

INDIGENOUS TRANSLATIONS

PUBLICATION 01 | 2026

FROM DIGITAL INCLUSION TO DIGITAL AGENCY

*Revisiting an Indigenous Translations digital communication strategy developed in 2015 - eleven
years on*

Naomi P. Gothard

Founder, Indigenous Translations

Eleven years later

In 2015, Indigenous Translations began formally exploring a question that has become considerably more important in the age of artificial intelligence:

If information is technically accessible but not understood, is it really accessible at all?

The work did not begin with the Fellowship.

Before receiving a Copyright Agency Publisher Fellowship in 2015, I had already undertaken extensive outreach to Australian government agencies advocating for improved first-language communication and exploring how emerging digital technologies might help overcome persistent barriers to Indigenous translation.

In May 2015, Copyright Agency named me as one of its inaugural Publisher Fellows, awarding \$10,000 to research digital ways to overcome barriers to Indigenous translations (Copyright Agency, 2015).

The Fellowship provided an opportunity to develop those ideas more systematically.

The research explored how digital technology, first-language communication and Indigenous creative participation could improve access to government information and services.

Its premise was simple:

Information is not genuinely accessible merely because it has been published.

For communication to be effective, people must be able to understand the information, navigate the system in which it sits, use it to make informed decisions and participate meaningfully in matters that affect their lives.

The work connected issues often treated separately: language · government communication · digital access · education · employment · media production · cultural preservation · community participation

Eleven years later, the technology has changed dramatically. The underlying challenge has not.

If anything, the digitisation of government, healthcare, justice, education, employment and everyday life - now accelerated by artificial intelligence - makes the original question more important.

How do we ensure that technological progress expands people's ability to participate rather than creating a new generation of barriers?

The original vision

The original Indigenous Translations work did not treat translation simply as converting written English into another language.

It proposed a broader communication system.

Government information could be translated into first languages and communicated through combinations of text, audio, animation, video and digital interfaces. Community members could access information through connected devices. Digital platforms could provide pathways into services while supporting language preservation, skills development and employment.

The strategy envisaged communication moving across multiple channels rather than remaining trapped within individual departments, documents or formats.

The subsequent National Indigenous myGov Pilot demonstrated elements of what this could look like in practice.

Indigenous Translations had signed a Deed to participate on the Creative and Digital Media Panel of Translators in 2014. Following the 2015 Digital Innovation Summit in New York, Indigenous Translations proposed the National Indigenous myGov Pilot to the Department of Human Services. The resulting work translated the How to create a myGov account training material into 15 Indigenous languages and dialects, comprising approximately 45 pages of written translation and 15 voice-overs totalling more than 60 minutes of audio, created by Indigenous language speakers around Australia.

That work was important for a reason beyond translation.

Comprehension.

A language sector transformed

The 2015 Indigenous Translations research commenced at an important point in the development of Australia's First Nations language sector.

The Second National Indigenous Languages Survey, published in 2014, estimated that approximately 120 traditional Indigenous languages were still spoken, only 13 were considered strong and still being learned by children as a first language, and approximately 100 were severely or critically endangered (Marmion et al., 2014).

The eleven years since have seen substantial development in the infrastructure supporting language maintenance, revival and revitalisation.

Language centres, Indigenous organisations, language workers and community-led programs now form an increasingly significant national ecosystem. The Australian Government's Indigenous Languages and Arts program supports language centres and community-led language activities and continues substantial investment in Indigenous languages and arts. In 2026-27, the program is investing more than \$48 million across Indigenous languages and arts projects (Office for the Arts, 2026).

The significance of this development extends beyond the number of organisations or the level of investment.

There is now a stronger ecosystem through which language expertise, community authority, institutional communication and technology can potentially be connected.

That matters enormously to the Indigenous Translations proposition.

In 2015, one of the practical challenges was how to connect government communication, language expertise, community authority and emerging digital delivery.

In 2026, we do not need to assume that this infrastructure must be built from scratch.

Language centres and Indigenous organisations can provide language expertise, cultural authority and local knowledge. Government and other institutions hold information that needs to be communicated. Interpreters provide an essential human bridge in consequential interactions. Technology provides increasingly powerful mechanisms for delivering approved audio, visual and interactive information.

The opportunity is not to replace any one of these parts. It is to connect them more intelligently.

The future of first-language digital communication does not need to be built for communities. It can increasingly be built with and through the organisations, language authorities and people already strengthening languages within those communities.

From access to agency

In 2026, I would take the original proposition one step further.

The next challenge is not simply digital inclusion. It is digital agency.

Digital inclusion asks whether somebody can connect to a digital system.

Digital agency asks:

What can they actually do once they are connected?

A person may have internet access and still be unable to understand the information in front of them. They may be able to open a government service but not navigate it. They may receive an automated decision but not understand how to question it. They may technically have access while lacking the language, confidence, capability or meaningful choice required to participate.

Connectivity is necessary. It is not sufficient.

Digital Agency

For the purposes of this publication, I propose the following working definition:

Digital Agency is the practical capacity to access, understand, navigate, question and act through digital systems while retaining meaningful human choice and control.

ACCESS → COMPREHENSION → NAVIGATION → PARTICIPATION → CONTROL → CAPABILITY

ACCESS - Can people reliably reach the device, network, service or information?

COMPREHENSION - Is information available in languages and forms people can genuinely understand?

NAVIGATION - Can people move through the system and successfully complete what is required?

PARTICIPATION - Can communities contribute, respond and influence communication rather than simply receive it?

CONTROL - Do people retain meaningful choice, privacy, consent and the ability to question or challenge an outcome?

CAPABILITY - Does interaction with the system strengthen people's longer-term confidence and competence rather than creating dependency?

Digital Agency is presented here as a strategic framework, not as a validated psychometric or diagnostic measure.

What the 2015 work anticipated

Looking back from 2026, several ideas within the original work remain striking.

It anticipated the importance of multimedia rather than text-only communication. It recognised that mobile and digital platforms could change how government information reached geographically dispersed communities. It proposed feedback loops rather than treating communication as a one-way transmission from institution to citizen. It recognised the potential for technology to contribute to language preservation.

It connected digital communication with training and employment, including opportunities for translators, language specialists, voice artists, producers and other creative contributors.

And it argued for greater coordination between government departments, communities and media rather than repeatedly rebuilding isolated communication systems.

The historical report itself describes a coordinated model involving websites, applications, audiovisual information, translations, language preservation, training, employment and communication between government and communities.

Some technologies and proposed delivery mechanisms have naturally dated.

The systems thinking has not.

The problem has moved

In 2015, a central concern was getting important information into people's hands in a form they could understand.

In 2026, that problem remains, but the environment surrounding it has become considerably more complex.

People increasingly encounter institutions through websites, applications, digital identity systems, automated processes and AI-assisted interfaces.

This creates extraordinary opportunities. Information can potentially be transformed into text, speech, video and interactive formats far faster than was possible eleven years ago.

But technology does not automatically create comprehension.

The ability to generate language is not the same as the authority to speak for a language or a community.

Technology can assist workflows. Cultural authority remains human.

The authority to determine how language, knowledge and cultural material are recorded, interpreted, attributed and used must remain with the appropriate people and communities. In the age of generative AI, this becomes more important, not less.

Comprehension is infrastructure

Comprehension should be treated as part of infrastructure.

We normally think about digital infrastructure as networks, devices, software and connectivity.

But a perfectly functioning digital service can remain inaccessible if the person using it cannot understand what it is asking them to do.

Language cannot simply be added at the end of service design. Neither can accessibility. Neither can cultural context. They should form part of the architecture of the service itself.

This changes the design question from: How do we translate this information?

How do we design this information so the people it is intended for can understand it, use it, question it and act upon it?

High-Consequence Communication

Not every communication failure carries the same consequences.

Misunderstanding ordinary information may cause inconvenience. Misunderstanding information concerning medical treatment, a legal right, a court condition or an emergency instruction can carry considerably greater consequences.

The greater the consequence of misunderstanding, the greater the obligation to design for comprehension.

HEALTHCARE - Safety · informed consent · treatment · preparation · medication · aftercare

JUSTICE - Rights · cautions · legal assistance · proceedings · obligations · conditions

ESSENTIAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES - Access · entitlements · responsibilities · identity · payments

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION - Warnings · evacuation · disaster response · immediate action

Healthcare: when comprehension becomes part of safety

Healthcare provides one of the clearest examples of why access and comprehension are different.

Complex information can be presented at precisely the moment when a person is frightened, unwell, in pain or being asked to make an important decision.

Language barriers in these circumstances can affect a patient's ability to understand what is happening, what they are being asked to consent to, what they must do before or after a procedure and when they should seek further assistance.

The original Indigenous Translations work proposed making important health information available in relevant First Nations languages through written and audio formats using digital technology.

Eleven years later, that proposition has significant contemporary relevance.

Queensland Health's current translation guidance explicitly recognises that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are oral languages and states that translations may therefore need to be delivered as audio or video recordings rather than written documents (Queensland Health, 2026).

The opportunity is not to replace existing healthcare systems, clinicians, interpreters or Indigenous health services. It is to investigate how the communication architecture surrounding them might be strengthened.

A hospital communication interface

A secure hospital tablet or other appropriate digital interface could, subject to co-design, clinical governance and language authority, provide approved information in an appropriate First Nations language through audio, video, text, illustration or animation.

A patient preparing for a procedure might, for example, access approved general information concerning: what fasting means · preparation for a procedure · the purpose of the consent process · questions to ask the treating team · discharge information · warning signs · how to request an interpreter or further human assistance.

Information could be replayed. Audio could be accompanied by illustration or animation where useful.

Importantly, the technology would direct the patient back to a doctor, nurse or qualified interpreter whenever individual medical advice, clarification or informed consent is required. It would not diagnose. It would not provide individual medical advice. It would not replace qualified interpreters. And accessing a digital resource would not itself constitute informed consent.

Technology should augment comprehension, not automate consent.

The person could enter the human conversation better informed and better able to participate.

A signature is not comprehension

The original healthcare thinking was particularly concerned with consent.

A person can physically sign a document or mark a box without that action, by itself, demonstrating comprehension of all the information relevant to the decision.

A signature in a box is not evidence of comprehension.

Nor is a downloaded document. Nor is a translated webpage. Nor is an audio recording simply because somebody pressed play.

The outcome we should seek is informed human agency.

Could first-language digital communication strengthen the environment in which informed conversations occur?

From one resource to a measurable pilot

Rather than simply translating an individual form or resource, a contemporary pilot could investigate:

Where does the communication gap occur across the patient journey?

A pilot could identify a small number of high-consequence communication touchpoints and work with participating communities, appropriate language authorities, Indigenous organisations, clinicians and interpreters to design and evaluate first-language communication around them.

IDENTIFY → CO-DESIGN → TRANSLATE → LISTEN → CLARIFY → MEASURE → IMPROVE

The objective would not simply be to record whether information had been delivered.

We should ask: Did the person understand it? Did they know what they needed to do next? Could they identify when they needed further explanation? Did they know how to obtain an interpreter or human assistance? Was the communication format itself useful?

This is Digital Agency applied to healthcare.

In healthcare, comprehension can become part of the safety architecture.

Justice: when comprehension affects rights

The justice system provides another powerful example of the difference between receiving information and understanding it.

A person may be cautioned, handed a document, asked questions, appear before a court, receive bail conditions or be required to comply with an order. Each interaction may carry significant consequences.

The relevant question cannot simply be: Was the information provided?

Was it sufficiently understood for the person to participate meaningfully in what happened next?

Queensland Courts' current Equal Treatment Benchbook contains guidance concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and communication. It notes the difficulties associated with untrained interpreters, the demands of legal terminology and the potential effect of trauma or stress on second-language competency. It identifies experienced professional interpreters as preferable while recognising the limited availability of accredited interpreters for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (Supreme Court of Queensland, 2026).

The interpreter as the human bridge

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander defendants or participants whose strongest language is not Standard Australian English, an interpreter can become a critical linguistic bridge between that person and the courtroom.

Through that bridge may pass the words of the judge, questions from lawyers, evidence, explanations and the person's own words back into the proceeding.

The legal responsibilities of courts, lawyers and other justice actors do not transfer to the interpreter. But from the participant's communication perspective, a substantial amount may nevertheless depend upon this linguistic channel.

Should one human interpreter have to carry so much of the communication burden alone?

The interpreter should not be expected to become the person's lawyer, legal educator or decision-maker. Their function is interpretation.

Yet a person may simultaneously be trying to understand an unfamiliar system filled with specialised terminology, procedures, people, rights, obligations and consequences.

Technology could potentially strengthen the communication environment surrounding the interpreter without attempting to replace them.

Before entering court, for example, a person could potentially access culturally and linguistically governed first-language orientation material explaining general matters such as: the courtroom · who the different participants are · the role of the judge · the role of a lawyer · the role of the interpreter · how to request clarification · how to request an interpreter · where to seek legal assistance.

Such information would not constitute legal advice. It would provide orientation.

Technology should strengthen the bridge - not replace it.

The interpreter should be the bridge between languages - not the entire communication infrastructure.

Designing around the justice journey

A contemporary pilot could investigate where comprehension barriers arise across a justice journey:

POLICE INTERACTION → RIGHTS & CAUTIONS → LEGAL ASSISTANCE → COURT PREPARATION → COURT PROCEEDINGS → CONDITIONS & ORDERS → NEXT STEPS

At each stage, researchers and participating communities could ask: Did the person understand what was happening? Did they understand what was required of them? Did they know when and how to request an interpreter? Did they know how to seek legal assistance? Did they understand the practical significance of an obligation or condition? Could they identify when they needed further explanation?

Any digital communication intervention should sit alongside - never replace - interpreters, legal representation, judicial safeguards and institutional responsibility.

INFORMATION → LANGUAGE → COMPREHENSION → HUMAN ASSISTANCE → INFORMED PARTICIPATION

Translation is an input. Comprehension is the objective. Agency is the larger outcome.

In justice, comprehension can affect rights, obligations and meaningful participation in legal processes.

Communication should be a loop

Traditional institutional communication often resembles: INSTITUTION → INFORMATION → COMMUNITY

Digital technology allows something more useful: INSTITUTION ↔ COMMUNITY

People can indicate whether information was understood. Communities can identify missing information. Language specialists can identify where literal translation fails to communicate meaning. Service designers can identify where people repeatedly encounter difficulties. Communities can participate in determining what information is important and how it should be communicated.

The system ceases to be merely a publishing mechanism. It becomes a learning system.

Language, technology and economic participation

The original Indigenous Translations work also connected communication with employment. That remains important.

First-language digital communication can create economic participation across a wider ecosystem than translation alone: language specialists · translators · interpreters · voice artists · cultural advisers · researchers · writers · producers · animators · designers · trainers · educators · technologists

Technology should not merely extract knowledge from communities and automate the work surrounding it.

Increase participation, capability and economic opportunity.

The development of Indigenous language organisations since the original research makes this particularly significant.

Indigenous Translations does not need to reproduce language infrastructure that already exists. It can work with it.

A future project could bring together an Indigenous language centre or Indigenous business, community language authorities, interpreters, institutional specialists and appropriate technology around a defined communication problem.

That creates a different delivery model from a conventional translation agency. It creates an ecosystem model.

Cultural authority in the age of AI

Artificial intelligence can now generate and transform language at a speed unimaginable when this work began.

That capability creates opportunity. It also creates responsibility.

The ability to generate language is not the same as the authority to speak for a language or a community.

Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge should not simply become ungoverned inputs into automated systems.

Permission matters. Provenance matters. Attribution matters. Cultural authority matters. Human verification matters.

A technically fluent output is not necessarily linguistically, culturally or contextually correct.

Technology can assist workflows.

Cultural authority remains human.

Eleven principles for the next decade

1. Treat comprehension as infrastructure. Information is not accessible merely because it exists online.
2. Design multilingual and audiovisual access from the beginning. Language should not be an afterthought attached to an English-language system.
3. Measure successful understanding and use. Publication numbers, page views and logins do not demonstrate that somebody understood information or successfully acted upon it.
4. Build genuine community feedback loops. Communication should enable communities to influence service design rather than merely receive institutional messages.
5. Preserve meaningful human pathways. As services become automated and AI-assisted, people must retain practical ways to obtain human assistance and challenge consequential outcomes.
6. Use technology to support language preservation under appropriate cultural authority. Digital tools can assist recording, teaching and intergenerational transmission where communities choose and govern their use.
7. Design for real conditions. Services must account for connectivity, devices, affordability, digital capability and the circumstances in which people actually encounter them.
8. Establish clear accountability for AI and automation. A technological system should never make human or institutional responsibility disappear.
9. Build Indigenous capability and economic participation. Where appropriate, communication programs should create opportunities for Indigenous people and organisations to participate in producing, governing and maintaining them.
10. Move from Digital Inclusion to Digital Agency. The ultimate measure is not simply whether people can reach a system, but whether they can understand it, navigate it, question it and retain meaningful control.
11. Prioritise high-consequence environments. Begin where misunderstanding can carry the greatest consequences: healthcare, justice, emergency communication and essential government services.

What should happen next?

The technologies available in 2026 make many elements of the original vision substantially easier to build.

But the question is no longer simply: Can we build it?

The more important questions are:

What should be built? By whom? Under whose authority? For which communication problems? And how will we know it actually improves comprehension and agency?

A contemporary approach would bring together communities, language authorities, Indigenous organisations and businesses, government, healthcare and justice institutions, interpreters, educators, technologists and service designers.

It would begin with real needs rather than technology.

Which interactions have the greatest consequences when misunderstood? Where would first-language audio or video materially improve comprehension? Which communities and language groups wish to participate? Who has the authority to approve the language and cultural material? How will contributors be recognised and paid? What material should never be placed into an AI system? Where must a human interpreter or specialist remain involved? How will an incorrect translation or automated output be challenged?

How will we know whether people's agency has actually increased?

From proposition to implementation

This publication is not an implementation manual.

The opportunities identified here require community authority, institutional leadership, Indigenous business participation, language expertise, professional expertise in the relevant sector, appropriate governance and genuine co-design.

Indigenous Translations contributes the originating strategic work, intellectual framework and continuing thought leadership.

Future operational projects should be delivered through appropriately constituted partnerships and teams with the cultural, linguistic, professional, technical and institutional capability required for each project.

This is particularly important in high-consequence environments.

No single organisation - and certainly no single individual - should attempt to hold every form of expertise required.

The appropriate model is partnership.

Indigenous Translations can provide the strategic framework around which those capabilities come together.

Eleven years on

The world of 2026 is technologically different from the world in which this work began.

Artificial intelligence can generate and transform text, speech, images and other forms of digital content at extraordinary speed. Mobile devices are vastly more capable. Digital government is increasingly normal. Language technologies continue to advance.

Australia's First Nations language sector has also developed significantly, supported by community-led activity, language organisations and continuing public investment. The Australian Government's Indigenous Languages and Arts program explicitly supports conservation, revitalisation, transmission and culturally appropriate use of digital technology in language work (Office for the Arts, 2025).

Yet the central human question remains remarkably similar.

Technology can distribute information. It cannot decide whether people have genuinely understood it.

Technology can generate language. It cannot independently confer cultural authority.

Technology can automate a service. It cannot absolve institutions of responsibility for whether that service is understood, fair or usable.

And technology can connect somebody to a system without necessarily giving them meaningful power within it.

The original Indigenous Translations work began with communication. Eleven years later, I believe the larger opportunity is agency.

Translation is the mechanism.

Comprehension is the objective.

Agency is the outcome.

The goal is no longer simply to connect people to digital systems.

It is to ensure that people remain capable of understanding, questioning, navigating and benefiting from the systems that increasingly shape their lives.

That is the proposition I carry from 2015 into 2026 - and beyond.

About the author

Naomi P. Gothard is the founder of Indigenous Translations.

Before receiving a Copyright Agency Publisher Fellowship in 2015, she had undertaken extensive outreach to government agencies concerning barriers to Indigenous first-language communication and the potential role of digital technology.

In May 2015, Copyright Agency named Gothard as one of five inaugural Publisher Fellows, awarding her \$10,000 to research digital ways to overcome barriers to Indigenous translations (Copyright Agency, 2015).

Her subsequent work included strategic research and practical digital communication initiatives, including the National Indigenous myGov Pilot documented in the Indigenous Translations Fellowship research archive.

Her work brings together business, strategic foresight, digital communication and human-centred approaches to emerging technology.

Her current role within Indigenous Translations is focused on founder direction, intellectual property, strategy and governance.

Operational opportunities arising from this work are intended to be developed through appropriately qualified Indigenous leadership, Indigenous businesses and organisational partnerships, language authorities and specialist delivery teams.

References

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2026). National Indigenous Languages Surveys. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/languages/national-indigenous-languages-surveys>

Copyright Agency. (2015, May 26). Copyright Agency awards five inaugural publisher fellows. <https://www.copyright.com.au/2015/05/copyright-agency-awards-five-inaugural-publisher-fellows/>

Copyright Agency. (2016). Copyright Agency annual report 2016. <https://www.copyright.com.au/about-us/governance/annual-reports/copyright-agency-annual-report-2016/>

Marmion, D., Obata, K., & Troy, J. (2014). Community, identity, wellbeing: The report of the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/publication/35167>

Office for the Arts. (2025). Indigenous Languages and Arts (ILA) Program - Fact sheet. Australian Government. <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/indigenous-languages-and-arts-ila-program-fact-sheet-december-2025.pdf>

Office for the Arts. (2026). Indigenous Languages and Arts program. Australian Government. <https://www.arts.gov.au/funding-and-support/indigenous-languages-and-arts-program>

Queensland Health. (2026). Considerations when requesting translations. Queensland Government. <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/public-health/groups/multicultural/interpreting-translation/language-services-program-framework/section-3-making-and-managing-bookings/key-considerations-when-requesting-translations>

Supreme Court of Queensland. (2026). Equal Treatment Benchbook (3rd ed.). Queensland Courts. <https://www.courts.qld.gov.au/going-to-court/court-resources/benchbooks>

Publication note

Indigenous Translations - Publication 01 | 2026

From Digital Inclusion to Digital Agency: Revisiting an Indigenous Translations digital communication strategy developed in 2015 - eleven years on.

This publication revisits and develops ideas originating in Indigenous Translations research and strategic work undertaken through the 2015 Copyright Agency Publisher Fellowship and associated Indigenous Translations activities. Historical evidence is distinguished from the author's 2026 analysis and strategic propositions.

© 2026 Naomi P. Gothard. All rights reserved.