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Day 1, Wednesday 14th September

10:10-10:30am: Mapping Digital Inclusion – What Does the New Index Tell Us?

(APPLAUSE)

And I'd like to invite out the front, if I may, Professor Julian Thomas. Is Julian with me? G'day, Julian. Hi. Julian, you've got some images, I think, on the PowerPoint. Would I be right? If it's OK with you, I'm going to interview you down on the floor, and I'll just get the clicker for you, and you can click spontaneously. So if I could ask Christian to pop up... There we are. Is that your poster?! Oh, that's Telstra. Well, thank you. It's an unfolding environment, which makes me feel good. Listen, let's come over this side, if that's alright. Um, just because it enables people... Well, come of right over here so they can stare. Measuring Australia's digital divide. I think we'll come forward, because I like to feel near people. If you stand right beside me... Really, beside me. Because I'm going to give you what we call amplification. This is Professor Julian Thomas, from the Swinburne Institute for Social Research. He's a professor of media communications. We're going to talk about mapping digital inclusion, but with a particular focus on the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. Give him a round of applause for agreeing to be interviewed, having never met me.

(APPLAUSE)

In a nutshell, what is the Australian Digital Inclusion Index? Many will know, but not everybody.

JULIAN THOMAS: OK. So, the index is a useful measure – we hope and expect – of digital inclusion in Australia. In other words, the degree to which Australians are participating in online communities, the online economy, online government, and so on. To what extent are we connected? To what extent are our connections affordable? And to what extent do we have skills, capacities, confidence in terms of using the internet? That's really what digital inclusion is about. And the index is our go at providing a measure of all of those things across Australia.

JULIE McCROSSIN: The Minister for Communications, Mitch Fifield, on a video at the opening made reference to it. Again, for someone who's never heard of it, exactly how do you collect the information, and how long has it been happening?

JULIAN THOMAS: What we've done is we've used a data set which is already collected by Roy Morgan Research, which many people here will have heard of and know about – one of Australia's largest commercial market research firms. The thing about their data is it's extraordinarily useful for this kind of purpose because it enables us to do a few things which other kinds of data sets that we've had in the past in this area haven't really been able to do. So one of those is to look in a reasonable amount of detail at particular regions. One of them is to look at a reasonable amount of detail at particular groups of Australians. Another thing is looking at how all of these things change across time. So you said how long have we been doing it – our data in our first report goes back to 2013-2014. We've got a couple of years there. What we're going to do is take it forward. So we've got those several dimensions that are really critical. The other thing about the data set that we are reporting on in the index is that it enables us to take together the whole range of problems, which we've already been talking about today and which the minister did address as well. So, the issue of access to the internet, the kinds of hardware we have, data allowances, those kinds of things – we will take them together under the category of

"access", but the issue of affordability, which is absolutely critical, as I'll probably say more about that, but also what we call "digital ability" – so these questions of confidence, skill, what people are actually doing. So we've got an index which takes all of those figures together and enables us to sort of see what's happening across all of those dimensions across Australia, across different regions, and across time.

JULIE McCROSSIN: How often will you report?

JULIAN THOMAS: We are going to do a general report every year, but the index enables us to do more detailed reports around particular states, particular territories, particular regions, and particular social groups. So, we expect to release a lot of data as we go, and already on our website you can access our first report, which came out a few weeks ago, but also look at maps and other things that sort of give you more information about particular things.

JULIE McCROSSIN: When you say "our website," that's the Swinburne Institute for Social Research?

JULIAN THOMAS: Go to digitalinclusionindex.com.au.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Obviously this is a passionate group of people about equipping people to be connected who might have difficulties. Can you give us three or four of the key findings that will be of interest to them?

JULIAN THOMAS: Sure. OK, look – if this thing works... It does work.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Don't worry about the mike, but just stand back a bit so I can see it too.

JULIAN THOMAS: You can sort of see there, right from the start, that the index is reporting unequal outcomes.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I'm sorry, but you're backing up, so I'll have to put my arm beside you.

JULIAN THOMAS: That's fine. ...across Australia. If you look at that, you can see a general score for Australia. On its own, that doesn't mean much. It's a score out of 100. It shows that we're doing OK – not brilliant, but alright. What's really important here are the relativities, the differences. When you see a state like Tasmania, a state like South Australia, in contrast to the ACT, this is where you're starting to see the sorts of different outcomes that we can report on out of the index, and we can go into those in more detail and understand what's happening and build an evidence base which enables people to do things about it.

JULIE McCROSSIN: So what's the key message to take away from what they're seeing? Could you go back? What's the key message you want people to take out of that?

JULIAN THOMAS: Those differences. Why are they there? What can we do about them?

JULIE McCROSSIN: OK.

JULIAN THOMAS: And you can see them in another form here – digital inclusion, as far as we can see, is a social issue in Australia and a spatial issue. So you've looked at the differences across a map of Australia in broad terms. You can also see, on this, and I think the minister actually mentioned that those with the lowest Digital Inclusion Index score are the 65s-plus. But you can also see the issues, the challenges, are by no means limited to that group. When we look at other groups of Australians, we also find really significant issues in relation to these outcomes.

JULIE McCROSSIN: And presumably within the 65-plus there's enormous variety within that age group?

JULIAN THOMAS: Of course. So, then what we look at are questions of where they are, levels of education and those kinds of things. There's a lot going on in that age group.

JULIE McCROSSIN: OK. Next one? Key message?

JULIAN THOMAS: Key message is – well, what really bothers us here is actually looking at Tasmania, because this is the only state where our score for digital inclusion across the three years of our first report is declining. So, here, we've got one state where digital inclusion is declining over time. Why is that going on?

JULIE McCROSSIN: What are your thoughts on reasons? Conjecture without evidence? I know it makes you uncomfortable, but do it.

(LAUGHTER)

JULIAN THOMAS: The Tasmanian data reflects issues around actually all of our dimensions – of access, affordability, and digital ability. But the real issues to us seem to be in that affordability area and in digital ability. Why that is the case in Tasmania – and there'll be a lot of people in this room who know as much or more as I do about that state and the challenges of digital inclusion there. But what we can see is a very distinctive profile in terms of an ageing population, high levels of unemployment, poorer education outcomes, and lower incomes.

JULIE McCROSSIN: You've only got to drive in Tasmania – they're poor and they're not educated.

(LAUGHTER)

Because people with skills go to Melbourne.

(LAUGHTER)

Sorry, you want to click on?

JULIAN THOMAS: So this is sort of tracking these changes across our three dimensions which I mentioned, and this really is there to sort of draw out for you what's going on. We can see that access to the internet in Australia is improving. The index shows that over time. And we can see that, from a low base, digital ability is also getting better. But what bothers us and this is I suppose one of our main findings out of this first report of the index, is what's going on with affordability. What we're measuring there – just remember – is not just the cost of data. As we heard in relation to New Zealand, we know that the price of data is falling. But what is going on is that people are buying more of it. So, as a proportion of your household income, the amount you're spending on it is growing. And that's what we're getting at there. In a way, this is the flipside of the success story of access, and it's also the consequence of the fact that the internet is now so critical to people's everyday lives. But they're spending more and more of their incomes on it, and that's an issue for lower-income Australians.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I'm sorry, I can't remember the term you're using, but this notion of digital capacity – how do you measure that?

JULIAN THOMAS: You measure what we call "digital ability" – this is really important, it's about what people are actually doing, Julie. What are people doing online? What sorts of confidence do they have about, you know, the range of tasks they are trying to undertake? Simply having access is one thing. Being able to afford it is another. But how confident are you about being able to deal with a government website, a commercial website, being able to deal with a service provider online, being able to find information – those kinds of things. For us, this is a really critical measure of the degree to which Australians are actually involved online.

JULIE McCROSSIN: How do you measure it?

JULIAN THOMAS: You ask people, actually. Strangely enough, they'll tell you. They'll tell you how confident they are. They'll tell you what they do. There is another thing which we would very much like to know more about, and this data doesn't quite tell us that – that is, what are the actual benefits for individuals of being online? I think that's our next sort of research agenda in this space. What sorts of outcomes do people manage to get? What are the concrete benefits? What this digital ability measure tells us very much is – I mean, how confident are people?

JULIE McCROSSIN: Do people be frank with you about pornography and gambling?

JULIAN THOMAS: Well, no, because we didn't ask them. So they could have a great deal of digital ability in that area, but we did not get to that point.

JULIE McCROSSIN: OK. How many more of these have you got?

JULIAN THOMAS: Let's have a look at this...

JULIE McCROSSIN: Key message?

JULIAN THOMAS: Key message is this point about affordability in relation to some of our critical groups where we think this makes a difference. Affordability doesn't make a huge difference if you're on an average income. But if you're on a low income, it does. And so, the story about, for example, older Australians is really interesting. You can see those access figures are rising very quickly. In a sense, there's grounds for some optimism about what's happening here. As the benefits of going online are increasing, more and more people are doing so. But the downside is this affordability problem, and so what this, I think, Julie, does is point to – "What can we do about this? What sorts of issues are we talking about?" These probably go beyond, you know, some of the sorts of programs that we have around at the moment. But we do have to look very hard at this over time in relation to these groups, and particularly this problem of income adequacy.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Just a quick question – what have you learned about both Indigenous people and people with a disability, in a nutshell?

JULIAN THOMAS: In a nutshell, we've learned, certainly, this issue of affordability is a big problem for both those groups, but there are grounds for optimism, because you can see things changing quite quickly in relation to both of them in terms of improvements in digital ability, relative to the national average, and improvements in access. So they're big changes for both those groups – changing quite quickly in the last few years. So, a very dynamic situation.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Now, I'm keen to give them a chance for questions, 'cause look, they're a curious and interesting group. Do you need to show them anything else on your screen?

JULIAN THOMAS: Let's leave it there.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Let's go to a question. That was brilliant. Would you give him a round of applause, please?

(APPLAUSE)

So, questions or comments about the Digital Inclusion Index? Thank you. And if we could just quickly introduce...

>> Malcolm Moore. Just interested about the size of the groups you're looking at. I'm particularly interested with the – if you're looking at, say, villages – up to 250 premises, small towns up to, say, 1,000 premises or larger towns up to 2,500 premises? Have you done that sort of analysis to look at how that digital inclusion is related?

JULIE McCROSSIN: Let me just give you the microphone. I'll grab another.

JULIAN THOMAS: Sure. Thanks for the question. No, we haven't done those local community-based studies. What our data is based on – it goes down to a regional level. And it uses... So if you look at the copy of the report, which I think you'll find in your conference materials, you can see where those regions are. And if you go to our website and you look at the maps online, you can see exactly what's included in them, and what is not. But you'll see they're significantly larger than a single town. That said, one of the main motivating factors for us in doing this work was to attempt to provide a useful measure, a useful benchmark, for organisations of whatever kind that are looking to make a difference in this space. And of course, a lot of those kinds of initiatives are at a local level. So what we would like to be able to do would be to give those organisations the ability to ask the sorts of questions we are asking and develop a comparable index that is relevant to a smaller-scale area.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Yes, thank you? I might just go to someone else, if I may, just to give them a go...

>> Hi. Lawson Ashburner. When you talk about affordability, I assume – well, my understanding is, um, you were talking about sort of, ah, expenditures on telecommunications as a proportion of total expenditures. Um, do you have any data on sort of the, I guess, affordability of basic services as opposed to the, you know, maybe the good services that people are purchasing?

JULIAN THOMAS: What we're looking at is expenditure in relation to household income. But I think the question you're getting at is actually a really critical one.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Nice and close to your mouth.

JULIAN THOMAS: Sorry. The question you're getting at is an absolutely critical one in terms of taking the arguments at a policy level further. What we would really like to understand, as we go along with this, is exactly what do people need? What do we – when we say internet access is a human right, for example, or a basic right, are we talking about access to everything, or access to critical information, key government services, other things like that? So, whether we do that through looking more closely at the affordability side or also looking at exactly what people are doing, it is very much an area I'd like to take further. Our data at the moment doesn't do that.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Professor Thomas, because of the need for morning tea, I need to finish there, but I urge you to talk directly to him, and I think we all have to do something for Tasmania!

JULIAN THOMAS: Absolutely.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Seriously, we do have to do something for Tasmania. A warm round of applause, please, for this gentleman.

(APPLAUSE)