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.

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 democratising 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,

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

al, 2014, p. 319). 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 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 crowds booed

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).[3] 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.

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

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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