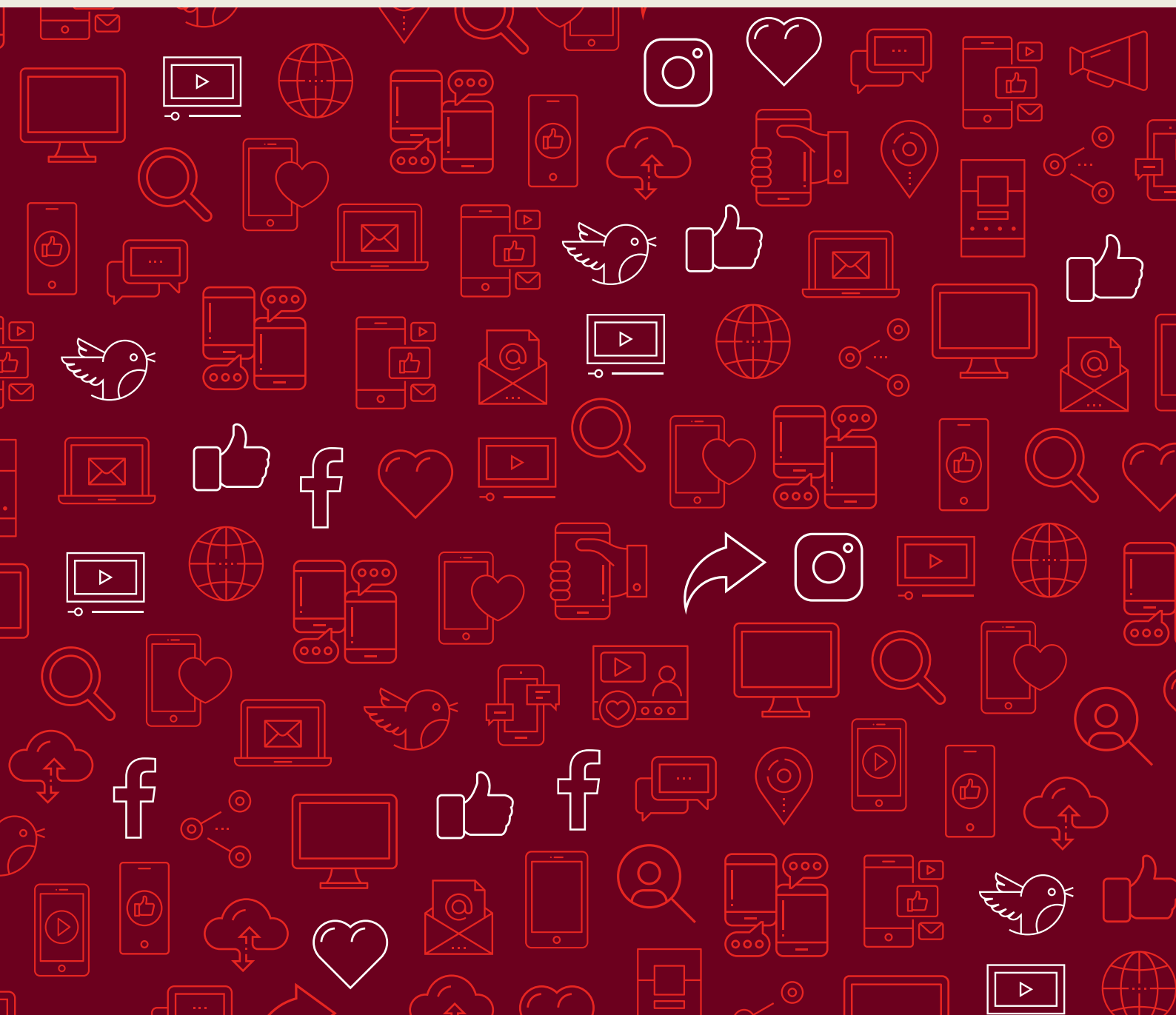




Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer

Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University



2018 likes

Social Media Mob: Being Indigenous Online



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A note on terminology: There is no universally agreed upon terminology for referring to the many diverse groups who comprise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. In this report, we primarily use the term 'Indigenous' to refer to all peoples and groups whose ancestors pre-date colonisation and who identify as such; 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' is also used where appropriate.

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- Awabakal (New South Wales mid north coast)
- Dharawal (Sydney south)
- Gadigal (Sydney)
- Inala (Brisbane south-west)
- Ngunnawal (Canberra)
- Wurundjeri/Boonerwrung (Melbourne south)
- Wurundjeri (Melbourne)
- Pitjantjatjara Anangu (Yalata)
- Yawuru (Broome)
- Noongar (Perth)
- Palawa (Tasmania)
- New South Wales: Illawarra, Penrith, Redfern, Sydney, Wollongong, Batemans Bay, Woy Woy
- Northern Territory: Darwin
- Queensland: Brisbane, Cooktown, Logan, Acacia Ridge
- South Australia: Adelaide
- Tasmania: Hobart, Launceston
- Victoria: Melbourne
- Western Australia: Broome, Perth

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Australian Government
Australian Research Council

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Introduction

Over the past decade or so, social media technologies have gradually become a central part of our everyday lives.

Although accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, recent research suggests that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have always been early adopters of technology and use social media at rates higher than non-Indigenous Australians, with more than 60 per cent of Indigenous people in specifically ‘remote’ communities active social media users (Callinan 2014). Even in the most ‘remote’ areas of Australia, mobile technologies are becoming increasingly commonplace.

Too often in research, social media is isolated as some separate sphere of life. But it is clear there are now no neat divisions between online and offline worlds, or the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ (Carlson 2013). Social media is deeply entangled in the lives of many Indigenous people, offering them opportunities to connect across vast distances and diverse populations. It provides a platform to express one’s identity, connect with community, learn, play, seek love, organise political action, find lost friends and family, search for employment, seek help in times of need – and much more. Almost every aspect of everyday life has, in some way, been shaped, modified or enhanced by social media technologies.

Although there has been an increasing abundance of critical research on social media, little is known about Indigenous Australians’ use of social media. This is significant, as there are reasons not to generalise about social media use across different cultural groups. For example, many Indigenous Australians are situated within complex kinship systems, which work to shape the ways in which people may socialise with one another, and there are often protocols regarding the distribution and expression of cultural knowledge, the sharing of images, and the customs of dealing with loss (or Sorry Business) (Carlson & Frazer 2015). Indigenous Australians are still impacted by colonisation and the complex, violent and ongoing history of material, cultural and physical dispossession that entails. So, we ask the question: ***How do these and other factors intersect with and play out through social media?***

BACKGROUND

Between 2013 and 2016, an Australian Research Council Discovery, Indigenous-funded project – ‘Aboriginal identity and community online: a sociological exploration of Aboriginal peoples’ use of social media’ – sought to provide a better understanding of how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people make use of online network sites. The project was guided by three interrelated questions:

- What has been the extent and nature of the uptake of social media in the broader Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community?
- Has the use of social media changed the way Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people think about both their identity and community?
- What are the new practices of identity and community that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people perform online?

As the project unfolded, it became clear that we had posed a complex set of questions. The stories of participants were rich and included both joyful and deeply negative engagements with social media. The political, social and personal implications of ‘being Indigenous online’ were considerable (Carlson 2016; Carlson et al. 2017).

On the one hand, many participants had seamlessly integrated social media into their everyday lives using it to connect with friends and family, share jokes, seek love and find information. For many, it had become an invaluable tool in the realisation of their hopes and dreams; it helped them ‘find’ and share their identities and produce intimate communities of mutual trust, respect, care and kindness.

Conversely, all participants reported unpleasant, painful and disruptive experiences on social media. Their engagement with social media operated not within a neutral space, but within a multi-layered terrain of cultural beliefs and practices, relationships with many kinds of communities, constant interactions with hostile others, and exposure to many forms of often harmful materials. There were experiences of direct aggression, often with people influenced by racist ideas, and participants reported feeling more, rather than less, alone online. Clearly, ‘being Indigenous online’ is no simple matter.

This report seeks to offer a concise yet broad summary of the project's findings, focusing on the most prominent themes that emerged from the participants' testimony. Some of these findings have been published elsewhere; much of it is published here for the first time. Our aim is to offer insights into the social, political, historical and cultural particularities of Indigenous people's use of social media. Far from seeing these results as in some sense 'conclusive', we see social media cultures as radically mobile: it is likely much of what is reported here will be, in a sense, 'out of date' by the time it is published. Likewise, we do not aim to moralise about either the beneficial or harmful effects of social media use. We hope instead to open up critical conversations about the complex consequences of social media use for Indigenous individuals and communities.

The report is divided into six sections based around a broad range of themes: Indigenous identities, online communities, practising culture, racism and violence, help-seeking, and political activism. To introduce each section and provide context, we briefly summarise the current literature on each topic. Where possible, we provide statistical data gathered through a social media survey developed for this project, which outlines some of the broader trends in social media use. Mostly, however, sections will be dedicated to fleshing out the rich interview material we gathered from talking with Indigenous social media users.

Although the period of funding has ended, we consider this to be an ongoing research project and we welcome any feedback, criticisms, suggestions and stories (see p. ii for contact details).

METHODS

To explore the diversity of the everyday experiences of Indigenous social media users, data were collected through a variety of qualitative methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews and community discussion groups. We also collected additional data through an online social media-driven survey created using SurveyMonkey and promoted via Facebook and Twitter (n=75).

Participants were recruited by contacting key figures from each community who were, thereafter, employed as local community research assistants. In total, 10 communities across New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia participated in the project, with between five and 10 people interviewed from each (n=60). These communities represented a broad social and geographical cross-section that included participants from cities (Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart), regional areas (Illawarra, Batemans Bay, Broome), and geographically 'remote' communities (in South Australia and Western Australia). Participants also came from a wide variety of ages (18–60 years) and backgrounds, including political activists, young adults, university students, stay-at-home parents, people employed in a range of occupations, and community Elders. Respondents (n=75) to the online survey were from every State and Territory, which meant we could include a few comments from those living in Victoria and the Northern Territory.

Although the vast majority of people participating in this study identified primarily as Aboriginal only, some also identified as Torres Strait Islander. For this reason, we use the term 'Indigenous' throughout the report to refer to the project's participants and findings in general. Other identifying terms, particularly those used by our participants, are used when appropriate.

ETHICS

Ethics approval was granted from Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. HREC Approval No: 5201700667.

1 Social Media and Identity

Much of the early literature on ‘online identities’ made a clear distinction between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ identities (Turkle 1997; Donath 1998; Robins 2000; Bell & Kennedy 2000; Christensen 2003; McCormick & Leonard 2007; boyd 2007). Through this lens, we each have an ‘online self’ (which we intentionally curate) and an ‘offline self’ (which is more ‘authentic’).

More recent work, however, has shown there is no simple way to distinguish neatly between the different ‘selves’ we perform. As social theorists have powerfully argued, all identities and subjectivities are contextually mediated. There is no pre-existing ‘true’ self, in an absolute sense. Rather, our identities are always shifting, adapting and responding to changing circumstances.

... one of the main questions driving the project concerned how, why and to what effect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people identified as ‘Indigenous’ online, and how social media facilitated the expression of Indigeneities.

New technologies, which facilitate innovative modes of social connection and organisation, create possibilities for people to express identities in different and creative ways (Lumby 2010; Carlson 2016). However, this does not mean we can simply ‘choose’ our identities. Rather, this process is always deeply political, entangled in complex histories (such as colonialism) and powerful hierarchies (such as racism). Moreover, with the rise of social media, a range of concerns have emerged around our online identities, including the potential of identity theft, users appropriating other groups’ cultural identities, and the use of ‘fake profiles’ to troll, bully and cause trouble.

With these concerns in mind, one of the main questions driving the project concerned how, why and to what effect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people identified as ‘Indigenous’ online, and how social media facilitated the expression of Indigeneities. In one respect, the online survey results offered clear answers, with 82 per cent of respondents openly identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on social media (5% no; 9% sometimes). Moreover, 73 per cent of respondents indicated they believed social media helped them express their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity (11% no; 16% not sure). As one survey respondent explained, ‘My Aboriginality is the focal point of my identity both in society and online. Specifically on Facebook, my photos and page/groups and friends all highlight my Aboriginality’ (male, 18–24, Redfern).

EXPRESSING INDIGENEITY ONLINE

Users said they expressed Indigeneity through engaging in a range of online practices. Often this was achieved through openly asserting one’s heritage or kin through their social media profiles, particularly on Facebook and Twitter, where users can provide details or a brief description of ‘who they are’, including their nation/clan or country of birth. As one survey respondent explained, ‘In my description on Twitter and Instagram I specifically state that I am an Aboriginal woman’ (female, 25–34, Penrith).

Participants said they also expressed their identity through the content they shared on their profiles, such as news articles about Indigenous-specific events, topics or issues. As one survey respondent put it: ‘At different times I might change my photo to have an Aboriginal flag or Aboriginal style’ (female, 35–44, Sydney). In this way, their identity is

expressed through practices and symbolism, rather than directly stated identification. For instance, one survey respondent explained, 'I can show people my Aboriginality through pictures without having to state it awkwardly' (female, 18–24, Dharawal). However, others were sceptical of being able to express their identity, which they personally experience as deeply rich and complex, on social media. As a respondent explained, 'I don't know if I can adequately express my Aboriginal identity in such a short word length' (female, 25–34, Ngunnawal).

For some, social media also facilitated the production of a new or strengthened sense of identity. As another interviewee explained, 'In helping to connect up with others across the country, I do get to feel more connected with my own sense of identity. It doesn't operate by itself as an affirmation of identity, but it's certainly an interesting space for talking about identity' (male, 35–44, Redfern). In these cases, social media can help form, rather than just express, identity.

SELECTIVE IDENTIFICATION

But 'identifying' online was not always a straightforward matter. Participants often expressed mixed views about being 'openly Indigenous' on social media. Just over half (52%) of survey respondents indicated they had been intentionally selective with what they post on social network sites in regard to their identity. There were many reasons for this.

The vast majority claimed they were selective because of the negative reactions that Indigeneity could provoke from some other social media users; many had experienced forms of abuse or discrimination online. They explained they had been questioned over whether they were 'really Indigenous', with other users drawing on stereotypical ideas of Indigeneity, particularly around skin colour. There were many

examples of this: 'Apparently I'm not black enough for some. It's their problem not mine' (female, 45–54, Awabakal, survey); 'I am not too open about my Indigenous background on social media sites because I am light skinned and have found that people pass judgment and make assumptions about my entitlements' (female, 18–24, Darwin, survey); 'Non-Indigenous people [have questioned me] based on the fact that I don't look Aboriginal to them' (female, 25–34, Gadigal, survey). For others, abuse stemming from racist stereotypes of Indigenous 'inferiority' or 'criminality' was a constant presence in their online interactions.

For these reasons, many participants found that 'it's sometimes safer to not identify as Aboriginal due to discrimination/prejudices', (male, 25–34, Wurundjeri/Boonerwung, survey) as one survey respondent explained. While social media facilitated the expression of new and existing forms of Indigenous identities, 'identifying online' could also create issues around personal safety. As an interviewee explained, 'If anyone identifies as Aboriginal by standing up for anything Aboriginal they can get slammed by lots of bigots and people who hate anything Aboriginal' (female, 21, Illawarra).

As this brief overview demonstrates, identifying as Indigenous on social media is not straightforward. On the one hand, it can facilitate the expression and achievement of individual identity, allowing social media users to explore their own identities and take pride in who they are. On the other, it can raise questions around whether social media platforms are even capable of facilitating the expression of Indigenous identity, along with concerns about the potential for vulnerability when identifying as 'Indigenous' online can lead to explicit forms of racism through prejudicial and/or discriminatory comments.

2 Social Media and Community

There has been a lot of discussion about the potential of the Internet, and social media platforms in particular, to facilitate the continuation, enhancement and spread of communities.

From early Internet chat rooms, which enabled people with specific interests to connect and engage with social media's capacity to help people find long lost friends and family over time and distance, to the use of social media for the recruitment of everything from community groups to terrorist organisations, the many links between social media and community are complex. It is clear that social media platforms are now increasingly engaged in the production of various online communities, and any distinctions between online and offline communities is becoming more and more blurred.

The small amount of research on social media and Indigenous communities has found mixed results. Undoubtedly, social media has become a platform through which community members can (re)connect. Rennie, Hogan and Holcombe-James (2016:18) recently reported: 'For Aboriginal people living in a remote town such as Tennant Creek, social networking can go beyond socialising into important instances of reconnection'. In a similar vein, Rice et al. (2016:10) found that 'social media can help form communities that people may not otherwise have the opportunity to connect with'. Family and kin separated through voluntary or forced relocation have been able to (re)produce new connections online.

However, the potentially damaging effects of social media in Indigenous communities have received extensive media coverage. As the *Courier Mail* (Michael 2012) reported in 2012, Facebook was facilitating antagonism among Indigenous youth in communities across Queensland. There were reportedly calls from Elders to ban Facebook to mitigate the 'rise in "blood feuds" between warring clans', the newspaper reported (2012:np). Rennie, Hogan and Holcombe-James's (2016:2) more recent report found similar tensions, particularly in remote communities where social media was sometimes

considered a 'threat to community authority and stability'. As a consequence, they continued, 'some remote communities have gone so far as to reject the extension of mobile [phone] coverage because of cyber safety concerns' (2016:2).

To complicate matters further, many Indigenous people have culturally specific ideas around 'community' that are often necessarily grounded in face-to-face interactions in particular places, responsibilities to kin, and engagement in particular community/cultural practices (Carlson 2013). A core question for the project, then, was how is social media use deployed to express and comment on ideas and practices relating to 'community' for Indigenous Australians. In other words, does social media facilitate the many and various expressions of Indigenous communities, and, if so, how does this function?

COMMUNITY OR JUST CONNECTIONS?

Responses to whether social media could ever facilitate a specifically 'Indigenous community' were diverse. Eighty-one per cent of survey respondents indicated they felt a sense of being a member of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community online, with the vast majority also indicating that 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, with:

- 62 per cent having met relatives on social media they wouldn't otherwise have met;
- 89 per cent having 'liked' or 'followed' pages specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on social media;
- 71 per cent being a member of at least one 'group' specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people; and
- 67 per cent feeling more likely to engage with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander events offline due to their use of social media.

A NEW 'MEETING PLACE' FOR COMMUNITIES

When asked whether social media sustained new Indigenous communities, one survey respondent explained: 'I think everything evolves. Our culture speaks of "meeting place"... online spaces are just a new "meeting place"' (female, 35–44, Sydney). Another emphasised the connections formed online: 'from my point of view, Facebook is, for the majority of people, about community. In that it's about connecting with other people, and that's what community is' (female, 25–34, Adelaide, survey). For some participants, social media such as Facebook, constituted the primary or only point of contact to community. 'Facebook is the only interaction I have with the community sometimes' (female, 48, Illawarra), one interviewee explained. Another used the 'group' function on Facebook to maintain family connections, including older family members:

We have like a family group, so all the old fellas as well, we made accounts for them, so they can all stay in touch with one another. And that's how a lot of us actually stay in contact. We find family as well. So my mother's sister was part of the Stolen Generation and she didn't see her; she finally managed to track her down through Facebook. Things like that are huge. So that's how my mob stays connected via social media, which is awesome (male, 18–24, Perth, interview).

Another interviewee questioned the distinction between offline and online communities:

... 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 (female, 37, Melbourne).

These participants correspond with the conclusion of Rice et al. (2016:10), who argue that 'community can be exemplified and strengthened through social media for groups that are already connected'.

THE CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

As might be expected, participants also had concerns about social media's role in community. In particular, apprehension was expressed that practices of 'online communities' might replace physical connection to Country and community. As one survey respondent explained, 'For some, it can take away onus to engage directly, and spend time on Country' (male, 25–34, Sydney). Another said that social media produced a diminished form of 'community', stating: 'being indigenous is about community contact face-to-face' (genderqueer, 45–54, Sydney, survey). Responding to the question about online Indigenous communities, one survey respondent bluntly explained: 'Hell no. Online community is an extension of or support for lived community. People can misrepresent themselves online. Have to mix with mob in real life' (female, 34–44, Inala, survey). Another explained: 'You need to be active in your actual community, not just be a part of a Facebook group. You have to be active in what you're doing' (male, 18–24, Perth, survey).

Carlson's (2013) research revealed that there is not an Indigenous consensus around what constitutes 'community', especially online. She notes, however, that there are

those who will assert that modern technology does not 'fit' with what they see as cultural practices [and] those who guard the offline community boundaries and feel less able to identify the boundaries online (Carlson 2013:161).

We can see these ideas playing out in the above participant accounts. For these participants, social media could not constitute a 'community' in the sense they understand it. Rather, while social media may facilitate valuable connections between people, community occurs in place and in face-to-face interactions. Community, in this understanding, involves physical togetherness and material practices.



“

We have like a family group, so all the old fellas as well, we made accounts for them, so they can all stay in touch with one another. And that's how a lot of us actually stay in contact. We find family as well. So my mother's sister was part of the Stolen Generation and she didn't see her; she finally managed to track her down through Facebook. Things like that are huge. So that's how my mob stays connected via social media, which is awesome.”

— MALE, 18–24, PERTH, INTERVIEW

We see here again the complex relationship many users have with social media. It clearly enables them to connect across distance, which takes on a particularly significant function for a population who have experienced high rates of forced removal from family and community. Some participants suggested that social media facilitates the continuation of community and acts as a seamless extension of

community life. Others, however, articulated a more limited role for social media in community suggesting that although it helps to maintain connections, it cannot be considered ‘community’ in its own right. This view supports the need to take culturally specific meanings of ‘community’ into account in social media research, particularly in relation to responsibilities to Country.

VIGNETTE: SOCIAL MEDIA IN A REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

Social media can occupy a unique position in smaller communities, such as in the remote South Australian Pitjantjatjara Anangu community described here, which had a range of online practices that we did not see elsewhere. The community differed significantly from all other sites in our research: it had a relatively stable population of around 300 who mostly spoke Pitjantjatjara as a first or primary language. While we did not obtain formal rates of smartphone ownership, it was clear from our observations that they were extremely high. The community also featured a local media hub, where people could freely use Internet-enabled desktop computers. The community members we spoke to used Facebook continually throughout the day, using both English and Pitjantjatjara language.

Most significantly, they had a Facebook ‘community page’ open only to community members, which was moderated by the local community corporation. It was used primarily as a community noticeboard, as one participant explained: ‘It’s for knowing what’s happening in the community, events coming up in the community’ (female, 25–34, interview). Another described the kinds of events being advertised: ‘BBQs, community BBQs, somebody opening up their shop, discos happening, Friday coming, football or netball training’ (female, 18–24, interview). Another added that it’s used to notify when ‘power [electricity] going off’ (female, 25–34, interview).

Because of the more physically bounded, close-knit nature of the community, Facebook could be used in ways perhaps not possible in larger, more populous and spatially diffuse communities. For instance, the community page was often used to communicate timesheets for employees; to notify community members of doctors’ appointments or emergencies; or even to ask for a lift when a car broke down: ‘When person break down on the road somewhere, and they’ve got no credit, and they go on Facebook, Oh yeah we’ve broken down, someone help us. Yes, help is on its way!’ (female, 18–24, interview). And surprisingly, unlike the vast majority of participants involved in this study, no participant in this community reported seeing racist content online.

Some participants explained that social media hadn’t necessarily changed the community for the better. One lamented that Facebook was preventing some kids from being active:

People used to play sports in the afternoon, go out do things around the community. As soon as this Facebook thing came to [the community], it stopped everything. Young people always on Facebook. Too much. We try to tell people to come do sports, always on Facebook. So see people going to someone’s house, always on Facebook’ (female 35–44, interview).

Another explained it affected people’s work: ‘Like some people stay in bed on Facebook instead of going to work. They’re addicted to it’ (female 35–44, interview). There were concerns that social media use was leading to anti-social practices that were affecting the wellbeing of users and the liveliness of the community.

While there were many similarities in social media use for this community when compared to the broader population, such as using it to stay connected to distant others, there were locally specific practices that remain undocumented in academic research. This points towards the importance of paying attention to locally specific social media practices of distinct Indigenous communities.

The community members we spoke to used Facebook continually throughout the day, using both English and Pitjantjatjara language.

3 Culture and Social Media

In lived, everyday life, ‘culture’ cannot be neatly isolated and studied. Rather, it is embedded in who we are and everything we do. While noting this, it is also important to recognise that many Indigenous people have beliefs and customs that distinguish them from other social groups in Australia.

When Indigenous people engage online, they often do so from a position of cultural difference. Accordingly, it is important to explore the social implications of cultural practice and expression online where vastly different ways of knowing and doing come into contact.

Recent research has found the use of social media has had significant cultural implications for Indigenous Australians by providing possibilities both for practising culture and for producing new forms of cultural expression (see Kral 2011). In an early paper on the topic, Corbett, Singleton and Muir explored the ways in which new media technologies could be used in a remote Western Australian Aboriginal community to ‘revitalise their culture and enhance community development both socially and economically’ (2009:73). Similarly, Singleton et al. explored the use of communication technologies, including social media, among Walkatjurra Cultural Centre members in Leonora, Western Australia, and found this technology ‘contributes to keeping knowledge alive within the community’ (2009:73). Through offering alternative avenues for communication, social media allows for the expression of cultural practice and transference of cultural knowledge.

But, for many Indigenous Australians, ‘culture’ is a complex subject. For example, there has been a long history of colonial violence through which Indigenous peoples were prohibited from engaging in various cultural practices. For this reason, many Indigenous cultural knowledges and practices are often described as being currently ‘threatened’ with extinction. For example, before colonisation, there were around 250 distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages; today, it is estimated that fewer than 120 are still in use, with only 13 considered ‘strong’ (Marmion, Obata & Troy 2014).

RESPONSES FROM PARTICIPANTS

In this study, there were similarly mixed responses to questions relating to the intersection between social media and cultural knowledges and practices. Survey respondents, for example, overwhelmingly agreed that social media offered a good platform for learning about and engaging in cultural practices (71%). However, the majority of both survey respondents and interview participants also expressed concerns around cultural practice, expression and knowledge online, particularly in relation to the breaking of cultural protocol, the danger of cultural appropriation and the misattribution of culture.

In interviews, participants described a range of cultural practices with which they engaged in online. The use of ‘closed groups’ on Facebook to share particular knowledges (such as language and stories) between a closed community of users was particularly common. In these instances, it was clear that social technologies were facilitating forms of cultural knowledge translation.

SORRY BUSINESS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Practices of ‘Sorry Business’ – protocols around death and loss that vary greatly between cultural groups – have been a particular point of focus for the project. We found that our participants often engaged with social media to express cultural practices and values around death. In particular, social media was used to notify family and community of deaths and funerals, to offer condolences and extend support, and as a platform for grieving and healing (see Carlson et al. 2015 for a more detailed account). Participants from a remote South Australian community even suggested that Facebook could be an alternative way for a friend or family member, who lived too far away to attend a funeral for example, to send their condolences. In other words, social media could help these users fulfil their cultural responsibilities across distance.

People put up a status of sympathy to the family. If they can’t make the funeral, they will say sorry on Facebook (female, 30, South Australia, interview).

Some people are too far [away], they write things, to that person in private, or as a status (female, 25–34, South Australia, interview).

“

Every year on his birthday we look at his [Facebook] page, because you see an influx of new messages, and people will share a story on his anniversary. It's like going to a cemetery and lighting a candle, but you don't go and physically light a candle”

— FEMALE, 34, BROOME, INTERVIEW

Others suggested that through sharing photos and stories and messages, deceased kin were 'kept alive', as these two participants explained:

So what we, with my cousin who passed away, we upload photos of them on their [Facebook] pages, if we can't be there, we'll write on their pages. Because that is a way that we keep them alive through that. That's a good thing (male, 20, Broome, interview).

Every year on his birthday we look at his [Facebook] page, because you see an influx of new messages, and people will share a story on his anniversary. It's like going to a cemetery and lighting a candle, but you don't go and physically light a candle (female, 34, Broome, interview).

In these and other ways, participants are reproducing cultural practices of Sorry Business. It can be argued, therefore, that online activity facilitates a closer connection to kin and provides opportunities for responding to cultural obligations when distance prohibits physical contact. Indigenous people's engagement with social media is creating new and dynamic forms of cultural expression and connection (Carlson et al. 2015).

SORRY BUSINESS AND CULTURAL PROTOCOL

Participants also had concerns around the use of social media for cultural practices, with 64 per cent of survey respondents expressing concern about sharing Indigenous cultural information on social media. When asked to explain why, the most common worries related to Sorry Business, particularly the naming and sharing of images of deceased persons without adequate permission. This often had a generational dimension, as one survey respondent explained:

A lot of younger ones post pictures and have a status update of someone passing. Due to the speed of social media, you might find this out on Facebook before you are actually told by family. I personally believe that this is wrong and should be addressed (female, 25–34, Brisbane).

Another remote community member reiterated a similar point, explaining how the inappropriate sharing of names or images of the deceased had, in some cases, led to discord in communities:

Sometimes they [young community members] put photos of the person who passed away. Some people like it, some people don't. Send message to older people. They get grumpy. Cause they don't like seeing photos or people talking about this family (female, 25–34, South Australia, survey).

THE APPROPRIATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES ONLINE

Concerns about culture extended beyond Sorry Business to include the sharing of other sensitive knowledges. As one survey respondent explained: 'Some things like traditional hunting techniques practised by my sons I feel are not appropriate for non-Indigenous people to view' (female, 45–54, Cooktown).

The appropriation of Indigenous and other minority cultures is an issue often debated in mainstream media. For many participants in this study, appropriation was an ever-present concern. As one survey respondent explained: 'You see that there are a lot of non-Indigenous people that pick up that information and then start using it' (male, 25–34, Redfern). Another case involved someone setting up Facebook 'fan sites' for significant Indigenous figures without permission. As an interviewee explained, in this case 'someone else is assuming the right to the story of that person, how they've changed stuff. And that's not right' (female, 37, Melbourne).

There were also concerns around misunderstanding and the spread of misinformation about Indigenous knowledges and beliefs. 'Information is open to the [individual's] interpretation and could be distorted or misconstrued', one survey respondent explained. 'It allows others to further bastardise an already fragile system of beliefs, customs and traditions' (female, 55–64, Logan). Similarly, another explained that they 'have seen many things attributed to [Aboriginal] culture which are not' (male, 55–64, Logan, survey).

The above accounts demonstrate that when it comes to engaging in cultural practices online, such as Sorry Business, social media can be a problematic space for Indigenous people. Competing cultural values and practices – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – come into contact and both clash and combine. Social media offers a platform to express culture and produce new cultural practices, such as those around grief and loss, but for most participants it also raises concerns. In particular, it appears that abiding by and enforcing cultural protocols becomes complicated online, with participants repeatedly stating the need to continue cultural protocol on social media. As one participant responded, when asked about how this should occur in practice, 'permission, permission, and permission' (male, 35–44, Dharawal, survey).

4 Online Violence

As this report has already made clear, social media is not a neutral space for social, cultural and ethnic minorities. Social media can facilitate the reproduction of power hierarchies in which Indigenous people are subjected to racial violence, subjugation and discrimination (see Carlson et al. 2017; Matamoros-Fernández 2017; Obeloir 2012).

Online racism against Indigenous people in Australia has received increasing coverage in recent news media. For instance, a Facebook ‘community page’ for residents of Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, attracted attention after the death of a 14-year-old Aboriginal boy, who appeared to have been intentionally hit and killed while riding his motorcycle by a non-Indigenous driver of a ute. An ABC investigation entitled, ‘Racist. Violent. Deleted: The Facebook posts dividing Kalgoorlie’ (Purtill 2016) reported that the site was accused of provoking racial tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and inciting violence against Indigenous people in the lead-up to the boy’s death. After his death, the Facebook ‘community page’ attracted a spate of racist, violent and even genocidal comments and was eventually shut down. Matamoros-Fernández (2017:930) has described the ways in which social media can amplify and even encourage these kinds of racist events as ‘platformed racism’.

Despite featuring commonly in media reports, we do not know much about the links between social media and violence both online and in communities. Rennie, Hogan and Holcombe-James (2016:8) explain:

Even in those incidents that do get reported to police, the role of social media is not necessarily identified, making it impossible to know whether social media is leading to a rise (or otherwise) in lateral violence.

Moreover, racism, a form of semiotic, structural violence, is common in online spaces where users can voice racist beliefs often behind the cloak of anonymity and ‘humour’ (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Research has found that experiences of racism

online have very real and often harmful effects on the health and wellbeing of users (Carlson et al. 2017). In this section, we explore some of our participants’ experiences of racism and violence on social media.

ONLINE RACISM

It is perhaps not surprising that 88 per cent of survey respondents have seen examples of racism towards Indigenous people on social media. One survey respondent explained the many forms that this can take: ‘Often the comment section of a news article on Aboriginal people is the worst. Massive stereotyping of Aboriginal people. Racist memes being shared. YouTube videos taken without permission of Aboriginal people’ (female, 25–34, Penrith). More than a third of survey respondents had personally been subjected to direct racism. More seriously again, 21 per cent had received threats by other users on social media, and 17 per cent indicated these had impacted their ‘offline’ lives.

However, some participants challenged the distinction between seeing racism online and being directly subjected to racism, with one survey respondent explaining: ‘I’d argue that to witness racism directed at Aboriginal peoples is to experience racism, so any racist or stereotypical remark is something shared by us all’ (male, 35–44, Dharawal). Another corroborated: ‘It is often indirect but I experience it as personal racism’ (female, 25–34, Woy Woy, survey).

Actual experiences of racism were diverse. As discussed in Section 1, direct racism most often came in the form of other users questioning the Aboriginality of participants, for example, stating or insinuating they were ‘too white’ to be Indigenous. Several interviewees reported being ‘tagged’ by friends in content that depicted Indigenous people in a derogatory manner, supposedly as a joke. The controversial case of ‘Aboriginal memes’ came up quite often (see Obeloir 2012) – images of Indigenous Australians with captions that draw on racist stereotypes in the name of ‘humour’ (see also Matamoros-Fernández 2017). For many participants, these kinds of racist encounters were simply an inevitable part of the fabric of social media.

RESPONDING TO RACISM

However, our participants were not passive victims of racism online, with several describing the distinct strategies they use for responding to (or pre-empting) racism. As discussed previously, this often took the (non-ideal) form of self-censorship: 'I find that it's sometimes safer to not identify as Aboriginal due to discrimination/prejudices' (male, 25–34, Wurundjeri/Boonerwung, survey). Others felt a kind of duty to respond to racist comments with information. As one survey respondent more optimistically suggested: 'Also it is a good medium to fight racism too' (female, 25–34, Woy Woy). Another explained: 'Often I simply provide information to contradict the racism, unless it is so blatantly stupid it simply need be reported then ignored' (male, 35–44, Dharawal, survey). One participant said she 'make[s] sure that what I post is real information and can be backed up with the true facts' (female, 35–44, Launceston, survey). Others 'unfriended' people who post racist comments or reported them to Facebook authorities.

For some Indigenous Facebook users, engaging with racist content online can cause a form of fatigue. They decide not to engage at all with this kind of content, and instead learn to be disaffected. As one interviewee explained, 'personally I just don't get involved at all. I just think, Okay, that's their issue, I'm not going to say anything' (male, 18–24, Perth). Recent research has linked this continual contact with negative, offensive and violent content with a kind of trauma (Carlson et al. 2017). In another sense, this constitutes its own form of political silencing through overburdening.

VIOLENCE IN COMMUNITIES

As has already been discussed in Section 2, Facebook has also attracted negative media attention through reports that suggest it contributes to facilitating violence within communities. Rennie, Hogan and Holcombe-James documented instances of young men using 'social media to organise fights, which were filmed and then uploaded to Facebook' (2016:20). Subsequently, there have been calls by some community Elders to shut down Facebook to mitigate these tensions (Rennie, Hogan & Holcombe-James 2016).

Among project participants, experiences of racism and aggression from other Indigenous people had also occurred. This is sometimes described as 'lateral violence', although critics argue the term is problematic as it suggests violence by Indigenous people towards Indigenous people is some kind of

special phenomenon, rather than something shared across all peoples and cultures (Clark & Augoustinos 2015). Often these experiences centred around questioning another's Indigenous identity, as one survey respondent explained after being confronted by a 'very aggressive Aboriginal man who described me as "a white person pretending to be black"' (female, 45–55, Melbourne/Wurundjeri). Another explained they had witnessed 'bad behaviour by elders of other mobs and have had to leave certain groups because it is so wrong' (female, 35–44, Launceston, survey).

In one remote community, Facebook and AirG (an instant messaging service commonly used in remote communities) had become platforms through which young girls quarrelled. As one participant explained, they often saw 'young girls fighting over boys, using Facebook to show their jealousy' (female, 25–35, South Australia, interview). Another community member said it was used to spread 'some gossip', which fuelled jealousies.

BYPASSING TRADITIONAL FORMS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Recent research has suggested that Facebook and other social media technologies have become a source of concern among Indigenous communities because of their capacity to facilitate connections and discourse outside of traditional kin relations. Kral (2014:185) suggests 'the gerontocratic norms of the past are undergoing a profound disturbance where the patterned habitual practice of elders exercising authority and exerting social control is under challenge' (see also Vaarzon-Morel 2014). Because young people have easy access to social media and, increasingly, mobile technologies, there are more opportunities for them to interact beyond the surveillance of adults. This has led Kral (2014:185) to conclude that 'these factors are coalescing in an environment where the socially sanctioned capacities for conflict resolution are not as evident as they once were'.

This project's participant responses concurred with these previous findings. As one participant explained:

Facebook really amplifies, or has the potential to amplify any negativity that's going on. And in a lot of communities where a lot of adults aren't on Facebook, then it creates that sort of Lord of the Flies space, where the kids can really amplify that, and there's no one to come in and say, 'Cut that shit out' (male, 35–44, Redfern, interview).

“

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— MALE, 35–44, REDFERN, INTERVIEW

Through directly connecting users, and bypassing existing sources of mediation, social media can make conflict resolution more difficult.

As this section has demonstrated, social media is not a neutral or necessarily safe space for Indigenous peoples. It can be used to reproduce power hierarchies and exacerbate unequal power relations. It can become a platform for abuse, as established by the high rate of racist encounters. In response, users

deployed a range of strategies to mitigate these negative encounters, such as through blocking/unfriending people, 'not identifying' as Indigenous, or learning to be disaffected by this kind of content. Social media use was also reported as sometimes exacerbating violence within some communities, particularly among young girls, and bypassing traditional forms of conflict resolution.

5 Help-seeking on Social Media

Through connecting users to friends, family, information sources and professional services, social media has become a significant avenue for both seeking help and providing help for a range of issues, including employment, housing, parenting, economic opportunities, relationship advice, wellbeing and legal services (Carlson et al. 2015; Fletcher et al. 2017).

Recent media reports have highlighted the potential of social media to achieve health benefits in Indigenous communities, such as through anti-smoking messaging being shared among networks of peers (ABC 2017; Hose 2016). Price and Dagleish's (2013) research revealed that Indigenous youth actively accessed self-help information online and peer support opportunities through social networking. Edmonds et al. (2012) found in their study of Aboriginal youth's use of mobile devices and social networking that the young used social media for 'maintaining connections and for pathways to assist them when facing big decisions' (2012:12) and that it offered them a sense of community that could provide support in stressful situations. Clearly, young Indigenous people are using their online networks for what could be described as informal help-seeking (Lumby & Farrelly 2009).

Such findings are promising. It is now well established that there are a range of reasons why Indigenous Australians are much less likely to seek formal help for issues such as health, education and employment – including suspicion of authorities, cultural inappropriateness, bureaucracy and disadvantage of access (Lumby & Farrelly 2009). They are instead much more likely to seek help through informal networks, including extended family, friend and kinship networks. However, there are hopes that social media can facilitate ways to overcome barriers to providing help. Through facilitating these kinds of concentrated networks between people, it might offer new pathways to connect help-seekers and help providers.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL WELLBEING

While it was clear that our Indigenous participants used social media to seek and provide help for a wide range of activities and issues, our focus was on the use of social media in relation to mental wellbeing and suicide prevention. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, Indigenous Australians experience the highest rates of suicide of any social group in the country (Elliot-Farrelly 2004; Tatz 2005; Georgatos 2016). There is a pressing need to understand why this is the case, and to develop strategies to mitigate this trend. Secondly, it soon became clear that almost all participants reported seeing regular suicide ideation posts on social media, which suggests that successful strategies might be developed through engaging with these technologies.

Existing research demonstrates a need to understand Indigenous suicide in its cultural context, rather than uncritically imposing Western notions of health and wellbeing (Tatz 2005; Elliot-Farrelly 2004). An emerging literature is providing a strong foundation for understanding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives of wellbeing (Dudgeon & Kelly 2014; Ranzijn, McConnochie & Nolan 2009; Westerman 2010; Farrelly & Francis 2009). Increasing consideration is also being paid to how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people's diverse notions of wellbeing dynamically interact with their ways of knowing, doing and being (Martin 2008; Moreton-Robinson & Walter 2009), with some research giving particular attention to the role of information and technology (Radoll 2012; Rigney 2011). Thus, there is an increasing acknowledgment of the need to establish a more robust understanding of the diverse ideas about health on which Indigenous people draw in their help-seeking and help-giving behaviours.

1 'Suicide ideation' is thinking about suicide. It includes the consideration of killing oneself, thoughts about how it might take place, and the expression of these thoughts to others.

SUICIDE PREVENTION ONLINE

Our survey yielded some promising results, with 48 per cent of respondents indicating that social media made them feel more likely to be able to identify someone at risk of self-harm or suicide (17% no; 35% not sure). Moreover, 68 per cent indicated they would contact through social media anyone who they believed was at possible risk of self-harm or suicide.

The interviews indicated that Indigenous people are engaging with Facebook both to seek and to offer help for issues relating to suicide and self-harm. At one level, it actually enabled some participants to overcome barriers to initially reaching out for help on issues relating to mental health:

It does make it easier. Because you might be too embarrassed or not want to talk to a person physically about it, whereas you can just go online and talk to someone or even look it up on the Internet... it's not as confronting. If you sat down with somebody, you think they might judge you. Whereas if you did it online you can't really tell if they're judging you, so it's less confronting (male, 19, Illawarra, interview).

Alternatively, in terms of providing help, we found evidence of an existing continuum of suicide prevention strategies – from light emotional support to direct suicide intervention involving health and emergency services. Most often, however, participants reported simply letting friends and family they were concerned about know that they were there to help:

And I was just like, 'I know we haven't seen each other in ages, but I just noticed that your posts are a bit down lately, I hope that you're alright.' And then we caught up for coffee and she cried (female, 25–34, Adelaide, interview).

In several more serious cases, where people were believed to be at risk of suicide, participants explained they had contacted friends, family or police, asking them to check in physically on someone.

I remember one young man was writing some, well, it seemed quite suicidal thoughts on that [Facebook]. So it ended up a bunch of us actually rallying together to make sure that police were sent around and went to that person's place and it was all okay (female, 36, Perth, interview).

“

And I was just like, 'I know we haven't seen each other in ages, but I just noticed that your posts are a bit down lately, I hope that you're alright.' And then we caught up for coffee and she cried”

— FEMALE, 25–34, ADELAIDE, INTERVIEW

Another similarly explained:

... she had a warrant out for her arrest or something, and she wanted to top herself off, she doesn't know what to do. So I messaged one of my cousins in Darwin and just let them know what was going on. And I'm pretty sure they went around and she was alright (female, 25–34, Adelaide, interview).

The results demonstrate that online social technologies, such as Facebook, offer Indigenous users new pathways to engage in help-seeking and help-giving behaviours. We propose that these online practices suggest social media presents a potentially effective platform for developing culturally appropriate suicide interventions and prevention programs.

It is clear that, for many Indigenous people, social media is considered as a place of mutual support, concern and care. The often-dense connections forged in these online spaces provide possibilities for identifying people at risk of self-harm, and pathways for intervening through extending support, providing information or even alerting emergency services. The task of future research is to explore these potentialities in more detail and to offer concrete recommendations for how they can be leveraged to reduce rates of suicide and self-harm in Indigenous communities.

6 Online Political Activism

For more than two centuries, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have been collectively campaigning for their cultural, economic, environmental and political rights.

Many hard-fought victories have been won through the collective efforts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, such as the overwhelming yes vote in the 1967 Referendum, the Mabo Decision in 1992 and the subsequent Native Title Act in 1993. The technologies used for organising and conducting activism have transformed greatly over the decades and it is not surprising there are a rapidly increasing number of Indigenous political movements prominent on social media.

Much has been made of the effectiveness of social media in political activism (see Berglund 2017; Carlson & Frazer 2016; Deschine Parkhurst 2017; Duarte 2017; McLean, Wilson & Lee 2017). Information can be distributed, events coordinated and alliances spontaneously forged across great distances largely outside of the surveillance and control of State actors. For these reasons, many scholars and activists have emphasised the democratic potential of social media (although there is certainly disagreement about this). Some of the earliest and most innovative uses of Internet technologies for activism were taken up by Indigenous and other minority groups, most famously the Zapatistas of Mexico (Duarte 2017) and the Falun Gong of China (Zhao 2003). Social media found perhaps its most considerable expression of democratic political power with the 'Arab Spring' when Twitter and other sites were used to distribute information, coordinate protest, and connect with media outside the coercive power of dictatorial States (Deschine Parkhurst 2017). Scholars have explored how social media has produced new kinds of more dispersed, democratic and personalised forms of activism – what Bennet and Segerberg (2012:740) have called 'connective action'.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND 'TRADITIONAL' ACTIVISM

Scholars are becoming increasingly interested in the politics of Indigenous activism in Australia. In recent years, a growing number of Facebook pages and Twitter handles have emerged that seek to advance the rights of Indigenous Australians, such as IndigenousX (a rotating Twitter account that aims to amplify diverse Indigenous voices) and the recently disbanded Recognise campaign (which sought to promote the idea of constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples).

However, assessing the actual impact of online activism is not a straightforward matter. When critically analysing some of these prominent online political movements, Dreher, McCallum and Waller (2016) found abundant evidence of Indigenous social media users engaging in policy discussions online, but also expressed uncertainty that they were 'being heard in the key spheres of influence – mainstream media and policy-makers' (2016:34). Thus, although online political movements might reach a substantial audience, it is difficult to extrapolate their impact at the policy level.

In a more recent development, different political groups are increasingly forging connections based on common causes. For instance, Black Lives Matter – a movement in the United States that campaigns against systemic racism and violence against Black Americans, particularly by law enforcement – has sprouted local offshoots in Australia, with significant social media followings (Clarke 2016). It is apparent that Indigenous people identify with the discriminatory structures that Black Lives Matter is campaigning to end. Similarly, Idle No More – a Canadian First Nations political group that has used Facebook and Twitter to advocate for the end to violence against Indigenous women and girls and the erosion of land rights – has inspired local 'chapters' across Australia², as Indigenous Australians face similar challenges in systematically ignored claims to sovereignty and experiences of oppression. For example, Idle No More Sydney has a Twitter handle @Idle_No_More³ and a Facebook page 'Idle No More-Sydney Australia'⁴ that describes itself as a 'Sydney based collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People unifying with the global Indigenous "Idle No More" revolution'.

2 In this context, a 'chapter' generally refers to a sub-group or branch of a founding group that advocates a particular cause and which might appropriate the name, arguments and tactics of the founding group.

3 See Idle No More Sydney Twitter page at: https://twitter.com/Idle_No_More.

4 See Idle No More – Sydney Australia at: <https://www.facebook.com/Idle-No-More-Sydney-Australia-100756536770175/>.

The #SOSBlakAustralia movement, a protest against the proposed forced closures of remote Aboriginal communities across Western Australia, has also found a vast network of support across the globe (see Carlson & Frazer 2016). Drawing on the capacities of social media to inform users of the government's plan to shut down remote communities, the movement was able to mobilise tens of thousands of Australians to march in capital cities and regional centres around the country, under the banner of #SOSBlakAustralia (Cook 2015). Although Australia's mainstream media either ignored or disparaged the considerable protests – which in Melbourne temporarily shut down the CBD – the movement found a huge global audience through Facebook and Twitter, eventually catching the attention and public support of a host of high-profile celebrities. By using social media, the Indigenous rights movement was able to have considerable social influence.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW FORMS OF ACTIVISM

Social media also facilitates less traditional forms of political engagement, as political activism does not necessarily start or end on the streets. Through enabling movements to gain members, raise funds and organise protests, social media allows for new forms of political expression. Researchers have begun to explore the myriad ways in which people engage in politics in more everyday ways online – what media scholar Marichal has called 'micro activism' (2013). In Australia, Petray (2013) argues that 'self-writing', for instance, where Indigenous social media users express themselves online, constitutes a form of everyday political action. Through self-expression, she notes, racist stereotypes may be challenged and diverse Indigenous voices trouble any notion of a single 'Indigenous identity'. There is a very real sense that, for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians, simply being Indigenous online is a political act.

'Micropolitical' acts also include the creation and sharing of different types of online content. For example, the Aboriginal activist Facebook group Blackfulla Revolution uses their platform to distribute content to a substantial audience that challenges the dominant (colonial) narrative. To take one example, they produced and published a set of Internet memes that aimed to reveal the violent ideologies and practices that underpin Australia as a colonial nation (see Frazer & Carlson 2017). They did this by appropriating the meme format and deploying

humour and irony so that they could make a radical political message more palatable and shareable. Moreover, followers of the page could engage in discussions about the anti-colonial content of the memes, ultimately creating a space in which a new image of Australia became possible – one that is more hopeful and liberatory for Indigenous Australians.

As these examples show, our everyday and often ordinary engagements on social media contribute to the production of political arrangements, not just those actions that are overtly or traditionally political.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey results demonstrated that participants were actively engaging in politics through social media by asking Indigenous social media users: 'Have you ever supported a political cause on social network sites?'. The vast majority indicated they were politically active online, with an overwhelming 79 per cent of respondents answering 'yes', only 15 per cent answering 'no' and 5 per cent 'not sure'. Those supporting political causes expressed a wide range of interests and standpoints, which often conflicted. For example, respondents reported supporting the Recognise campaign, the anti-Recognise campaign, the Greens Party, climate change initiatives, the Redfern Aboriginal Tent Embassy, Black Nationalism, the Aboriginal Sovereignty Movement, LGBTQI rights, and anti-Tony Abbott (former Australian Prime Minister) sites. One survey respondent answered that he supported 'Anything run by blacks for blacks' (male, 25–34, Wurundjeri/Boonerwung). Online activities included liking pages; sharing information, links and events; signing online petitions; posting comments and 'reposting' statuses; and donating funds.

The results show that political involvement in Indigenous issues is not just limited to activities on social media, but blends with offline activism in a wide variety of traditional activist and microactivist practices. One male survey respondent from Sydney captured the range of pursuits well: 'I have raised funds, held membership/follower drives, promoted causes and petitions, provided offline support to improve online causes/campaigns, etc. – all voluntary' (male, 25–34, Sydney).

However, reservations were expressed among some respondents about participating in political activity online, as exemplified by the following survey response: 'I don't want to "politicise" my social media, as I also post stupid, fun things, [I] don't need





79%

**OF INDIGENOUS SOCIAL MEDIA USERS
HAVE SUPPORTED A POLITICAL CAUSE ON
SOCIAL NETWORK SITES**

possible backlash that I sometimes see' (male, 35–44, Melbourne). Another noted that she feels constrained by her profession and its public profile: 'Now that I'm a public servant it really limits my ability to support [political causes]' (female, 25–34, Brisbane, survey). One survey respondent indicated the resistance that many Indigenous people meet when expressing their opinions online: 'We also meet a lot of prejudice when we assert our ideologies amongst varying audiences with a range of political stances' (genderqueer, 25–34, Wollongong).

As these respondents suggest, despite the burgeoning use of social media by Indigenous people, participation in political activities online is not unproblematic and is, at times, met with reservations about 'politicising' online spaces. These misgivings include restrictions on social media commentary by employers, and fear of the consequences if not followed, and racism from political opponents. However, our findings suggest there are sustained, widespread and highly diverse political engagements among Indigenous social media users.

Summary of Findings

Social media is increasingly ensconced in our everyday lives and it appears inevitable that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. Given its ubiquity, it is possible that we will soon stop talking about ‘social media’ as an activity separate from regular sociality in all its many forms.

However, the consequences of this shift will not be uniform across social groups. This project was prompted by the belief that Indigenous people’s engagements with social media cannot simply be equated with those of the broader national community. Although much good literature has been produced in recent years, Indigenous social media use, as a topic of research, still remains under-theorised and under-studied. This project has begun to address this gap in the literature more comprehensively.

In this report, we offer insights into the lived experiences of Indigenous people’s engagements with social media. Although not an exhaustive account, we are aware that people’s everyday experiences are irreducibly complex. We also acknowledge that social media technologies and the online cultures they facilitate are changing with incredible speed. However, through our extensive research and the generosity of the project’s participants the report does offer contextualised snapshots of the impacts that social media is currently having on Indigenous people’s experiences of themselves and their communities.

In Section 1, we focused on the ways in which social media is implicated in the production of Indigenous identities. It is clear that Indigenous social media users convey their identities in myriad ways even though some are sceptical that something as complex as cultural identity can be expressed in a meaningful way online. For some participants, social media allows them to ‘feel more connected’ (male, 35–44, Redfern, interview) with their own sense of identity. For others, however, ‘being Indigenous online’ is a source of real anxiety. More than half of the people we talked to said they had been selective with what they had posted online out of fear that others may respond negatively, or even violently.

In Section 2, we broadened the analysis to explore the intersections of social media and ideas and practices of ‘community’. Responses were similarly mixed. Some participants were hopeful about the potential of social media in helping to keep communities connected, even while physical communities increasingly become dispersed across Australia and the world. It also offers opportunities to reconnect people who have been (often forcibly) separated over time. For many participants, social media such as Facebook and Twitter has become a ‘new meeting place’ (female, 35–44, Sydney, survey) for community, where users can interact, share stories, support one another, and so forth. Equally, however, social media presents a range of problems relating to community. In some cases, it has exacerbated existing tensions, leading to escalating violence and discrimination within communities. Others felt that it threatened to reduce the incentive for Indigenous people to engage physically with community, which was seen as vital in maintaining a working sense of community. This section argues that we need to engage with culturally specific meanings of ‘community’ if we are to gain a better understanding of how social media technologies are impacting Indigenous communities.

Section 3 examined the politics of cultural knowledge and practice online. We focused primarily on ‘Sorry Business’, which emerged as a central theme within the research. In this area, social media is clearly facilitating new forms of cultural practice around death and loss, with users able to express sorrow, extend support to loved ones, and keep the memories of people alive through social media technologies. However, these practices are also the source of tension and concern for other community members, as cultural protocols in relation to death are sometimes violated or circumvented. There are fears, too, that sharing culture online risks allowing others to appropriate knowledge and practice.

Section 4 focused on the reported experiences of racism and other forms of violence and discord stemming from social media use. Almost all participants had seen anti-black racism on Facebook and Twitter, and most had personally experienced it. It is clear that social media is not necessarily a safe space for Indigenous people. For this reason, many participants avoided ‘identifying’ as Indigenous online. Others used social media to fight against anti-black racism by engaging with discriminatory users.

Confrontations between users in the same Indigenous community also took place, particularly around jealousy over romantic partners. And it appeared these tensions were often exacerbated by the age-divide in social media use in which younger users bypassed traditional forms of conflict resolution by remaining connected online.

Section 5 explored the help-seeking and help-giving practices of Indigenous social media users. It is clear that social media offers users opportunities to seek and provide help for a whole range of issues, including employment, relationship advice, education, parenting, and so on. We focused on help-seeking for mental health and wellbeing, which emerged as a dominant theme in participant accounts. Most participants expressed fear for the safety of certain members of their online networks who were at risk of self-harm and suicide. In many cases, users had intervened in these situations, offering support to those at risk. This raises important questions about the possibilities for social media in facilitating culturally appropriate and efficacious forms of help.

Section 6 looked at political engagements online. Social media is increasingly becoming an important medium for political activism allowing people to share information, connect over distance, and organise political activity. Indigenous people have been quick to take advantage of these opportunities in their campaigns for political change. The #SOSBlakAustralia movement, for instance, leveraged extensive online networks to coordinate mass protests against the forced removal of Aboriginal people living in remote communities (Cook 2015). However, many more 'micro-political' actions take place online, for instance, 'memes' have become a platform of democratised political expression. Easily sharable pieces of digital content can have considerable impacts on political discourse, as the case of Blackfulla Revolution has shown (Frazer & Carlson 2017).

SOME LIMITATIONS OF THIS PROJECT

In closing, we believe that it is important to discuss what we see as some of the limitations of this research project. Firstly, while offering a simple way of presenting the findings of the project, we must acknowledge that the six sections produced an artificial separation between the connected and interrelated spheres of everyday life. For many users, the expression of 'identity' is not separate from the production of online communities or experiences of racism. Similarly, it has been argued that 'being Indigenous online' is always political (see Petray 2011, 2013). However, for analysis reasons, it has been useful to present the findings in this way and attempt to make connections between them.

There are other methodological challenges in this research. As previously mentioned, social media is a highly fluid subject of enquiry as it is continually changing and expanding to meet and create the demands of online users. Every day there are technological advances, new mobile technologies, 'application updates', and so forth, which radically shift the ways in which we engage with one another. For this reason, we must continue to study our lives in the context of Internet technologies and the connections they facilitate. We must also continue to develop research methodologies that allow us to take advantage of the huge amount of data being generated online, while also being able to pay attention to the ways in which it is navigated and experienced at the individual level. This approach requires continual adherence to the ethics of good research and the protocols of data collection, and its uses and applications in the public domain.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We have attempted to cover a broad cross-section of themes in this report, but it is far from exhaustive. Although our participant sample was quite large for a research study of this scope, there are many communities that were not represented adequately, for example, Torres Strait Islanders, LGBTQI people and Indigenous youth under 18 years of age. There is still much that we do not know about Indigenous people's online practices and the ways in which they are implicated in new social, cultural and political arrangements. Thus, we suggest the following directions for future research.

First, there is still a paucity of research on the lived experiences of various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social groups in Australia. In particular, with the exception of Farrell's (2017) recent work on blogging, there is no research on the online experiences of people living at the intersection of Indigeneity and sexual/gender minorities, including LGBTQI people. It can be justifiably assumed that Indigenous people from these minority communities will engage with social media in different ways and have unique experiences online. Similarly, little research has been done on Indigenous people's use of social media for seeking and developing romantic relationships. Web applications for 'hooking up' have fast become commonplace in Australia, yet few researchers have critically engaged with how Indigenous people use dating apps, and the effects this may have on their mental and sexual health.

Secondly, despite attracting a significant amount of media attention in recent years, through high-profile cases of racism directed at Indigenous personalities like former Senator Nova Peris, there is little critical work on the online politics of anti-black racism in Australia (with the exception of Matamoros-Fernández 2017). Our research has shown that racism and discrimination online are all too common experiences for Indigenous Australians. Yet we know little about how these experiences affect the mental wellbeing of social media users, nor how these users respond to such experiences. Much more research could be done in understanding these links.

Finally, while there has been growing academic interest in Indigenous political activism online, no work has yet explored the connections between Indigenous groups across different countries. As we discussed in the final section of this report, clear links are being made between the political causes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Native Americans, Canadian First Nations and Black Americans. The local Australian offshoots of 'Black Lives Matter' and 'Idle No More' show that Indigenous people are making connections between forms of colonial and imperialist violence globally – including police brutality, the neglect of Indigenous communities, the forced removal of children from their families, the theft of land and culture, and the lack of meaningful political representation. Through social media, diverse Indigenous and other minority groups are forging new alliances across distance – a phenomenon that warrants much greater attention.

Our research has shown that racism and discrimination online are all too common experiences for Indigenous Australians. Yet we know little about how these experiences affect the mental wellbeing of social media users, nor how these users respond to such experiences.

Appendices

INTERVIEW GUIDE: ABORIGINAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY ONLINE

1 IDENTITY & COMMUNITY OFFLINE:

- Do you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?
- Would you say that you are a member of the local Aboriginal community?
- Do you identify as being part of any other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities?
- Are you active in any Aboriginal community events in your local area? (Ask for details)
- How do you usually find out about such events?
- Are you a member of any Aboriginal community organisations? (Board of Directors, committees, etc)
- Do you access local Aboriginal-specific programs and services? (Ask for details)
- How do you find out about such programs and services?
- Do you subscribe to or have access to any Indigenous media? (Koori Mail, Tracker, email lists, etc)
- What do you think are the main issues facing Aboriginal people in your community? (Prompt: health, education, suicide, employment, etc)
- Do you think racism an issue in your community? (Ask for details)
- Have you ever experienced or witnessed racism in your community? (Ask for details)
- Do you participate in any types of activism, such as attending marches or signing petitions? (Ask for details)
- Do you support any causes? (Ask for details)

Lead into this next part by saying: Sometimes Aboriginal people are asked to produce proof that they are Aboriginal, especially to access services.

- Have you ever been asked to produce a Confirmation of Aboriginality?
 - If no: Do you know what a Confirmation of Aboriginality is? (If not, explain what a CoA is)
 - If yes: Tell me about the process you went through to gain a Confirmation of Aboriginality?
- Have you ever been questioned or challenged about your identity? (If yes, ask for details)
- Have you ever questioned or challenged anyone else's identity when they claim to be Aboriginal? (If yes, ask for details)

2 SOCIAL NETWORK SITES (SNS):

- What social networks do you use?
- Which is your preference and why?
- What technology do you use to access SNS? (phone, computer, tablet, etc.)
- Which is your preference and why?
- How many hours per day do you spend on SNS?
- What sorts of activities do you engage in on SNS?
- Do you use YouTube? If yes, what type of videos do you watch?
- Do you upload videos to YouTube? If yes, what? Do you subscribe to any channels?

- Do you read or write blogs? (If yes, which ones? What types of content is posted? Do you comment on blogs?)
- Do you engage in multiplayer online gaming? (World of War Craft, Minecraft, Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto, Skyrim, etc)
 - If yes, ask about interacting with others, how many hours per day, etc.
 - If so, do you identify as Aboriginal while playing such games?

3 IDENTITY ONLINE:

- Do you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on social network sites?
- If so, what are the ways you do this online? (Ask: If I looked at your site, would I know you were Aboriginal?)
- If not, is there a reason?
- Have you ever been questioned or challenged about your identity, as an Aboriginal person, on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)
- Have you ever questioned or challenged anyone else's identity when they claim to be Aboriginal on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)
- Do you know of any instances where someone on SNS has claimed to be Aboriginal when they are not? (If yes, ask for details)

4 SOCIAL NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY:

- Do you have Aboriginal friends and family on your SNS?
- Do you interact more with your family on SNS than you do offline? (If yes, ask why this might be the case)
- Do you have family on your SNS that you might not see or interact with offline? (If yes, ask for details)
- How do you interact with your family on SNS? (Like their pages, leave comments, share links, etc)
- SNS like Facebook have a function that allows you to identify who you are related to. Do you use this function?
- Do you interact more with your friends on SNS than offline?
- How do you interact with your friends on SNS? (Like their pages, leave comments, share information, etc)
- Do you accept all friend requests? (Ask for details, why/why not)
- Do you customise your privacy settings? If yes, how and why?
- Do you allow everyone to see your page and what you post? (Ask for details, why/why not)
- Have you ever been upset over something that was posted on your SNS or that you were included or tagged in? (If yes, ask for details)
 - If yes, what did you do?
- Aboriginal Elders in some communities are calling for a ban of Facebook. They say that malicious gossip and bullying on social media is fuelling violence in communities. What do you think about that?
- Have you seen any instances where an argument that begun online had an impact offline? (If yes, ask for details)

Given most Aboriginal people have connections with friends and family on SNS who are Aboriginal:

- Do you think that there is an identifiable Aboriginal community or network on SNS? (Ask for details)
- Do you feel like you are part of an Aboriginal community or network on SNS?
 - If so, in what way?
- Do you think SNS may impact on what we mean by 'the Aboriginal community' in the future? (e.g. do you think that an online Aboriginal network can be called a community? Ask why/why not)
- Do you think SNS can help with connecting Aboriginal people with their family and community? (e.g. Stolen Generations, families who have moved, etc) (Ask how)

5 CULTURE AND SNS:

- Can you describe the kinds of pages you interact with on SNS and how you interact with them? (Like, leave posts, share, etc)
- Do you know of any Aboriginal specific pages on SNS? (Ask for details)
 - How do you interact with Aboriginal specific pages? (Like, leave posts, share, etc)
 - Do you feel confident engaging with Aboriginal specific pages? (leaving posts, etc)
 - Have you ever had a negative experience by leaving comments or posts on Aboriginal specific pages? (If yes, ask for details)
- Do you think SNS are a good way to maintain, share, and learn about Aboriginal culture? (If yes, ask how. If no, ask why not)
- Have you seen any examples of people sharing culture on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)
- Do you think there are any issues around sharing or practicing culture on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)
- Do you think there are any issues around posting images of Aboriginal people or families on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)

6 CONFIRMATION OF ABORIGINALITY ONLINE:

Part of the application process to get a Confirmation of Aboriginality involves providing evidence that you openly identify as Aboriginal. Another criterion is that you must have community recognition:

- Do you think that your activity on SNS could provide evidence that you openly identify as Aboriginal? (Ask for details)
- Do you think that Aboriginal friends and family on SNS could provide community recognition that someone is Aboriginal? (Ask for details)

Some people have a great deal of difficulty gaining a Confirmation of Aboriginality:

- Do you think SNS could play a role in the application for a Confirmation of Aboriginality? (Ask for details)
- Do you think that there could be an online process for getting confirmation of Aboriginality? (Ask for details)

7 INFORMATION AND NEWS ON SOCIAL NETWORK SITES:

- Do you receive links to new on SNS? (Ask for details)
 - If so, do you: Like? Follow the link and read the information? Make comments? Repost?
- Would you like to receive information and news on your SNS? If so, what kind of information and news would you like to receive?
- Are you more likely to read a news report on SNS or in a newspaper or on TV?
- Do you receive information on SNS about Aboriginal events in your community or in Australia? (If yes, ask for details)
- If so, do you: Like? Follow the link and read the information? Make comments? Repost? Invite others?

8 ABORIGINAL CAUSES AND ACTIVISM

- Do you know of any Aboriginal causes or movements that are organised or shared on SNS? (Ask for details)
- If yes, do you: Join? Like? Invite others? Make comments? Repost?
- Have you signed any online petitions? (If yes, ask for details)
- If you supported a cause online would you participate in an event to support the cause offline?
- Do you or would you support Indigenous groups outside of Australia? If so, what kind of group or cause?

9 RACISM AND SOCIAL NETWORK SITES:

- Have you ever been affected by racism on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)
 - Have you ever seen racism towards other Aboriginal people, groups, and pages on SNS? (If yes, ask for details)
 - If so, did you react in any way? (e.g. comment, delete, etc. Ask why)
 - When you see racism on SNS, how does it make you feel?
-

10 SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM AND SOCIAL NETWORKING:

- Aboriginal suicide is a major issue in Australia. Have you ever seen posts from your online networks that have made you concerned for a person's safety? (If yes, ask for details)
 - Do you feel confident that you would be able to respond to someone in your online network who you thought might be at risk of suicide or self-harm? (If yes, ask how)
 - Do you think that SNS could assist with suicide prevention campaigns? (If so, how?)
-

11 DOES ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING EVER MAKE YOU FEEL?

- 'Connected' with others? (Ask how)
- Good about yourself? (Ask how)
- Not so good about yourself? (Ask how)
- Able to access information or advice from your online networks? (Ask how)
- Able to access support from other people in your online networks? (Ask how)
- Able to provide support to other people in your online networks? (Ask how)
- If you were no longer able to access your SNS, how would you feel?

ONLINE SURVEY: ABORIGINAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY ONLINE

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

I identify my gender as:

Male | Female | Trans | Other, please specify: | Prefer not to disclose

Age

18–24 | 25–29 | 30–34 | 35–39 | 40–44 | 45–49 | 50–54 | 55–59 | 60–64 | 65–69 | 70–74 | 75–79 | 80–84 | 85+

Location

NSW | QLD | NT | SA | WA | ACT | VIC | TAS

Do you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?

Yes | No

Which community do you reside in?

INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

Do you own any of the following?

Smart phone | Tablet | Laptop | Netbook | Desktop | Other, please list:

Do you use the following?

Smart phone | Tablet | Laptop | Netbook | Desktop | Community Computer |

Other, please list:

How do you access the Internet?

Mobile Internet | WiFi | Desktop Internet | Computer Centre | Internet Cafe | Library |

Other, please list:

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

What technology do you use to access social network sites?

Smart phone | Tablet | Laptop | Netbook | Desktop | Other, please list:

Which social network sites do you have a profile on?

How much time per day do you spend on social network sites?

0–15 minutes | 15–30 minutes | 30–60 minutes | 1–1.5 hours | 1.5–2 hours | 2–3 hours | 3–4 hours | more than 4 hours

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY ONLINE

Do you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on social network sites?

Yes | No | Sometimes | Not sure

Comment

If yes, what online activities identify you as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?

'Liking' pages/pictures/comments | Posting pictures | Joining groups | Commenting | Sharing links |
 Updating Your Status | Following people, pages, or groups | Creating Pages | Creating Groups |
 Subscriptions | Joining networks | 'Re-pinning' | Writing blog posts |
 Other, please list:

Do you 'like' any pages specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on social network sites?

No | If yes, please list:

Are you a member of any groups specifically for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on social network sites?

No | If yes, please list:

Do you think social network sites help you express your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity?

Yes | No | Sometimes | Not sure

Comment

Have you ever been selective with what you post on social network sites in regard to your identity?

Yes | No | Not sure

If yes, why?

Has anyone ever challenged your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity on social network sites?

Yes | No | Not sure

If yes, how?

ABORIGINAL CULTURE ONLINE**What sort of information relating to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people do you access on social network sites?**

Music | Art | Language | History | Upcoming Events | Community | Health | Education | Politics |
 News | Opinion | Other, please list:

Do you think social network sites are a good way to maintain and practice Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture?

Yes | No | Not sure

Do you think social network sites are a good way to learn about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture?

Yes | No | Not sure

Do you think there are any problems with sharing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural information online?

No | If yes, why?

Do you think there are any problems with posting images of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people or families online?

No | If yes, why?

Do you use any languages other than English online?

No | If yes, please list:

Have you ever made a post in relation to sorry business – death or remembering the dead?

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY ONLINE

Do you feel a sense of being a member of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community online?

No | Not sure | If yes, please specify how:

- ☐ Adding friends
 ☐ Liking content
 ☐ Commenting
 ☐ Joining groups
 ☐ Liking pages
 ☐ Other, please specify:

Have you used social network sites to connect with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander friends or family across distances?

Yes | No | Not sure

Have you met relatives on social network sites you wouldn't have otherwise met?

Yes | No | Not sure

Do you keep in contact with relatives on social network sites you perhaps wouldn't do offline?

Yes | No | Not sure

Have you made Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander friends on social network sites?

Yes | No | Not sure

Have you ever attended an event for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people that you learnt about through social network sites?

No | If yes, please list:

CONFIRMATION OF ABORIGINALITY ONLINE

Do you know what a Confirmation of Aboriginality is?

Yes | No | Not sure

Have you ever experienced applying for a Confirmation of Aboriginality?

Yes | No

Do you think social network sites could provide evidence of community recognition for a Confirmation of Aboriginality?

If yes, how?

If no, why not?

EFFECT OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

Does online social networking make you feel 'connected' with others?

Yes | No | Don't know

Does online social networking make you feel more likely to engage with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander events offline?

Yes | No | Not sure

How likely are you to attend an event in the future for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people you learnt about through social network sites?

Very unlikely | Unlikely | Neither likely nor unlikely | Likely | Very likely

Does online social networking make you feel more likely to be able to identify if someone in your online network was possibly at risk of self-harm or suicide?

Yes | No | Not sure

Would you contact someone in your online network via the social network site if you thought they were at possible risk of self-harm or suicide?

Yes | No | Not sure

Would you like to receive health information via social network sites?

Yes | No | Not sure

Would you like to receive other information via social network sites?

Yes | No

If yes what sort of information?

Education | Employment | News | Parenting | Relationships

ONLINE EXPERIENCES

Have you ever seen examples of racism towards Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on social network sites?

No | If yes, please describe:

Have you ever personally experienced racism on social network sites?

No | If yes, please describe:

Have you ever received threats on social network sites?

No | If yes, please describe:

Have you ever experienced a time when online threats impacted on you offline?

No | If yes, please describe:

Have you ever supported a political cause on social network sites?

No | If yes, please describe:

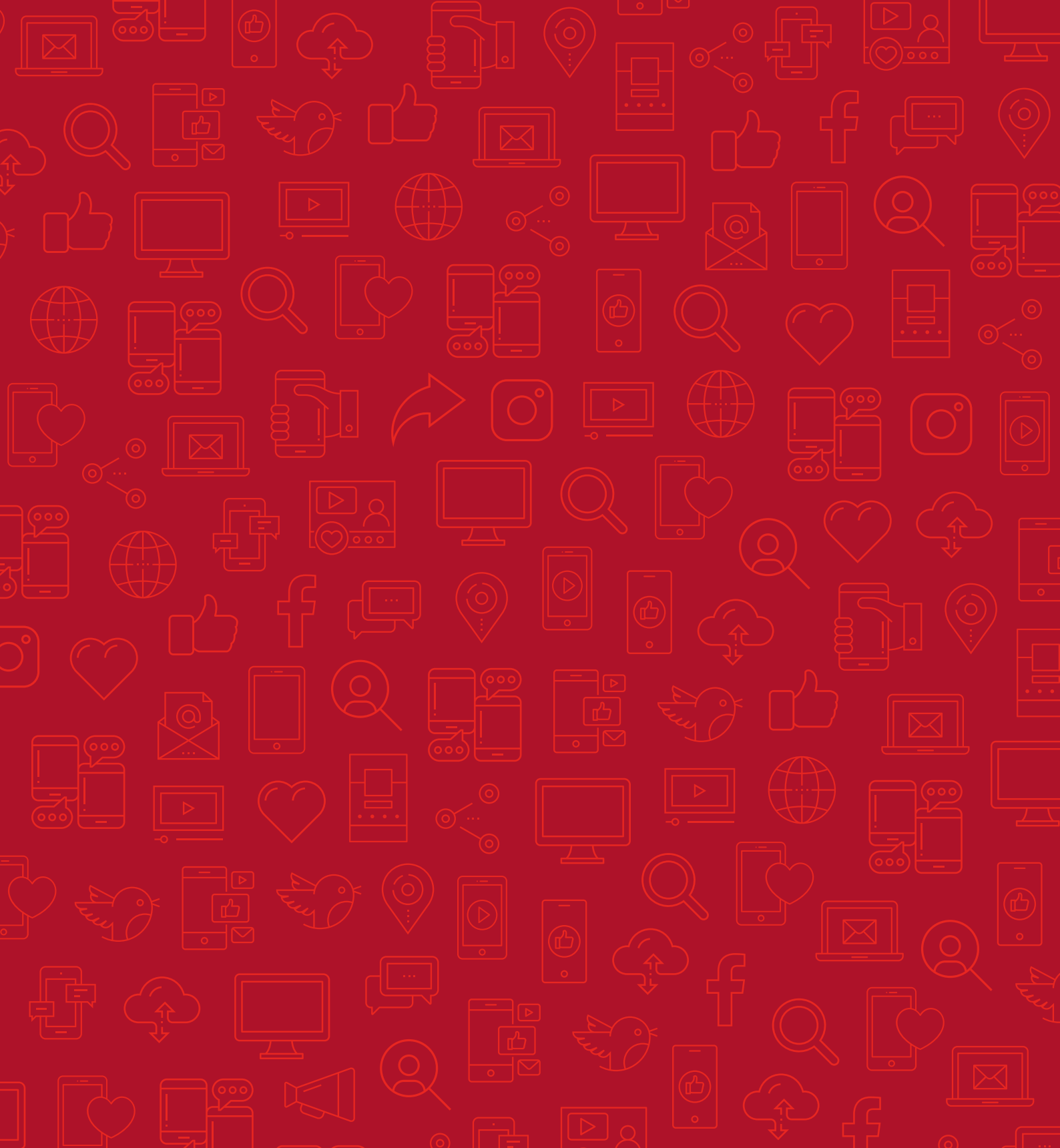
Have you ever attended a rally or protest that you first heard about on social network sites?

If you could no longer access social network sites how would this make you feel? Please describe:

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