

THIS EDITION:

ACCAN: THE LAST 10 YEARS

Accessible Telecoms
Project: what's new and
what's next?

No Australian Left
Offline – Regional, rural
and remote update



PLUS: Telecommunications news and policy updates

ACCAN is the peak organisation representing all consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new services. Our mission is to ensure that communications are trusted, inclusive and available for all Australians.

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Our CEO: Teresa Corbin

This edition of the magazine is *Communications + Consumers: the next 10 years*. This theme is a chance to look back at the wide-ranging impact that ACCAN together with our members have had on communications since we were founded in 2009. It's also an opportunity to envision a world where communications services are trusted, inclusive and available for all Australians and what more we need to achieve in the next ten years.

In the decade since ACCAN was formed we've been honoured to be "the voice of communications consumers". There has been much achieved and this edition gives an overview of some of these outcomes for consumers. However, we know that these achievements are not ours alone; we're very grateful to have had the support not just of consumers but also the government, academia, industry bodies, service providers and regulators, many of whom are speaking at ACCANect2019.

Our feature article this quarter looks back at ACCAN's successes over the past 10 years and predicts what issues the next 10 may bring for consumers and consumer advocates.

This edition also puts ACCAN's affordable broadband policy in the Spotlight. Find out how the debate has progress since launching our policy position in February and read about our latest focus on regional, rural and remote communities.

We also speak to ACCAN's Director of Inclusion to hear how the Accessible Telecoms project has progressed since being unveiled at last year's ACCANect conference

For all the latest ACCAN updates, follow us on Facebook (facebook.com/accanau), Twitter (twitter.com/ACCAN_AU) or LinkedIn (linkedin.com/company/australian-communications-consumer-action-network-accan). The ACCAN website has lots of useful information, tip sheets and guides for communications consumers. As always, if you have any comments, suggestions or feedback, please email: ceo@accan.org.au or call me on **02 9288 4000**

Warm regards

Teresa Corbin

ACCAN CEO



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Telecommunications Consumer Protection Code Inadequately Protects Consumers: Consumer Groups

According to consumer groups the revised Telecommunications Consumer Protection (TCP) Code once again fails to adequately protect telco consumers, according to consumer groups.

Despite consultation with the telco industry and regulator, consumer groups including ACCAN, Consumer Action Law Centre, WEstjustice, Financial Counselling Australia, Financial and Consumer Rights Council, Financial Rights Legal Centre, Money Mob, and HK Training and Consultancy, consider that the new TCP Code does not provide strong enough consumer protections.

As the main safeguard for mobile, landline and internet customers in Australia, the TCP Code is meant to protect consumers against harmful sales and billing practices and provide for situations of financial hardship. While the industry has changed some rules in these areas, there is still

room for improvement.

One of the weaknesses in the revised Code relates to responsible selling practices. Customers can easily find themselves overcommitted when it comes to buying telco products due to questionable sales tactics from telco sales staff, as research from ACCAN and TIO complaints demonstrate.

Updates to the TCP Code also neglect to properly address issues with customer credit assessments. These new rules mean that telcos only have to confirm new customers' source of income and credit rating for a product or service costing more than \$1,000. While welcoming the addition of an external credit check, consumer groups would like to see telcos adopt an affordability assessment like those required for other types of credit.

Telco complaints demonstrate need for right to reliability

ACCAN has called for greater reliability safeguards after data from the ACMA shows unreliable telco services are driving hundreds of thousands of complaints.

The ACMA has revealed that 448,470 complaints were filed by unhappy telco consumers in the quarter to December 2018. Taking into account the number of telco services in operation across the country, this equals 108 complaints per 10,000 services – a 10.2 per cent increase since the previous quarter.

As the consumer voice for Australian phone and internet users, ACCAN was disappointed to see that faults to telco services were among the highest causes of complaints. The ACMA's data also shows that it took telcos a median time of six days to solve complaints when they arose.

"When people buy a product or service, they rightly expect it to work as promised. It's simply unacceptable for the millions of Australians who are connected to essential communications services to be left waiting for days on end without the service they have paid for," said Ms Corbin. "Consumers should have a right to reliability."

ACCAN has previously highlighted the need for reliability consumer protections to be extended to include fixed-line broadband services from all telecommunications retail service providers. In response to Part B of the Consumer Safeguards Review, ACCAN also proposed that connection and repair times for fixed-line services should be at least the same as the existing Customer Service Guarantee and should be defined in terms of days, rather than working days.

Of particular concern to ACCAN is the high level of complaints that were reported in the ACMA data for NBN voice-only services (commonly known as landline phone services). Although the number of landline users in Australia has been declining, they remain an important communication link for many in our communities, especially older Australians and those in rural and remote areas.

Please hold: costing telco customer wait times

A new report released in July from ACCAN provides advice on how to estimate the cost of consumer wait time.

Customer time – whether waiting to speak to an agent or waiting for a connection to be restored – does not have a price. This is because it's not traded in a market like the time spent working. However, we know that customer time has a value so we can estimate a cost.

Our consultant, Synergies, looked at how customer time has been estimated in other sectors. They looked at transport, water, and waste management.

Synergies found most of these studies are in the transport sector, where the value of time is used to measure the benefits of public infrastructure spending. Specifically, the value of time is used to measure travel time reductions as a benefit of investing in different modes of transport or road design (e.g., the benefit of adding a lane to a highway or a new train system).

The way the average value of time is calculated in transport is well-accepted and relatively up-to-date. Travel time is valued at an average of \$13.70/hour (2018 dollars). This approach, and the costs that have been estimated in recent studies, can be applied to telco customer time forgone.

ACCAN

– 10 years of consumer outcomes and achievements

In celebration of ACCAN's 10 year anniversary, it is timely to acknowledge some of the consumer wins where consumer representation and research has had a positive and tangible impact. Our work is based on robust evidence gained from our consultation with consumers and experts, and supported by our research. We depend on the dedication and participation of our members - it is their participation that empowers us to be their voice in our engagement with the industry and government.

Consumer protections

Throughout the years, ACCAN's research projects have provided evidence about the telecommunications consumers' experience. This has been a solid foundation for ACCAN to advocate for stronger, more enforceable consumer protections to lift the practices of telcos.

One of the major pain points for consumers that ACCAN has actively worked to improve since our inception is telco customer service and complaints processes. 2018 marked a turning point when the ACMA introduced the **Complaint Handling Industry Standard**. This gave the regulator new power to act against telcos who mishandle complaints, and tightened up the rules. 2018 also saw the introduction of new record keeping rules that compel telcos to provide their complaints data to the ACMA for publication. For the first time, we will have a comprehensive picture of complaints made by Australian consumers to their telcos, to shine a light on performance and drive greater accountability by the industry.

ACCAN has also championed reforms to third party services billed by telcos. Our 2017 research into Third Party Charging helped inform our approach to reforming the **Mobile Premium Services Code and the Telecommunications Consumer Protections Code**. Since then, the ACCC has taken action against a number of telcos over issues

related to Mobile Premium Services, such as Direct Carrier Billing.

In 2011, with support from over 70 organisations, ACCAN advocated for **1800 calls and 13 calls from mobile phones** to be charged the same as from landlines – meaning free for 1800 (no connection fee, no per-minute charge), and the cost of a local call for 1300 and 13 (a single, low, flat fee). Following consultation, the ACMA announced in 2014 that as of January that year all 1800 mobile calls would be free. This has been a great win for all consumers, but particularly for those on low-incomes who were disproportionately impacted by these charges.

Consumer Information

When the National Broadband Network (NBN) began rolling out, it was very confusing. There was no simple information for consumers about what this massive infrastructure change would mean for consumers. To correct this, ACCAN published the first **NBN Consumer Guide**. This has been one of many innovative tools ACCAN has created to provide independent consumer advice.

Another of our resources, **Get Connected**, provided an interactive map to identify ADSL availability in areas where NBN was not yet rolled out. ACCAN was the first consumer organisation to develop a mobile app which not only helped to make complaints but also tracked mobile coverage. Other easy to understand information includes graphics showing what affects the quality of broadband and an **NBN Sky Muster Guide**. Through many media appearances, we have raised consumer awareness about what the NBN switchover involves, particularly around the life threatening issue of emergency **medical alarms** transitioning to the new network.

Accessible Communications

From the beginning, ACCAN has been a strong advocate for

improvements in the telco sector for people with a disability. In 2013 we held **M-Enabling Australasia**, the first of an international series of conferences about telecommunications and disability held in the Southern Hemisphere, in partnership with Telstra. This conference helped to raise awareness of how public funds could be used to improve access to employment, information and government online services for people with disability. It contributed to Australia's later adoption of a European Standard setting out accessibility requirements for **government procurement of ICT products and services**.

Another significant win has been improved information about telecommunications products and services suitable for people with disability. The lack of information provided by telcos was first identified by ACCAN members as serious problem in 2010; ACCAN's research in 2014 and 2016 provided ample supporting evidence; and in 2019 the ACMA issued formal warnings to Telstra, Optus and Vodafone for failing their obligation to provide information about their products suitable for consumers with disability.

This context was the catalyst for ACCAN's **Accessible Telecoms** service, hosted by IDEAS NSW, and funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency in 2018. Today, Accessible Telecoms provides up-to-date, comprehensive and reliable information about mainstream and assistive telecommunications equipment and services, as well as training and ongoing support.

Regional, Rural and Remote Communications

One of the key issues identified through our regional consumer consultation is the need for greater mobile coverage. Since the **Mobile Black Spots Program** was first announced in 2015, ACCAN has supported the important role this program plays in increasing mobile coverage across the country.

We developed the ACCAN **Community Consultation Guide**

- a resource to help local communities advocate for greater mobile coverage in their area. ACCAN's broader achievements for rural, regional and remote consumers have included improvements in the NBN Sky Muster service and the success of the **Public Interest Premises** initiative which provides connectivity for many remote Indigenous communities. Many of these achievements would not have been possible without the collective efforts of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance and also the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition – formed in 2016.

What's next?

There are a number of consumer concerns that will challenge ACCAN and others in the telco industry over the next decade. As the number of products and services grows, so too does complexity. Our increasing reliance on telecommunications networks and digital platforms requires additional considerations around the safety, security and privacy of our information.

Advocates have a vital role to play in helping consumers understand the risks of innovation but also working with providers to build consumer confidence and trust in the networks. Ultimately, the growth and adoption of telecommunications networks relies on consumer trust.

Telecommunications services are now akin to other essential services yet providers are not delivering, nor are they regulated in the same way as other essential services. Consumers need improved network reliability and better customer service. They need improved accessibility and availability. And perhaps most importantly, consumers need all of this at affordable prices so that no one is left behind.

ACCAN will continue to inform and support consumers to navigate the telecommunications market place as well as to advocate for better outcomes for all telecommunications consumers.

No Australian Left Offline – Regional, rural and remote

WRITTEN BY GARETH DOWNING

In February, ACCAN launched our *No Australian Left Offline* initiative in order to secure support from government and industry for the introduction of a low cost broadband service available to households on limited incomes including those receiving income support. In the six months since launching the policy it has gained the support of over 15 not-for-profit organizations representing people with disability, older Australians and low income families.

What's next?

Last month, ACCAN released our regional-focused affordability policy - *Affordable Broadband for the Regions*. This targeted initiative seeks to introduce a wholesale concession that would support the availability of Sky Muster Plus and Fixed Wireless MAX services at a wholesale price of \$20 for households regional, rural and remote Australian households receiving income support. This is an important step to ensuring that Australians have access to affordable broadband, no matter where they live.

ACCAN's policy has been supported by the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition and its 21 members, including the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), Country Women's Association of Australia (CWAA) and Isolated Children and Parents Australia (ICPA).

As part of ACCAN's ongoing efforts as part of the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition we will be participating in a delegation to Canberra in September to raise the need for ongoing investment to ensure that regional, rural and remote Australians have equitable access to communications services.

Since its launch, *No Australian Left Offline* has been received positively by the telecommunications industry. Telstra and Aussie Broadband have expressed support for the creation of a concessional broadband service for low income households, and Vocus (Dodo and Iprimus) has expressed support for the creation of lower prices to support the affordability of services. This support comes at a key time when NBN Co is conducting a wide-ranging review of prices and the potential creation of a concessional broadband service.

The pricing review will take place over the coming months through the NBN's confidential product development forum process. As a member of the forum ACCAN has had the opportunity to submit on the need to create a concessional service for low income households and will continue to advocate on behalf of consumers throughout the course of the review. ACCAN continues to engage with industry and government in order to encourage the adoption of measures to reduce the cost of communications services and promote communications affordability to ensure all consumers can be connected.





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Accessible Telecoms Project: what's new and what's next?

WRITTEN BY MELYSSA TROY

After hearing countless stories from people with disability who were frustrated about the lack of information on appropriate telco equipment, ACCAN wanted to do something to solve this important issue.

"We wanted to be able to provide a one-stop shop for people with disability where they could easily find information on everything from mobile phones and tablets to assistive technology," said Wayne Hawkins, ACCAN Director of Inclusion.

With this goal in mind, ACCAN launched the Accessible Telecoms project in December 2018 with a National Readiness grant from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

"Accessible Telecoms is a website and call centre that lets you search for telco products according to your access needs," Mr Hawkins explained. "For example, if you need a device to cater for your vision issues, you can plug that information into the website or tell the call centre operator, and it will identify which telco products are going to best suit you."

ACCAN has enlisted IDEAS (Information on Disability Education and Awareness Service) to deliver the information via their website and call centre.

Since launching at the end of 2018, Accessible Telecoms has added nearly 500 products to their database, and has received positive feedback from its users and the aging and disability communities.

"We've had over 19,000 page views on the website and had dozens of enquiries from people across the country," said Mr Hawkins. "It's been great to see that the community is embracing Accessible Telecoms."

The Accessible Telecoms team are committed to working with members of the community to help ensure that the resource is keeping up to date with community needs. To provide guidance on important elements of the project, the team brought together members representing groups with vision, hearing, intellectual, physical and speech disabilities, and the aging community. This group is known as the AT Advisory Committee and is tasked with providing guidance on important elements of the project.

"The committee has helped us to expand the project beyond handsets, to include accessories, tablets and now apps," explained Accessible Telecoms Project Officer, Andres Merlano. "They've also helped us to identify which access features are important for each community and helped us to re-write those features in plain English."

In the coming months the Accessible Telecoms team will be releasing updates to the website with an improved look, search features and accessibility.

"Creating a resource that allows Australians with disability to be able to use telecommunications to participate in all aspects of life – from economic to social – has been extremely rewarding," said Mr Hawkins. "We're excited to show our users the new look website and the additional features it will bring with it."

The Accessible Telecoms website is available now and will be updated by the end of September.



A close-up photograph of a man with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a grey t-shirt. He is looking down at a smartphone held in his left hand, with his right hand resting on his chin in a thoughtful pose. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

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