My Language Conference

FECCA and CALD COMMUNITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

_Digital technologies can unite, but they can also divide._

Speech Delivered by FECCA Chair, Mr Pino Migliorino

11 August 2010

State Library of NSW

Good Morning,

I thank you for the opportunity to speak here today on behalf of the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA).

Firstly I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, and pay my respect to their elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge the dignitaries here today.

I would like to begin by offering my sincere thanks to the organisers of this conference - for the issue of _culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in the digital age_ has rarely been addressed in research, and the issue of digital literacy rarely acknowledged as a very real consideration when it comes to the successful settlement of migrants and refugees in Australia.

FECCA is the national peak body representing Australians from CALD backgrounds. We provide advocacy, develop policy and promote issues on
behalf of our constituency to government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism.

As the national peak body we are only too aware of the effects, both ill and positive, that digital technology can have on CALD communities. We therefore heartily encourage conferences such as this one which facilitate discussion around the issue.

Indeed, a discussion about digital technologies as they affect our culturally and linguistically diverse communities has never been more pertinent.

With each passing day we are witness to the emergence of new technologies – advances in computer technology, the digitisation of television and radio, the emergence of multifaceted mobile phones, the IPAD, the Kindle - technologies which are more efficient and effective - and the use of which are increasingly dependent a high level of digital know-how.

Understanding and using new technologies can be daunting for most of us. In effect, learning to use technologies – email, online services, online research tools and online news sources – is like learning a new language.

Australians from CALD backgrounds are all too familiar with the process of learning a new language, learning about a new culture, coming to grips with a new social and cultural landscape.

And, as they know, this process if far from easy.

When we talk about settling migrants in Australia we often confine ourselves to discussions around developing English language literacy.
Certainly, in the absence of strong English language skills, CALD Australians have difficulty accessing health services, securing adequate housing and employment and interacting with educational institutions. Their struggle is worsened by the subtle racism that often exists in our society, which sees migrants bypassed, particularly in employment settings, (we only need to think back to the 2009 Australian National University study\(^1\) in which those people who had a non Anglo–Saxon name, in particular those from Chinese or Middle Eastern background, with the same level of qualifications and experience, needed to apply for far more jobs than those with Anglo-Saxon names in order to secure a job interview) and by the failure of service providers to acknowledge they need to do more to specifically cater to the needs of our diverse communities.

However we tend to forget another big hurdle facing many migrants – low levels of digital literacy – digital literacy referring to the confident and critical use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Digital literacy allows individuals and communities to:

- **Resource themselves** - critique, analyse, navigate and use digital media/sources/tools to find credible, reliable information.

- **Represent themselves** - to voice concerns, needs and issues, to find and produce credible and reliable information and to meet needs, to protect themselves (children, communities) against any kind of exploitation.
Migrants and refugees in Australia are not homogenous, and their ability to engage with new technologies differs.

However, a constant in any discussion about CALD communities and digital technologies is that, in the absence of digital literacy, migrants and refugees often struggle to engage effectively in the workplace and with vital basic services.

**Digital Technology: Divider or Equaliser?**

When we talk about new digital technologies we are largely talking about the means to facilitate and enhance the flow of information.

If we include CALD communities in this information exchange we will better facilitate their social inclusion. If we allow barriers of access to develop which exclude CALD communities from these information flows we will be further exacerbating their experiences of social exclusion.

In many ways it is as simple as that.

To take the internet as an example: freely or cheaply available internet technology can be used to facilitate English language training, provide service information in-language and allow community groups to maintain their cultural identity through online forums.
Alternately the internet, if expensive, difficult to access, and used by service providers to limit information so that it is only accessible to those who have a high level of digital literacy and English language ability, can be a means of excluding CALD communities from pertinent information sources.

Indeed, as technology advances, and replaces much of the day-to-day human interaction reflective of the service delivery of the past, CALD Australians are finding themselves faced with novel barriers— which often present themselves in digital form.

**Communication and Accessibility**

Communication and the ability to access information really are key components of any democracy – key factors in the process of allowing all Australians to understand their rights and fulfil their responsibilities.

Communication is also the key to equitable access and use of vital programs and services.

If services are unable to *inform* and *engage* their constituents then they are indisputably ineffective. How successful can housing services be if they fail to effectively inform Australians who have low levels of English language literacy? How inclusive can education programs that fail to make themselves accessible to our young migrants and refugees really purport to be?
Facilitating Accessibility: Understanding Difference

How do we, then, ensure that digital information is accessible to our CALD communities?

Firstly, we must acknowledge that members of CALD communities are not homogenous and it would be unwise to suggest that any one technique in isolation would facilitate accessibility.

With this understanding we must then consider a number of factors:

1. English language Literacy
2. Digital literacy
3. Digital Access

The factors intersect in a number of different ways - resulting in diverse barriers for Australians from CALD backgrounds.

To Illustrate I discuss here a few key groups.

1. Older CALD Migrants

A huge group - 23% of the Australian population aged over 65 years come from a migrant background.

Members of this group can be affected by all three factors simultaneously:
Limited English language ability – Older migrants may struggle to acquire English language particularly if they migrate later in life. Also, as they get older CALD migrants can become increasingly dependent on their first language.

Limited digital literacy – older CALD migrants are unlikely to have received training in the use of many new technologies.

Limited access to digital technology - many older CALD migrants operating on a pension may be very limited in their capacity to engage with digital technology because of financial constraints.

Consequently we can see that older CALD migrants may be very easily excluded from digital exchange. It is also increasingly evident that older workers, without at least basic digital literacy are being excluded from the workforce.

Mechanisms that can be employed to engage this demographic may include:

- Increased funding to assist with basic digital literacy training and digital access. This may include additional funding to libraries to ensure that adequate free internet is available to those who need it.

- An acknowledgment that service providers may need to focus more heavily on ‘human’ interaction and actively engage interpreters and translators to assist in the best possible service provision for older CALD Australians.
2. Refugees

Recently arrived refugees often may not have had digital access in their countries of origin.

Again, I re-iterate here that becoming digitally literate is comparable to becoming literate in any other language.

Many newly arrived refugees may have limited educational history in light of significant displacement during their schooling years. Just as it is particularly hard for these new arrivals to acquire basic English in the absence of literacy in their own languages, so to it is also difficult for them to acquire digital literacy in the absence of existing digital understanding.

Working in today’s workforce necessarily requires a degree of digital literacy – more so than in years past.

Therefore, during the early settlement stages, refugee and humanitarian entrant arrivals, over 70% of whom are under 30 years of age on arrival, must be offered necessary training and assistance in building a degree of digital literacy, as well as English language literacy, so making them more employable, and helping them feel more comfortable and included in workplaces.

Again I reiterate the need to ensure that adequate free internet is available to those who need it.
3. Skilled Migrants

A final group to consider are skilled migrants who generally fall into two groups: 1) Those with high level English language skills and high digital literacy and 2) those with high digital literacy and medium level English language ability.

For those who are digitally literate but struggle with English proficiency mechanisms may be needed to ensure they can access key services with strong online presence. These mechanisms may include ensuring that there are online in-language options when it comes to key online services.

Links to relevant service websites should also be added to prominent community pages so to facilitate easy access, as, often, in-language service pages are difficult to identify on mainstreams service pages, reducing their utility.

Until we understand that members of the groups identified have different abilities and needs, little can be done to improve their access to information – we need to understand the demographics before we start implementing solutions.
Our Broadcasters:

I wish to also quickly make reference to the importance of our national multilingual broadcaster SBS. It is imperative that we fund this broadcaster appropriately so that our CALD communities can access local news in-language.

It is notable that our CALD communities are increasingly turning to overseas news sources, readily available online or via satellite TV.

The uptake of Satellite TV is very high amongst Greek, Italian, Turkish, Lebanese and other Middle Eastern migrants in Australia. One study\(^2\) indicates that 80% of Lebanese households in Australia watch Satellite television. These technologies provide new sources of connectivity to in-language programming from home countries, but also make reaching these populations more challenging for Australian service providers.

We also need to make sure in-language programming is accessible to those on limited incomes in this time of digital switchover. Free in-language television and radio are an excellent means of closing the information gap.

Research Gaps:

I am cognisant of the fact that there has been very little research into the area of the digital needs, and digital literacy, of CALD communities in Australia.

What I call for here is for further and in depth studies to be conducted in this area. FECCA will certainly play its part, ensuring the interests and needs of CALD communities are considered in the digital agenda. If we understand how digital technologies are isolating, or in the alternative, can better facilitate the
inclusion of our CALD communities, we will be better able to utilise them to facilitate access and equity.

Conclusion:

I close here by re-iterating my key proposition. Digital technologies can unite, but they can also divide.

In our community we have a number of groups, including ageing CALD Australians, newly arrived refugees and skilled migrants with medium level English language literacy, all of whom are at risk of being excluded by new technologies that require either, or both, high level English ability and high level digital literacy.

It is our responsibility to ensure that we adequately provide in-language services, that we provide appropriate ready for work digital literacy training, that we ensure that key digital technologies are accessible to those on limited incomes, and that we ensure key service providers recognise that the needs of CALD Australians must be addressed in a considered manner.

It is our responsibility to use digital technologies to facilitate inclusion and address barriers that create exclusion.

---
