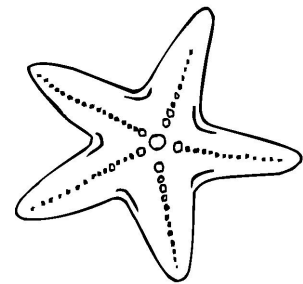


Understanding and countering the influence of cyber racism on Australian world views



Karen Connelly

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(Anthropology)

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Doctor of Philosophy

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Karen Connelly, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

Date: 3 July 2019

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STATEMENT OF FORMAT

This is a ‘thesis by compilation’, described by the University of Technology Sydney Thesis Guidelines as “a single manuscript that comprises a combination of chapters and published/publishable works” (p.17). The published works include 2 published book chapters and a published journal article, which are incorporated into the thesis chapters. The book chapters are based on collaborations (50 percent my work) with another project team member and a civil society organisation, that while not specifically attempting to answer my research questions, complement the overall arguments in the thesis. The journal article is based on one of the case studies undertaken and is one hundred percent my work.

LIST OF INCLUDED PUBLICATIONS

Connelly, K. (2016). Undermining Cosmopolitanism: Cyber-Racism Narratives in Australia. *Sites*, 13(1), 156–176.

Racist Narratives Online in Jakubowicz, A., Dunn, K., Paradies, Y., Mason, G., Bliuc, A.-M., Bahfen, N., Oboler, A., Atie, R., Connelly, K. (2017). *Cyber Racism and Community Resilience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Building Online Communities of Resistance and Solidarity in Jakubowicz, A., Dunn, K., Paradies, Y., Mason, G., Bliuc, A.-M., Bahfen, N., Oboler, A., Atie, R., Connelly, K. (2017). *Cyber Racism and Community Resilience*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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PREFACE

I was inspired to write this preface after hearing a presentation on the demise of standpoint theory (Paradies, 2018). The aim of standpoint theory was broadly to acknowledge and call for a variety of points of view (other than those in a position of power, usually white males) in the construction of knowledge or ‘truth’. However, Paradies (2018) argues that in this post-truth digital era, where truth is now marketed based on emotional affect rather than facts, “we are experiencing a re-invention of societal knowledge itself” (p.5). With so many points of view now circulating in the digital space, Paradies (2018) suggests that standpoint theory is now less important than our ability to understand different perspectives and to move outside the academy and connect with those engaged in social activism.

These observations are particularly relevant to my study for a number of reasons:

Firstly, it is obvious that the influence of the digital cannot be denied so understanding how it operates is essential to the continued construction of knowledge or truth based on facts. My own knowledge of the digital world is grounded in past experience as a computer programmer. In the course of my subsequent studies (in the social sciences) I was drawn to digitally produced data and its uses. My honours thesis focused on activism through dissent in Fijian political blogs, leading me to an understanding about the use of social media for putting forward alternative points of view.

Secondly, while standpoint theory may be less important, it is not irrelevant. My own standpoint is important insofar as it has influenced the perspective I have taken. As a privileged white woman I have had only limited experience of racism prior to this research. Like many Australians I have a mixed heritage, including Italian and New Zealander. I also have Chinese relatives and have heard familial stories about racist incidents. These stories seemed out of place in what I believed to be a successful multicultural and egalitarian country like Australia and I was interested to understand this contradiction.

As an anthropologist I am also fascinated by culture and the way our worldviews are shaped by our different life experiences. I have come to appreciate that cultures and cultural practices make sense in the context that they evolve and that all should be regarded as equally valid. However, racism challenges that premise. It became clear through my studies that the reality is that in western multicultural societies some cultures and cultural practices are judged against a supposedly superior western culture. Through this research I have the opportunity to expose this judgement and the injustices that it creates.

Finally, Paradies (2018) observations on social activism overlap somewhat with my own desire to ‘make a difference’. My children and I laugh that this desire is born out of an overactive empathy gene. I find it difficult to disregard emotional pain and suffering in others caused by injustice. My own varied life experiences mean that I have experienced injustice and discrimination in relation to gender, age, mental ill health and disability among other things and I am therefore able to empathise with the emotional impact of these and other

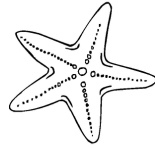
injustices. I am also acutely aware of the role the Internet plays in amplifying all injustices.

As Paradies (2018) alludes to, the best way to ameliorate injustice is to firstly expose it and then assist in facilitating evidence based change. The project that this research is a part of provided opportunities to not only assist in knowledge production related to cyber racism but to join with government departments and civil society organisations in the promotion of resilience against racism. These opportunities have allowed me to make my own small contribution to exposing injustice and facilitating change.

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands on which my research was conducted. I pay my respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. I am committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

Early in my research I asked one of my research participants why he continued to work against injustice despite the lack of respect shown to his people and he told me this story, which still resonates with me today:



The Starfish Story

An old man was walking along the beach one morning after a storm.

In the distance he could see someone moving like a dancer.

As he came closer he saw that it was a young woman picking up starfish and throwing them into the ocean.

“Young lady, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” the old man asked.

“The sun is up and the tide is out, and if I do not throw them in they will die” she said.

“But young lady, do you not realize there are miles of beach and thousands of starfish? You cannot possibly make a difference”.

The young woman listened politely, then bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea.

“It made a difference to that one”.

Adapted from the original by Loren Eiseley

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ABSTRACT

In an age when the Internet allows the proliferation of race hate and vilification with increasing speed and impact, liberal democratic societies need to understand the implications of this trend and curb its influence. However, research in this field is only beginning to develop, with work in Australia so far primarily focused on everyday racism and anti-racism. The Australian Cyber Racism and Community Resilience (CRaCR) Project, to which I was attached to as the higher degree research student, is the first in Australia to make these areas a major focus of research. The CRaCR project explores the phenomenon of cyber racism, drawing on a range of social science perspectives. This thesis adds an important and unique anthropological perspective, which examines how the greater proliferation of racism on social media impacts on the worldviews of Internet users. Given the cultural diversity in multicultural nations such as Australia, countering cyber racism through the promotion of community resilience demands a sophisticated insight into how more tolerant and cosmopolitan worldviews may be corroded or, alternatively reinforced and cultivated.

Four case studies were conducted on Facebook and Twitter over varying periods. A narrative approach and the anthropological perspective allowed the development of an understanding of the worldviews of the authors in the context of cultural exclusion in Australia. The value of a narrative approach is in the way it enables analysis that draws out the underlying meaning in the social media posts and its potential influence on those that interact with it. The

premise of this methodology is that the proliferation of societal narratives on social media, such as those found in the case studies, may influence individual and ultimately national worldviews related to cultural exclusion. The research questions were designed to understand these phenomena in the context of the enabling characteristics of social media.

The findings show that a culturally inclusive worldview is undermined in Australia through the reproduction of narratives that promote cultural exclusion and foster the denial of racism and white privilege. The ease of interaction, favouring of free speech and lack of legal consequences on social media platforms also contribute to the development and growth of communities with racist worldviews. In contrast, community resilience case studies show that target groups can build social media communities that put forward alternative narratives, which promote cultural inclusion, challenge negative stereotypes and work against the denial of racism and an uncritical acceptance of white privilege. These narratives support community resilience by creating safe spaces on Facebook and Twitter where target groups and their supporters can come together to develop and spread worldviews that counter racist influences. The community resilience case studies in this research demonstrate the potential for future action against racism on social media that is not just relevant in an Australian context but could be applied internationally.