THE PROJECT

Aboriginal identity and community online: a sociological exploration of Aboriginal peoples’ use of online social media.

• The purpose of the study is to gain insights into the ways in which Australian Aboriginal people utilise and interact on social media.
• Results demonstrate that Aboriginal people are avid social media users, that they use social media for a range of cultural, social, and political activities.
• Enthusiastic users of mobile technology
• Aboriginal use of social media is 20% higher than the national average
• Over 60% of the population in remote communities are Facebook users (Callinan, 2014; Carlson & Frazer, 2015)

• Everyday typical activity
• Cultural practices
• Social interactions
• Political activism

“Ah, there would be a sense of loss. Most definitely.” (Male, Sydney)

“So yeah, I’d feel quite disorientated nowadays. Unless we had a time machine that went back to the nineties when none of us had it.” (Female, Illawarra)

“devastated!!!” (Male, Broome)
SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CULTURAL INTERFACE

• A site of negotiation, resistance and interaction whereby the specificities of the
everyday articulations of Indigenous people can be understood in both
productive and non-productive ways (Carlson 2016).

• According to Nakata, The Cultural Interface is located at:
  • the intersection of the Western and Indigenous domain…the place where we live
    and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures
    and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives—

ABORIGINAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

• Social and Cultural Connectivity
• Kinship Mapping
• Intergenerational Relationships
• Sharing Culture – Language and Knowledge
• Learning about Culture and in some case ‘being’ Aboriginal
• Koori Grapevine – News and Information
IDENTITY SURVEILLANCE

- Community conflict, surveillance and exclusion exist in the online environment.
- The Question: ‘Can community recognition of someone’s Aboriginality come from an online community’?
- Responses: ‘Community Recognition is just that!!!’; Do you have a Confirmation of Aboriginality?; Are you a member of the Aboriginal Lands Council?
- Another respondent claimed I was ‘NOT Aboriginal’ and made mention of knowing my workplace and where they could find me.
- I was informed I would be removed from the group as my identity was under question. This notification was followed by a further response to my post: ‘and for the record community recognition in cyberspace please, nothing can replace the real thing’.

INDIGENOUS ONLINE

- 82% of respondents openly identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on social media
- 73% indicated they believed social media helped them express their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity
- 52% indicated they had been selective with what they post on social network sites in regard to their identity.
- Many users had experienced forms of abuse or discrimination online, based on their identity.
- Skeptical that social media are capable of expressing something like their Indigenous identity, which they experience as rich and complex.
COMMUNITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- 81% of respondents indicated they felt a sense of being a member of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community online.
- The vast majority indicated they engaged with other Indigenous people and groups in ways that could be construed as “community-forming.”
- Almost all (94%) had used social network sites to connect with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander friends or family across distances;
- 62% had met relatives on social media they wouldn’t have otherwise met;
- 89% ‘liked’ or ‘followed’ pages specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on social media;
- 71% were a member of at least one group specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; and
- 67% felt more likely to engage with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander events offline due to their use of social media.

Do you feel like you are part of an Aboriginal community or network on Social Media?

“Yeah, yeah very much. I think that a lot of my politics and a lot of my will to actually push forward with that sort of stuff has grown directly from the communities that have formed online. To the people that encouraged to write in the first place, I’ve never actually met in real life”.

Do you think Social Media may impact on what we mean by ‘the Aboriginal community’ in the future?

“To an extent. I think that we always still need that connection, but I think, too, that we can’t undervalue these sorts of virtual communities that we set up. So they’ve got meaning and, you know, they DO fill a space. They break down those barriers of land and distance in order to actually link people together. So people do form networks and friendships and inspire each other through it. Like I said, social media is real life now.”
Where community recognition is well-established it is relatively easy to achieve official sign-off in the formal process.

In other cases, where individuals have to appeal to the organisation for community recognition on the basis of the documentation they are able to supply, it is not as easy.

The notion of ‘Aboriginal community’ is complex.
CHALLENGES

• Racism
• Use of Divas Chat
• Bullying/Lateral Violence
• Sexting
• Cyber payback
• Privacy Setting
• Cultural Protocols
• Suicide
• Trauma
In his admissions to police, Chris Nelson stated he was not motivated by racism but by government policies on illegal immigration and Aboriginal welfare payments.

DIGITAL INTIMACIES: DATING AND HOOK UPS

- Telstra-backed social networking site called ‘Divas Chat,’ which is used for online dating, amongst other things.
- High levels of racism
- ‘fake’ profiles and “textual romances”
- Health and well-being issues (STIs, violence, rejection and community shaming, ‘Self-pornography’)
- GPS enabled mobile; linked to Facebook accounts (Tinder)
- “one’s success on Tinder depends on having ‘a datable Facebook self’
Lack of agreed upon protocols that fit with Aboriginal cultures and social norms

Broader issues: Poverty, social isolation, racism

The Australian reported Facebook being used by Aboriginal people to post messages of suicidal intent, with one young girl posting, “Feel lost right now hang myself”

SUICIDE AND SELF HARM

- Aboriginal people are engaging with Facebook to both seek and offer help for issues relating to suicide and self-harm.
- An existing continuum of suicide prevention strategies was evident—from light emotional support to direct suicide intervention involving health and emergency services.
RESULTS

• A Less Daunting Way to Seek Help
• An Opportunity to Offer Help
• Aboriginal Facebook Suicide Prevention Strategies
• Rapid Information Dissemination
• Mediating Tragedy – Bullying, Racism, Negativity, and Suicide Contagion

SORRY BUSINESS

• “Sorry Business”: a term used by Aboriginal people across Australia to describe a broad range of practices associated with death, dying and funerals.
• Vast distances often isolate communities and their members. In response, communities are increasingly participating in cultural practices online
• Notification of death
• Funeral notice
• Expressing grief and loss
• Keeping in contact with kin
• Memorialising the deceased

The late Charles Dixon's State funeral
HIGH RATES OF MORTALITY

• In many Aboriginal communities, Tonkinson (2008, p. 38) explains, “Deaths occur with bewildering frequency”.

• The absence of certain family members from a funeral, “can bring shame to the extended family and other members within the kinship system”

• Aboriginal people can be expected to attend between 10-30 funerals per year

The findings also highlight points of tension within Aboriginal communities as public expressions of Sorry Business appear on social media sites and begin to transform the norms of what is and is not culturally acceptable.
TROLLS

• Social media can also provide a space where Aboriginal people become subject to abuse.
• Georgatos (2014) powerfully argues that racism is implicated in some suicides in Aboriginal communities.
• R.I.P Trolls

TRAUMA

• Indigenous people suffer high rates of trauma.
• Enthusiastic social media users.
• There is a paucity of research that examines the individual and collective effects of being subject to ongoing and often consistent racial discrimination and traumatic events on social media.
• Online hate and harassment are very real issues for Indigenous people and constitute a form of “shared recognition” whereby trauma is understood as a consequence of colonialism and the continued subjugation and vilification of Indigenous people.
POLITICAL ACTIVISM

• The vast majority indicated they were politically active online, with an overwhelming 79% of respondents answering “yes”, with only 15% answering “no” (and 5% “not sure”).

• The results show that Aboriginal political involvement is evidently not just limited to activities on social media, but blends with offline activism.

• One male participant from Sydney captures the range of pursuits: “I have raised funds, held membership/follower drives, promoted causes & petitions, provided offline support to improve online causes/campaigns etc - all voluntary” (Male Sydney).

CHALLENGES

• “I don’t want to ‘politicise’ my social media, as I also post stupid, fun things, [I] don’t need possible backlash that I sometimes see” (Male Vic).

• “Now that I’m a public servant it really limits my ability to support” (Female QLD).

• “We also meet a lot of prejudice when we assert our ideologies amongst varying audiences with a range of political stances” (Male NSW).
#SOSBLAKAUSTRALIA

- Successful social movements are dependant on communication that is autonomous from state or corporate control. Social media has changed the control of communication.
- Manuel Castells (2015) argues - social movements in the contemporary world are hybrid in nature – extensive use of online tools and physical occupation of urban spaces.

“I challenge anyone to say this wasn’t the first real Indigenous Social media defeat of Mainstream media - This whole campaign was a massive historical marker. So many elements to it have been replicated since” Sam Cook (2017).

#INDIGENOUSDADS

- Theresa Petray (2011; 2013) found that social media enabled the emergence of political subjectivities that may otherwise be marginalised in offline forums - She argues that “self-writing”, where Indigenous Australians express and perform their identities online, constitutes a powerful, everyday form of micro-activism.

“#IndigenousDad campaign was an important demonstration aimed at countering racist depictions and stereotypes, an essential reminder in any ‘national conversation’ that is going to take place. It sets the conversation tone and reminds us and reinforces the importance of our collective strength and humanity” Luke Pearson (2016, np).
AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS

• Special Section focus

• Research on Indigenous use of Information and Communication Technologies: Reterritorialising Social Media: Indigenous People Rise Up

• Due for publication May 2017

CALL FOR PAPERS

• Media International Australia

• http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mia

• Theme Issue: Indigenous Innovation in Social Media

• Theme Issue Editors:
  • Prof Bronwyn Carlson (Macquarie University) bronwyn.carlson@mq.edu.au
  • A/Prof Tanja Dreher (University of New South Wales) t.dreher@unsw.edu.au