JULIE McCROSSIN: Ladies and gentlemen, if you could take your seats and get your numbers out, we've actually had a few people leave the conference. This will only increase the chances of you winning a tremendous box of chocolates and welcome Cecilia who's just come in the door. Get your numbers out. Someone is waiting in the wings to be interviewed. You can be the puller. Professor Julian Thomas, professor of pulling lucky door prizes. We'll do this quickly, if the person's not here it's redraw.

JULIAN THOMAS: Purple E28.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Yes, sir. Congratulations. He looks absolutely shocked which is always very pleasant. Ladies and gentlemen, if I could ask you to take your seats, welcome back to our after lunch session and we're going to begin -and I might ask you to come over here so people can still see the screen -I want to introduce again Professor Julian Thomas director of RMIT Social Change Enabling Capability Platform -I'm going to say that again -Social Change Enabling Capability Platform, RMIT, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. I have to follow my own guidelines. He is the lead author of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. Hand up if you've heard about this index before. A large number, but not everybody. A new one is out and we're going to learn a little bit about it. Before we do, what is it and what's its purpose? About 10 people are hearing about it for the first time.

JULIAN THOMAS: What it is, is recognising that digital inclusion is a complicated and difficult problem and a persistent problem, something we've seen emerging and developing in Australia over several decades. So, the index aims to provide a robust, evidence base which we hope can be usefully used by community organisations, by policymakers, by researchers and consumer advocates indeed in this area in order to help frame better policy responses and interventions to this issue.

JULIE McCROSSIN: So, what data do you collect and where do you get it from?

JULIAN THOMAS: We don't collect the data ourselves. So, the work we've done is provide an index. The data it's based on -and I think when you're using the index it's important to bear this in mind -is collected by Roy Morgan research as part of their general surveys of household media use and consumption. This is 15,000 households across Australia every year. The reason why we use that data is because it goes back a long way so we can tell a bit of the story of digital inclusion going back to 2014 which is when our data set starts and also because it's a relatively large sample and it's collected right across Australia, we can see what's going on in particular regions and across all the States, so it gives us that granularity, Julie.

JULIE McCROSSIN: And it's funded by Telstra. Sir, let me come to you. Introduce yourself.

>> Just for a dummy, what is digital inclusion, please?

JULIE McCROSSIN: This is a man with ABC training, thank you very much. What is digital inclusion?

JULIAN THOMAS: I'm very happy to answer. Digital inclusion is the degree to which people are able to participate fully in what we have now -a digital economy increasingly and a digital society where many of our interactions with government, business, education, the health system, the labour market are mediated through digital platforms and the Internet. That's what it is.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Can I give a quick image of what this gentleman has described? I was MCing a forum or carers at the Catholic Club in Campbell Town in south-west Sydney and there were 230 people there. 11 were service providers, either State or Federal and the rest were carers of either people with a disability or elderly family members and many Federal and State agency representatives were there encouraging people... I think the language is "driving people towards websites". I was watching the crowd and the fact that they didn't constantly look at their telephones and I just said, "Hand up if you have either a phone or a computer and you know how to Google and get information" -13 hands went up. That's about three months ago, so that's a lack of digital inclusion. You've got a couple of slides. What I'm going to ask him next is, what are the key results of the latest report, thanks to Telstra for funding it, and any trends to note? He's got a couple of slides, but it's not launched yet and yet, he's going to give us secret information. Are you ready? Give us something visual!

JULIAN THOMAS: Thank you, Julie. Yes, as you can see from the slide, we've got up there, the report is going to be released next week. For all the details -I don't want to spoil the surprise -there's a lot in there. I really encourage you to take a look when it's out. You can see what we're doing is updating our national and State results across Australia and doing some critical case studies, because we always know that in addition to that national sample that I talked about, we do need to do more detailed on the ground work, as well. In terms of key results -and we could go to maybe the next slide thanks which tells you about this and gives us a glimpse -you can see that digital inclusion as we're measuring it is continuing to increase in Australia. You can see from this slide that when we're talking about digital inclusion, because it's a fairly complex problem we're looking at three dimensions of it. We're looking at access to data and infrastructure and devices. We're looking at the affordability of digital services and we're looking at people's, what we call their "digital ability", their capability and skills. So, we've broken it down according to those different dimensions as well, because that helps us think about what sorts of interventions are important and where the real problems lie.

JULIE McCROSSIN: One or two messages coming out of the latest report that you think this mob will be interested in. We're interested in equity in getting equal access; what have we learnt?

JULIAN THOMAS: We're seeing significant trends emerging, Julie. What strikes me is that access is getting better. We've got the nbn nearing completion and in the research, we’ve done we can see the impact of that in States like Tasmania and South Australia and elsewhere. It makes a difference, so better infrastructure certainly helps, but what the index really tells us is that there's so much more we need to work on.

JULIE McCROSSIN: What?

JULIAN THOMAS: Well, affordability. It's pretty flat since our data, since we began collecting it in 2014, so that points to some real problems. Not in the price of data which has been going down, but of course we've been using more and more of it and as a proportion of our overall incomes we're spending pretty much the same, so that's not getting better. And digital ability is also just improving very slightly, so we think these are the areas we need to do a lot more work.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Can I make one more observation and get your comment. We talk about digital literacy, people's skills to access information via the myriad dimensions of the Internet, but I was recently in Burnie Tasmania talking with multidisciplinary teams, nurses and dieticians and speech pathologists and people working with people with cancer in Tasmania. Burnie is north-west Tasmania, very low-income area and what we found there... I was there partly promoting a website that provides information for people with head and neck cancer. What we realised quite rapidly meeting with the patient groups and talking to the staff there is that many of the patients don't have literacy, literacy. Like, they actually don't have proper reading -I'm trying to use neutral language, but they can't read and write at a functional level. That training has actually been cut over the last 10 to 15 years at TAFE which has become more work-orientated rather than those sort of core-based skills. So, when I look at your graph I wonder when we'll hit some sort of bottom line where a proportion of the population don't have sufficient reading and writing to progress to digital literacy? Or is that old-fashioned thinking and you don't need to read and write to have digital literacy?

JULIAN THOMAS: I think we're already seeing that in some of the key groups, Julie. We did a case study in Shepparton for this year's report which we document in the report that's coming out next week and you'll sort of see there that those fundamental issues around literacy are really significant and definitely play out in terms of people's capacities and capabilities on-line. These problems are connected, and we have to approach them in that way.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Before we let you go, is there anything else you'd like to tell them about the latest index?

JULIAN THOMAS: I just hope this is useful in informing your thinking about what we can do on this problem. Working on this over the last few years has really reinforced for me a few things. It's not something that can be fixed by government alone, but community organisations, businesses and researchers as well all need to contribute. I think the index is a kind of good example of how that might happen, but I'm hoping that it's a resource for all of you. Also, I'd like to kind of add my happy birthday to ACCAN even though I'm partly conflicted as a member of ACCAN, but I do think one of the things they've done that is wonderful is look at universities and other resources that are around that can produce research that might be useful if it's combined with other things like community action and so on to produce some better results for everybody.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Could I ask you to give Julian a round of (APPLAUSE) please. I'd like to take one or two questions, but just before I do, could I invite the following people to come up on to stage and get into position for our next session which is about the affordability of broadband for all, so Julie Robinson, Nan Bosler, Joel Pringle, Lynda Edwards and Sue Salthouse. Just take any seats you've like, and you've got a mic there, just turn it on. As they take their places, does anybody have a question or a comment and I'll give you sir a microphone.

>> Hi, I'm Tess from West Justice. I haven't read the Digital Inclusion Index report before, I was wondering whether your affordability assessment took into account rising rents, energy prices and compared those against the cost of digital inclusion or the cost of telco bills, or just the bills itself?

JULIAN THOMAS: We don't look at the costs of those other utilities. We're interested in the costs of access to the Internet, the costs of data, but what we do -it's not just about that -I think the way to approach affordability whether you're talking about energy or any of these other key services, they're all essential, is really what proportion of people's incomes are going to these things, because we know that at the lower end of the income range household budgets are increasingly squeezed and what we see is a rising proportion of income having to be dedicated to just essential services. So, I think the comparisons are really interesting and important, but we can see that what people are now spending on telecommunications is becoming a very significant part of household budgets generally for low-income families alongside those other things you mentioned. So, it needs to be taken into account when we're talking about living standards and what people need to survive. It's got to be part of that broader conversation.

>> I think maybe what you summarised was my point. Is it part of that calculation of what is affordable and so, how much information are you collecting on what people are spending the rest of their money on and looking at something like an affordability percentage for telecommunications?

JULIAN THOMAS: I'd just say quickly I think that's part of a larger project. We might be hearing a little bit about that kind of work coming up now. There's a lot of work to be done on understanding better that whole picture, I think.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Professor Julian Thomas, I'd like to ask you to sit in the front row and I'll take your mic now if I may and hand it to you. If at any point you think you would like to comment on anything, wave at me. Julian's work is utterly pertinent to what we're turning to now.