



**ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria**

Patron

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AC, CH, former Prime Minister of
Australia

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ECCV Submission
on
the Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media
on
Victorian Elections and Victoria's Electoral Administration
to
the Parliament of Victoria's Electoral Matters Committee

June 2014

About the ECCV

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the *Voice of Multicultural Victoria*. As the peak body for ethnic and multicultural organisations in Victoria, we are proud to have been the key advocate for culturally diverse communities in Victoria since 1974. For 40 years we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community.

We aim for a culturally diverse and harmonious society that is just, fair and inclusive where all people have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to, community life. We advocate for freedom, respect, equality and dignity for multicultural communities and strive with others, to build a strong, vibrant Victorian community.

The ECCV supports and encourages the full participation of culturally diverse communities in the political activities in Victoria. The organisation is concerned by the growth of apathy and disengagement from the democratic process in Australia, and welcomes this inquiry which explores possibilities that social media offer to improve Victorians electoral participation and engagement.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in multicultural communities

While it is true that members of multicultural communities have had increased access to communication technologies, a significant number of them, especially those of refugee backgrounds, are still lagging behind the mainstream Australian population in terms of access to these technologies.

When it comes to overall trends in Australian households with computers and internet access, the progress has been impressive over the past ten years. The percentage of Australian households with internet access has jumped from 67 percent in 2006-2007 to 79 percent in 2010-2011. With regard to access to a computer, the



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percentage was 83 percent in 2010-2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Despite these statistics, the digital divide among Australians remains pronounced. Research indicates that some of the contributing factors include, but are not limited to - income levels, education levels, age and English language proficiency.

Although it is crucial not to make the stereotyped assumption that all members of culturally diverse communities come from low socio-economic background, evidence suggests that these groups are over-represented in the low-income category. As such, they tend to constitute a disproportionately large proportion of the total population that do not have access to online-based communication tools. A report by Anglicare Victoria and the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), examined telecommunications access among low income earners and revealed that approximately 44 percent of people from non-English speaking backgrounds had little or no home internet access. Around 33 percent did not have access to fixed-line home phone and 42.6 percent did not have internet-capable smart phones.

Levels of educational background and proficiency in English have also been found to be major determinants of access to information and communication technology. It was reported that Australians who have limited or no English proficiency were 27 percent less likely to have broadband access than those proficient in English. Refugees and humanitarian entrants who came to Australia from predominantly non-English speaking countries, tend to make up the majority of this group (cited in Queensland University of Technology, 2012). Additionally, people with limited literacy skills and formal education are at a disadvantage in regard to accessing computers and other communications tools, and more likely to utilise traditional media such as newspapers, radio, television (Victoria University, 2010).

Role of social media and communication technologies to enhance learning about democratic electoral processes

The ECCV recognises the significant role that social media can play in raising awareness about political issues, and mobilising communities to address various needs and concerns. Nevertheless, it admits that some social platforms, particularly high visibility ones such as Twitter and Facebook, may not be the most effective means to promote civic engagement and political participation. Evidence indicates that the effect of social media on civic engagement is in fact limited and those likely to increase their political activity because of social media are already politically

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committed to a political group or an issue (Australian Electoral Commission, 2013 and European Parliamentary Research Service, 2014).

In relation to culturally diverse communities, the use of social media alone as a way of engaging them with the democratic process would most likely fail to have the desired effect. There are many reasons for this, including lack of or limited experience of democracy, cynicism to democracy, language barriers, lack of or limited access to communication tools, and preference for traditional media such as newspapers, radio, television and video over new and more interactive media (Vicnet, 2007). To this end, the ECCV believes that both traditional media and written and audio/visual materials (translated accordingly) represent a better option to improve multicultural communities' knowledge of electoral processes. This option should also be complemented with outreach sessions. These sessions should be as interactive as possible and not be used as a one-way transmission of information. The ECCV advocates that such sessions should be primarily organised around discussion topics (e.g. necessity of having an impartial electoral body, strong men versus strong institutions) when possible, while at the same time providing information about voting procedures.

The ECCV also believes that culturally diverse communities should not be excluded from access to social media. Therefore, it is essential that access to internet and computer facilities, as well as teaching the skills required to utilise these facilities must be addressed, previously recommended by several other studies. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of seniors, women, humanitarian entrants and people on low incomes (Victnet, 2007).

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC), a leading organisation in developing electoral education resources, will need to actively promote resources available on its website such as enrolment form in languages other than English and the Virtual Voting Experience to ethno specific agencies who may not be aware of their existence. Easily accessible YouTube videos in community languages explaining the voting process would also assist communities with oral traditions, as well as people with lack of literacy in their first language. The Australian Taxation Office's (ATO) production of short educational videos on various issues, such as explaining the Goods and Services Tax (GST) could be used as a model.

With regards to Twitter, the VEC has been active on this platform since June 2012, and is following more than two hundred people and organisations including three ethno-centred organisations (the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the New Hope Foundation, the Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES), Action on Disability

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within Ethnic Communities (ADEC)). The ECCV applauds the VEC for engaging with these multicultural organisations through Twitter, but encourages the Victorian electoral body to establish contact with more organisations. Of especial benefit would be peak multicultural organisations or those that work with multicultural communities such as the ECCV, Spectrum, Brotherhood of St Laurence and community groups that use social media.

Additionally, the ECCV suggests that the VEC interacts over Twitter with key people from culturally diverse communities who are active in their respective communities and use this social platform. The VEC would also benefit from following a number of international organisations that specialise in electoral matters and democracy monitoring. These organisations include the Open Society Foundation, Democracy International, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the ACE (Administration and Cost of Elections) Electoral Knowledge Network. By following these organisations, the VEC would access news and anecdotal information relating to elections and democracy and share them on the Twitter platform, thus making its Twitter feed more engaging and attractive to potential 'followers'. Another benefit of this approach is that some of the younger members from culturally diverse communities who are more proficient and prolific users of social networks than their elders (Victoria University, 2010) would share and disseminate the information found on the VEC feed with friends and family members.

In conclusion, the ECCV proposes a number of recommendations to improve the electoral participation of multicultural communities through the use of social media.

Recommendation 1

That traditional media and translated materials, both written and audio-visual, be used to increase community knowledge and awareness of the Australian electoral system.

Recommendation 2

That interactive information sessions supported by qualified interpreters and organised around discussion topics be provided to communities.

Recommendation 3

That training on how to use the internet be offered to seniors, women and people on low incomes. That access to and use of information communication technology be increased.

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Recommendation 4

That the VEC actively and continuously promotes resources available on its website to ethno specific agencies that may not be aware of their existence.

Recommendation 5

That easily accessible YouTube videos in community languages explaining the voting process be produced and made available to communities with oral traditions or people with lack of literacy in their first language.

Recommendation 6

That the VEC establishes contact with;

- more ethno-centred organisations and community groups active on social media
- key prominent people from culturally diverse communities active in their respective communities and prolific users of social networks
- organisations that specialise in electoral matters and democracy monitoring groups

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