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Becoming propaganda: critical race theory and the effect of fiction on education

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ABSTRACT

How does a social cause like race in public education get revived and reinvented? How do political interest groups mount a campaign that flows internationally from the United States to Australia and leads to the political exclusion of Critical Race Theory from the Australian Curriculum? This article addresses these questions by examining how social media has been used to distribute propaganda that infers racial literacy education is a problem for Australian schools. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's theories of propaganda and using artefacts from multiple Internet websites, including social media, this article examines how conservative lobbyists in education have adjusted claims from the United States to suit the highly mediated political culture of Australia in 2021. These conservative groups worked to gain political ground by deliberately subverting Critical Race Theory, turning it into a political weapon that has been deployed by political actors across the US, UK and Australia. This article traces the subversion of CRT and efforts by social media creators, editors and academics to control the meaning of the Law School concept. It concludes by discussing the consequences the use of CRT as a political weapon has had on Australian education.

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The rewriting of critical race theory: US propaganda and the Australian curriculum review

In recent years, the US Law School concept Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been rewritten into a social media meme where it has become a political weapon which has destabilised education policy development, in both school curriculum and workplace programs, concerned with inclusion, equity, and differentiation. CRT, which began its life as a theory of race, developed to explain why changes in law do not automatically ensure changes in social consciousness, became a viral social media meme in the early 2020s when it was weaponized as a digital rhetorical

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tool by conservative education commentators in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. The rhetoric made its way into the Australian Commonwealth Senate twice in 2021 while the National Education Standards were under debate. On 21 June 2021, the Australian Senate voted to ensure CRT was excluded from the Australian Curriculum. We asked, *how did this US Law School abstract concept that is not part of and never has been part of the Australian education standards, end up being a moral panic leading to conservative politicians calling for its exclusion from the Australian Curriculum?* Misinformation on social media is the obvious answer, but it must be remembered that misinformation has always been a factor in political debates and how politicians gained a well-worn reputation for being liars long before social media.

In this paper, we analysed communication about CRT to theorise how and why a distinctly US so-called misinformation phenomenon found its way into the Australian political sphere. We considered scholarship on transnational networks, where social media functioned as a tool of ideological fellowship that amplified misinformation about CRT, whether people were broadcasting misinformation or attempting to correct it. We tried to do this by drawing on contemporary digital rhetoric research concerned with how political and media arguments are networked in the post-global financial crisis (GFC) world (Davies & Gane, 2021; Slobodian, 2018) and globalised rhetoric theory from postcolonial feminist researchers (see, for example, Dingo, 2012). In the end, while these ideas were useful for understanding the globalised context CRT virality existed within, we realised we were trying to be academic and scholarly, studiously applying different analytical methods and theoretical frameworks to justify sociologically, linguistically or algorithmically how Australian Senators could be so duped by outright and blatant political tactics. In the end, we turned to Arendt (2017) and Laclau (2000) to explain the strategies and tactics that turned CRT into an empty signifier. An empty signifier is a concept that is, and remains, unattached to any signified but is a key part of a system of communication (Laclau, 2000). CRT became an empty signifier in the early 2020s because it became something that the general population who do not engage with the concept on a daily basis, who have encountered its recent virality, might only have a vague idea of what it refers to. Many have gleaned their understanding from Wikipedia and what they have come to understand through observing and participating in online interactions, watching news media and engaging in discussions with friends and family. CRT became an empty signifier because when the understanding is peeled back everyone has a different conceptualisation but using the same term. In other words, it became a signifier that has been emptied out because it became unanchored from its original source or signified. We noted through our research that CRT was being used as an empty signifier to define anything that a voter might feel uncomfortable about or fear. In terms of Laclau's characterisation of empty signifiers, it is not that CRT did not mean something to scholars who worked closely with CRT, but that it was selected by an ideological entrepreneur to become the term people could use to describe a feeling that 'does not have a signification of its own, but which nevertheless has to be named' (Laclau, 2014, p. 119). In other words, CRT became propaganda. As such, we stopped trying to explain how CRT developed from scholarly work to a meme and turned to, drawing on Hannah Arendt, describing the deliberate rewriting of the concept by ideological entrepreneurs and its spread (whether deliberate or not) through social media engagement.

For a number of years, we have been reluctant to call the type of political manoeuvring we noted attached to CRT propaganda because of the historical connotations that accompany the word. We are also conscious of the contemporary scholarship around post-truth, mis-, dis- and malinformation (see, for example, Cook, 2023; Wescott, 2022). We posit to the reader that the rewriting of Critical Race Theory in the 2020s is indeed propaganda and calling it misinformation or disinformation or post-truth does not rhetorically get to the heart of the issue – that certain political actors actively worked to destroy CRT's integrity by positioning it as a scapegoat. We are no longer prepared to dance around naming what we have observed as right-wing authoritarian ideas emerging from the US, nor dismiss their imperial influence on how Australian politicians see the Australian Curriculum. You, the reader can decide if we are invoking a Godwin's Law fiction or describing the world in its reality. To make our case, we used social media data as mappable artefacts alongside Australian Senate Hansard transcriptions to demonstrate deeper neoconservative strategies that utilise education (or more precisely, children) as a pawn in nationalist agendas. The CRT viral phenomenon that affected Australian education in 2021 is a useful case study for illustrating this process. As such, we also recommend that closer attention must be paid to social media in the field of mediatisation of education because, while social media memes may not be able to be conclusively connected to direct effects on education policy, they are symptoms of deeper political functionality of our times.

This article is organised such that it first explains Arendt's political theory of propaganda and then takes you through the academic and political life of Critical Race Theory – from a Law School concept to a political propaganda project. The article traces how CRT developed over decades of law academic theorising, debate and scholarship, only to be picked up by ideological entrepreneurs on Twitter and Fox News and deliberately subverted, to the point that the Australian Senate debated a fictitious world created by propaganda rather than reality in June 2021. We end by discussing the consequences for education policy in Australia and what Arendt suggests could be done about it going forward.

Propaganda, social mediatisation and ideological mobility

Social media has profoundly changed the nature of public debate and has attracted a flurry of research in media studies on the content and consequences of how political issues are framed (Tewksbury & Riles, 2018). The research field of journalism has dominated this move towards social media inclusion in political studies as it endeavours to work out how to continue their key functions within liberal democratic society when opinion has usurped investigative journalism (López-Rabadán, 2022). Analysis has focused on big, global issues that attract large amounts of data and interactions such as the so-called Egyptian Spring in 2011 (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012), controversial characters like Edward Snowden (Qin, 2015) and Donald Trump (Zembylas, 2020), and other global crises. The virality of Critical Race Theory in the early 2020s is another global phenomenon that produced massive amounts of online impressions and a phenomenon that directly affected education policy development, not just in schools and universities but also in workplaces looking to address their internal culture; however, this article will concentrate on the effect on schools-based curriculum and pedagogy.

Within education sociology and critical policy research, this phenomenon has been referred to as the mediatisation of education (see Rawolle, 2010 for an introduction to the field). Rawolle (2010) describes the field as having two theoretical positions here reworked to be relevant to this research: 1) the processes by which political actors have used CRT as a knowledge game aimed at gaining relative power; and 2) how the involvement of those political actors has shaped power relations between those seeking political power and education policy. While Rawolle and others in the field of mediatisation of education (Baroutsis, 2018; Blackmore & Thomson, 2004; Hattam et al., 2009; Lingard, 2016; Mockler, 2020) have largely situated their research in journalistic media, there is a growing field of research that considers the role of social media (see, for example, Barnes and Heggart's previous work, plus Baroutsis & Lingard, 2018; Hogan, 2016; McKnight & Graham, 2018; Woods & Baroutsis, 2019) as a process by which political actors have strategically worked to gain power. In the previous research, two of us (Heggart et al., 2023) drew on a joint Hayek and Foucauldian theoretical proposal by Pennington (2023) that defined knowledge games as the strategic games that political actors play to manipulate knowledge about a field, tap into public fears and subvert the discourse about, in the case of this research, education policies and practices associated with diversity, equity and inclusion. In this paper, we take that theorisation one step further and argue that the knowledge gaming of CRT on social media is one of the 'identifiable sets of practices' that education researchers should be aware of because the 'effects of which impact on the practices of people in other fields in systemic ways' (Rawolle, 2010, p. 22). In other words, the political knowledge games being played on social media are affecting the practices of Australian Senators and, we argue, could systematically affect the teaching of racial literacy by Australian teachers.

To explain the effect that the viral phenomenon of CRT has had and will continue to have not just on education policies, but arguably on broader social policies, we draw on the work of Hannah Arendt and the *Origins of Totalitarianism* because we no longer wished to tiptoe around with a discourse, sociolinguistic or media and communications analytical frameworks that try to categorise and make sense of what is happening. The case of the subversion of CRT is, to put it simply, propaganda. A malignant lie. Propaganda that has, through social media and other well-worn imperial global pathways, escaped the boundaries of the United States and made its way into the Australian Senate. The reason to use Arendt, despite her incredibly problematic views on the *Brown v Board of Education* desegregation of schools in the US¹ and hence to the concept of CRT itself, is because she was unwavering and unapologetic when it comes to identifying the development of and the effect of propaganda. As Stonebridge (2024) puts it, Arendt is the master at 'giving brilliant expression to a sense of powerless vertigo in a world that seems to be in the grip of a relentlessly awful plot' (<https://lithub.com/why-we-should-all-read-hannah-arendt-now/>). And as we show below, those that we captured in the uncanny valley of online CRT discourse CRT in 2021 would understand this from *Origins* (Arendt, 2017, p. 349) 'Nothing which was being done . . . could be undone or prevented' and 'no matter how stupid, no matter how many people knew and foretold the consequences' people were powerless to stop it. This is because, the process of disputing the propaganda on social media only served to spread it further. This fact alone requires social media to take its place in the mediatisation of education field.

The value of thinking with Arendt when analysing the effect of the CRT viral phenomenon is her refusal to see the politics of it as either right or left wing. She, after all, wrote *Origins* with both the extremes of each political spectrum in mind. Influenced heavily by existentialism she understood that there was no neat theoretical framework that will successfully guide the categorisation of politics under the Nazis or Stalinist Russia. Though we have tried in the past (Heggart et al., 2023), we and increasingly others (S. J. Ball, 2021; Stonebridge, 2024) have come to realise that trying to pin down the effects of the politics of 21st century information culture warfare on education is absurd. In the end, the most logical framework is that there is no framework because the 2021 CRT phenomenon is an example of what Arendt would describe as the use and abuse of ideological elements that are foundational to a political position. In the past, we suggested it was an ideological borrowing and laundering but, on further reflection, it is the contamination of the foundational political theory to the point where the strength and value of that theory has all but disappeared. And behind it all is a 'great unorganised, structureless mass of furious individuals who had nothing in common except their vague apprehension' coming together in 'terrifying solidarity' (Arendt, 2017, p. 412) to either support the propaganda or correct it. The terrifying component of which is that regardless of the position you take, on social media the propaganda is exponentially spread making both its supporters and detractors complicit in its virality (Maly, 2019). In the case of this research, that virality moved all the way from the US to Australia.

Networks have been a relatively common motif in education policy sociology over the past decades, generally used to demonstrate how policies are mobile and attached to large globalised, or neoliberal, public and private organisations (see, for example, Beech et al., 2023). These networks have been characterised as dense, involve trust and are the means by which 'certain policy discourses are reiterated and legitimated' (Allen & Bull, 2018, p. 448). Gulson et al. (2017) have characterised these education networks as 'cartographies of power and influence . . . enabled by the interoperability of data infrastructures; that is, by that capacity to share and make use of information' (p. 230). This characterisation of networks as cartographies is most useful for describing how ideas associated with education are mobilised as they move across the globe and not just policy ideas but culture war propaganda.

The CRT viral phenomenon sits neatly in the political and sociological field of the culture wars, defined by Hesová (2021) as struggles for political hegemony via the politics of memory, identity and morality. Most studies of the culture wars are within a single nation or comparative. By bringing together education research interested in global network influences on education policy with historical and political research on the colonial nature of globalisation, we argue that the neoliberal networks work as imperial networks where the ideas of one nation can invade the ideas of another. Kachru (2019) made similar observations in regard the sociolinguistic complexity within global English language speaking. They argue that the UK, US and Australia are not only seen as the inner circle determining what gets to be the English language, despite enormous global variations, but also the use of the English language as a 'vital weapon for articulating various positions and visions' meaning English becomes essential global knowledge to engage with global politics. In terms of our research, the English-speaking nature of the CRT propaganda is a core reason why the UK, US and Australia are key players in its virality. Hussain et al. (2024) argue that the shift away from traditional electoral politics

to individualised politics galvanised by the online world needs a new approach to the education of young people. They argue that ‘curriculum wars’ are breaking out in the US, UK and Australia because young people are both being radicalised ‘around the axes of race, religion and gender’ (online first) but also note that there are political and curricula elites working to resist young people’s engagement with the School Strike for Climate and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

Australia’s connection to CRT through the BLM movement

In the 1960s, the United States (US) was at the beginning of a civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr (MLK) which was focused on a race of people, other than white, who had spent generations being oppressed socially and politically by larger systemic systems, governments, policy, and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2023) Critical Race Theory emerged from Critical Legal Studies in the late 1970s was concerned with how the oppression of coloured people, derived from theories of colourism that hierarchically differentiated people from the white and male group, was exerted through racist systems and structures. CRT used terms such as ‘white’ and ‘black’ to refer to political and legal structures that are rooted in the ideology of White European supremacy and the impact of colonisation.²

Historically, to make changes to White European structures, public pressure has usually been brought to bear by public voice and as such African American leader in America, MLK used public pressure to influence political agendas (Richardson, 2018). He orchestrated large gatherings of black people, using their collective voice to speak out against their oppression. Over the decades, we have seen numerous events around the world that trigger the oppressed to speak out for social justice and equal rights. Such a global campaign was again reignited in 2020 after George Floyd’s death in America (Reny & Newman, 2021), and the reaction in the US and Australia saw protests to governments and politicians as why so many people of colour were dying at the hands of law enforcement (Wyvill, 2010). Australians used the slogan Black Lives Matter and joined the movement to protest the continued increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s deaths in custody since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 (Wyvill, 2010). These events are separated in time and location; however, they are social justice events which are examples of how a race of people continue to live in a white system without the same civil liberties, along with unequal access to resources.

Becoming propaganda: the CRT viral phenomenon

Despite BLM protest organisers insisting that the protests that erupted across the US and Australia during these protests were largely peaceful (Beckett, 2002; Hammond et al., 2024), those watching along online, while largely in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, had media images of looting, riots and fires streaming into their homes and uncritically commented on by neoconservative commentators. These commentators who already had been arguing that the economy was worth treating so-called essential workers as superfluous in the face of a global pandemic, now had a clickable scapegoat for the sense of unease spreading across the globe.

On 21 March 2021, Christopher Rufo, senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute, who has been described as the most important intellectual entrepreneur of the political right (Beauchamp, 2021) tweeted the now deleted statements that still exist quite extensively online:

I am quite intentionally redefining what ‘critical race theory’ means in the public mind, expanding it as a catchall for the new racial orthodoxy. People won’t read Derrick Bell, but when their kid is labelled an ‘oppressor’ in first grade, that’s now CRT.

Rufo is what Finlayson (2021) describes as a ‘radical and reactionary ‘ideological entrepreneur’ who unites an ‘ideological family’ (p. 167). First noted by Dardot and Laval (2013) the *ideological entrepreneur* riffs on the idea of an intellectual entrepreneur. It refers to writers, academics and intellectuals who use their platform, often a media platform, to enter the marketplace of ideas, with the intention of earning a living from public intellectualism. Conservative actors who espouse populist ideas hostile to progressive politics and globalism are finding the most success as ideological entrepreneurs (Schradie, 2019). These conservative political actors now work the mediated imperial networks to nudge neoconservative ideas and in the case of Rufo, completely rewrite the history of race and racial theory in the US.

Rufo engaged in a political agenda that was not directed at the members of his faction who were already convinced. He is appealing to those Arendt would the ‘politically neutral and indifferent masses’ (2017, p. 407) who are the majority of the population in democratically ruled countries. An ideological entrepreneur captures this majority by preparing communications that appear to make sense of a complicated matter. The advantage of this population for propaganda is that there are no arguments from political opponents to be made (p 408). The political opponents are relegated to continuously playing catch-up and recovering from the whiplash of the incoherent fictions being poured into the catch-all. There is very little time to develop a coherent response and by the time it has been thought through, the discourse has moved on leaving destruction in its wake. The ‘mass society of atomised individuals’ (p 514) across the globe on social media were never really unified but able to ‘follow consistently the fiction and the rules of the fictitious world which were laid down’ (p 570). The rule was simple: transpose an experience that made someone feel uncomfortable or fearful and call it CRT. These people were not necessarily becoming indoctrinated by the propaganda because they are most likely still indifferent and politically neutral. What CRT did is allow them to put their fears in an explanatory framework so that they could return to their everyday lives. As such, the refusal of the conservative political actors to actually define what CRT was in any consistent manner was the point. Drawing on her existentialist influences, Arendt explains,

The masses escape from reality is a verdict against the world [which] was the result of their atomization, of their loss of social status along with which they lost the whole sector of communal relationships in whose framework common sense makes sense. (p 460)

The pandemic that kept people in their homes away from their social networks, continuous images on screens of looting and death, world leaders who were abusing the

theoretical frameworks of their parties until they were unrecognisable, and mass confusion on social media as strangers tried to make sense of what could not be made sense of created the perfect conditions for propaganda to work. All that was needed was an empty signifier that could continuously be rewritten on social media by the indifferent millions who had never heard of CRT.

Getting swept up in the fiction

We have shown previously that Rufo had an agenda to subvert CRT for at least 18 months before the virality of 2021 where he finally made the connection between CRT and children (Heggart et al., 2023). On 19 February 2021 Rufo participated in a discussion with Colin Hughes and Professor John Loo entitled ‘Parent Led Challenge to CRT’ (<https://manhattan.institute/event/the-parent-led-challenge-to-critical-race-theory>) that indicated the ideology of CRT threatened schools, and consequently children, the usually, politically neutral and indifferent masses were suddenly paying attention (see Figure 1).

In this discussion, CRT was defined and discussed using blatant propaganda tropes of fear, infection, othering and celebration of heroes, misusing the democratic vocabulary for its own selfish purposes (Stanley, 2016). The panellists characterised CRT as a Marxist and Maoist plot ‘spreading’ out ‘to the masses’ from the confines of the academy, ‘seeping’ into schools and public institutions. It was characterised as the opposite in spirit to Martin Luther King’s dream. Loo explained the criticisms of CRT within the academy, suggesting that to argue with its tenets is unwelcome. Rufo, on the other hand,

Growth of Rufo’s Articles about CRT and Education

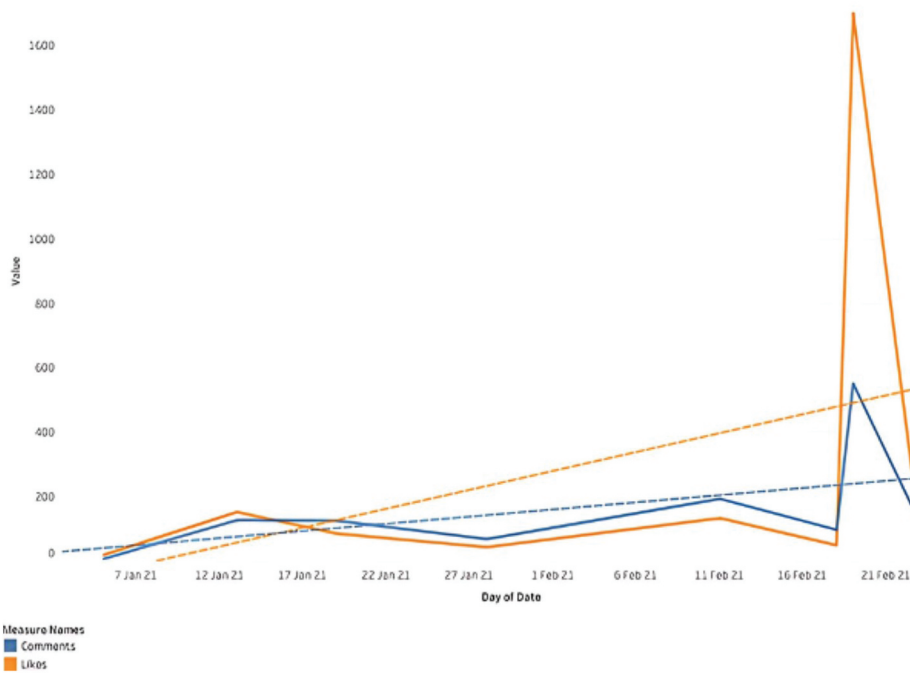


Figure 1. Growth of Rufo’s articles about CRT and Education.

was more sensationalist, connecting the academic theory ‘on a practical level’. He explains in theory CRT was a good idea, but in practice it was dangerous to freedom. He explained that teachers were engaging in ‘moral crimes’, using the teaching of ‘Brazilian Marxist theoretician named Paulo Freire’ to train children to criticise America and celebrate black Communism. He explains that the ‘endpoint goal’ is a ‘totalitarian’ ‘permanently funded fourth branch of government, a department of anti-racism that’s not accountable to the executive’. He then conflated CRT with diversity and inclusion programs, congratulating parents who are standing up to CRT in schools as frontline activists.

Rufo’s bid to rewrite CRT was taken up by neoconservative commentators on Fox News and other conservative news vloggers. Traditional news media outlets regularly post excerpts of its programming on Facebook pages, and these clips are stored on YouTube. Viewers of YouTube’s CRT content most likely arrived at the platform via a Facebook site. Two of our authors have looked at how Sky News Australia uses their Facebook page for subverting and rewriting CRT and have published about this elsewhere (Heggart et al., 2023). The YouTube videos we scraped overwhelmingly framed CRT as a threat to the US school system and continuously and confusingly framed and reframed it across official news sources and viral videos. The YouTube and Fox News propaganda machine argued that schools should judge students ‘by the content of their character rather than the colour of their skin’ claiming that any school engaging in inclusivity, diversity or equity practices were engaging in discrimination against children. The types of discriminatory practices that were claimed as CRT included the teaching of race and gender and sexuality without parent permission, assessment practices that equitably supported students, claims of white racism, and calls for sacking teachers who discussed CRT, race, gender and sexuality, inclusive education, anti-discrimination and equity in education on TikTok. Rufo’s tweeted threat on 15 March 2021 was very much realised on YouTube:

‘We have successfully frozen their brand — ‘critical race theory’ — into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic ... the goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory’.

Rufo was relying on the fact that ‘consistency-hungry masses [would] accept the fiction as supreme proof of [its] truthfulness’ (Arendt, p 460).

The fabrication and debate of CRT can also be found on Wikipedia, Twitter and TikTok, and these platforms reveal a sobering insight into how those who resisted the framing of CRT by Rufo and Fox News were also getting swept up in the fiction.

Wikipedia

The evidence of the mass confusion associated with CRT correlated with a spike in the editing of the Wikipedia article on Critical Race Theory (see [Figure 2](#)).

Editing Wikipedia is a process of collaborative knowledge building that has strict rules around the truthfulness and reliability of the content (Bruckman, 2022). The page will usually hum along with edits, but when a concept breaks through into the public domain, a page will experience a spike in both edits and views. The Wikipedia

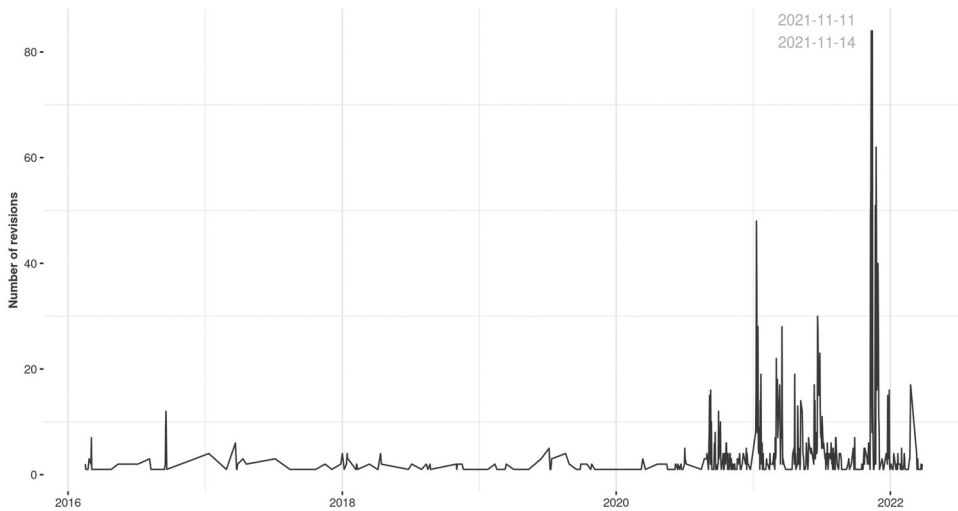


Figure 2. Daily revisions of the CRT Wikipedia page 2016–2022.

page for CRT, however, experienced more than just a community of practice clarifying terms, it became subject to information warfare, more popularly known as edit warring.

The political use of Wikipedia is well known by its content and editorial communities who have developed mechanisms for locking pages to prevent information warfare. Information environments, especially Wikipedia, are continuously being reshaped as they are now considered vital knowledge platforms by those looking for geopolitical, electoral, or economic advantage as theatres of culture war. Indeed, the CRT page at the time of data collection in 2022 was locked down for edits due to persistent vandalism and edit warring. According to the editorial chatter from the backstage area of Wikipedia that keeps a record of all the edits and decision making about the audience facing pages, the introduction had been vandalised, editors were engaging in theoretical conversations about reverse racism, and editors had been blocked for ‘grossly insulting, degrading, or offensive material’. Wikipedia deemed some material so offensive, it was deleted rather than archived, a move quite extraordinary for a website that prides itself on its archive.

The role of edit warring on the CRT Wikipedia page is a fascinating case study of knowledge gatekeeping and the rewriting of history that is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it should be noted that a whole new page was developed to record the ‘controversies of the 2020s’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020s_controversies_around_critical_race_theory) because, according the backchannel, the key editors of the original page wanted to protect its integrity. This new page includes references to the Senate debate discussed further below. The section does not adhere to the rigorous editing that the main CRT page is subject to, with numerous misconceptions. For example, the Senate did not ‘ban’ CRT, it rejected it from inclusion in the Australian Curriculum. Senator Hanson’s conflation of CRT and the preoccupation of the curriculum with the struggles of Indigenous Australians are not questioned, despite its inaccuracy. Further, there is a conflation of the

school curriculum with the academic curriculum, though it could simply be bad grammar:

the Australian Senate approved a motion tabled by right-wing senator Pauline Hanson calling on the federal government to reject CRT, despite it not being included in the curriculum. Despite this, CRT is gaining increasing popularity in Australian academic circles. (extracted 27/02/2024)

While Wikipedia editors have every right to create a page about the CRT controversies in the early 2020s, its lack of precision and accuracy alongside the long, multifaceted, and often difficult to comprehend original CRT page is of concern. Of interest is a debate in the backchannel of the original CRT page to not include media articles as references because of their tendency to perpetuate propaganda resulted in the 2020s controversy page. While the original has its problems of uncritical citation, the Australian section of the new page only uses the media as a source of citation, largely drawing on the opinion articles to support a factual statement, even if the statement is not fact. In other words, the editors of the Australian section have been ‘swept up in the fiction’ and while probably well intentioned, have perpetuated it.

Twitter

A social network analysis we conducted on Twitter showed that Rufo and his associates were using Twitter to broadcast their propaganda and then not continue to engage on the platform. Those on Twitter who then corrected the propaganda engaged in critical dialogues, discussing what CRT really is, its history, its importance as a critical theory important to education and law, and ultimately the complete misunderstanding of CRT within the propaganda. What people who engaged in this practice did not realise, was that in debating the concept they were quote-tweeting the propaganda. This activity and even the debate without linking Rufo et al. in, still distributed the propaganda more effectively than the single broadcast itself. This is a feature of social media that has been demonstrated many times in media and communications as how online debates and binaries are what social media algorithms thrive on (see, for example, Hames & Barnes, 2023; Maly, 2019).

TikTok

We also found sobering dynamics on TikTok. TikTok was, surprisingly, more progressive than YouTube in the content we analysed. This could be because TikTok is quite a controversial platform being owned by a Chinese company connected to the Chinese Communist Party. As such, there have been several moves to ban the platform in the US, probably meaning TikTok’s commentary in 2021 was less corporatised than YouTube. An analysis of 100 TikToks about CRT saw 69% of the engagement was with TikToks seeking to correct the propaganda concerning CRT. TikTok’s focus was more on dialogue. Though how the dialogue was broadcast was through ‘stitching’ the chaotic and confusing explanations of CRT on YouTube and probably did more harm than good. For example, a creator interested in academic understandings of CRT would create a TikTok that first showed a Fox News piece about so-called white racism, with a banner

informing the viewer a ‘stitch was incoming’. The stitch would be of the creator critically disputing the claims made in the Fox News piece and explaining what CRT really was, using references to CRT academic theorists and experts like Bell, Crenshaw and/or Hill Collins.

The critical problem with stitching TikToks, as with quote tweeting on Twitter, is that the creator inadvertently promotes the content they wish to critique. This changes the experience of the audience. For example, Klibbe was unable to continue beyond 100 TikToks in their analysis because it was too mentally draining to watch. They were continuously having to watch all the way through the propaganda content to get to the stitch in order to determine how to categorise the TikTok. This means consuming almost 100 TikToks with propaganda, even if the creator was engaging in critique or correcting it. The promotion of propaganda through the critique of it, whether through stitching or quote tweeting, does not, indeed, stop the its spread (Maly, 2019) and could inadvertently be promoting it.

CRT in the senate

On 21 June 2021, the Australian Senate debated CRT’s inclusion in the Australian Curriculum (National Education Standards in the Hansard). This Senate debate was raised within the mediated environment described above by Senator Pauline Hanson, a conservative senator to the Australian federal parliament who has ‘profited from the increased mainstreaming and normalisation of far-right ideas in Australia’ (Sengul, 2020, p. 21). She proposed the following general business motion: ‘That the Senate calls on the Federal Government to reject critical race theory from the national curriculum’ (Hanson, 2021, p. 3326). The motion was passed by a majority of two Senators.

What differentiates the Australian framing of CRT is that the arguments are framed against the development of the Australian Curriculum and Indigenous representation in the disciplines, whereas in the US, CRT is framed against diversity, inclusion and equity programs in US schools and other institutions. Sky News Australia tweeted Senator Hanson’s justification for the motion on 28th June, 1 week after the notion passed: ‘If people think critical race theory is a “joke” and is not happening in schools, it is and it’s evident in the draft national curriculum, according to One Nation leader @PaulineHansonOz’ (<https://t.co/rqrFnAQ2MW>). This tweet was in response to those suggesting Senator Hanson did not know what CRT was. Despite efforts to decouple CRT from the National Curriculum, the work done in the US to turn it into an empty signifier meant that its meaning was malleable for how the Australian Senate used it. It was framed in three different ways in the Australian Senate debate.

Liberal Party Tasmanian Senator Jonathon Duniam spoke on behalf of the conservative Coalition parties and framed CRT as spurious: ‘Critical race theory is predicated on the belief that the laws and institutions of our nation are inherently racist. This theory is patently false, discredited and without any basis in fact’ (Duniam, 2021, p 3326). He also framed the issue of the development of national standards as something the federal government could hold to ransom because of the way Australia’s educational curriculum processes worked: ‘The federal government will reject any changes to the national curriculum that would give effect to critical race theory within the curriculum’ (Duniam, 2021, p 3327). There was no Coalition engagement on Twitter in the days

surrounding the vote, but there was substantial One Nation engagement, as described above.

Greens Party Senator Mehreen Faruqi showed that both she and Senator Hanson had been watching the CRT virality when she opened her speech with, 'It looks like Senator Hanson has been watching a little bit too much of Fox News and Sky News lately' (Faruqi, 2021, p 3327) and suggested that Senator Hanson did not know what CRT was. On 21 June, after the motion to reject CRT was passed, Senator Faruqi again pointed to the network of neoconservative media on Twitter: 'Critical race theory fear-mongering is no more than a beat-up by Fox News and their local outpost of cranks, Sky News' (<https://t.co/W07zomAsj7>). Senator Faruqi also suggested in her Senate speech that the use of CRT as a political object was a propaganda strategy by neoconservative political actors: 'Shame on this government for voting for this motion, because that's what it looks like it's going to do. You will be condoning racism and you will be condoning far-Right politics' (Australian Senate, 2021, p. 3327). In her Senate debate speech, Senator Faruqi framed CRT as a strategy by the far Right to engage in racism and stop anti-racist work happening in Australia. She also delinked the phenomenon from schools by taking the framing to the streets: 'out there on the streets, tens of thousands of people are marching against systemic racism' (Australian Senate, 2021, p. 3327).

Australian Labor Party (ALP) Senator Katy Gallagher framed CRT as something education experts would be left to consider, indicating that the development of the national curriculum was not something politicians should interfere with: 'It is long-standing practice that the Australian Curriculum – the national curriculum – is developed by education experts, not by senators and not by motions in the Senate' (Gallagher, 2021, p 3327).

It is important to note that neither Senator Gallagher nor Senator Faruqi explained that CRT was not in the national curriculum. Senator Gallagher did not expand on the ALP's decision to oppose the motion, simply stating, 'Labor will oppose the motion'. Indeed, the main objection outside of Parliament was that CRT did not exist in the Australian Curriculum and neither opposition party drew on that fact. For example, Indigenous X Ltd, a First Nations media organisation, wrote an explainer on the lack of CRT in the curriculum and the conservative politician's erroneous definition (Pearson & Cromb, 2021) as did various academics in *The Conversation* (Gatwiri & Anderson, 2021) and other opinion pieces (see, for example, Connick, 2021; Wilson, 2021). But it is also important to note that both the ALP and Green Party statements still erroneously framed CRT as something that was in the curriculum. We argue that when even the most progressive politicians are misinformed or even ignorant of the way the Australian National Education Standards and/or CRT work they leave the door wide open for propaganda. They did not neutralise the rhetorical weapon affecting education and their indifference to accuracy is irresponsible because 'propaganda can outrageously insult common sense only when common sense has lost its validity' and the 'masses probably will always choose [fantastically fictitious consistency] ... and this is not because they are stupid or wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them is a minimum of self-respect' (p 461). People have a responsibility to ensure they know the consequences of their decisions, but politicians need to do better. They need to recognise propaganda when they see it and act to neutralise it.

The consequences of CRT propaganda

What does exist in the National Curriculum, and was under attack by conservative politicians, was the evidence-based importance of including more First Nations content in the National Curriculum (J. Ball & Le Mare, 2011; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013) and the synergy between quality teaching and engaging with Indigenous knowledge (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011; Lowe, 2017). The inclusion of increased First Nations content in the National Curriculum and teacher professional development is a very different notion from the politically charged CRT debate; however, the majority of the Australian Senators conceivably poured this into the empty signifier, following ‘consistently the fiction and the rules of the fictitious world which were laid down’ (p 570) by the indifferent masses and commentators in the US. Despite indifference and fictions, the effect of the propaganda would have very real and material effects on teachers and teacher educators to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, language, histories and culture in the Australian Curriculum and within the National Teacher Standards.

CRT virality, and the subsequent exclusion of it by the Australian Senate, has turned CRT into a policy object that can be deployed to continue to silence racial literacy in Australian schools. Indeed, Bargallie, Fernando and Lentin (2023) argued that racial literacy in Australian education ‘is dismally low and talk of race and racism is silenced’. For example, the authors demonstrate that the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s (AITSL) discussion paper, Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce (AITSL, 2020), used silencing rhetoric framed in a way that ‘protects whiteness, and specifically, white teachers for whom it is a “sensitive issue”’. They argue that this is done through advice to cautiously approach race as ‘unconscious bias or prejudice’ might provoke ‘defensive attitudes or unintentionally cause division’ (2023, p. online preprint). There is also an increasing body of scholarly work evidencing the need to make visible political, moral, and epistemological structures of whiteness and how race operates in the Australian pedagogical, curriculum and assessment standards (see, for example, Bargallie, 2020; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Sriprakash et al., 2024). We argue that the Critical Race Theory propaganda phenomenon reveals a dangerous backlash to this work.

Being educated is at the core of operationalising racial literacy and action for improving the inequitable structures in society. It is fundamental for a black person to have the language to challenge the systems and structures and education helps with that need. The curriculum and pedagogy policy documents engage with discourses of representation (S. J. Ball, 1993) and as such are a key sites of racial literacy education. For example, in Australia, the Humanities and Social Science curriculum has long been concerned with whether the history of Australia is told truthfully and by whom and who can speak with authority about Australia’s past (Allender, 2020; Macintyre & Clark, 2013). Therefore, while CRT might not be literally in the Australian national curriculum, because the political tension about what to include and what not to include settles over and over again on racial representations, it will attract, and consequently be influenced by, a culture war propaganda campaign concerning CRT.

As the curriculum and pedagogy in Australia is centrally organised through the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s (AITSL) decisions made by

misinformed federal politicians about what should and should not be included in those policy documents lends itself to a reproduction of power that already exists in Australian schools that the work of the above experts is working to undo. When the politicians are making these decisions while being influenced by a neoconservative propaganda context, they open the door to the teaching of false history and poorly taught Indigenous perspectives. This does not just slow down the closing of the racial literacy gap, it is widened.

We posit that education policy and politics are currently undergoing deepening conservatism, increasing authoritarianism, and in some cases, especially those related to CRT propaganda, rising fascism. We do this by considering how different social media and political platforms have misunderstood CRT and made nationally significant decisions with that misunderstanding. We also argue that the misunderstanding is deliberately strategized by conservative ideological entrepreneurs. Of most concern to Australian education policy researchers, and others around the world who have noted the disruption caused by ideological entrepreneurs like Rufo, is the manifestation of CRT as propaganda: a populist empty signifier that can be recoded and redefined according to the local context. Rufo tweeted that the goal of rewriting CRT was to ‘annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans’ but we argue that it has had global material effects.

Notes

1. See the backlash to her thoughtless Little Rock essay that is foundational in scholarship concerned with white ignorance.
2. For other resources on the history and significance of CRT, Tate (1997) is also useful but various editions of Delgado and Stefancic (2023) with the various prefaces updated by Angela Harris are excellent introductions. Each preface by Harris explains the historical context the book is published within.

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