Can Networked Participation Deliver Political Transformation?: An Australian Aboriginal activist context

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Acknowledgement to country

I respectfully acknowledge the Elders and custodians of the Whadjuk Nyungar nation, past and present, their descendants and kin. The Curtin University Bentley Campus enjoys the privilege of being located on the site where the Derbal Yerrigan (Swan River) and the Djarlgarra (Canning River) meet. The area is of great cultural significance and sustains the life and well being of the traditional custodians past and present. As representative of Curtin University I am proud to honour the Nyungar people and value this place of shared learning. I recognise the impacts of colonisation on Indigenous Australians and am committed to moving forward together in a spirit of mutual honour and respect.

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Abstract

Enthusiasm for the politically transformative potential of networked participation is echoed throughout Internet studies. In many accounts, *participation* in digital networks is configured as a central democratizing force: if networked platforms afford an opportunity for the previously voiceless to speak, the flattening of old hierarchies, it goes, must follow. However, critics are increasingly questioning this logic as social and political inequalities persist both on- and offline. This criticism is a particularly pertinent when considering the chronic inequalities that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Discourse around online Indigenous activism has emphasised ‘creative resistance through daily practices’, however, I argue that participation a. An overemphasis on networked participation obscures a number of myths and inconsistencies around digital network theory, and potentially draws scholarly attention away from the role of power in networks; its existence and operation throughout and within both on- and off-line activist networks.

Keywords: activism, Australia, digital networks, Indigenous, participation, politics
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Introduction

Indigenous peoples from around the world have long utilised, appropriated and modified digital networks for a wide range of purposes (Dyson, 2011), including cultural resilience and preservation (Molyneaux et al, 2014; Bidwell, Radoll & Turner, 2007), maintaining cultural identity (Lumby, 2010), education (Townsend, 2014), and activism (Petray, 2011; Soriano, 2011; Carlson & Frazer, 2017). A strong focus of scholarship has been on Indigenous peoples’ digital practices, particularly the compatibility of traditional ontologies and ways of knowing, which favour storytelling, visual representation and networking, with the affordances of Web 2.0 platforms (Molyneaux et al, 2014, p. 277; Townsend, 2014, p. 4). Discourse around Indigenous activism has emphasised ‘creative resistance through daily practices’ (Soriano, 2011, p. 4), for example, social networking to sustain community resilience (Molyneaux et al, 2014), (micro)blogging injustices and dissenting views (Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016), and disseminating memes to create an anti-colonial politics (Carlson & Frazer, 2017). In these accounts, participation in digital networks is configured as a central democratising force: if networked platforms afford an opportunity for the previously voiceless to speak, the flattening of old hierarchies, it goes, must follow. Enthusiasm for the politically transformative potential of networked participation is echoed throughout Internet studies, however critics (Couldry, 2015; Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016; Nakumara & Chow-White, 2013) are increasingly

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1 As author I acknowledge my background as white Anglo and accept my likely biases and limits in knowledge of Indigenous issues.
questioning its logic as social and political inequalities persist both on- and offline. In this essay I first provide a review of scholarship in the area of Australian Aboriginal activism and digital network use. I then draw on the work of Couldry (2015), which highlights the myths and inconsistencies around digital networks, and Bozzo and Franceschet's (2016) theory of power in networks, to argue that locating systems of power that operate within and across on- and off-line activist networks may enable further studies of digital network use by Australian Aboriginal activists and allies to better determine how to leverage these networks (and communities) to effect greater political change.

**Australian Aboriginal activism and digital network use**

In scholarly accounts, it is recognised that while known social, economic and geographical factors continue to contribute to notable lacks in internet communication technology (ICT) access and expertise among Aboriginal people, there is no shortage of political activity among those who use social networks (Petray, 2011; Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016; Carlson & Frazer, 2017). As Dreher, McCallum & Waller (2016) observe, there are myriad dissenting Australian Aboriginal voices online (p. 31-32). Activists like Gary Foley and Celeste Liddle actively blog and Tweet their frustrations with mainstream politics and respond to injustices, while Facebook groups like [Black Fella Revolution](#) create and share political memes and commentate on current affairs (Carlson & Frazer, 2017; Black Fella Revolution, 2014). Aboriginal people make up roughly only 2.5 per cent of the Australian population (Petray, 2011, p. 926), yet the demographic reportedly uses social media at rates up to 20 per cent times higher than mainstream Australia (Carlson & Frazer, 2015, p. 215). Furthermore, many Aboriginal
users of Facebook report ‘liking’ and following Aboriginal-affiliated causes and political pages as an important part of authenticating their Aboriginal identity online (Lumby, 2010, p. 71). Among the connected Indigenous population, the conditions for political participation described by Schlozman, Verba and Brady (2010) are present, namely access, skill-level, motivation and exposure to issues (p. 487). And yet, to borrow Couldry’s (2015) observation, the causal link, or lack thereof, between the extent that networked participation of Indigenous users can be said to influence or feed into wider political discourses to effect change, remains unclear.

In her study on the use of digital technology by an Aboriginal activist group based in Townsville, Queensland, Petray (2011) recognises the clear operational benefits of utilising email, blogs and social networking to coordinate activities and mobilise political action. However, Petray concludes the use of ‘push-button’ activism such as online petitions and Facebook posts do not illicit enough engagement to sustain a movement. She calls for activists to devise clearer targets, goals and instructions to their followers in order to achieve effective political action (p. 936). The study’s faintly technological-determinist criticism is thus aimed at the functions of social networking technology for failing to inspire engagement, and responsibility laid on activists to ‘get around’ the potential traps of social network sites. Like many scholars, Petray recognises and grapples with the difficulties of sustaining an online social movement enough to extend its reach ‘offline’. Descriptions of digital participation may not be enough to render an understanding of the factors that result in political outcomes, however Dreher, McCallum and Waller (2016) may offer an inroad.

In their work, Dreher, McCallum and Waller put the onus of action not on activists and users, but on those in established positions of power to ‘listen’. They conclude that “the
proliferation of diverse and dissenting Indigenous voices online does not necessarily ensure that those voices will be attended to or engaged with by decision-makers” (Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016, p. 33). According to them, political change fails not because of a platform’s inability to motivate users to act, nor the activist’s or everyday user’s type or level of participation, but the mainstream media and government’s failure to respond to views that are in a minority or otherwise unaligned or anathema to mainstream agendas and narratives. The mediatisation of politics is identified as one potential muffler on the ears of political elites. The authors are concerned with how the convergence of political and media interests impedes the capacity of policy-makers “to engage with grassroots or alternative media” (p. 27). The authors conclude the article calling for further investigation into the diversity of Indigenous voices, the types of views that mainstream media favour, and what might facilitate political listening (p. 35). The limit of the investigation again is that it stops at participation as the primary signifier of a healthy democracy; this time the participation of politicians, media players and prominent Indigenous figures in meaningful dialogue with diverse Indigenous voices.

Both studies point towards the impotence of networked participation but fall short of critiquing the “general logic of ‘horizontal’ networking” itself (Couldry, 2016, p. 614). PETRAY imagines the virtual space as separate to mainstream media and outside the control of the powerful elite - perhaps envisioning Habermas’s hypothetical ‘public sphere’ whereby inherently subjective, private individuals come together to form a necessarily rational and humane public free from government and corporate interests (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta & David, 2004, p. 319) - but surmises that these spaces are unable to challenge established politics because the platform encourages ‘armchair activism’, not ‘real’ action (McLellan, 2010 cited in Petray, 2011,
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p. 935). Here Habermas’s democratic public sphere fails as individuals are proven irrational or disengaged and separating virtual networks from mainstream media or state institutions is muddied. Our understandings of user practice must change, or we must refocus on locating power both within and outside networks. Dreher, McCallum & Waller’s article asks important questions about the need for political listening and surfacing diverse voices, but these discussions again beg the issue of power imbalances within networks - both ‘real’ and digital. Why are some voices listened to and not others, or to put it in Couldry’s (2015) terms, “what actions regularly get connected to what other actions, and what actions just as regularly do not get connected up in this way” (p. 615)? Next I will look at Couldry (2015) and Bozzo and Franceschet’s (2016) work to infer that a deeper understanding of how networks configure and reproduce power may go some way in pinpointing these imbalances.

Demythologising digital networks

Couldry (2015) surmises that the democratising digital network is as much a myth as the state-and-mass-media-generated ‘imagined community’ or nation state (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Mass media has been for decades positioned as a centralised ‘collectivity’ that tells us ‘what is going on’ in the world; acting as the ‘voice’ of a nation, thus solidifying particular narratives above others over time (Couldry, 2016, p. 614). As social networks like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly seen as the places where events ‘happen’, the myth of ‘us’ has been relocated onto digital networks. In Anderson’s terms, the collective ‘us’ online has been endowed with all the attributes of an ideal community, i.e. Habermas’s public sphere in which all citizens can speak free from the constraints of authority and cut through to what is ‘really’ happening (Katz et
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Harlow (2012) deemed that during the 2009 Guatemalan social movement, Facebook participation “helped generate debate and create a sense of community and collective identity, furthering the likelihood of users participating offline” (p. 14). However Harlow’s data shows that links to mainstream media articles were the most frequent type of post at 35 per cent, with alternative news articles comprising only 15 per cent (p. 13). Additionally, the second-highest purpose of comments was to ‘convey information’ (p. 12). It remains unclear how much of the movement’s ‘collective identity’ was shaped by mainstream information and narrative. Here we see mainstream media potentially playing a prominent role in a movement that has been critically assessed as networked and user-driven.\(^2\) While social networks are undeniably important in mobilising political action quickly and efficiently, the danger of the egalitarian network myth is that it may obscure the intrusion of mediatised commercial and state interests in digital social space, as well as draw attention away from issues of sustaining and resourcing movements in the long-term (Couldry, 2015). I argue that issues of whether activist communities can access resources due to power imbalances in digital networks (who is ‘heard’ or given attention) and funding restrictions imposed by governments and institutions should be given more weight in scholarly case studies than participatory behaviour alone.

Everyday users of social networks indeed now have a voice, but so do to long-established state and media institutions, who use the very same networks. These institutions have always been networked, and have only intensified their networks in the digital age (Couldry, 2015, p. 611). The networks themselves are owned by private entities with commercial interests in the data of their users (Couldry, 2015, p. 609; Hathaway, 2014, p. 306). Furthermore, “governments

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\(^2\) Another example where mainstream media’s contribution to a ‘Facebook-led’ movement has been underplayed is the 2015 Guatemalan protests. Attendees to the protest soared when a mainstream media outlet shared the Facebook event page, however the movement is attributed to nine ordinary Facebook users (Rogers, 2015).
are increasingly requesting and can even compel private sector assistance in conducting voice or data surveillance”, meaning governments are actively seeking pathways to access the rich data sources of social networks (Hathaway, 2014, p. 310). While on one hand we must recognise that “the very interconnectedness of people can be denied [by states] and freedom of communication and political freedoms are clearly linked” (Hathaway, 2014, p. 309), the link becomes less clear when supposed freedom of communication does not equate to full political freedom i.e. the ability to participate effectively in political debate and be heard, which has been a common experience of Aboriginal activists in Australia (Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016). Further to this, evidence points to long-term social patterns becoming digitally networked, such as the ‘platformed racism’ experienced by ordinary Aboriginal people online after crowdsbooed Indigenous Australian Football League player Adam Goodes during a match (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). We cannot assume that freedoms of communication and participation automatically result in social and political equality.

Instead of imagining social networks as domains that automatically elevate the most persuasive or entrepreneurial voices - a prevailing concept with neoliberal undertones - Couldry unsensationally reads networks as “the outcome of local struggles over resources in particular historical contexts” (p. 614). This shifts the approach to networks from one focused on the network as symbolic route to democracy (the only trick being to get the type and/or level of

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3 While researching this essay, I found similarities between Couldry’s (2016) unsensationalist concept of networks and Latour’s (2005) actor-network theory whereby he discourages determinist/structuralist thinking by prescribing the network scholar five areas of concern: groups, actions, objects, facts and discourse. The links need to be fleshed out but it seems both attempt to ‘see through’ digital network myths, which have tended to stand in for the ‘social’ i.e. there has been a lack of theoretical leg-work bridging digital networks and social change; scholars have simply inserted ‘network’ where they have envisioned transformation. As Couldry puts it, “we do not yet know what ‘a successful transition to [a different politics] looks like’ ([Juris,] 2013, p. 214): put more bluntly, accounts of digital networks... have not provided such answers” (2016, p. 619). Latour’s instructions may be another way to if not sketch out a ‘successful transition’ then produce research that gives sober consideration to all physical and nonphysical actors at play in digital networks.
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participation right), to one focused on power and resource allocation situated in time. For accounts of networked Aboriginal Australian activism, the emphasis may then change to questions of how resources - time, money and energy - flow through and are sustained in these networks, how they respond to ‘short-term external events’ and what capacity they have for ‘long-term adaptive responses’ (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013, p. 9, quoted in Couldry, 2015, p. 619). Couldry suggests sustained resourcing, not simply a free horizontal networked space, is required for a political environment in which conflict and conflict resolution are both accommodated, yet sustained resourcing implies organisational/institutional structures, which further challenges the myth of the ideal network sitting ‘outside’ structures (p. 614). Perhaps an avenue for future studies of digital Aboriginal activism could be to locate how and why activist groups are, or are not, financially and socially resourced, and put pressure back on policy-makers and other powerful elites to close disparities.

Bozzo and Franceschet’s (2016) account of how power works in networks states that an actor is more powerful if its connections do not have many of their own connections or options. Conversely, a well-connected actor linked to many other well-connected actors is not as powerful. In Bozzo and Franceschet’s view, options equal power. What political options do Indigenous Australians have? The few prominent Indigenous political players are more likely to echo mainstream party politics more than dissenting opinions (Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016). This suggests the government remains disproportionally powerful because Indigenous people, due to complex factors, continue to have fewer options and alternatives for political representation - and indeed for education, health treatment, employment and access to integral technologies such the Internet - than mainstream populations, who can pick and choose from a
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much wider range of representatives and life trajectories. Although there are arguably many options for voicing Indigenous opinions via digital networks, I would also ask to whom these voices are connected? The prevalence of social media ‘bubbles’ whereby online communities with similar interests become insular may be relevant here.

We can take as a mini case-study the recent incident involving the mainstream Australian morning television program Sunrise. Sunrise conducted a discussion panel on adoption rates of Aboriginal children. None of the panelists were Indigenous; indeed all were from white-Anglo backgrounds. The segment relayed a number of false facts and one panelist even suggested reinstating the policy which resulted in the Stolen Generation. The segment provoked widespread condemnation on social media and from other mainstream media outlets for its racist overtones, and protesters gathered outside the program’s studio, which the broadcaster blanked out (Latham, 2018). As such, an issue that would be far from new to activists, the removal of Aboriginal children from homes to enter the foster care system, is brought into the national spotlight due to the blunders of a mainstream program. The program’s power to reach a wide audience provoked a wide response, while by the same token its power enabled it to control and contain the protest by rendering the relatively small group of on-ground protesters invisible. The response to this incident involving a mainstream media player could be said to differ from other related activist action because it was ‘listened’ to - the powerful connections of the program begetting a powerful response.
Conclusion

I have presented an alternative, though admittedly ‘negative argument’ to the discourse on participation within digital networks (Couldry, 2015, p. 621). Couldry’s concept of the digital network as a myth of ‘collectivity’ highlights the need to look beyond the assumption that ‘us’/’we’ online are autonomous and ‘free’ to speak and be heard on an equal footing online - this myth potentially benefits those already in power, as networked action, though its impact remains unclear, is still imbued with transformative powers. For minority communities such as Aboriginal Australia, the Web’s unique networking capabilities to coordinate activities and mobilise political action are all the more important as the struggle for Indigenous recognition, self-determination and equality continues to have its voices silenced. However, I argue that Internet studies must encompass not just user practices and participatory behaviours but the mediatisation of and influence of commercial and state interests on networks, where resources are allocated and sustained, and macro or long-term structural forces at work. At this point in history, almost any object, group or actor has a networked web presence, so research efforts must extend beyond the idea that platforms automatically enable democracy.
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