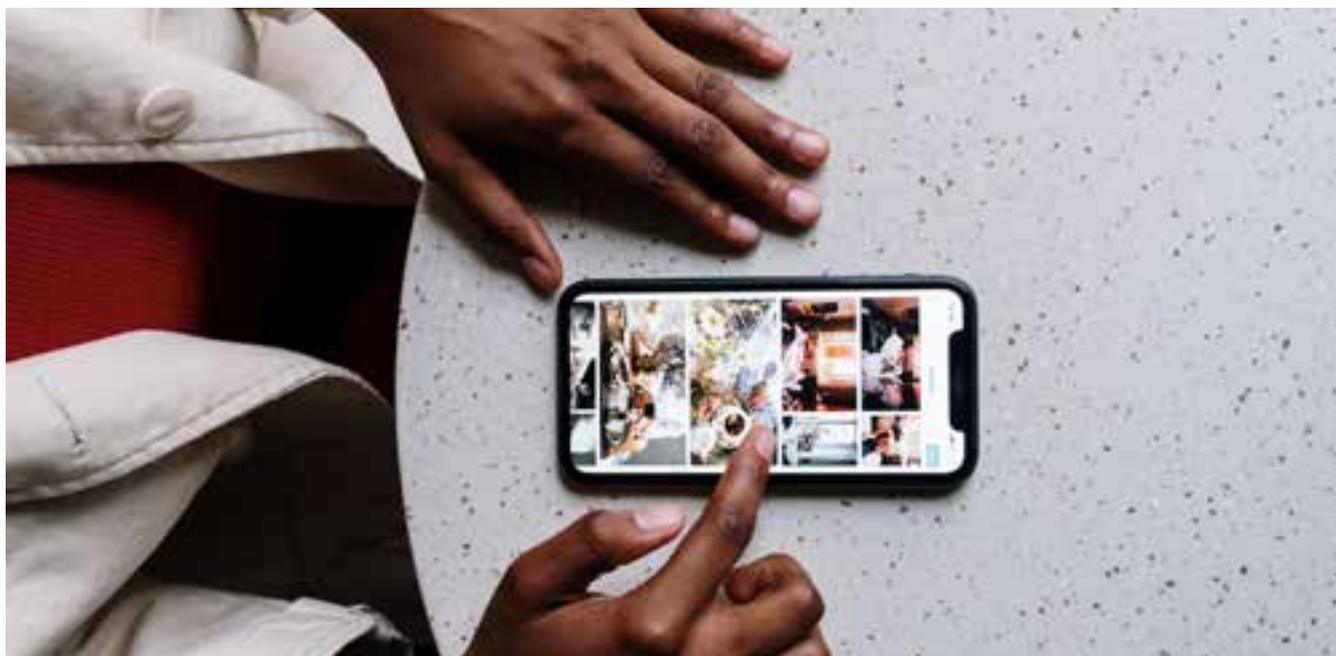
Internet companies and governments need to set minimum quality standards to ensure that the internet works for everyone.

Internet companies and governments work together to create a product offering that provides low-cost options that do not force people to sacrifice quality or reliability.

Internet/NBN costs need to reflect that many people use mobile data when the NBN fails.

Governments, internet companies and social housing providers should speak to people who find it hard to access the internet because the involvement of housing providers can help make sure that the internet works better inside social housing estates.

Researchers must focus more on how people access the internet, not just on whether they access the internet or not and at what cost.