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**Web 2.0 Indigenous activism:
virtual communities empowering Indigenous Australian voices**

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Acknowledgement of 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

This paper discusses the efficacy of Web 2.0 technologies to encourage individuals spread across time and space to unite into virtual activist communities, campaigning for Indigenous Australian recognition through the creation of alternative narratives to the traditional colonialist discourse. . It considers the ephemeral and unstable nature of virtual communities, and the value to activism of the weak ties they produce. The paper examines the creation of “resistance hashtags” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.7) employed for the #SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA, #IndigenousDads, #InvasionDay, #SurvivalDay and #WhiteProverbs campaigns to determine the level of success achieved through virtual community activism, and explores the possible risks and vulnerabilities attached to social media activism for Indigenous Australian people. It concludes that, despite the acrimony these communities attract, Web 2.0 technologies facilitate the effective formation of virtual activist communities which unite to empower Indigenous Australian voices.

Keywords: Indigenous Australian, activism, community, hashtag, social media, Web2.0

Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies, primarily social media, offers Indigenous activists unprecedented opportunities to connect and interact with other people both locally and across the globe, and campaigns organised by Indigenous Australians have dotted the social media landscape in recent years (Carlson & Dreher, 2018, p.17). However, there appears a dearth of research specifically exploring Indigenous Australian online activism and the virtual communities which emerge from the campaigns they support. Over time, Indigenous Australians have creatively repurposed social media to deliver a contemporary space in which to form virtual communities of activists (Wilson, Carlson & Sciascia, 2017, p.1), providing these communities with both a place for, and an instrument of protest, shaping the way they structure and model online campaigns (Petray, 2013, p.7). This enables Indigenous activist communities to resourcefully employ new ways of challenging colonialist discourse (Carlson & Dreher, 2018, p.17) and invoke innovative strategies to dislocate dominant power structures and agitate for alternatives to replace them (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.45). However, social media are not balanced or unprejudiced milieus, instead remaining embedded with hierarchies and cultural and social norms (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.1). Indigenous Australians often experience the online activist space as malicious, suffering trolling, racism, abuse and violent threats (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.50). In addition, virtual community protest voices often remain unheard by governments and policymakers (Carlson & Dreher, 2018, p.17). This paper focuses on several Indigenous campaigns and the communities that unite around them in support, challenging mainstream discourse and essentialist rhetoric. It argues that, despite the acrimony these communities attract, Web 2.0 technologies facilitate the effective formation of virtual activist communities which unite to empower Indigenous Australian voices.

Ephemeral Communities

The affordances of social media and the weak ties they generate encourage the creation and development of Indigenous activist communities, encompassing people from different geographical locations, cultures and nations connected in a common purpose (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.90). Petray (2013) describes these communities as containing a “collective identity” (p.4), a shared space essential for providing activists with a sense of unity and determination,

thereby maintaining the endurance of a movement (Petray, 2013, p.4). Online activist communities emerge through “shared interests” rather than “shared place or ancestry” (Wellman, & Gulia, 1999 p.171) and they develop organically, creating themselves (Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta & David, 2004, p.321) by forming “intimate secondary relationships: informal, frequent and supportive community ties that ...operate only in one specialized domain” (Wellman & Gulia, 1999 p.180). Described by Katz et al (2004) as “neo-tribes” (p.342) and defined as “unstable, self-defined communities marked by fluidity and dispersal” (Katz et al, 2004, p.342), online communities and the weak ties they produce present as more evanescent, difficult to maintain and volatile in comparison to ties in a physical community (Katz et al, 2004, p.336). However, the affordances of Web 2.0 also facilitate the expansion of the “‘virtual we’ of Indigenous solidarity” (Petray, 2010, p.11) embodying both Indigenous and non-Indigenous advocates and sympathisers from across the globe (Petray, 2010, p.11), and Indigenous activists manifest this solidarity through online “resistance hashtags” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.7).

Resistance hashtags

Web 2.0 affordances create and activate virtual communities much faster and across larger geographical spaces than communities which develop offline (Katz et al, 2004, p.319). One vital social media tool, employed by online Indigenous activists to organise protests and rapidly form communities of weak ties to further resistance to the colonialist dogma, is the hashtag (Carlson & Dreher, 2018, p.17). As Fransen-Taylor and Narayan (2018) observe, “the speed with which hashtags can come into being in response to emerging issues allows them to facilitate the formation of ad hoc publics” (p.312). The plethora of information on social media suggests “access and visibility is particularly transient in cyberspace” (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.319) and Petray (2010) argues that the increase in “push-button activism” (p.2), while encouraging participation by the activist community, “also changes the notion of participation as marches and demonstrations give way to electronic petitions and Facebook fan pages” (Petray, 2010, p.2). Within the space of a few minutes, individuals can sign petitions, share information, write an email or join an online campaign, creating the perception of involvement in a cause with nominal participation (Petray, 2010, p.13). Therefore, “resistance hashtags” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.7) provide an effective campaign tool to grow online communities consisting of previously unconnected individuals who gather information, engage

in conversations and share strategies under a specific banner (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.312).

#SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA

One of the most successful “resistance hashtags” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.7), employed to agitate an online activist community, was #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA. In a move reminiscent of the forced removal of Indigenous Australians from their land during colonisation, the West Australian government, in 2014, proposed closing 274 remote Indigenous communities (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.45), potentially displacing as many as 12,000 people from their homes (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.84). Then Prime Minister Abbott’s ill-advised comments further incensed Indigenous Australians when he suggested the “notion of Indigenous people living in the country as a ‘lifestyle choice’” (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.89). Carlson and Frazer (2016) refer to this as a “critical event”, infuriating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians enough to spurn them into united protest (p.90). The Bieundurry family from the Wangkatjungka community took to the internet to connect with kin across the country via a private Facebook group and from here; an international movement began (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.89).

Web 2.0 activism achieves greater community participation when it works in conjunction with offline physical demonstrations (Petray, 2010, p.13). The #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA campaign sent out a call to action, and over 4000 members of this online community took to the streets in united offline protests (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.90). Response from mainstream media was less than supportive, referring to the protesters as “selfish rabble” (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.90). Undeterred, the #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA community responded by appropriating the phrase and applying the tag #selfishrabble to tweets, photos and memes which they shared on Twitter and Facebook. Social media provided creative avenues for the #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA community to voice alternative perspectives and responses to mainstream media attacks (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.90).

The burgeoning community mobilized once again and online protests spilled over into offline spaces culminating in much larger numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people demonstrating at rallies across Australia and the world (McCallum, Waller & Dreher, 2016,

p.33). Their communal message: “Stop the forced closures of Aboriginal communities” (#SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA website). The former West Australian Premier Colin Barnett questioned the legitimacy of the protests, intimating most of the activists were not part of the communities involved and therefore should not have a say in the matter, reflecting “an homogenous, unified set of values, to the notion that only ‘remote’ Aboriginal people could have a say in this particular case” (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.91). Furthermore, rather than reporting the facts behind the demonstrations, mainstream media again preferred to demonise the protesters (McCallum et al., 2016, p.33). The #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA community employed social media again to ridicule the hegemonic discourse “amplifying the voices of those ignored by mainstream media” (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.91). The outcome of the #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA movement in regards to funding remains contentious, however the West Australian government eventually shelved plans to close communities (Perpitch, 2018). The #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA movement demonstrates “community-level social media activism of national significance and international reach” (McCallum et al., 2016, p.32). #SOSBLAKA AUSTRALIA provides an example of social media as a powerful tool for gathering activist communities under a single banner and propelling them into action. It offers creative opportunities to challenge the government and mainstream media narrative which labours to silence Indigenous Australian voices (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.92).

#IndigenousDads

The “resistance hashtag” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.7) #IndigenousDads was created to collate messages on social media of dignity and love for Indigenous Australian fathers. The activist community was responding to a cartoon drawn by Bill Leak and published in The Australian characterizing Indigenous fathers as abusive (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.45). The cartoon was shared on social media, replete with derogatory remarks aimed at Indigenous fathers (Carlson, Jones, Harris, Quezada & Frazer, 2017, p.3). Community anger towards the cartoon instigated the #IndigenousDads campaign, encouraging Indigenous children and parents to post images and comments applauding fathers as loving role models and inspirations (Carlson et al., 2017, p.5). The Press Council determined that the cartoon did not cause “substantial offence, distress or prejudice” (Carlson et al., 2017, p.3), however this was not the lived experience for Indigenous Australians, who turned to social media to voice their exasperation and resentment in

a “shared recognition” of the trauma they experienced (Carlson et al., 2017, p.3). The term “shared recognition” describes a “collective sense of anger and frustration experienced by Indigenous people when traumatic events in the public domain act as reminders of the enduringness of colonial violence” (Carlson et al., 2017, p.1). This term acknowledges a communal rejection of racism directed at Indigenous Australians on social media platforms (Carlson et al., 2017, p.1). The #IndigenousDads campaign functioned to challenge the essentialist narrative of Leak’s cartoon, creating an online space for the community to celebrate Indigenous men and their contribution to family care. (Carlson et al., 2017, p.13)

#InvasionDay

The ‘Australia Day You Way’ campaign began in 2014, encouraging Australians to post individual celebrations under the hashtag #AustraliaDay, the intention to encapsulate the festivities “to an annual time capsule stored by the National Museum of Australia” (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.311). For Indigenous Australians however, the symbolism of this day represents decades of dispossession, persecution and anguish and demonstrates “the tension between the mainstream Australian discourse and the hurt and anger felt by Australian Indigenous people in regard to Australia Day” (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.315). The Indigenous community turned to social media again, employing the “resistance hashtags” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.7) #Invasion Day and #SurvivalDay to counteract the Australia Day celebratory discourse. The hashtags gathered together an ad hoc virtual community that sought to resist the essentialist rhetoric of commemoration in the ‘Australia Day Your Way’ campaign, providing instead alternative representations and voices of dissent (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.316). The results from research conducted by Fransen-Taylor and Narayan (2018) noted “this alternate narrative was excluded from the official time capsule” (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.311), indicating that alternative perspectives which contest dominant narratives suffer similar treatment to public graffiti in that they are expunged from public spaces (Fransen-Taylor, & Narayan, 2018, p.313).

#WhiteProverbs

Indigenous online activism operates not just nationally but internationally, uniting Indigenous people on a global scale. From its creation in 2014, the “resistance hashtag” (Petray

& Collin, 2017, p.7) #WhiteProverbs produced a virtual activist community as it trended across the world (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.1). The goal of #WhiteProverbs is to challenge racism and White privilege through a series of satirical memes and tweets (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.2) which draw “attention to racist and ethnocentric comments used to justify or mask White privilege” (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.1). A vital part of defeating racism is for non-Indigenous people to recognise and confront their own White privilege, however, Petray and Collin (2017) note the difficulty of holding up a mirror to non-Indigenous people and reflecting back their White privilege and associated benefits, amassed at the expense of Indigenous Australians (p.3). While memes may be used to counter racist and essentialist discourse, they may also work to perpetuate existing stereotypes, a narrative often excused by colonial discourse as protecting free speech and humour (Frazer & Carlson, 2017, p.5) which demonstrates the tensions that exist for Indigenous people in overcoming mainstream racist narratives and representations.

Indigenous activist challenges

Each of these activist movements, although varied in their purpose, exploits the affordances of Web 2.0 to establish virtual communities designed to deliver an alternative narrative and challenge dominant culture (Frazer & Carlson, 2017, p.2). However, although social media provide the opportunities for activist communities to unite across geographical boundaries, this doesn't necessarily produce positive political or social outcomes for Indigenous Australians (Carlson & Frazer, 2016, p.88). Doubts exist as to the effectiveness of this space in ensuring Indigenous voices are heard by policy makers. The inability of “influential players to listen sits at the heart of the failure of Indigenous policy in Australia” (McCallum et al., 2016, p.24), and “a voice that is not heard or recognized cannot fully achieve the promise of democratic participation or media justice” (McCallum et al., 2016, p.27). Petray (2011) argues that although social media platforms offer innovative ways for communities to engage in activist protests, they may also generate a “digital subaltern” (p.935), a group concealed and ignored in society due to their inability to participate in Web 2.0 activist movements (Petray, 2011, p.935). Online community activists may experience a kind of “connected solitude” (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.44) due to the ephemeral nature of virtual communities (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.44) and the discourse of colonialism is formidable, therefore protesting often results in pain and a sense of defeat (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.44) when “colonial normativities invariably position

Indigenous people as the strange ‘other’ necessitating homogenisation” (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p.51). These challenges highlight the continuing biases which exist within online spaces however further research into Indigenous Australian online activism and the virtual communities which emerge from the campaigns they support may assist in refining activist participation, thereby improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 presents unprecedented opportunities for Indigenous Australian activists to form virtual communities across time and space under a united banner, and social media platforms offer innovative ways for these communities to engage in activist protests. However, online Indigenous activists continue to suffer racism, trolling, violence and a persistent struggle against mainstream Australia’s essentialist notions of colonialism. By amassing support through a hashtag community Indigenous Australians create opportunities to provide an alternative narrative to predominant discourse and racial vilification. In this way, despite the acrimony they attract, Web 2.0 technologies facilitate the effective formation of virtual activist communities which unite to empower Indigenous Australian voices.

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