New Ways to Yarn: expanding Aboriginal communities and

communications beyond the physical

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WARNING

Please be advised that the following document may contain mentions of deceased persons. (NITV Staff Writer, 2017)

'**Acknowledgement to Country (Boodja)**

Curtin University would like to pay our respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of our community by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which the Bentley Campus is located, the Wadjuk people of the Nyungar Nation; and on our Kalgoorlie Campus, the Wongutha people of the North-Eastern Goldfields.' (Centre for Aboriginal Studies, https://karda.curtin.edu.au/)

Abstract

This paper will argue that the internet is an invaluable addition to Aboriginal communities, given the appropriate introduction, while also considering awareness, access and inclusion of all. Indigenous people of Australia use the internet, specifically the participatory nature of Web 2.0, to build and evolve their culture and thus their communities. The focus will be on the advent of social media usage and identity, both personal and community-based. These examples will highlight that the use of the Internet will further the interests of all Aboriginals in their own culture and strengthen confidence in their identity on and off-line.

Introduction

Defining the concept that encapsulates all the ideas of 'community' is a complex matter, as Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta & David (2004), discuss. Therefore, the proposed definition of community for the purposes of this paper is that which gathers a group of like-minded individuals together via the Internet and/or in person to discuss a shared topic (Katz et al., 2004, p. 327-329). They must also have a sense of trust in sharing their thoughts on the topic at hand, and so this trust will produce a level of sociability (Froldova, 2017). This sociability will then lead to ongoing participation within the group by all members for the group to be classed as a true 'community' of people (Rheingold, 2000). The internet, specifically the changes allowed by the advent of Web 2.0, has therefore provided options for Aboriginal communities to connect, socialise, create and communicate their passions and knowledge to better themselves and their communities, both locally and Australia-wide. Web 2.0, as defined by Petray (2011, p. 924), which provides a more elastic and participatory experience for its users, is crucial for both young and old Indigenous community participants in spreading the word regarding their culture, language and all other significant interests specific to the local Indigenous Aboriginal peoples. For the purposes of this paper, Indigenous peoples are those that regularly inhabited the lands of Australia pre-colonisation, which is in alignment with the research studied to complete this paper (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, Townsend, 2015 & Petray, 2011 & 2015).

This paper will argue that the internet is an invaluable addition to Aboriginal communities, given the appropriate introduction, while also considering awareness, access and inclusion of all. Indigenous people of Australia use the internet, specifically the participatory nature of Web 2.0, to build and evolve their culture and thus their communities. The focus will be on the advent of social media usage and identity, both personal and community-based. These examples will highlight that the use of the Internet will further the interests of all Aboriginals in their own culture and strengthen confidence in their identity on and off-line.

Web 2.0 and Social Media platforms

The Indigenous youth of Australia are active online. Like most youth today, indigenous children are no different when it comes to their fascination with technology; this obsession is often utilised to promote and discuss good health (Weston, 2011), or education, such as promoting the local language (Dickson, 2016). Access and availability of the internet has improved in more recent years; the launch of satellites providing access to remote locations and more funding to ICT (Internet Communication technology) centres in local towns and schools has begun to close the gap on the education of indigenous youths in computer technologies (Reading et al., 2006, "Western Australia" & Townsend, 2015, p. 3)

The internet also allows for the culturally accepted teaching methods, described by Weston (2011, p. 9) as 'communities of practice' (CoP). This way of working and teaching is traditional to the indigenous people of Australia and thus more effective and empowering. Communities of people learn better together because they connect regularly with each other and share the learnt skills around, thus learning the task required more effectively than other methods. Using this method to introduce the internet as a communications device and, once online, to use the method to teach and learn specific subjects such as languages, has proved effective (Weston, 2011). Connecting those who are interested in learning the local languages, and keeping them alive, is just one part of maintaining Indigenous culture and will assist those of a younger generation in preserving pride in their heritage and social background.

With the advent of social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, the younger generation now have ways of connecting more regularly with their local community and the world using this CoP method. They choose to represent and share their culture and language in ways that were not possible prior to the arrival of the internet (Petray, 2011). For example, Kral (2011, p. 11) discusses a platform like YouTube, called IndigiTUBE, which has been created especially for and by Indigenous artists to share and create music. However, many artists also choose to share their works on YouTube in order to communicate their identity and what their culture means to them. As Chris and Nathan,

cited by Kral (2011, p.10) said, 'we have responsibility for, like, … message and all that, singing and letting people know and like, getting the message out there.'' The IndigiTUBE website also links to all the different indigenous radio stations available around Australia; once again potentially connecting listeners to their own and other communities with similar interests. In listening to the local station Noongar radio 100.9FM via IndigiTUBE (https://www.indigitube.com.au/), it was noted that in between music sets health advice was given courtesy of the Australian Government. Perusing the website further also showed links to news articles specifically relating to Indigenous matters around Australia; for example, a report regarding studies on bush medicine (Wangki radio, 2018). Youths are now able to connect with each other and others outside of their communities with more confidence because of these platforms (Singleton, Rola-Rubzen, Muir, Muir & McGregor, 2009); 'the power and control is in the hands of the Indigenous young people, rather than the expert' (Rice et al. 2016). This shift of power into the younger peoples' hands is crucial, as they are the generation that is defining current cultural and social understandings of Indigenous people at large. It is imperative that Indigenous people are in full control of their culture, on and offline, as it is theirs and so any future misunderstandings and mis-educations can be avoided or corrected efficiently.

The social media platform Facebook is also a strong example of how important control of identity and freedom of expression can be online. For instance, friends are often chosen on Facebook depending on their identity being able to support your own. Lumby (2010, p. 71) describes this as a 'sanctioning of indigenous cultural identity by 'friends''. While this sanctioning of identity via online friends can be a concerning issue, it can be managed by those willing to 'call-out' others online partaking in possible identity theft or racist remarks. The 'panopticon' approach to governing the internet, and therefore social media, is often effective in this way (Lumby, 2010, 72).

These examples, supported by the statistics provided by Rice et al. (2016) and Hogan (2016), show that Indigenous people believe that the use of the internet is important in growing and defining indigenous culture into the future. The growing accessibility of the internet, and thus social media platforms and forums, allows for Indigenous youth to

share their identity and experiences with each other and others outside their immediate physical communities.

Identity

Sharing or exposing identity as an Indigenous person is a difficult and sensitive task both online and offline, often due to racism and lack of knowledge from different participants when communicating. In Carlson and Frazer's report (2018, p. 1), it was noted that all the contributors to the research mentioned 'unpleasant, painful and disruptive experiences on social media'. In maintaining an online identity, some choose to acknowledge their Indigenous heritage, while others are more discreet (Mountain, 2018) to preserve their anonymity. With these concerns as a focus, identifying as an Indigenous person online can be broken into several parts; identity within a community (on and offline), identity in terms of copyright (what can and cannot be shared in public), and control of the identity (who owns the website and controls the people using it).

Communities have identities that are created from people that are involved in the community in question. Huffaker (2004), for example, discusses the trend of instant messaging (most prevalent in the 1990s) regarding the concept of community. While instant messaging has now shifted to more portable devices, such as mobile phones, the sense of identity and belonging that comes with being in a group message is undeniable. A sense of community is created through these chats and connects those who may not be as physically close on a more regular basis. Sociability, as Ridings and Gefen (2006) found, is important in maintaining and building any type of community. A level of anonymity is still attainable while maintaining some sociability (Froldova, 2017), for those who wish to participate with no perceived repercussions as applications such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp allow for user control via various privacy settings.

In terms of sharing community identity online with the wider world, there is always concerns with the 'victim gaze' as Zamorano, cited by Dyson (2011, p. 254) explains:

'views from outside tend to show indigenous peoples as victims, the gaze is attracted to the sandals, the hungry people, the dirty child. . . .When Native people represent themselves they show more dignity'.

The gaze often used by the media in viewing Indigenous people is the 'victim gaze', rather than the original 'female gaze' concept as Reinhardt (n.d.) discusses. The viewer is set up to see one side of the narrative only. For this reason, control over online identity for individuals and communities is essential in moving forward with reconciliation. A specific example of ongoing control and management of Indigenous identity online is visible on the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre website. This site allows users to access local Indigenous information, along with selling specific language books and resources that the local communities have deemed appropriate (Injie & Haintz, 2004, as cited by Dyson, 2011, p. 258). Control is therefore key to keeping Indigenous people empowered and in charge online. As the centre requires direct contact with customers when selling resources, control is kept with Wangka Maya as the customer will need to vet themselves to the group. The possibilities of identity theft and cultural misunderstandings therefore become a low risk.

Indigenous identity is also defined by who can access and share their stories and information shared online. As mentioned above, the Wangka Maya centre has permission from itself, due to controlling its own interests in local community culture. However, in other cases control, and therefore access, is often shared by indigenous and non-indigenous parties. For example, the Indigenous health website mentioned by Weston (2011) is backed by ECU; this is assumed from the website address ending in 'ecu.edu.au'. It is a collaborative website between two different parties; however it is dominated by those that have the knowledge to share and thus control over their identity and information shared. Weston (2011, p.10) states that 'currently there are 358 yarning place members. Over 70% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers.'. This example is therefore of a community sharing information both internally and externally of their immediate community, or as Fuchs (2010, p. 767) writes: 'from

communication processes shared or jointly produced resources [and co-operation] can emerge'. This co-operation cannot occur on what could be a large scale if the internet had not evolved into the Web 2.0 it is today. Co-operation should therefore produce better understandings between two or more parties, in this case it is argued that forums such as the one Weston (2011) refers to could be a small part of the move towards reconciliation in Australia.

Activism

Reconciliation in Australia is assisted by the advent of Web 2.0 as more Indigenous people take to the internet to express their opinions and share their culture (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p. 17). Twitter and Facebook are examples of popular Web 2.0 platforms that provide users with simple ways to contact others around Australia and the rest of the globe and hopefully raise awareness for various issues affecting Indigenous people. Carlson and Frazer (2018, p. 18) discussed multiple, socially successful activist movements online in their report, however as Petray (2011, p. 935) points out 'strong feelings of collective identity do not always translate into a strong movement.' For instance, the hashtag #SOSBlakAustralia represented those with opinions about remote communities in Western Australia being closed. This social media-led form of activism had a strong following online (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p. 18), however despite its social popularity in raising awareness of the issue online it appears that little progress has occurred in terms of policies changed at a government level (Perpitch, 2018), and has been debated many times over (Cabrera, Matias & Montoya, 2017, para. 1). This lack of apparent action as a result of online activism, among other reasons, has led to the coining of the term 'slacktivism', which can be defined as 'instances of lackluster support hidden under the guise of simple "shares," "likes," and "favorites."' (Cabrera et al., 2017, para. 1), and which is now possible in part due to the rise of social media platforms. While the success of activism online in terms of resolving issues is in question still, Petray (2011, p. 933) highlights the importance of regular participation online if activism is to be socially successful; 'communities must have ongoing conversations and updates of their pages, otherwise it just doesn't work as a community.' The introduction of a participatory Web 2.0 also allows those who have a cause to promote do so far easier

than before. For example, Petray (2011, p. 929) gives evidence in her report that the introduction of the internet, specifically email and online communities, have made activism and awareness of activist activities easier to access and thus people can act in a timelier fashion than in the pre-internet world. Financially there are benefits too, as email and the cost of internet access is generally better priced than printing and mailing flyers out (Petray, 2011, p. 929).

Another consideration for Indigenous people to consider when conducting activist-like behaviour online is, as previously mentioned, the issues surrounding identity. As Carlson and Frazer (2018, p. 18) state: 'simply being Indigenous online is a political act.'. It is difficult to balance personal or community identity along with supporting a cause or actively pursuing change via social media when the person in question can be judged by others based upon their appearance or written profile (Carlson & Frazer, 2018, p. 18-19). However, it appears that some Indigenous people online, as surveyed by Carlson & Frazer (2018, p. 19), felt this was a risk worth taking; '79% of Indigenous social media users have supported a political cause on social network sites'.

The internet now provides space for Indigenous people to involve themselves in different levels of activism, whether it is to further awareness of an issue, or just to show support for others in the community. Indigenous people online are better able to communicate with themselves and others outside their immediate communities.

The internet, in its current evolution of Web 2.0, allows the Indigenous people of Australia to connect, create and involve themselves in communities both inside and outside of their physically inhabited space. Identity is a large concern for Indigenous people, both on and off-online, and this is highlighted in the ways in which Indigenous people recognise and identify with themselves and others online. Community identity is also important, as how an Indigenous person represents themselves online can also reflect upon the community that they are connected to and so can empower all those involved (Singleton et al., 2009, "Conclusion," para. 1-2). While representing themselves online can present issues at times, such as lack of internet access or other access concerns (Hogan, 2016, p. 25), or cases of online bullying and racism, Carlson and Frazer (2018) made it clear that those surveyed around Australia do not all feel the need to hold

themselves back from experimenting online with identity and communications. The

internet is proving to be a key factor in yarning with the mob and the rest of the world

regarding Indigenous issues and in sharing learning and culture.

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