[Working title] **Sharing First Nations stories online: the narrative-engaging capabilities of social media for marginalised groups**

Friedel Marquardt | PhD Candidate
University of Canberra

Friedel.Marquardt@canberra.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Social media has been seen as a type of public sphere where contemporary issues can be discussed and debated. It may also be considered a more accessible space for communication and information dissemination that is not as hindered by the power structures that plague traditional institutions like mass media. There is no doubt that social media has allowed for perspectives and voices not as prominent in more traditional public spaces to share information and engage in public conversation. This paper presents a component of the author's PhD research, which considers the viability of social media for marginalised groups to engage with narratives about issues that matter to them. The research focuses on First Nations in Australia, and this paper presents a discussion of interview themes from the empirical component of the research. These themes show that while social media can mean increased accessibility for nearly anyone to share their stories online and engage with narratives, it does also mean increased access for harmful discourse in response. Social media certainly offers more and easier opportunities for participating in the public sphere through narrative engagement, fostering community and celebrating culture online, but doing so does not happen without facing backlash such as trolling, racism and harmful stereotypes.

Keywords: public sphere – social media – narratives – misinformation – marginalized groups

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INTRODUCTION

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FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas (1974:49) writes that the public sphere is the space where "private individuals" come together to "form a public body", and consequently generate a "public opinion". This public gathering draws on discussions that are usually already happening in more private spaces, such as within homes, and oftentimes these discussions centre around what are essentially political matters (Habermas 1989:27, 29-31). Requirements for engagement in the public sphere include being able to access the public space and engage with it in a relatively unhindered way (Habermas 1974:49; Kruse et al. 2018:63). The free flow of information is also necessary for public discourse, and this is usually transmitted by media channels (Ibid.; Habermas 1989:181). From the above, one can distil the characteristics of the public sphere into a place where anyone can join a gathering of people to freely access information and, together with others, engage with it to form political opinion.

Considering these key public sphere characteristics, spaces on the internet can be seen as types of public spheres. Social media, with its ease of access, free flow of information and public nature, could be considered a space in which public debate occurs and public opinion is formed and that influences the other public spheres a person finds themselves in (Bruns & Highfield 2015:70). While there is debate about whether or not social media should be considered a type of public sphere, it does prove helpful for enabling people to engage in public discourse, particularly for people who may not normally have access to or take part in it through more traditional channels (Carney 2016:184; Bortone & Pistecchia 2018:432). Fuchs (2022:57) says that "the public sphere exists wherever people gather to organise collectively and express their anger and displeasure at

exploitation and domination." Considering this description about the purpose of the public sphere, social media can certainly be considered a type of public sphere as it currently seems to be one of the first spaces people go to voice their anger about an issue.

The public sphere, while proposed by Habermas to be accessible to anyone who wants to participate, has, in its traditional sense, in many ways been an exclusive space. This exclusivity can be blatant through explicitly banning participation by certain groups, or more subtle with the maintenance of certain customs of engagement and norms (Asen 2002:345). There has also been a disparity regarding those who engage in the public sphere, with those who are educated and have more resources being more present (Fuchs 2022:56). This points to the fact that the public sphere is in many "colonised and feudalised" (Ibid.). Exclusion of any kind can mean that important perspectives are left out of a public conversation about an issue, thereby impacting the narrative about that issue and consequently the groups that issue is about.

Narratives

Narratives are essentially the story of something (Rappaport 1995:803; Patterson & Monroe 1998:315). They are important for assigning meaning to an event or issue, gaining understanding, and through this meaning generation they are influential in shaping society and furthering social change (Shenhav 2006:346; Shenhav 2005:315; Rappaport 1995:796; Wittgenstein 1922:74; Bruner 1987:15). There are dominant narratives that are broadly accepted and maintained by powerful actors, such as the mainstream media and other established institutions, that can be harmful to certain groups (Shenhav 2006:253; Rappaport 1995:803; van Dijk 2002:145-146). Thomas, Jacubowicz and Norman (2019) conducted a study into the dominant narratives projected by mass media towards First Nations issues over a 45-year period. They found that three of the four dominant narratives were harmful towards First Nations political goals, while the other narrative acknowledged First Nations sovereignty and was especially present in First Nations media (Thomas, Jacubowicz & Norman 2019:236-237).

What the above study shows is that narratives impact political outcomes for marginalised groups. They can support these goals or disempower them through the presentation of the issue. What is included and what is left out of a narrative are crucial for this presentation and impact

(Patterson & Monroe 1998:329) as well as how narratives are maintained. There is a reflexive construction for narratives and political reality (Bruner 1987:13). Shenhav (2006:254) uses the term "mutual imitation" to refer to how narratives are constructed, maintained and even transformed in the context of politics. If certain details are omitted or included in a narrative, particularly one that has been circulated or dominant in the public sphere, then it is likely that the political reality that narrative spoke to can shift. Challenging and changing narratives can lead to social change, as they confront the dominant narratives that have been maintaining the status quo (Patterson & Monroe 1998:321).

Habermas emphasised the need of the media to inform public debate, however, if the media projects certain narratives which may emphasise some details over others, then there is a chance that the public debate will be skewed (Fielding 2024:13). This is concerning, particularly if the issue is one that significantly impacts marginalised groups and where it is important that their perspectives are heard regarding the proposal to address the issue. In the lead up to the Voice to Parliament referendum in October 2023, it was found that News Corp, the dominant media organisation in Australia owning approximately 60 per cent of media outlets (Fielding 11 October 2023), was championing arguments from the "No" campaign and framing "Yes" campaigners in a negative light, as well as misrepresenting information such as the length of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Fielding 2023:26-27; Fielding 2024:15).

Therefore, challenging narratives that maintain the status quo are not so straightforward because many actors benefit from things being the way they are. In fact, many may even resort to spreading false information regarding certain narratives to maintain existing power structures (Reddi et al. 2023:2202-2203). Misinformation and disinformation are significant threats when it comes to the public sphere and distribution of narratives. Misinformation refers to the spread of false information while disinformation refers to intentionally spreading false information (Gibbons & Carson 2022:231-232; Guess & Lyons 2020:10-11). This can lead to significant negative impacts. Gibbons and Carson (2022:242-243) identified five types of harm mis- and disinformation can lead to: physical, emotional, electoral, financial or economic, and intangible. While false information can spread anywhere where there is communication, social media is fertile ground for its distribution. So much so that Guess and Lyons (2020:10) posit that social media is better known for being spaces for mis- and disinformation as opposed to being "tools for

empowerment and social change." Adding further complexity to the situation is that most people do not have the time or put in the effort to interrogate the information they are being exposed to on social media (e.g. Kruse et al. 2018). They may take the information they see online at face-value, particularly if the information reinforces already held beliefs (Guess & Lyons 2020:20-21).

All of this can make transformative discussions in the digital public sphere challenging, as well as limit the potential for narrative engagement for marginalised groups who may be looking to introduce alternative perspectives into long-held narratives about issues.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper draws on the empirical component of my PhD research, which sought to understand whether and how social media can be a space for marginalised groups to engage with narratives about issues that matter to them. It considers to what extent social media can be considered a more inclusive public sphere for voices that have not previously been included in public conversation. The focus is on First Nations in Australia and what benefits and limitations social media affords for engaging in narratives in their own way. The thesis analyses three case studies of First Nations social media use in Australia through the lenses of themes generated from semi-structured interviews with First Nations people. These themes will be discussed in this paper. The thesis is predominantly theoretical with an empirical component to support the findings.

METHOD

The empirical component of the research involved semi-structured interviews with First Nations people about their experiences of and on social media for engaging with narratives. Ten people were interviewed, including one who was not a social media user. Their names are used in this paper with their permission.

These interviews took place from March to June 2023. This was in the lead up to the Voice to Parliament referendum, held on 14 October 2023. Interviews also included a photo elicitation component (Bates et al. 2017) where participants were asked to share of their social media use and explain the narrative engagement taking place. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Code of Ethics (2020) along with an Indigenous advisor guided this research.

Participants were recruited through X (then-Twitter) and email, and interviews were conducted in-person and via Zoom. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, with a combination of deductive and inductive coding to generate themes (Braun & Clark 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). Transcripts were deductively coded using the interview questions, and then I would inductively code using words participants used, such as "campaigns" or "empowerment" or other words I had come across in the literature about similar studies, predominantly by First Nations authors (e.g. Carlson & Kenndy 2021; Kennedy 2020; Carlson et al. 2017).

It is recognised that the sample size is small. This is because recruitment proved challenging for a variety of reasons, including low responses to invitations to participate, as well as the challenge of recruiting through social media. First Nations people are also one of the most over-researched people groups (Blair 2015:464-466; Thambinathan & Kinsella 2021:1; Held 2019:4). This, along with my being a non-Indigenous researcher and the history of exploitative research of First Nations people and issues (Smith 2012:30), may have also contributed to the low participation rates.

FINDINGS

Five core themes were identified from the data and inductively generated from the codes: Context, Motivation, Enhancement, Inhibition and Beyond Social Media. These themes are discussed below.

Context

This theme considers what is happening around a participant's social media use and acknowledges the historical and contextual influences on online engagement. Specific areas of concern in this theme included First Nations movements, mainstream media coverage and colonialism. The Voice referendum was frequently mentioned in interviews, as well as Black Lives Matter and other previous First Nations campaigns. Social media was a place where participants would monitor movements and campaigns to learn about them and their progress, as well as engage with the movement to correct or share information or tie the movement in with local events. There was also mention of non-Indigenous allies online, their engagement with First Nations and how that is met by others on social media as well as First Nations people.

The influence of the mainstream media was discussed, particularly regarding how a story is presented. Social media provides the opportunity for people to share their own account of events, which may be different to that being presented by the mainstream media. Mark Mullins shared,

> *Whilst I'm not disputing, in any way, that those who control the media still have the greater power, social media has allowed the other side of the story to be put forward.*

Colonial influences were also discussed, particularly in the way that colonial thinking influences discussions taking place on social media, and how social media offers First Nations the opportunity to "colonise" the digital space in their own way by using it in the way they would like to.

Motivation

There are many reasons why participants chose to and felt motivated to sign up to social media platforms. This was usually as a result of family and friends being on these platforms, and sometimes because there was pressure from family to be on it. Social media platforms would be used differently, such as Facebook and Instagram being key spaces for connecting with family, friends, groups and businesses, and Twitter (X) being a space to share and learn various perspectives about issues. Dr Sharlene Leroy-Dyer shared about her motivation for using social media,

> *I see these platforms as a way to actually plant seeds in people's minds that you might be able to persuade or change their attitudes, you know, and the whole reason I do the activism around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues is so that people can come to some sort of truth telling about the history of this country. You know, if we don't have truth in our history, then Australia is never gonna reconcile with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So, I see social media as a really good way to do that.*

The content of information shared online can range from context and culturally relevant humour to sharing more serious personal accounts of issues. This can lead to a sense of solidarity, as well as enhancing First Nations identity. Steve Hodder-Watt shared,

> *I mean it's like, you know, having come from, you know, I guess more community journalism background is that sense that, you know, you're Aboriginal or First Nations first, that's your identity. Without that, you're not really who you are. And then your profession comes after, you know, so I think that's, that's something that, that can rub the wrong way just generally. And, and maybe, yeah, maybe the social media spaces are a place where that, I guess, not discussion or more of understanding or realization can take place.*

Steve also shared a screenshot of one of his Twitter posts in response to an IndigenousX post to show how he has used the platform to show his connections.

Figure 1 – Screenshot supplied by Steve Hodder-Watt

Being a channel to share stories in response to other social media posts was also noted by other participants as a motivator for using these platforms. It can lead to support within First Nations groups in Australia with similar experiences as well as internationally, which can lead to a strong sense of solidarity. Siobhan King put it this way,

> *Well, people around the world, we have Indigenous people in all parts of the world. We have them in Europe, like the Saami people, Ainu people of Japan, the Taiwanese First Nations, First Nations in Canada, America. Like I said before, just combining the voices and saying, like, 'We're going through stuff that you've gone through, how did you deal with it?' Or, 'Can you back us with this?' Or, it's just that really great connection that we're building. We're very small populations where we're from, but we're a big group when together.*

Enhancement

This theme looks at the way social media can support narrative engagement around First Nations issues and stories. Participants shared about how they can easily share their stories online and tell them in the way they want to. This is often in contrast to the way the mainstream media would frame stories, which can draw on stereotypes and focus on negative stories when reporting on First Nations issues. John Gibson shared of a previous job he worked in where a team would film good news stories about First Nations people to share on Facebook. He said,

> *...we knew the mainstream media wouldn't see this. They wouldn't pick these stories up. We, we're not limited by, on social media. We can share our own stories.*

John shared that this was a good way to share the positive things that are happening in communities and introduce a different perspective into the negative coverage that seems to pervade First Nations stories in the mainstream media. These stories would often elicit pride and inspiration in the people and communities being covered, as well as inform the broader society about the positive things that are happening in First Nations communities.

Steve Hodder-Watt also shared about how social media allows users to amplify voices that may not otherwise be heard and to add layers to bigger issues by showing how that same issue is taking place in a different area.

> *So, re-sharing there, maybe adding commentary to that from, you know, I guess living regionally or regional/remote means you get to bring that into the equation, too. Or even creating posts that refer to the topics. And yeah, I guess having that localised or personal spin on it just gives more dynamics to it.*

Steve also shared about how he has been able to have a conversation with people who were trolling him. Even though he may not have changed their minds, Steve said it "*[felt] like there was some sort of dialogue.*"

Inhibition

There are number of factors that inhibit narrative engagement on social media around First Nations issues and by First Nations people. This includes the ease of First Nations people being targeted online, racism, stereotypes, accusations, and "pile-ons". Lateral violence is also an issue, with Tamara Murray sharing that "*sometimes the Indigenous community can be, like, more toxic, you know, than just the general mainstream.*" Posts and comments can be taken out of context with malicious intent, and there is widespread misinformation circling on these platforms. Participants did note that some people do address the misinformation on social media, but due to the nature of social media, posts can be lost in all the information circulated if there is not continual content being put out on the platforms.

There are days when it is particularly challenging to be online, such as 26 January, also known as Australia Day or Invasion Day. Siobhan King generally avoids being online during days like these to limit viewing any harmful comments toward First Nations people,

> *I personally stay off social media on Australia Day, leading up to it and after it because I don't want to be exposed to it. Even, like, when you're scrolling through news articles and in the comments you see, like, if it's an issue for Aboriginal people, you have people under it commenting some very hateful stuff: 'well, you should be grateful we built this*

> *nation. Youse would still be living out back in the sticks' and all that. It can be a very hateful and harmful place.*

For many, dealing with trolling, hacking and harmful comments comes with the territory of being online, as Steve Hodder-Watt said, "*you just mute and block and, and sort of go on with your life.*" Mental health, however, is a serious concern online, as Siobhan touched on in the quote above. Nyingari Little also shared about caring for her mental health online,

> *I live with the history every day, and I live with, you know, I live with being Aboriginal every single day, so, having to further engage with issues that already face me on a everyday basis, on an extra level on things like Facebook and Instagram can be too much.*

Beyond Social Media

What happens on social media is not confined to those platforms. As outlined earlier, online comments and conversations can impact the wellbeing of someone such as their mental health. Managing the negative repercussions of social media engagement requires care. In a more positive light, social media can be useful to put pressure on public figures, such as politicians, to act in certain ways and/or to respond to an issue due to the public nature of social media. Participants noted that the people they engaged with online can be quite different to the people they engage with offline, but these online connections can lead to fruitful offline connections.

The very nature and ease of access of social media has also meant that it has become a part of many areas of life, such as entertaining children, school announcements, death and funeral announcements and even serving divorce papers. These points are beyond the scope of this study, but they are mentioned here to show that if social media is currently being used as channels for these activities, then using it to engage with narratives may be just as viable to do online.

DISCUSSION

As the above findings show, engaging with narratives on social media involves many factors and can be met with a range of responses. Social media certainly does make engaging in

public discourse much easier, and thereby creating a channel into and from conversations in the public sphere. However, it is not without its drawbacks and negative repercussions.

Public sphere-nature of social media for marginalised groups

Participants shared that one of the main reasons for them joining social media platforms was to engage with family and friends online. This already hints at the public nature and motivation of using social media for the people interviewed, especially when considering the public sphere as an extension of the conversations happening in more private spaces (Habermas 1989:27, 29-31). This is not to discount that there are also closed groups on social media platforms where private conversations take place. Social media was also a way of connecting with people who may share the same circumstances, but who are not in the immediate geographical vicinity of social media users, such as First Nations groups in other regions or countries. This connection is a way to share experiences, learn from each other about issues and garner support for causes. In many ways, these connections include more people into the public conversation about an issue.

Enhancement of narrative engagement on social media

There is very much discourse happening on social media by First Nations people and about First Nations issues. The platforms themselves are being used to share ideas and perspectives about First Nations issues that may not otherwise be shared in public conversation, as well as using them as tools to reframe the idea of colonisation by First Nations people using them on their own terms. Online communities are formed and people can respond to prompts from actors in these communities to contribute to the narrative being shared. The social media post shared by Steve Hodder-Watt is an example of this. He “quote re-tweeted" a post from First Nations media group IndigenousX about celebrating family. In his re-tweet Steve included photos and the Lardil word “kilmu” which refers to family (Hodder-Watt 2020). This illustrates how social media can allow for and enhance sharing culture and language that may not be as present or even accepted in the norms of more traditional public spheres and even media channels. In doing so, it can insert new narratives as well as reframe and challenge certain negative narratives that have been accepted about First Nations people (Carlson et al. 2017:5).

Limitations for narrative engagement on social media

Engaging on social media is not without its challenges and dangers. As participants shared, it is a space that can cause great harm particularly for First Nations people. Some participants spoke of the negative side of being on social media as a given; with an air of 'that's just the way it is.' Even if this is the case, it did not lessen the harms that they face by being online. There is also the danger of content online being misinterpreted and used out of context, by non-Indigenous and First Nations users alike, as Tamara Murray shared. Mis- and disinformation is also rife on social media, drawing on and speaking to misconceptions and harmful stereotypes, as Siobhan King shared. Some also shared that there are some topics they do not engage with on social media or they avoid the platforms at certain times because of the racist and harmful discourse taking place online. This shows that while social media may be a more accessible public sphere, or a more accessible channel into the public sphere, it is not necessarily a more inclusive space. It can be quite an unwelcome space for First Nations people, leading to silence on certain topics where their views are perhaps most needed, such as on significant historical days. If this is the case, it means that dominant and harmful narratives may continue to circulate in the public sphere, and consequently maintain a societal status quo that excludes certain people.

CONCLUSION

Coming soon...

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