Push-button Activism: the use of technology by Townsville Aboriginal activists

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**Abstract:**

In an increasingly technological age, the internet is becoming a primary source of networking. From common interest groups to business meetings, many members of western society have at least a minor presence on ‘Web 2.0’. Social movements, like every other aspect of life, have become increasingly reliant on the internet for networking, information sharing, and coalition building. This is the case even for disadvantaged groups with fewer resources and less capacity for utilising computers and the internet. Aboriginal activists in Townsville have been slow to exert their presence on the web, but are gradually becoming savvy in the use of electronic networking in furthering their cause. They rely on listservs, blogs, and more recently social networking sites to make their struggle known to a broad audience. The rise in ‘push-button activism’ increases the opportunities for everyday engagement with the state by social movement participants. However, it also changes the notion of participation as marches and demonstrations give way to electronic petitions and Facebook fan pages. This paper argues that web 2.0 can be a beneficial resource to activists if it is carefully managed to avoid the risks of complacency that it may also bring about.

**Keywords:**

Social movement, technology, web 2.0, Aboriginal
**Introduction**

Networking has always been a key feature of social movements, but as technology becomes embedded in our social consciousness, the modes of networking are changing. Since the mid-1990s, activists have used websites to get their message out to the world (Belausteguigoitia 2006, Landzelius 2006a, 2006b). Email listservs became a key tool for social movement participants to keep in touch between meetings, to plan for actions and to discuss and debate points of internal contention (Juris 2005, Graeber 2009, Kavada 2010). Recently, the internet has taken a more interactive turn, known as ‘web 2.0’; this term was coined by DiNucci (1999) to indicate the profound shift from the monolithic and static, ‘brochure-like’ webpages with only the occasional comment function, to spaces where everyone is an author. Just as individuals rely more heavily on blogs and interactive networking sites like Facebook and YouTube, social movement networks are entering this realm as well (Birdsall 2007). Unlike the web pages of the earlier years of cyber-activism which had a tendency to essentialise Indigenous groups as a political tactic (Landzelius 2006b), ‘web 2.0’ is a space which encourages hybridity and horizontality (Birdsall 2007).

This has been heralded as a digital democracy (Williams 2009). It decentres the ‘expert’ author, placing the emphasis instead on the conversations which can happen through comments, blogs, ‘tweets’, and so on (Lai & Turban 2008, Williams 2009). Web 2.0 increases the possibilities for people around the globe to exercise their ‘right to communicate’ (Birdsall 2008). In particular, it gives Indigenous groups the opportunity to communicate in their own language – for instance, the Cherokee Nation, which offers online tuition in Cherokee language (Cherokee Nation 2010), or the Gugu-Badhun Digital History Project, which has collected recordings of elders telling their own stories (Gugu Badhun 2010). Of course, this democracy only applies to those with access to the related
infrastructure – about 1.6 billion people worldwide, or 25% of the global population (Franklin 2010). As this infrastructure becomes more affordable, however, it is being increasingly taken up by many traditionally marginalised sectors of society (for instance, remote Aboriginal communities; Kral 2010). This paper explores the role that the internet plays in the activism carried out by Aboriginal people in Townsville. This movement is led by older activists, who are not as comfortable in the technological realm as their younger counterparts. Thus, they have been slow to adopt these new, interactive technologies. However, activists recognise the important potential of web 2.0 for networking opportunities, and are attempting to embed themselves in this milieu. I argue, in this paper, that web 2.0 has much to offer activists in terms of efficiency, but that it needs to be carefully managed to ensure that digital activism remains meaningful and effective.

Cyber-Activism

The role of the media, according to Moe (2010), should be to allow those at the political periphery easier access to the political core. Web 2.0 facilitates this relationship. Instead of letters to the editor, which were a historical means of publicly expressing one’s viewpoint (Moe 2010), individuals can now write their own blogs, or post their opinions on twitter, or comment on news stories. Whereas letters to the editor and other forms of public expression are mediated, web 2.0 offers an unfettered soapbox from which to shout to the world what you think. Castells (2008) suggests that the internet has become the public sphere, where global civil society is communicated and expressed. Part of what makes web 2.0 so powerful is its unpredictability (Drezner 2010), meaning that the state cannot develop responses as quickly and efficiently as they can with predictable activist repertoires. The key benefit of web 2.0 in activism is that it offers a ‘many-to-many’ mode of communication (Moe 2010), enabling broad conversations about issues that would
otherwise not gain the attention of the mainstream media. One drawback of web 2.0 is that, in addition to lowering the costs of activist organising, it also lowers the costs of government monitoring. It allows for states to create a ‘digital panopticon’ (Drezner 2010). Drezner (2010) points out, however, that this is most often the case in states which already have repressive regimes, such as Iran. In places like Australia, however, the benefits of web 2.0 to civil society are much greater.

The role of the internet in activism has been the focus of several recent studies. Much of the research focuses on the global justice, or anti-corporate globalisation movement. For instance, Juris (2005) examines the use of the internet by movement participants to coordinate actions and build social networks. Juris (2005) argues that digital technologies reflect and express the non-hierarchical ideals espoused by participants in this movement (see also Juris, Caruso & Mosca 2008). Likewise, Kavada (2010: 356) argues that the internet ‘has the potential to contest the prevailing model of top-down communication’.


**Aboriginal Resistance**

Aboriginal people have actively resisted colonisation of their lands since European arrival. This resistance began to coalesce into a recognisable social movement in the 1920s (McGregor 1993; Maynard 2008). Activists in the 20th century relied heavily on letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and conferences. It was common for local groups to operate
largely independently but to converge under national umbrella organisations like the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). These coalitions kept in touch via phone conferences, letters, newsletters, and occasional conferences where members from many groups travelled to one place to meet in person and discuss overarching issues and strategies (Taffe 2005). Although the historical focus on Aboriginal activism is centred on the capital cities of Australia, regional centres were also a hub of resistance. Places like Townsville had the benefit of proximity to Aboriginal reserves, and activists had firsthand experience with the extreme repression of the early 20th century.

This history occupies a central location in the memories of Townsville activists, with whom I conducted field work from May 2007 until December 2009. During this period, I acted as a critically engaged activist researcher (Speed 2006), working in solidarity with my research participants. Critically engaged activist research accepts that objectivity is impossible and instead strives to carry out meaningful, movement-relevant research (Isaacman 2003, Bevington & Dixon 2005, Speed 2006). Activist researchers play a role in shaping their research settings, but Bevington & Dixon (2005) argue that this does not necessarily affect research outcomes. Rather, as long as researchers remain committed to improving the movement, they will avoid uncritical adulation of the movement under study (Bevington & Dixon 2005). As an activist researcher in Townsville, I was a part of the shift that took place as Aboriginal activists in Townsville adopted new technology as a key tool for organising.

As I spoke with activists throughout my fieldwork, I noticed a major focus on the importance of networking. Florence considered this her most important role in the social movement as it allowed a number of people to keep up to date on the events and issues around the area. Florence relies heavily on email, and she has several lists which she can
use to rapidly diffuse information. However, given that she is 50 years old, Florence has not always had the benefit of computer technology.

**Social Movement Networking – Then and Now**

Although Florence has fully adopted the internet as a networking tool, she does not think badly of pre-technology activism. She remembers that ‘We sent out letters. Back in the early days, before we had email, it was writing letters. Utilising the systems that were available’

More specifically, Florence remembers a campaign she became involved in during the early 1990s, in response to the planned mainstreaming of Indigenous housing. Florence said that activists wanted housing to remain a specifically Indigenous entity and used this as a call for a policy review, because ‘there wasn’t a policy review from Joh Bjelke’s era, on Indigenous housing. And Aboriginal and Islander people here in Queensland were in the worst, you know, sub-standard housing’. This action began as a small project in Townsville but eventually spread across the state and went on for more than two years.

At the time, very few Aboriginal activists and community members had access to email. In 1992 when this campaign started, the local Indigenous radio station had not yet been established, so there was no simple way of contacting a large portion of Indigenous families in the area. Instead, Florence used the ‘Indigenous grapevine’ to announce community meetings where activists could inform others of the issue and the plans to address the situation. For instance, she targeted Indigenous organisations like the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service, where she hung flyers advertising meetings. Once the campaign was established, Florence approached the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA) and was able to utilise their ‘mail-out system’ so that she could contact ‘all the Indigenous households in the region’.
With this contact information, Florence and a small group of activists eventually went door-to-door, visiting Indigenous families living in DAIA housing to hear their thoughts on what improvements were needed in Indigenous housing. The door-to-door action covered a very large geographical area, including Townsville, Charters Towers, the Burdekin district and the Hinchinbrook district. By identifying the people most affected by the issue, Florence was able to put her efforts into targeted actions aimed at educating and mobilising these Indigenous families. As with a lot of activism at the time, ‘it was a lot of work and it was a lot of really underground, going out, talking to people, going from house to house, paying for your own petrol, all that sort of stuff that you have to do’. The ‘Indigenous grapevine’ was successful, and it was not long before activists in other areas heard what was happening in Townsville: ‘other regions got wind of it, and so we had a whole state petition. And I sent our letters to the network down in central Queensland, and southern, and they sent it out. So that was a whole statewide action’. Eventually, a statewide petition was drawn up and delivered to the DAIA, and a policy review was established to improve the standards of Indigenous housing. Florence considered this a major win and sees the two years of work that it took as completely worthwhile.

Since then, however, the internet has become an integral part of her activism. She says that ‘Definitely, the multimedia has really helped’; it allows her to disseminate information far more quickly and to a broader range of people. Rather than visiting Indigenous services to hang flyers, she can email the flyer and it will be posted by others. Another bonus is that ‘you can do it with very little cost’. Advances in technology make the opportunities for networking—locally, nationally, internationally, and between movements—much faster and simpler. But the rise of the internet in activism is far more complex than just making communications easier. As Landzelius (2006a) argues, the
increasing moves made by Indigenous peoples into cyberspace complicate the relationship between identity and place, and affect the ways that identities are constructed and presented. Much of the literature on cyber-activism focuses on global campaigns, such as the U’Wa of the Colombian Amazon who became the ‘poster child’ of the global environmental movement (Landzelius 2006b), or the Zapatistas, who created a global spectacle in their ongoing struggle for autonomy within the Mexican state (Belaustegui-goitia 2006). These movements utilise technology for outreach purposes.

In addition to outreach, Landzelius (2006a: 9) has identified ‘inreach’ as ‘the dissemination of in-group information ... as well as the import of expert knowledge to the local level’. This is the cyber-activism more often utilised by the Aboriginal movement in Townsville. When I joined the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group, members kept in touch by email, using the ‘reply all’ function which many found confusing. Someone suggested a list serve, and as I had used them before, I offered to set one up. As of April 2010, the TIHRG listserv had 32 members, 25 of whom had started at least one discussion; 10 of these active participants in the discussions are Indigenous. The vast majority (67%) of emails to the list were sent by a small group of members, made up of Florence, me, Marilyn (an Indigenous woman) and group leader Gracelyn (Figure 1). Between the establishment of the listserv in August 2007 and October 2009, there were 381 discussions started; many were multi-post threads, with a total of 639 emails exchanged in this 27-month period. The volume of email discussions moved between peaks and troughs, correlating with the organisation of events or the discussion of timely issues (Figure 2). For instance, there is a small peak in October and November 2007, when the TIHRG was planning a demonstration to mark the third anniversary of the death in custody on Palm Island. Another, larger peak
Figure 1. Number of emails sent through TIHRG listserv by member. Figure shows the number of discussions started by members as well as responses to other discussions.

Figure 2. Total number of emails sent through TIHRG listserv each month.

occurred between March and June 2008, corresponding to the most active period in the Stolen Wages campaign. The emails that come through the TIHRG listserv range from plans for meetings and demonstrations, to newspaper articles about Indigenous issues or politics,
to notices about other social movement activities, such as an environmental rally. The purpose of the list is to keep people in touch and up to date on local issues; it serves to strengthen offline activism.

Another, more recent, phenomenon is the rise of social networking sites as a form of cyber-activism. Sites like Facebook allow users to seamlessly merge their various political and social interests as they post links to articles and events or publicly express their thoughts to their entire network of ‘friends’. Users can easily express their identity as an Aboriginal person, a unionist, a greenie, and a feminist with the click of a button and the update of a profile. Facebook and similar social networking sites, then, may make it easier to balance multiplex identities. Web 2.0 also acts to expand the ‘virtual we’ of Indigenous solidarity, encompassing not just Indigenous people but their supporters, and many sympathetic individuals from around the world. Several of Townsville’s Aboriginal activists have created Facebook profiles, though use varies considerably. For instance, while Florence has wholeheartedly embraced email as a form of information sharing and political networking, her presence on Facebook is so far limited to keeping in touch with family members. Younger users, like Janine, have embedded themselves socially and politically in Facebook as a medium for networking on a number of causes.

However, Townsville Aboriginal activists are beginning to embrace web 2.0 as a tool of protest. For example, a key focus of activism in Townsville in the past few years has been the 2004 death in custody on Palm Island, and the events which happened shortly afterwards (Glowczewski 2008). In October 2008, Palm Island resident Lex Wotton was on trial for inciting a riot a week after the death, in response to an announcement that no charges would be laid against the police officer responsible for the death. During his trial, a
key participant in my field work asked me to set up an online petition calling for the charges against Wotton to be dropped. Using a petition-hosting website, we created an e-petition. The target was vague: the Queensland Justice System. I was sceptical that the petition could have any influence on the outcome of the trial; the petition was not started until after the trial had begun, and was directed at no one in particular. Still, the petition attracted 404 signatures from around the globe – transnational ‘netizens’ (Hauben & Hauben 1998) from places like the US, India, Canada, and Europe calling on the Australian government to address a ‘terrible injustice’. This activist tactic took only moments – just long enough to fill out a form indicating one’s name and location, with the option of additional comments. It was circulated on email lists, forwarded around the globe; it was also publicly available on thepetitionsite.com where anyone could read and sign the petition. This petition was never presented to anyone in power, and its only function was to demonstrate international condemnation of what activists regard as the racist overtones of the event.

Web 2.0 as a tool of protest

The petition in support of Lex Wotton illustrates the changing nature of activism in a digital age. Supporters of the cause indicate their support by clicking a button from the comfort of their home. Unlike the housing action, this petition was not directed at a clear target; its goal was vague and unachievable. The message becomes condensed, short enough to keep readers’ attention, rather than being shared, discussed, and worked out together over the course of hours at community and activist meetings. At the same time, this form of activism opens up the issue to anyone, anywhere (with internet access), as opposed to the very targeted housing action which was only advertised to those living in DAIA housing.
Social networking sites like Facebook and electronic petition sites allow activism to become accessible to a wider variety of people. Cyber-activism is quicker and simpler than traditional methods of networking; one can sign a petition online, join a Facebook group to stop black deaths in custody, and email a form letter to a politician in the space of several minutes. This opens up politics to people who would otherwise not become involved in activism, because ‘push-button activism’ (Landzelius 2006b) is quicker and easier than spending hours at meetings and demonstrations. This makes it more appealing to many people, because they do not need to invest as much time or effort to the cause. But, as Landzelius (2006b) argues, this virtual effortlessness may also decrease the effectiveness of action. Those in power realise the ease with which emails are sent and petitions are signed, and are less likely to respond in the same way as they might to a strike or a protest march. Push-button activism allows people to feel as if they are involved in a movement with minimal participation. In other words, web 2.0 may increase the numbers of inactive movement members. The question for movement participants, then, is whether the reduced time costs and broad networking possibilities outweigh these negative aspects of push-button activism.

To be truly effective, I argue that web 2.0 should be used to enhance offline activism, rather than to replace it. Activists should apply the same principles to cyber-activism that they used before the availability of the internet. For instance, Florence’s door-to-door activism on the issue of Indigenous housing in Queensland was focused on a specific audience, it had clear issues and goals, and an obvious target: the DAIA. The e-petition in support of Lex Wotton had none of these. Applying these concepts to cyber-activism will allow web 2.0 to strengthen and enhance offline activism. Web 2.0 does have numerous
benefits – it makes it possible for activists to communicate quickly, with a broad audience. Moreover, supporters can be quickly organised to address issues in a very timely manner (McFedries 2003). If carefully managed with clear goals, audience and target, the benefits of web 2.0 to protesters are significant in terms of efficiency and ability to reach a broad audience. However, the resource needs to be deliberately and consciously utilised to ensure effective and meaningful protests.
References


¹ Interview quotes in this section come from a formal interview with Florence Onus, 12 May 2008.