

CORRECTED EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of social media on Victorian elections and Victoria's electoral administration

Melbourne — 18 June 2014

Members

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Witnesses

Mr M. Assan, policy officer, and

Ms S. Daravong, policy officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings. This is the inquiry into the impact of social media on Victorian elections and Victoria's electoral administration. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. I also wish to advise witnesses that comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You can say what you like in here, but walk out the door and you are in trouble. Have you read the guide to giving evidence at a public hearing pamphlet that the committee provides?

Mr ASSAN — Yes, I have.

The CHAIR — Marvellous. Thank you very much indeed. I ask you both to state your full name and business address, whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation and, if you are representing an organisation, what position you hold in that organisation.

Mr ASSAN — My name is Me'ad Assan, and I am representing the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. Would you like me to give you the exact address of the organisation?

The CHAIR — That would be good, thank you.

Mr ASSAN — I will give you my business card. It is 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton, Victoria.

Ms DARAVONG — My name is Sylvia Daravong. I am a policy officer at the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, and our address is 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton.

The CHAIR — Wonderful. All of your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. I ask you to give a verbal submission to begin with, and then after that we will open to questions and we will see where that takes us. Over to you.

Mr ASSAN — We are very excited to be here. First of all let me say thank you very much for giving us this opportunity but also for looking into this matter, because we know what social media can achieve. The classic example is the Arab spring, which played a key role in spreading information and promoting the insurgent agenda, so thank you very much.

In terms of Australia, particularly in relation to culturally diverse communities, we do have some reservations about what social media can achieve in relation to the promotion of civic engagement and also improving the electoral knowledge of culturally diverse communities. The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria is an advocacy organisation, and it interacts with communities. We organise forums and, once in a while, those issues — access to computers and the internet — come out, so we are quite aware of those issues, but also there have been various reports, so I want to give you maybe three or four ideas about why we have some reservations.

Overall, internet access by Victorians from non-English-speaking backgrounds is slightly lower than by those from English-speaking backgrounds. The uptake of the internet for some languages such as Chinese, Spanish, Serbian and Singhalese is higher, and middle-age and older tertiary-educated members with sufficient financial resources and access to a computer and the internet tend to use more basic functionality. Those with a lower level of English and limited literacy or limited formal education primarily use traditional media to get information. Lastly, culturally diverse communities, particularly those from new and emerging communities are overrepresented in the category of households with low income. For those reasons we think that social media may not be the most effective tool to promote civic engagement.

Having said that, they should not be left out in programs and policies that you may develop in the future. We think they should be taken into account. However, there are some other ways that you can engage with culturally diverse communities to improve their civic engagement and also electoral knowledge. I have quite a few steps written down. I used to work at the Victorian Electoral Commission. I dealt with community engagement during the local government elections. I also worked at the 2010 federal election

and at the last federal election, so I am quite familiar with this. I came across quite a lot of stories and anecdotes.

What I would do in terms of improving civic engagement and electoral knowledge, for example, is encourage the Victorian Electoral Commission to promote their online resources. I think a lot of community groups or multicultural community organisations are not aware that the VEC has some wonderful resources on its website. One example is the enrolment form in community languages. You are not able to print it, but you can show and explain it in terms of what needs to be done if you want to vote — that you need to enrol first. The other thing we could do would be to produce a series of YouTube videos. There are a lot of communities with limited literacy skills. They are not literate in their first language, but they are likely to understand if there is a short video explaining the procedure in terms of voting and enrolment and how things work.

The other thing we could probably encourage the Victorian Electoral Commission to use is Twitter. They have been using it since 2012, and it is quite a wonderful tool. Actually they could probably source and use information from international organisations that work in the area of elections or promoting democracy. I can give you a classic example. Last night when I was preparing my oral presentation I looked at the website of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. I came across an article talking about the voting participation of some diaspora communities of Egypt and Syria. Someone from the community may pick up and engage in a conversation, or maybe if you are a young person of Egyptian background and come across those kinds of information, you may start a conversation with your friends or parents.

The other information that I came across while I was reading this article from the *Washington Post* — it was on the website of that organisation — was that Australia was one of the first countries that actually adopted the out-of-country voting, allowing people to vote while overseas. Those kinds of facts are quite good to know. In terms of tweeting, you can actually use a lot of news and anecdotal evidence from international sources to make the Twitter feed more engaging and more relevant to some communities.

We also think that in terms of outreach sessions — the VEC does some outreach sessions — we need to move away from the classical way of giving information, because what happens is most of the time, when they go and deliver the information sessions, it is only one way. You actually need to use that opportunity to have a conversation and engage the community on some issues. For example, there is still a strong belief in the idea of having a strongman. You can actually have a debate around the issue of a strongman versus a strong institution, or what about freedom of speech? Those kinds of things. You can have 30 minutes of discussion and then proceed to giving information.

You can also use that opportunity to actually gather information from the community. For example, at the end of a session you could ask some basic questions: did you know this information before; how often would you like to get this information; would you like this information in your community language? It does help to give you an idea, because people are quite fed up with being consulted. There have been a lot of consultations going on. This is quite a wonderful opportunity not only to give information and have a discussion but also to gather evidence in terms of improving the next session or developing an approach in terms of electoral knowledge.

Those are the kinds of steps that we would like the Victorian Electoral Commission to do. Having said that, we also need to be really realistic about what the VEC alone can achieve, because we live in a state in which more than 25 per cent of people were born or have parents who were born overseas, so I think there should be some other actors. For example, local governments can really play a role in terms of engaging communities they work with particularly those who work in the community services, to have a discussion or encourage.

While I was working at the Victorian Electoral Commission I actually remember some of the people who worked in the regional local governments calling me and trying to get information. I think we need to encourage this kind of initiative. Staff members need to go to the communities rather than waiting for people to come to them and saying or telling, 'We need some information', I think should be proactive. It is about election times and about times to have a conversation about democracy, about voting. This is the

kind of thing that I have not really seen while I was working with both organisations. I think we really need to go after people rather than waiting for them to come. Thank you very much for listening to me.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Sylvia, did you have something to add to that?

Ms DARAVONG — Just adding on from the last statement about being more proactive, we have been working with the Victorian Electoral Commission to do outreach programs, and we have been finding it hard to engage especially new and emerging communities who perhaps have no experience of an election in Australia or Victoria and getting them to engage with the commission on their outreach program and on educating them on how to vote.

The CHAIR — Is that because they are just generally finding it difficult to settle in, or is it specific to the electoral process?

Ms DARAVONG — I think it is both. One of the things is that the commission probably does not have the contacts available to them on the different communities available. They have been contacting our organisation but also the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship to get those contacts. Also it is hard for new and emerging communities to think about voting when they are trying to settle in and have an organised group that can actually find out this information for them. They could actually be individuals.

The CHAIR — And presumably in a number of cases they come from backgrounds where voting is quite a foreign concept to them.

Ms DARAVONG — That is right. I know the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship does have the rights and responsibilities at seminars, which helps them get more of an understanding of Australian democracy, but I think it is still a big leap for a lot of communities to have that understanding, but also understanding that we do have compulsory voting, unlike the rest of the world. I think it is hard to grapple with the everyday political debate within the media and still having to understand your responsibilities to vote on election day.

Mr DELAHUNTY — I have a couple of questions. You said you were working at the VEC. First of all, well done for coming along today.

Mr ASSAN — Thank you. We are quite excited about these issues.

Mr DELAHUNTY — That is good, and it helps us. My background is Irish, but it was a long time ago; my forefathers from a long time ago. I was thinking about the language difficulties. When I travel overseas I have language difficulties when I go to other countries, so it is really important we hear your messages. When you were working at the VEC you said there were a lot of requests for information coming to you. What were the things that people were asking you? What types of information were they asking for?

Mr ASSAN — I think one of the issues was that people were not actually aware of information available on the VEC website. When you look at the website of the Victorian Electoral Commission, you have to look further down and then click a link to go to another screen. I do not know why, but people did not go and actually say, 'There are those resources available', and some of the people who actually called me were looking for written translated information. What we did at the last local government election was to produce easy English information, but we did not have translated materials. Most of the translated information was online, which I thought was quite a bit.

One of the issues that I really struggled with, particularly while I was working at the VEC or at the AEC — is the fact that they do not really seem to invest in relationship building with the community. That should really be the key element. You have to engage with the leaders, you have to attend community events and you have to make an effort to even reach out not personally but at least kind of get to know them so you are likely to influence and engage in a conversation. If you do not really have that relationship, it is really hard. People are not going to come, because it is not a priority; I mean, there are some other issues (settlement issues) they are dealing with.

Besides, we live in a democratic country; we have got a say. They do not really see. You have to have a deeper discussion: 'I think you need to engage with the political process; this is a part of the integration, if you want to be part of this country; you have got the wonderful option, which is you can go and have a conversation with your local elected officials or you can set up a community group'. I mean, there are all these things. I think you cannot just go and give information sessions.

Mr DELAHUNTY — Can I just go on from that, then? You talked about promoting civic engagement. Has the ethnic communities council or any group like yours done any research to see how they get their information? Is it through the written media? Is it through the VEC? Is it through social media? How do people get this information out?

Mr ASSAN — From our understanding, because there have been a number of reports and research done, particularly on trying to find out how CALD communities get their information in relation to values like health information, most of the time it is through one on one — —

Mr DELAHUNTY — Through word of mouth?

Mr ASSAN — Yes, word of mouth, also through their community groups or media — like traditional media, newspapers. That is how they can get information, yes.

The CHAIR — Do the new and emerging communities embrace social media to any large extent? To what extent do they embrace social media?

Mr ASSAN — It depends. When we look at some of these people at arrival, they have really good established skills in terms of using computers and the internet, but those who come from Iran or some of those countries where social media is quite an important tool — —

The CHAIR — Do they use Facebook or Twitter?

Mr ASSAN — I suspect the younger generation may be quite a bit into it, but the uptake is not that high. It is probably between 10 per cent and 20 per cent, and it is predominantly the younger generations. I only joined Twitter two or three weeks ago. It is not a very popular tool among certain generations, but they do value the importance of some media — the connection and information they provide and the way they mobilise communities around particular issues.

Mr TARLAMIS — Is it fair to say that one of the concerns you have is that, with the emergence of social media platforms, organisations like the Victorian Electoral Commission do not move all their communication strategies across to those platforms when you want them to look at other ways of engaging the community, because that would definitely leave people in those communities behind if those organisations were to do that?

Mr ASSAN — To be fair to those organisations, the main issue is that they do not seem to be proactive in terms of promoting themselves. They just expect people to come, and it does not work that way. I think you need to be proactive. It is the same thing with the Australian Electoral Commission. I will share a little fact with you. We also need to be aware that some of what is happening internationally is actually influencing communities about the whole issue of democracy. I think a lot of the time people associate democracy with chaos when they look at what is happening in Libya after Gaddafi and in Syria and South Sudan. We need to be really mindful. There is a price to pay to have a democracy, so I think we need to move beyond that.

Just to get information out to people, you need to engage with them, have a conversation and have a debate on various issues. That is my concern with the Victorian Electoral Commission — they will put information online or it will be the same information given to service providers and they will expect the community to find that information. I think there are two assumptions with this approach: that people are going to read it but also that they are going to understand it. Particularly when it comes to local government elections it is really very tricky, and we need to explain a lot of things. You need to be more proactive and establish a relationship.

Another way you can encourage people to be part of it, particularly during an election period, is that there are a lot of jobs that need to be done and you could really encourage people in these communities to apply for them and you could also offer them jobs that last more than one day. Who knows, you may actually trigger something. People may realise how important it is and understand how wonderful it is to be part of this. Those are the kinds of things we really need to do going into an election period in educating people about democracy, because we understand what democracy is and we are here because of a lack of democracy. People just want things to be explained and they want to be engaged in a more sophisticated way.

Mr DELAHUNTY — I have a couple of other questions. Sylvia, from your point of view, do you believe that the information — whether it be on the internet, social media or anything like that — is good enough for your communities? Has there been any thought about that?

Ms DARAVONG — Like Me'ad said, I think we need actual engagement. They are not going to read, and even if it is in their community language, sometimes, especially with some of the humanitarian settlements, they are actually not literate in that language, so it is very hard for them to actually read in their own community language if they do not have literacy in that language. I think there needs to be an approach that includes social media, but also traditional media — and I include ethnic media in that as well — but also community outreach, because a lot of these communities will listen to people who they have a relationship with and trust. They will not go out and listen to people who are just going to be there one time to give them information.

They do want engagement and they do want to ask questions, but I also think it is helpful for people who go out to make those presentations to actually get some feedback to understand what the gaps are in the knowledge of these communities. For many of the people in these communities, they might not have had a background in democracy. When they are talking about how to vote, they would probably like to know why they need to vote in the first place — what is the context? I think engagement and starting a relationship with these communities is very important because you are not going to get the information across with just leaflets, brochures, social media, Twitter feeds or other social media pages. You actually need to create a relationship with these communities, because they will actually start listening to you more.

Mr DELAHUNTY — Because our reference is mainly built around social media, do you have any idea what percentage of people in these communities use social media or information, whether it be electoral information, health information or employment information?

Mr ASSAN — It is quite a new area actually. There has not been much study. People started exploring the impact of social media during elections, but the other thing you need to be aware of is that generally people from culturally diverse communities do not expect to find translated government information online. I think it is a new area, but what we could probably do first is maybe teach people how to use the internet and social media. That could be one way to promote social media to people and explain to them what social media can offer, particularly younger generations — those who will actually embrace or be enthusiastic about social media.

Mr DELAHUNTY — I am going to show my ignorance here, but if I google something, it will come up in English and I will be able to read it. But if you googled it, could you get it in your language? Does it translate?

Mr SOMYUREK — Not well.

Mr DELAHUNTY — Are there any programs that do that?

Mr SOMYUREK — There is Google Translate, but it does not work well.

Mr ASSAN — It is terrible, Google.

Mr TARLAMIS — You can change the language in which you do your search. For instance, a friend of mine borrowed my iPad to do a Google search, and when they gave it back to me it was all in Greek because they had switched it over to Greek language. You can actually do that.

Mr DELAHUNTY — You can do that, but it is not good.

Mr SOMYUREK — It is just not practical.

Mr ASSAN — I did try to use it. I am a francophone — I speak French. When you look at the quality of the translations, it is very poor.

Mr SOMYUREK — Just to follow up on Hugh's question — and I think I know what he was getting at — I guess an indicator would be newspapers in foreign languages. I know the Turkish newspapers because I am from the Turkish community. The online news is taking over from the print editions. Is that across the board? If people are going online for their community news, is that an indicator that people are engaging more with the internet and maybe with social media as a consequence?

Mr ASSAN — It is, particularly for the more established communities — the Turkish, the Vietnamese, the Chinese — but for the new communities, word-of-mouth and traditional media would be the primary means of getting information. When you are quite new and you are not sure, you tend to listen to people who have been in the country, so that is probably one of the issues.

Mr DELAHUNTY — Thanks for your recommendations, and well done.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much indeed. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. If you could suggest any typo changes to that but no changes to anything of substance, that would be very much appreciated. Thank you very much for your contribution to this inquiry and for being with us today.

Mr ASSAN — Thank you very much for having us.

Witnesses withdrew.