CRIS
Issues Papers

Enhancing digital capacity among diverse youth

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This Issues Paper addresses current barriers and opportunities regarding the digital practices of culturally diverse youth with a focus on young people from refugee, migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. It outlines key issues affecting diverse young people, particularly in relation to their use of digital technology in a post-COVID world. It offers recommendations on supporting civic participation among culturally diverse youth that build on their existing digital capacities and align with the most pressing issues they currently face.

Executive Summary

A growing body of work recognises that participation by young people from refugee, migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (referred to as 'diverse' youth in this paper) is increasingly informed and facilitated by digital technology. However, the opportunities, barriers and cultural specificities of digital participation among these youth are not sufficiently recognised in existing policy and programmes. The digital realm offers enhanced opportunities for diverse youth to contribute to social cohesion and civic life. At the same time, diverse youth face similar barriers to participation 'online' as they do 'offline'. These barriers include (online) racism and uneven levels of digital access, affordability and competency, which threaten to curtail their opportunities to participate fully in social, economic, civic and political life.

Key proposals to enhance digital citizenship among diverse youth, including contributions to civic participation, are:

- **Recognition of Online Communities:** Governments need to recognise online communities as being as real as physical communities.
- **Awareness:** Greater evidencing and government and community awareness of diverse young people's digital competencies and needs, vulnerability to online social harms, and their capacity to collaborate with communities, government and stakeholders to enhance digital engagement.
- **Digital Resourcing:** Targeted digital resourcing and skilling of marginalised youth and communities to reduce barriers to participation in online social, civic, economic and political life.
- **Co-designed Resources:** Collaboration between and among diverse youth, governments, communities and industry partners to develop culturally relevant, linguistically accessible and co-designed digital resources for diverse young people and their communities to enhance social, civic, economic and political participation.

CRIS Issues Papers identify what an issue is about; why it's of strategic importance; who or what has the power and resources to act on an issue; where current policy can be improved; concrete proposals for action; potential impacts of proposed policy changes; and related areas that need further research and exploration.

Some Issues Papers also contain appendices with useful resources or additional information or data on a particular issue.

The policy issue

1. Why is it an issue of strategic importance?

Concerns about social cohesion often focus on the social and civic lives of diverse young people, in particular, migrants, refugees and religious minorities (Harris 2013; Johns, Mansouri & Lobo 2015). While there is growing recognition of the complex colonial and migration histories and cultural and socio-economic conditions that shape social and civic participation in the offline world among diverse young people, less attention has been directed towards understanding the opportunities and barriers to participation among diverse young people in the digital realm. A greater understanding of the opportunities and barriers to digital participation among diverse youth is required to ensure that their capacities for social and civic participation in the digital realm are adequately recognised and supported in policy and programmes. While the most recent 2019 - 2020 Victorian Government Information Technology Strategy (State of Victoria 2016: 19) recognises that access to technology is 'a matter of equity' and a requirement for 'meaningful engagement with government', information about how 'the government will continue to cater for specific requirements', and how 'specific requirements' are determined is less understood.

Digital technology offers diverse young people enhanced opportunities for civic participation, especially those who face exclusion from other more formal mechanisms for civic and political connection and expression (Caluya et al. 2018). At the same time, research on the experiences of young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth shows that young people do not have consistent levels of digital access, and have differing levels of proficiency in their use of digital technologies (Van Dijk 2006; Sartori 2016). For example, research on migrant and refugee-background young people's experiences of digital citizenship has found that length of settlement affects digital access more than ethnic difference, with newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers having less access than more established (for example, second and third generation) migrant communities (Caluya et al. 2018: 4). This increases the likelihood of further exacerbating inequalities, given that the internet is an important resource for young people to build bridging social capital (Putnam 2000; Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton 2001).

Recent studies have also drawn attention to issues of social cohesion, resilience and belonging for young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds, with both this group and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Australia reporting widespread incidences of discrimination online (Carlson and Frazer, 2018; Caluya et al. 2018; Harris & Johns 2020). A study of the digital citizenship of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) youth conducted by the Centre for Multicultural Youth and University of Melbourne researchers found that those who were politically active online were more likely to experience harassment and bullying (Caluya et al. 2018: 5). However young people from CALD backgrounds are less likely than those from non-CALD backgrounds to seek help from their family and friends to resolve negative online experiences, with 56% of them doing so compared to 74% from non-CALD backgrounds (Office of the eSafety Commissioner 2018: 25). Formal reporting processes are also often under-utilised, for complex reasons (Vergani & Navarro 2020). Research on social media usage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has also found that while they 'have always been early adopters of technology and use social media at rates higher than non-Indigenous Australians' (digital media forming an important dimension of Indigenous people's political and civic lives), many experience aggression, racism, accusations of non-Indigeneity and stereotyping on social media (Carlson & Frazer 2018).

Online racism and discrimination, combined with uneven levels of digital access, present a serious threat to civic participation among diverse young people, yet is currently insufficiently addressed by existing policy and programmes. This is because government and state policy on digital citizenship in Australia has been framed predominantly around discourses of 'digital risk and danger', especially in relation to online grooming, sexting, pornography and radicalisation (Harris, Walton, Johns & Caluya). There is an overriding focus on 'strengthening online safety and protection frameworks for young people' in Australian policy on youth digital citizenship that does not sufficiently address the unique needs of marginalised youth, including Indigenous and cultural minority youth, LGBTIQ+ youth, and young people with disabilities (Harris, Walton, Johns & Caluya: forthcoming). According to UNESCO (2016: 53), Australia stands out in the Asia-Pacific region as having more policies oriented to children's safety and risk, than to opportunity. More recently, this has been evident in the proposed Commonwealth Online Safety Bill 2021. Advancing the right regulatory approaches to discrimination and racism online is an ongoing challenge in this policy and programme landscape that focuses on individual behaviours and developing resilience to harms more than addressing environments where hate is cultivated and promulgated.

It is therefore of strategic importance to ensure that protection from online racism and discrimination and enhancement of digital participation are clearly identified among the 'specific requirements' (as flagged by the 2019 - 2020 Victorian Government Information Technology Strategy) in Australian youth digital citizenship policy, and that information and resources for addressing these specific requirements are readily available and accessible to communities. It is also of strategic importance to ensure that diverse young people's digital access, and their opportunities for civic and political participation are not curtailed by policies that do not sufficiently balance issues of risk and danger with engagement and opportunity.

2. What is the issue about?

Australian young people live fundamentally digital lives. Their communities are as much online as they are offline. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on Household Use of Information Technology reveal that young people aged 15 to 17 years make up the highest proportion of internet users (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Ninety-seven per cent of Australian households with children and young people have internet access (86% of households overall; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018) and 92% of Indigenous youth have internet access at home, with 86% accessing the internet at other sites, including schools and libraries (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018). Internet access is 'increasingly regarded as an essential service' for participation in education, employment, information, community services, organisation of finances, health and wellbeing, and connecting with family and friends (Thomas et al. 2018: 5).

However, internet access is stratified, with young people from refugee, migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds experiencing lower levels of digital inclusion, mainly due to issues of affordability. Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds may also have limited skills in using digital technologies, increasing their vulnerability to bullying, exposure to harmful content, and online marketing (Alam & Imran 2015; Office of the eSafety Commissioner n.d.). Barriers and opportunities for digital participation among diverse youth, along with the dynamics of digital participation in culturally diverse communities need to be better understood and addressed to enhance diverse young people's contributions to social cohesion and civic life.

3. What is the impact of COVID-19 on the issue?

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the move of all communities online, and has highlighted the crucial role of diverse youth as active citizens in assisting communities during the pandemic through translation of government health messages, compliance with restrictions, and facilitating access to service provision. At the same time, the pandemic has drawn attention to uneven levels of digital access and inclusion among newly arrived migrants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and has reignited racist commentary in the public sphere, both on- and off-line. Asian communities bore the brunt of physical and verbal attacks during the first wave (and continue to be targets of COVID-19 racism), while migrant communities in Victoria have been accused of seeding the second wave due to inadequate comprehension of and adherence to COVID-19 safety measures. More recently, threats to social cohesion have been evident in parliamentary calls for Chinese-background individuals to publicly condemn the Chinese Communist Party, and conservative media rhetoric blaming Victoria's second wave on the 'failure' of multiculturalism (Bolt 2020). In the face of these developments, many online spaces have become toxic and polarising battlegrounds for the assertion of right-wing, racist and anti-immigration commentary, exacerbating challenges to social and civic participation for diverse young people.

Due to COVID-19, there is also a risk that diverse young people facing multiple forms of disadvantage will fall even further behind regarding digital access and inclusion, with negative flow-on effects to their social and civic participation, education, employment and transitions to adulthood. Community workers report that online learning during lockdowns has had a detrimental effect on already vulnerable diverse young people. Challenges include needing to share devices among siblings, broadband problems, disconnection from teachers, support staff and school resources, and inadequate return to school processes resulting in potential longer-term non-attendance (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2020: 5-6, 9). During and beyond times of crisis, diverse young people need better access to digital technology and culturally and linguistically accessible resources to help improve their social, civic, economic and political lives (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2020: 12-13). While young people often play the role of 'cultural brokers' in their communities, translating information and assisting parents and elders with digital access (Reedy 2007), this role is at odds with the current top-down, surveillance approach to young people's digital citizenship (Third, Collin, Walsh & Black 2019). Diverse young people need more support to manage these roles alongside their education, employment and other aspirations. Diverse young people also need to feel safer and more included in digital spaces to amplify their capacities as digital citizens.

4. Who or what has the power or resources to act?

Governments at all levels could consider funding digital resources and skills training workshops for newly arrived refugee, migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, and the translation of eSafety resources on racism and discrimination into different languages, as well as continuing to develop robust mechanisms to address online hate.

Local councils could offer public spaces, e.g. libraries and community centres, for digital skills training workshops, and could host or organise community consultation forums to discuss needs, enable the sharing of community knowledge and bring government, community members of different age groups and key stakeholders.

Researchers could build on their existing knowledge base and expertise to design and conduct the research required to fill knowledge gaps and generate the evidence needed to develop relevant programmes and policy. The findings of research should be made available to the government, youth sector, diverse communities, key stakeholders and other researchers in a variety of formats, including research reports, infographics, policy papers and journal articles.

Schools could help identify particular students who may be 'at-risk' of digital exclusion, and could help design and 'triage' digital support programmes on an individual or family basis. Schools could also incorporate education about online racism and discrimination into existing eSafety and anti-bullying programmes, with

clear guidelines for students seeking support for online racism and discrimination, and effective feedback mechanisms to continuously improve students' online (and offline) experiences. Schools could also build on the everyday competencies of diverse youth to shape more relevant and youth-centred digital citizenship initiatives and curricula.

The youth sector, including peak bodies, agencies and advocacy groups, could provide advice to government and researchers on the engagement of diverse communities in the design and implementation of digital resourcing and training, including advice on cultural, religious and linguistic needs, barriers to participation, and key figures to consult.

Diverse young people could provide their insights and experiences of digital inclusion, safety, the strategies they currently use to deal with online racism and discrimination, their experiences of reporting, and their take up of eSafety resources. This could be done via research dissemination, advisory groups and forums, community liaison that prioritises youth voices, and partnerships across schools, government and the youth and community sectors. They could also draw on their digital skills to help co-design more effective policies and programmes to address the needs of diverse young people.

The media could help counter or minimise incidences of online racism and discrimination by including more diverse perspectives on issues of cultural diversity (beyond existing polarising debates). This might include featuring stories about the digital needs, competencies and experiences of multicultural communities, and experiences of racism and discrimination. Local media could also assist with the dissemination of information about digital skills training workshops, anti-discrimination initiatives and programmes, workshops and grants.

5. Where can current policy be improved?

Existing policy and discourse on digital citizenship has focused on keeping young people away from dangerous, risky and subversive practices, and channelling them towards performing responsible, restrained and disciplined forms of citizenship (Third & Collin 2016: 45). In particular, the Australian Government has invested heavily into online counter-terrorism initiatives, and into developing training resources for educators, communities, corporations, peak sporting organisations, libraries, 'eSafety Providers' and mental health, law enforcement and social workers to promote online safety for young people through the Office of the eSafety Commissioner. Among the issues identified by the eSafety Commissioner are: image-based abuse, cyberbullying, online hate, the protection of personal data, unwanted contact, 'digital reputation', online scams and identity theft, illegal and harmful content, 'sextortion', and balancing time online. These initiatives are a welcome recognition of the online and digital risks faced by young people. However, it is important to ensure that these issues are not silo-ed or de-racialised which potentially overlooks the ways they may intersect or be experienced simultaneously by diverse young people. Relatedly, it is crucial to ensure that there are adequate effective mechanisms for young people to report intersecting, rather than just issues-based inequalities.

An inattentiveness to the voices of young people in relation to digital engagement could result in a number of shortcomings that, if left unaddressed, pose serious problems for marginalised youth and communities at large. For example, research on digital engagement in rural Australia has found that those living in remote areas experience a 'double jeopardy of digital disadvantage', whereby inequalities that result from lack of access to digitally mediated infrastructure are experienced alongside inequalities in education and work (Park 2016). Research has also uncovered the ways young people from higher and lower socio-economic neighbourhoods experience differential access to and use of screens and devices.

Further, a protectionist approach to youth digital engagement may prevent decision-makers from recognising the opportunities for enhancing youth citizenship in a digital age (McCosker, Vivienne & Johns 2016). According to Third and Collin (2016), there is a need to find ways of working with and alongside young people to rethink the generative possibilities of digital citizenship for young people. Research on the use of digital technology and social media among youth has begun to surface a range of activities that indicate both the enhancement of traditional forms of participation, and the generation of new yet equally productive modes of civic and political participation, resilience and wellbeing. These possibilities should be explored with a thorough acknowledgement and understanding of the complex and intersecting risks faced by diverse young people, and appropriate mechanisms for feedback and co-design of research, policy and programmes.

Proposals: what should be done, what further action is needed and by whom?

Researchers, government, communities, schools, young people, youth sector agencies and advocacy groups can work together to reduce barriers to participation, and empower diverse young people to participate more fully in social and civic life. To achieve this aim, the following actions are proposed:

- **Digital Needs**: It is first important for researchers to develop a comprehensive database on digital needs within diverse communities, experiences of online racism and discrimination, gaps in knowledge, and existing digital skills and capacities. This would ideally identify particular groups in need of assistance, key areas of concern within communities, barriers to participation, and the availability of resources within different communities. It would be important to engage schools, youth agencies and advocacy groups, community leaders and other key stakeholders with expertise and knowledge about the digital needs of diverse youth. The findings of this research could then be used by agencies to provide digital resources to individuals or groups on an as-needed basis, and to shape programmes and policies.

- **Digital Accessibility:** Drawing on data collected about the digital needs of diverse youth and their communities, relevant agencies could then organise, purchase and make available government-funded digital resources, including laptops, monitors, broadband subscriptions, handheld devices, and digital skills training resources to individuals and communities

identified as at-risk of digital exclusion and online racism and discrimination. Data would also be used by researchers to co-design with diverse young people and their communities culturally appropriate digital skills training programmes and policies as well as recommendations for reducing racism and discrimination online.

- **Digital Citizenship (Web 2.0):** For the above proposals to have maximum effect, the government should consider a shift from treating digital technology as simply a platform for the dissemination of information from the government down to diverse communities (a Web 1.0 model), to harnessing the transformative potential of the internet and digital technology for digital citizenship, collaborative information sharing, intercultural engagement, anti-racism and discrimination initiatives (a Web 2.0 model). This would involve developing genuinely open and ongoing cycles of collaboration, consultation, feedback, co-design and implementation, bringing together diverse youth, government, community members, educators, web developers and other key stakeholders in a series of public workshops or forums, to generate greater awareness of the intersecting inequalities, barriers and community strengths with regard to digital engagement.

6. What are the impacts of a change in policy?

Youth inclusion and participation can be enhanced by understanding diverse young people as capable yet unevenly supported digital citizens. Better understanding and addressing of online and digital risks to social cohesion will lead to enhanced levels of safety, inclusion and trust within diverse communities, enhanced capacity to protect oneself from and report online harms including racism, discrimination and other intersecting forms of disadvantage, and higher levels of social and civic participation among diverse youth. Other likely impacts include a reduction in the 'digital divide', higher levels of participation in education, employment, public discourse, and better responsiveness to and active shaping of government and community messaging, which have proven to be crucial during times of crisis.

7. Related areas that need further research and exploration

- **Digital Needs:** The digital needs of diverse communities, including their access to digital equipment, experiences of racism and discrimination online, their existing digital skills, and their engagement with existing eSafety resources on racism and discrimination.

- **Government Engagement:** Migrant and refugee background and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's experiences of engaging with government messaging during times of crisis, needs of specific communities in Victoria, ethnic and religious groups, and comparison to diverse young people's experiences nationally.

- **Online Racism and Discrimination:** Key areas of concern in relation to online racism and discrimination need to be identified– whether there are any particular forums, websites, digital and social media apps and platforms that are experienced as less safe than others and strategies for their regulation.

- **Existing Government Strategies:** Existing strategies for dealing with online racism and discrimination experienced by diverse youth – do these align with government recommendations from the eSafety Commissioner? What awareness exists within diverse communities about eSafety Commissioner recommendations for dealing with online hate, and where are the gaps in knowledge for different communities (i.e., differences in knowledge based on length of settlement, age, different ethnic and religious groups). Are any recommendations from the eSafety Commissioner website particularly difficult to implement? How can strategies be further enhanced to address perpetrators and bystanders as well as targets of racism and discrimination online? How can we extend our concept of communities to include online communities when developing public policy?

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