

# That computer is clever like a dingo: principles and practice for Indigenous digital governance and digital sovereignty

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## Abstract

With the insinuation of digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the most mundane crevices of our lives, a revolutionary shift has been happening in the way governance and government is conducted globally. This is referred to as **'eGovernance' (Electronic Governance or Electronic Government) and more recently, 'Digital Governance'**. The COVID-19 Pandemic has greatly accelerated this momentum amongst First Nations peoples worldwide. Sometimes these digital transitions are the result of creative Indigenous innovation, sometimes it is in response to dire crises. There is also growing pressure on Indigenous organisations to use ICT for their mandatory reporting responsibilities to government. However, there are significant gaps in our knowledge about Indigenous digital engagement. In particular, we know little about how they are actually *governing* their engagement with ICT, or the ways they are using it to maximise their own self-determination.

The underlying hypothesis explored by the paper is that Indigenous Australians are acting as digital innovation agents, not passive recipients. Furthermore, they are infusing ICT with their cultural logics, creatively remixing and reshaping it in self-determining ways to revitalise their collective identities, reclaim cultural knowledge, and exercise their rights and interests. These are all fundamental components of self-governance and nation-rebuilding.

The paper divides into three parts. The first part unpacks the concepts surrounding digital ICT and related debates about what constitutes 'governance' and 'government'. The concept of 'Indigenous Digital Governance' is introduced as a 'contact zone' (Mary Pratt 1991) and 'cultural interface' (Martin Nakata 2006) where there are emergent transformation and innovation taking place. The second part provides a literature-based snapshot of three digital initiatives by Indigenous nations and their organisations – the Ara Iritja project by Anangu peoples of Central Australia which highlights governance of digital knowledge and heritage; the Yawuru peoples' digital environmental mapping initiatives for governing Country in the Kimberley region of Western Australia; and the TraKs database designed by Queensland South Native Title Services to support native title claimants and holders to govern their land rights and development outcomes.

The final third part of the paper analyses important commonalities in the deep principles which Indigenous groups are bringing to bear on their collective Digital Governance. The concept of 'relational digital governance' is introduced to critique wider global discourses about the 'digital divide', 'digital colonisation' and 'digital discrimination'. A rights-based framework is proposed that highlights Indigenous capabilities for digital innovation, improvisation and agency. In conclusion, the paper sets out Indigenous principles and practice as a possible framework for Indigenous *Digital Sovereignty*, which is described as the recognised Indigenous right and ability to exercise control over the self-determined form, pace and direction of digital engagement and transformation.