Conceptualising tweets as electronic graffiti challenging prevailing narratives: a case study of the official #australiaday tweet archive.

Pamela Fransen-Taylor and Bhuva Narayan
University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Introduction and background: Social Media has undoubtedly changed the way we conceptualise the boundaries of space and time as well as how we interact, exchange and respond to information in a global society. Increasingly, scholars are looking at the opportunities it might provide as an enabler for civil society. Employing graffiti as a metaphor for tweets, and Twitter as the wall or, space/place on which graffiti is documented, this study aimed to contribute new insights towards an understanding of how minority voices are using social media to challenge prevailing offline narratives, in online spaces. Australia Day is widely promoted as a national day of festivity and celebration, however, for Australia's Indigenous minority, it is symbolic of an entirely different narrative. The National Museum of Australia's "Australia Day Your Way" initiative actively promotes using #AustraliaDay to metatag tweets for capture to an annual time capsule maintained by the Museum. Through an examination of the #InvasionDay and #SurvivalDay hashtags on Twitter, often used simultaneously with #AustraliaDay, this study identified the presence of a small but active community clearly contesting the prevailing narrative to express an alternative discourse. Nonetheless, this narrative was not discernible from the Museum's 4,000-tweet, curated online retrospective. Like graffiti it appeared to be wiped clean by officially sanctioned authorities. This suppressing of minority voices in the State's narrative has implications for civil society that should be of concern to all citizens.

Literature review and conceptual framework: If determining 'how to foster and develop social interactions which will lead to a strong and inclusive society' (Onyx et al. 2011, p. 47) is at the heart of achieving equity for all citizens, a greater understanding of information behaviour as a core component of the 'human communication process' (Pettigrew, Fidel & Bruce 2001, p. 67) is required. Tuominen & Savolainen (1997) describe information behaviour as discursive action which involves people interacting with and through symbols, such as language (Veinot & Williams 2012) where information forms 'a property of conversation' (RJ Taylor in Pettigrew 1999, p. 811). When information is considered a social construct, where meaning is negotiated though discourse, it becomes particularly important to consider whether all conversing agents are treated equitably. Acts of resistance by individuals or marginalised communities can occur due to a perceived lack of opportunities for fair and open dialogue, reinforcing marginalisation and undermining our prospects for achieving a civil society in the process. One long-standing method for enacting resistance is graffiti. Considered art by some, and vandalism by others (Gomez 1992), in its purest sense, graffiti represents 'freedom of expression' (Tracy 2005, p. 22). As a form of informal writing, employed to contest dominant discourses, this paper looks to extend the conceptualisation of graffiti, reaching beyond the boundaries of the physical world, positing it in a public space in the digital sphere. This study conceives the hashtag #AustraliaDay, as constructing a cultural space, in turn establishing a 'wall' on which resistance can be expressed. Written communication research tends towards formal writing, that which constitutes

organisational behaviour and is produced from a position of power (Scheibel 1994) rather than alternative forms of communication such as graffiti. In response, this study explores graffiti as a form of written public address, in the intangible world of cyberspace; more specifically, as a form of writing used by everyday people to challenge prevailing narratives. This study aimed to contribute new insights towards an understanding of how prevailing narratives are expressed and challenged in cyberspace. By analysing a set of tweets posted during and immediately adjacent to Australia Day 2015, this paper examines the similarities and differences between graffiti writing and tweeting; two forms of written communication where contesting a dominant discourse is assumed to provide strong motivation for action by graffitists and Twitter users alike.

Methodology and context: The vast quantities of data generated by social media, combined with the dynamic nature of its form, can present significant methodological challenges (Siapera 2014, p. 544). To spotlight graffiti in cyberspace, a sample which could reasonably be expected to return sentiments from one or more non-prevailing narratives was sought. Cognisant of the public campaign for #AustraliaDay tweets, this hashtag, along with two related but contentious hashtags, namely; #InvasionDay and #SurvivalDay, were collected. Data was purchased via Sifter, an application developed by Texifter (http://sifter.texifter.com). The tweets were loaded into DiscoverText, a Cloud-based solution which provided tools to produce quantitative statistics including number of tweets, most frequently used hashtags, and most active users. A qualitative content analysis was performed resulting in the development of a set of thematic codes to explain the tweets collected. Employed as a metaphor, graffiti provided 'a central theme to the text, introducing the data and explaining the relationships among concepts' (Carpenter 2008, p. 275).

Findings and conclusion: All tweets utilising #AustraliaDay, #InvasionDay or #SurvivalDay during the three days surrounding Australia Day 2015 were downloaded. Employing the 'de-duplication' features of DiscoverText the data was refined to 58,099 unique tweets. Using 'advanced filters' to segregate tweets containing either #InvasionDay or #SurvivalDay from those only containing #AustraliaDay, the dataset was further refined. Lastly, tweets containing images and website links were removed, forming a final text only corpus of 945 distinct tweets. The 945 tweets coded, comprising of 830 unique tweets, along with exemplars of 115 tweet clusters. Most importantly, an examination of the digital archive at www.your.australiaday.org.au, failed to find discernible representation of the alternative voices analysed, in this official public record. Although all #AustraliaDay tweets were archived, those combined with the hashtags #SurvivalDay or #InvasionDay were not located in the public showcase. We see this as a silencing of alternative voices and a threat to civil society. While it may be difficult for any institution to 'dominate the conversation' (Bruns & Burgess 2011, p. 7) in real time, they retain the power to erase from view, select narratives once expressed. This raises questions regarding how cultural organisations are appointed, funded, and regulated, to ensure equitable curation of the digital artefacts of modern society.

References

Bruns, A. & Burgess, J.E. 2011, 'The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc publics', paper presented to the *6th European Consortium for Political Research General Conference*, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, 25 - 27 August 2011.

Carpenter, J. 2008, 'Metaphors in qualitative research: Shedding light or casting shadows?', *Research in Nursing & Health*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 274-82.

Gomez, M.A. 1992, 'Writing on Our Walls: Finding Solutions through Distinguishing Graffiti Art from Graffiti Vandalism, The', *U. Mich. JL Reform*, vol. 26, p. 633.

Onyx, J., Ho, C., Edwards, M., Burridge, N. & Yerbury, H. 2011, 'Scaling Up Connections: Everyday Cosmopolitanism, Complexity Theory & Social Capital', *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 47-67.

Pettigrew, K.E. 1999, 'Waiting for chiropody: contextual results from an ethnographic study of the information behaviour among attendees at community clinics', *Information Processing & Management*, vol. 35, no. 6, pp. 801-17.

Pettigrew, K.E., Fidel, R. & Bruce, H. 2001, 'Conceptual frameworks in information behavior', *Annual review of information science and technology (ARIST)*, vol. 35, no. 43-78.

Scheibel, D. 1994, 'Graffiti and "film school" culture: Displaying alienation', *Communications Monographs*, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 1-18.

Siapera, E. 2014, 'Tweeting# Palestine: Twitter and the mediation of Palestine', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 6, pp. 539-55.

Tracy, S.K. 2005, 'The graffiti method', *Australian Midwifery*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 22-6.

Tuominen, K. & Savolainen, R. 1997, 'A social constructionist approach to the study of information use as discursive action', *Proceedings of an international conference on Information seeking in context*, Taylor Graham Publishing, pp. 81-96.

Veinot, T.C. & Williams, K. 2012, 'Following the "community" thread from sociology to information behavior and informatics: Uncovering theoretical continuities and research opportunities', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 63, no. 5, pp. 847-64.