

Indigenous People and the Varieties of Colonial Violence on Social Media

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It's 2009 and Facebook has been open to members of the public for almost three years. It has just become the most popular social media platform globally, boasting almost half a billion users. For most of these people, the website is still strange and exciting—an entirely new digital space in which they can form connections with countless others, experiment with different forms of self-expression, and keep up-to-date with breaking geopolitical news and hometown gossip. It's a strange, playful place, where users write on each other's 'walls', share 'memes', and post links to 'fail videos'. For many, it feels like a whole new kind of society is being born; a more democratic, hopeful and connected world; a world free of the shackles of the merely analogue nation state and raced body; one where anyone can be anything and anyone can connect with anyone else.

While these early days of Facebook are often looked back upon through these kinds of rose-tinted glasses—a bygone era before the insidious growth of white supremacist sub-groups, deranged mummy wellness influencers-cum-globalist conspiracy theorists, and the loud, idiotic, obnoxious violence of Team Trump—for Indigenous people, Facebook was always a highly ambivalent development.

February 2009, and a Facebook group is established for angry residents of Alice Springs “who’ve had enough” (Henderson 2010). Over 400 people have joined the group, including at least one local police officer, and it fast becomes a space for members to complain about the violence, theft and public drunkenness in the community—but really, it’s about vilifying local Aboriginal people. Despite the extreme, violent, racist rhetoric that fills the page for the

next two years, before it is ultimately shut down, the creator of the page explains that it is simply a ‘petition’ to government to do something to help the community.

Now it’s May 2009—National Reconciliation Week¹—and a quiz has been circulating wildly on Facebook. It claims to be able to determine specific characteristics of Aboriginal identity and provide a measure of ‘how Aboriginal’ you are (Harris 2009). It asks respondents whether they have ever asked strangers for ‘train money’, but then spent it on cigarettes or fried chicken. At the end of the quiz, it informs respondents they are either a ‘crazy noonga (sic)², get me Hungry Jacks bro³’ or a ‘white fella, you got a nice car bloke can I have it?’ (Harris 2009). After pressure from hundreds of outraged users, many of them Indigenous, Facebook agrees to remove the quiz, citing a violation of its community standards.

For Indigenous people, Facebook has always been a highly contradictory space—at once making them more powerful through their connections to one another and more vulnerable to the racist violence of colonialism. Over the last ten years, a wealth of research has documented the many ways that social media has created opportunities for Indigenous people—from Australia to Mexico, from Canada to Chile—to powerfully resist and reject the violence of settler colonialism, its ideology of Indigenous elimination, and work towards alternative futures (Carlson & Berglund 2021; Barker 2015; Duarte 2017; Salazar 2003). It

¹ National Reconciliation Week is an annual event that seeks to foster mutual understanding and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, with the broader aim of healing the Australian nation.

² ‘Noonga’, usually spelt ‘Noongar’ or ‘Nyoongar’, are the Aboriginal people of the South-West of Western Australia. It is also used as a generic racist epithet to refer to all Aboriginal people. That is the sense in which it is used here.

³ Hungry Jacks is a popular Australian fastfood chain that serves burgers and fries, akin to Burger King or McDonald’s.

has allowed geographically disparate Indigenous people connect, form alliances, and together resist the settler colonial state's attempt at further dispossession of land and connection to Country. This has been evidenced in countless Indigenous protests, digitally mediated, such as the #SOSBlakAustralia movement, which rolled into global protests against the closure of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia (Carlson & Frazer 2015); or the incredible #NoDAPL⁴ movement against the oil pipeline at Standing Rock in Sioux country, which ultimately became the largest gathering of Native American people in history (Deschine Parkhurst 2021; Estes 2019).

Social media has also facilitated much more mundane, quotidian, though no less significant practices of Indigenous political resistance, cultural resurgence, and connected self-determination (Frazer & Carlson 2017; Hutchings & Rodger 2018; Latimore et al. 2017).

While settler colonialism invariably seeks to define, contain, and ultimately eliminate Indigeneity (Tuck & Tang 2012; Wolfe 2006)—most often through racist stereotypes of Indigenous 'backwardness', criminality and laziness—Indigenous people themselves have skillfully deployed social media to represent and experiment with their own Indigenous subjectivities (Akama et al. 2017). The #IndigenousDads movement, for instance, countered the damaging stereotype of the absent, alcoholic father by flooding Twitter timelines with images and stories of loving, kind, and caring Indigenous fathers (Carlson & Frazer 2021). More recently, TikTok has become a key platform for young Indigenous people to be playful with their identities, generating content that expresses incredibly diverse and complexly intersecting gender and sexual identities (Loyers 2020; Malik 2021; Rizzo-Smith 2021; Salem 2021). As digital citizens, Indigenous people are exposing the colonial lie of

⁴ The hashtag refers to the main rallying cry: No Dakota Access Pipeline, which was an oil pipeline that was to cut across Indigenous country from the Dakotas to Illinois.

Indigenous backwardness, demonstrating a vibrant playfulness that is also powerfully anti-colonial (Carlson & Frazer 2021).

In contrast however, and as the above examples of early Facebook life show, social media are often incredibly violent spaces. They have constituted new planes on which the colonial forces of marginalisation, disenfranchisement, and elimination can extend and strengthen their power. Research has shown that Indigenous social media users are disproportionately targeted with racist abuse in its many forms: hate speech, trolling, cyberbullying, online harassment, digital sexual abuse, and police surveillance (Kennedy 2020; Jakubowicz 2017; Katz et al. 2014; Matamoros-Fernández 2017). It has also facilitated new forms of Indigenous surveillance for the settler colonial state. In 2016, for instance, the media reported that Australian police were using laws designed to disrupt organised crime to target Aboriginal people (Fitzpatrick 2016). While the laws were implemented to allow police to track associates of suspected participants of organised crime, a reported 44% of people targeted using these laws were Aboriginal, and police were using social media to track who Indigenous people were associating with, determining if they were breaching bail conditions. That same year, as Native American protestors were gathering at Standing Rock to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, hundreds of police were stationed outside the camp, reportedly gathering information about Indigenous protestors inside by tracing who had ‘checked in’ there (Cappelli 2018; Hinz & Clark 2019). There were also reports that mobile internet service was deliberately blocked at the Standing Rock camp to sever the powerful connections that Facebook and Twitter had created among and outside protesters in the camp.

While some of these claims have been difficult to verify, it’s clear that social media provides not only new channels for existing flows of racist violence, but entirely new forms of

digitally mediated colonial violence. This special issue of the *Journal of Global Indigeneity* unpacks the varieties of violence against Indigenous peoples on social media. It interrogates the many forms that colonial violence takes on social media, how this violence flows through different actors and technologies, and how it is both experienced and resisted by Indigenous people. This is not an exercise in ‘trauma porn’, which explores violence only as a form of entertainment, but an attempt to understand how the many tentacles of colonialism are digitally extended through social media—and how they might then be severed.

The papers unpack myriad overlapping themes that arise at the point where the settler state and digital technologies intersect, including:

- How Indigenous social media users recognize and respond to online violence.
- How Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies bring to light different forms and understandings of violence.
- The forms of settler-colonial violence facilitated by social media and their differences from/similarities to ‘older’ forms of settler-colonial violence.
- The subjectivities, institutions and technologies that are implicated in the production, circulation, and maintenance of online violence.
- The place of emotions, affects, and desires in the circulation of online violence.
- How anti-colonial activists, allies, collectives, and movements respond to, resist, and reject the existing and emerging forms of online violence.

In examining the impact of surveillance technology and mobile devices Brown and colleagues tackle the significant and urgent issue of gendered violence through the concept of Technology-Facilitated Abuse (TFA). They navigate this highly sensitive yet vastly important terrain by drawing extensively on interviews with frontline health care workers

who have had experience with Indigenous women exposed to TFA. They highlight TFA as a grim element of lateral violence in Indigenous communities, the prevalence of which increased during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. They also assert that TFA occurs mostly as a form of intimate partner violence and that it is most often women who are victims of TFA instigated by current or former intimate partners through surveillance, gaslighting, and threats of physical and emotional abuse. Brown et al reveal the disturbing apathy on the part of authorities as participants noted victims often have trouble convincing police and social workers of the significance of their experience of TFA because it has historically been deemed ‘virtual’ and therefore less real and affective. The authors provide innovative recommendations to combat the complexities of the issue including awareness raising of the diversity of experiences, education, and improved digital literacy.

Al-Natour’s paper on the impacts of ‘Aboriginal memes’ presents an urgent need to develop more effective algorithmic identification of culturally nuanced violence on social media. Al-Natour unpacks fourteen separate memes which revisit common racial slurs and redeploy them via digital media. These memes are shown to “assert fragments of white colonial identity ... across a spectrum of white superiority and white victimhood” (p. 2). The impact of these memes and the swift spread of them across all social media platforms make them particularly difficult to recognise and resolve. In unpacking these memes Al-Natour focuses our attention on one of the most common forms of online colonial violence that is also one of the most damaging as it is reiterated and redeployed in offline social settings.

Bradfield and Fredericks provide a much-needed commentary on the affordances of social media technology for the successful promotion of the need for change in line with the Uluru Statement from the Heart. They see social media as providing a positive space that is

“predicated on building networks and connections where people may exchange ideas, challenge outlooks, and create a sense of solidarity” (p.12). They eloquently demonstrate how social media provide a site for raising awareness of the Statement while simultaneously countering misinformation. An added contribution of their paper is the showcasing of key names and organisations in Indigenous social media activism demonstrating the considerable import of digital technology for Indigenous peoples’ continued resistance to colonisation.

Ahmed and Bhattacharya provide an insightful analysis of the real impacts of the spread of colonial misinformation and essentialising discourse on Twitter. They highlight the specific cases where racist discourse targeted at Assamese peoples in traditional media outlets has been (re)produced on social media platforms and amplified in its reach. They deploy a combination of affect theory and J.L. Austin’s work on illocutionary acts to demonstrate how “digital media commentaries regarding citizenship in Assam have produced an essentialist discourse” (p. 24) that has tangible negative impacts for Indigenous peoples in the Assam region of Northeast India. Their paper offers a vital insight into the way mainstream media can influence social media sentiment.

Ali’s paper rounds out this special issue with a forward thinking and insightful description of ‘digital settler colonialism’. Ali shifts the focus of interrogations of online colonial violence toward an analysis of digital communication technology. Ali draws on the work of key Indigenous and non-Indigenous digital theorists to explore the embedded notions of white supremacy and colonial hegemony in the very technology that facilitates our daily, digital lives. Ali’s findings stand as a stark reminder that we must not abandon the interrogation into the machinations of digital technology, from its foundations to its contemporary

developments. More than simply affording the global spread of violent colonial ideology, technology is inextricably entwined with its racist foundations.

This special issue demonstrates the need for continual identification of the ever-evolving character of online colonial violence. As technology facilitates further innovative means of communication, connection, and surveillance and with the imminent arrival of the ‘metaverse’ (Sparkes, 2021) it remains crucial to monitor, analyse, and respond to the impacts of technology and technology users on Indigenous peoples digital lives. As the papers in this special issue remind us, the potential impact of misinformation and new forms of colonial violence reaches deep into the lives of Indigenous people.

A core responsibility of Indigenous digital scholarship remains to understand and emphasise the epistemological, ontological and axiological diversity amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as we participate as digital citizens. Where once it was assumed digital communication technology was complementary to, yet separate from, social organisation (Markham 1998) this special issue reminds us that a digital presence is inextricable from other aspects of our lives. Social media is not a site for virtual, non-real interactions. That is, social interactions, imaginations, and lives are played out with all their emotional and affective complexity in digital spaces. Our lives are intimately tied to digital citizenship. The importance of this point, eloquently raised in each of the contributions to this special issue, is that further scholarly investment is very much required to maintain our finger on the pulse of digital society.

This special issue is but one contribution to an emerging oeuvre of scholarship produced by Indigenous and allied scholars and across the globe. Digital communication technology

facilitates our “increasingly accelerated and dangerous modernities” (Redhead 2006, p. 11) characterised by compressed time and space in ways that have altered the history of capitalism and humanity. Indigenous peoples and communities have embraced the vast changes to our lives and become active and innovative digital citizens. What this special issue has shown is that there are unique challenges faced by Indigenous peoples in the digital realm and that these challenges will evolve as technology evolves. Colonisation continues to negatively impact the lives of Indigenous peoples across the planet. Digital technology facilitates new and innovative ways to deploy colonial mechanisms of oppression. However, while digital platforms present the latest site of colonial violence, Indigenous peoples as digital citizens are leading the development of innovative approaches to resist and reject existing and emerging forms of online colonial violence.

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