

First Australians: Building comm-unity online
through activism and Web 2.0

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Abstract

This paper reviews a selection of published scholarly articles concerning the uptake and use of Web 2.0 technologies by Indigenous Australians to fight for Indigenous rights. This paper also reviews various websites and social media sites where Indigenous Australians' connect with each other, express their political viewpoint, exercise resistance, and advocate for Indigenous rights. The paper follows Indigenous Australians' advocacy and activism and how online and offline activities converge and support their overall political and social movements. It explores how the pursuit of these common causes collaboratively and collectively through weak ties via modern mediating technologies, to rally support and unity, enhances Indigenous communications, generates solidarity and strengthens Indigenous community ties. This paper concludes that Web 2.0 has strengthened ties in online Indigenous communities by facilitating their engagement in social and political movements that advocate Indigenous rights.

Keywords: Advocacy, colonialisation, community, cyber-activism, Indigeneity, Indigenous Australians, Indigenous rights, online activism, social capital, social movements, social networking, weak ties / strong ties, Web 2.0 technologies

First Australians: Building comm-unity online through activism and Web 2.0

First Australians have experienced inequalities and inequities since colonialisation. Reductive and abusive treatment ranging from segregation and family separation to forced assimilation, lack of recognition as Australia's First people, land rights issues, life expectancy disparity with the rest of Australia, poverty, lack of education and proper health care, are but a starting point of their ongoing struggle. First Australians' long battle for recognition, rights, apology, social justice and equity, has fueled activism and social movements over time, by way of communications via the conventional Indigenous grapevine through to modern day information and communication technologies (ICTs). AIATSIS (n.d.) informs that the first Indigenous political organisations were formed in the 1920s which heralded the modern movement for Indigenous rights in Australia. More recently, Indigenous groups have been using social media to break the colonial cycle (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015, p.688). The Internet and Web 2.0 has provided access to a broader audience of potential supporters for Indigenous rights and freedoms. Soriano (2012, pp.39-40) talks of online spaces providing Indigenous people with opportunity for communication, broader reach to international audiences, ability to attract attention to their causes and claims, as well as recognition for and assertion of their cultural identity and history. More importantly, the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies have improved communications across geographically isolated and disparate Indigenous communities. Further, Web 2.0 supports oral communications. This is important because oral communication, 'yarning', is an integral element of Indigenous culture in Australia. In this way, Web 2.0 provides Indigenous Australians access to a

compatible, inclusive online environment. Yarn Australia (<http://yarnaaustralia.com/>) and its extensions, promote and facilitate conversations using Web 2.0 technologies. Wellman & Gulia state that Web 2.0 and the Internet combines “the rapid dissemination of mass media with the persuasiveness of personal communications” (1999, p.7). This facilitates networking, so that First Australians themselves are able to collectively and more effectively ‘rattle the cage’ to achieve progress for their people. This ability to perform collective activism through mediated technologies reinforces solidarity and promotes community ties. Web 2.0 has strengthened ties in online Indigenous communities by facilitating their engagement in social and political movements that advocate Indigenous rights.

Despite significant improvements in communication technologies, there has been a slower response to these technologies on the part of Indigenous Australians in remote regions. This is due in part to unreliable services because of geographic remoteness, together with associated high costs of providing these services and technologies to remote areas, and also partly because of low ICT literacy, language barriers and Indigenous concerns about cultural ownership rights. Dyson explains that Indigenous populations have experienced exclusion and access difficulties resulting from a complex mix of socioeconomic, geographic and language factors (2011, p.256). Notwithstanding these barriers, as technologies have reduced in cost, and services to remote locations in Australia have improved, uptake of these technologies has occurred in isolated Indigenous communities. As Web 2.0 accommodates language diversity, Indigenous populations are drawn to it. In fact, Dyson points to a range of Indigenous language revival programs in Australia facilitated through the use of Web 2.0 technologies (2011, p.263). Indigenous youth

particularly are drawn to Web 2.0's multi-media technologies. According to Dreher, McCallum & Waller, Indigenous Australians have become very active social media users (2016, p.29). In support of this, these scholars cite recent statistical evidence that Facebook enjoys an active uptake by 73% of Australia's Indigenous population compared to 62% of the general Australian population (2016, p.29). Frazer & Carlson provide a recent estimation that Indigenous Australians' overall use of social media is 20% higher than other Australians (2017, p.4). Clearly, Indigenous Australians are using Web 2.0 technologies to connect and communicate online.

Indigenous Australians are attracted to Web 2.0 technologies like multi-media and video for their online communication as these technologies accommodate their oral traditions and minimize language and literacy barriers. Petray agrees saying, "certain forms of Web 2.0 ... do not require extensive literacy skills and privilege the oral culture that Aboriginal society is founded on" (2011, p.936). YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/>) and Vimeo (www.vimeo.com/) are prime examples of support for the playing out of Indigenous oral culture through Web 2.0 technologies. These sites afford the ability to record and disseminate voices and motion online through the use of multi-media tools. These technologies are used by Indigenous Australians to share and network via social media sites, like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram using hashtags such as #sixtythousand, and also via blogs (see Leesa Watego's list of Aboriginal bloggers (<http://deadlybloggers.com/deadly-bloggers-directory/>), and websites such as Stayin' on Track (<https://stayinontrack.com/>) where Indigenous dads share their experiences of fatherhood. Indigenous Australians are communicating and linking to one another through Web 2.0 technologies, and increasing their online presence.

Whilst Web 2.0 and the Internet help Indigenous people to connect to each other, to build community, it is important that identity is established to verify belonging and inclusion. "Proof of Indigeneity is a requisite of entry into the real world of Indigenous communities in Australia" (Lumby, 2010, p.71). However online, imposters can be disguised and protected through anonymity and pseudonymity, and as such can perform misrepresentation of identity. Cyber-performance is a common phenomenon, and online performance and identity formation does not in itself represent deliberate mischief or concealment per se, but is a normal part of self-presentation, self-expression and personalisation. Indigenous Australians themselves, use avatars for their profile pictures, just like many people online, to express self and identity. Avatars are beneficial in resisting prejudice and bias, and therefore have an equalizing effect. Indeed, the use of avatars in social media profiles rather than actual photographic images may well align with cultural sensitivities related to Indigenous customs in Australia connected to the passing of Indigenous people. Papacharissi says that Facebook is relatively loosely-structured and flexible, which enables freer self-presentation (p.215). Self-presentation is typically done in relation to others, such as 'Friends', rather than in isolation. As social media sites are spaces where many people from diverse provenance converge, it can become a minefield of 'context collision' where one is judged by their undiluted performances of self which are open to interpretation by a mixed audience and will likely be confusing and revealing all at once, affecting one's reputation. Many random and isolated pieces of information aggregate over time to form a real-and-telling story. Thompson says that these "little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of [you], your friends and family" (2008, para.16). Online identity can be examined and authenticated through 'Profiles' and 'Friends'

lists. Because 'Friends' lists denote associations, one can be judged by who they know, for better or worse. Papacharissi explains that social media profiles and displayed connections present information that can be assessed by onlookers to ascertain whether the profile is credible and reliable (2009, p.202). So, falsehoods can be uncovered. Lumby warns that faking-it online can generate penalties (2010, p.74). Indigenous Australians have their own set of cultural cues and codes by which to identify Indigeneity and assess credibility and belonging. This is nuanced and involves cultural signifiers. Lumby explains that "performance of Indigeneity is necessary for the subject position to be taken seriously, and for recognition to occur in a meaningful way, and the performance requires knowledge of the terrain" (2010, p.71). Once identity, belonging and trust is ascertained, weak ties have the potentiality to develop into stronger ties. Weak and strong ties between individuals establish community.

Community ties are formed through communication and co-operation. Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta & David say that community relates to being in a common space and time (2004, p.310). Therefore, participatory websites, blogs and social media sites provide "a public space with potential for building or enlarging the sense of belonging to a community" (Lumby, 2010, p.69). Common themes and interests encourage participation. Examples of this include Yarn Australia's 'Sixty Thousand' Facebook and Instagram pages and the 'Blackfulla Revolution' Facebook pages, as well as websites like Creative Spirits (<https://www.creativespirits.info/>) and ANTaR (<https://antar.org.au/>). These spaces support Indigeneity and communication, and can forge a sense of community. Australia's Indigenous community benefit from the communicative and collaborative offerings of the Internet and Web 2.0. Through

these means they are able to exercise their social and political actions in solidarity, and in so doing enhance their online community ties.

Community is represented by ties of mixed strengths along a continuum. Online, community is not constrained by geography or limited by physicality. Ties can be latent or active. Strong ties are typically limited in quantity per person and are represented by close mutual connection between trusted friends/family, generally involving frequent contact. Steinkuehler & Williams define strong ties as exclusive and represent bonding social capital (2006, para.36). Contrastingly, weak or tenuous ties are represented by more casual relationships, such as acquaintances/contacts. These tenuous ties can be numerous and due to online media, have exponentiated in recent times. Whilst these links are weak, the number of connections and density of exchanges are substantial (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007, p.54). Steinkuehler & Williams define weak ties as inclusive and represent bridging social capital (2006, para.36). Bridging social capital created by weak ties is particularly conducive to online dynamics. According to Ridings & Gefen, people participate in online communities to gain social support, knowledge and information exchange from broader expertise than exists in their usual social circles, which is a valuable resource in online communities due to weak ties (2004, para.27). Weak ties facilitate information transfer and this is greatly accentuated online. So, mediating technologies can mean dramatic upscaling. The #hashtag, for instance, expands the conversation and the audience. Small contributions by many participants creates a granular effect (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007, p.57). This can render an impressive, dynamic outcome. As such, online media are a strong platform for activism and drumming up support for social causes.

Engagement in Indigenous advocacy and activism online, can strengthen community ties within online Indigenous communities. Katz et al. believe that solidarity is essential for community formation, and the Internet can be a useful resource for solidarity (2004, p.308) and that much more can be accomplished as a community than any aggregate of individual action (p306). Community and solidarity is strengthened through participatory Web 2.0 technologies. According to Aguiton & Cardon, Web 2.0 introduces horizontal connections and co-operation (2007, p.58). The ability to mobilize weak ties is Web 2.0's strength. Because Web 2.0 presents a world of horizontal connections, it sidelines traditional hierarchical and authoritative communication structures. Katz et al. explain that "online interactions and their feeling of community are amplified by their ability to bypass authority and experience horizontal equality, as well as devise their own rules" (2004, pp.344-5). For Indigenous Australians, tapping into their community across geographic boundaries and strengthening ties with those with shared lived experience, away from the interference of government, is empowering and liberating. This form of communication eliminates the need to function within the confines of the power structures of those they are fighting against. This alternative delivers autonomy, freedom from powerlessness and misrepresentation through distortion of meaning. Web 2.0 then, stacks up to be a good fit for Indigenous people to stage their resistance to colonialism. Social movement, activism and protests that empower Indigenous people can be faster, more effective and more easily achieved, when organised horizontally through the auspices of social media networks and the Internet. People are more likely to share information that is relevant and important to them, expanding its dissemination. This can be simply advertising social events, or fighting for rights. This is witnessed on social media using hashtags such as

#sixtythousand and #sosblakaustralia. Harnessing the power of Web 2.0 to support and enhance offline activism can lead to greater effectiveness through a larger network of active supporters. "Web 2.0 has the potential to democratize and decentralize large social Movements" (Petray, 2011, p.936). Cyber-activism using Web 2.0 technologies allows Indigenous Australians opportunity to connect to their community based on themes of common and mutual interest, and along the way, create and develop stronger, more enduring relational ties online.

Numerous rally cries and protests have been staged by Indigenous Australians to tackle issues of concern, such as black deaths in custody, Indigenous land rights - *The Tent Embassy*, Native title - *Mabo*, the 1965 'Freedom Ride' campaign, the 'Stolen Generations' - *Bringing them Home*, protesting colonisation - *Day of Mourning*, to name a few. Some movements have been published online such as 'Recognise' (<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/>) which is a top down, well-funded corporate sponsored campaign. Its youth campaign 'RecogniseThis' operates through Facebook. Also, #sosblakaustralia (<http://www.sosblakaustralia.com/>) is an ongoing grassroots, community level campaign supported by donations. Dreher, McCallum & Waller indicate that "online communications have been vital to building solidarity networks and mobilizing support" (2016, p.34). A very recent protest 'StolenWealth Games Brisbane April 2018' appears on the 'Blackfulla Revolution' Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ourcountryourchoice/>). Web 2.0 provides new opportunities for Indigenous protest.

Social media and Web 2.0 provide opportunity for new forms of political and social expression, and performance of collective action. Internet memes are an example of Web 2.0 innovation used for this purpose. Frazer & Carlson anticipate

that memes may represent new ways for Indigenous Australians to engage in activism (2017, p.5). Memes proliferated on the Facebook page, 'Blackfulla Revolution' between 2012 and 2016. Resistance memes created by Indigenous activists and disseminated on social media have been catalysts for greater awareness, engagement and deeper scrutiny into the concerns and issues of Indigenous Australia (Welcome to Country, 2017). According to Dreher, McCallum & Waller, Indigenous Australians are actively using emerging technological resources in the online environment to voice their concerns and to effect change (2016, p.34). Web 2.0 and social media are important for activists to progress their movement, but of significance beyond this, are the relationships they negotiate and community they establish through its use (Petray, 2013, p.16). Social actions performed through Web 2.0 contribute to the development of stronger online Indigenous community ties.

Indigenous Australians have endured inequality and reductive experiences since colonisation. For almost a hundred years Indigenous Australians have fought against inequities and humiliations through the establishment of formal Indigenous political organisations and activism, seeking apology, fair treatment, reconciliation, respect and rights. More recently, through the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies, Indigenous Australians have been able to extend their reach to connect with each other easily and expediently. Web 2.0 and mediating technologies increase information dissemination via weak ties. Despite a slower uptake of these technologies in Indigenous communities due to geographic, cultural and other barriers, Indigenous Australians now engage with these technologies more broadly. These technologies complement and are compatible with Indigenous Australians' cultural and everyday needs. They make use of these technologies to communicate,

express their collective cultural identity and Indigeneity, promote solidarity, disseminate their messages of advocacy, and rally for rights. Their online communications and actions support their offline protests to consolidate their social and political movements. Commitment and engagement with these common pursuits and activities, strengthen their relations and unity. By using Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate and perform social and political movements advocating Indigenous rights, Indigenous Australians strengthen their online community ties.

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