

Social Media Conflict: Platforms for Racial Vilification, or Acts of Provocation and Citizenship?

*Amelia Johns, Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University
Anthony McCosker, Swinburne University*

Abstract

Although racism remains an issue for social media sites such as YouTube, this focus often overshadows the site's productive capacity to generate 'agonistic publics' from which expressions of cultural citizenship and solidarity might emerge. This paper examines these issues through two case studies: the recent proliferation of mobile phone video recordings of racist rants on public transport, and racist interactions surrounding the performance of a Maori 'flash mob' haka in New Zealand that was recorded and uploaded to YouTube. We contrast these incidents as they are played out primarily through social media, with the case of Australian Football League player Adam Goodes and the broadcast media reaction to a racial slur aimed against him by a crowd member during the AFL's Indigenous Round. We discuss the prevalence of vitriolic exchange and racial bigotry, but also, and more importantly, the productive and equally aggressive defence of more inclusive and tolerant forms of cultural identification that play out across these different media forms. Drawing on theories of cultural citizenship along with the political theory of Chantal Mouffe, we point to the capacities of YouTube as 'platform', and to social media practices, in facilitating ground-up anti-racism and generating dynamic, contested and confronting micropublics.

Keywords: social media, racism, provocation, agonism, publics, acts of citizenship

Introduction

Social media platforms have brought to the fore the promise of new modes of public, political and civic engagement. Although it is a highly dynamic field of platforms and practices, by 'social media' we are referring to networked media technologies that enable multi-directional communication, media production and exchange, within both narrow and mass public forums. This includes social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, or video sharing sites like YouTube (which is the focus of this paper). These are communication tools that are productive of new forms of 'digital citizenship' and that encompass creativity, cultural expression and civic engagement by enabling more active and interactive engagement with media content, audiences and publics. In particular, there have been numerous studies that identify a link between social media use and increased political and civic engagement for young people and other marginalised groups who tend to be underrepresented in more conventional forms of civic and political participation (Coleman 2006, Harris et al 2007). This underlines the democratic potential of social media platforms, if not always their actuality.

But social media platforms are also frequently admonished for supporting the flow of unchecked racism, misogyny and other forms of ‘anti-social’ practice. Public anxiety is enlivened by the same extension of the means to participate in public media forums. In line with these arguments, proprietary social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are under increasing pressure to weigh their interests in mass participation and freedom of use against stronger regulation and platform moderation (see Dibben 2012; Pakham 2012). Certainly, federal governments have been steadily expanding the scope of regulation for social media misuse in the guise of ‘cyber-safety’, digital citizenship policies and by increasing pressure on service providers to remove ‘offensive content’, but also under more constructive policies of social inclusion (Penman & Turnbull 2012). Underlining this commitment, an Australian ‘cyberbullying commissioner’ role has been proposed by the current federal government to provide legislative muscle in dealing with ‘aberrant’ uses of internationally based social media service providers (Department of Communications 2014).

Meanwhile, in contradiction with this move toward greater regulation, the Australian government has recently been embroiled in a media storm over proposed changes to section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) (RDA), which would remove clauses that make it illegal to ‘offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate’ on the grounds of race (McIlroy 2014). Although this move has been blocked by opposing parties, the changes were proposed in light of a successful case being made against political and media commentator, Andrew Bolt, under section 18C for his offensive comments relating to ‘white aboriginals’. The equally inflammatory choice of words of Attorney-General George Brandis – who defended the proposed changes because ‘everyone has a right to be a bigot’ (Griffiths 2014) – led to a public outcry from commentators on the left and right of politics, including many Coalition MPs, who claimed that the proposed changes would act as a ‘dog whistle’, giving a ‘green light to bigotry’.

Worryingly, and despite valid objections to the proposed changes to the RDA, the devaluing of freedom of speech and its relevance to a healthy democracy in the furore has had the unfortunate effect of invigorating calls for a tightening of laws and increased regulation of media content across the board. In other words, rather than having a reasoned debate about the pros and cons of increasing regulation in the complex media ecology emerging in an era of convergence, the debate has been reduced to one where freedom of speech is equated with the right to be a bigot whilst media censorship is hailed as the only remaining measure to protect our civic rights and freedoms. In thinking through these issues, media and platform specificity is crucial.

In this evolving and contested context we consider recent instances of racist provocation in Australia and New Zealand, where social media platforms have played a central role in the dynamic that has unfolded. The problem that concerns us is not that there is a ‘rise of social media racism’ (although one study conducted by Dunn, Jucubowicz and Paradies has provided strong evidence for this claim). Rather, we want to emphasise the need to better understand social media participation in order to bring into the frame the importance of these platforms and their uses for rethinking responses to racism and promoting anti-racism strategies.

We first consider two instances of racist provocation and counter-provocation on YouTube and compare them to a similar instance that played out through mainstream commercial news media. Racist rants and associated bystander actions have recently been recorded on public transport in Australian cities and uploaded to YouTube, echoing cases across Europe and the UK (Johns 2013a). In these (Australian) cases, we will highlight the extent to which social media circulation and interaction enabled a broader public exchange, mostly condemning the racist sentiments of those recorded, albeit often in equally provocative and vitriolic language. Secondly, we look at the celebratory uploading of a ‘flashmob haka’ videos recorded in New

Zealand. The flashmob is a social media-oriented practice, but these cases involved intense racist and anti-racist exchange over an extended period of time within the videos' comments fields. We contrast these incidents with the move by Australian Football League (AFL) footballer Adam Goodes to make public – and condemn – a racist slur levelled against him by a crowd member during the AFL's Indigenous Round. These cases demonstrate some of the affordances of social media sites in contexts of public conflict, including their ability to extend anti-racist publics beyond those present at the specific time and place of the racist act whilst also highlighting the 'counter-provocative' potential of these interactions. By making reference to the Adam Goodes incident we also want to highlight the specificity of media platforms and to demonstrate the different capacities and expressions of anti-racism and bystander actions, where participants in publicly mediated racist exchange are able to leverage the reach, attention and legitimacy afforded by mainstream commercial and public news media through television, radio and newspapers.

Digital Citizenship and the Building Blocks of Bystander Anti-Racism

Problems with conceptualising social media participation are often to do with the reflexive adherence to a dominant and persistent normative notion of digital citizenship. Specifically, digital participation in these accounts is aligned with a desire for rational discourse and conflict-free, productive civic or democratic engagement in line with a Habermasian or Rawlsian model. Digital citizenship has thus been defined as 'the ability to participate in society online' and in terms of the potential the internet has 'to benefit society as a whole, and facilitate the membership and participation of individuals within society' (Mossberger et al. 2008, p. 1). This reflects the common moral or ethical positioning in government, educational programs and social media codes of practice. However, there are many problems with this vision of life online (and citizenship more broadly) that a reading of Chantal Mouffe's concept of 'agonistic pluralism' usefully addresses (see Shaw 2012; Marchart 2007).

Mouffe's notion of agonism is helpful here because it points to the potential behind the kinds of adversarial and passionate contest that can follow from open modes of civic engagement. In Mouffe's model, the institutions of democracy should aim to allow 'collective passions ... to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary' (Mouffe 2000, p. 103). Agonistic contest occurs when conflicting parties acknowledge that they are adversaries but nonetheless 'operate on common symbolic ground' (Papacharissi 2010, p. 161). Unlike in models of deliberative democracy, in Mouffe's account of agonistic pluralism 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs' (Mouffe 2000, p. 103). Passions and affects, she argues, play a crucial role in securing allegiance to democratic values (Ibid., p. 95). Mouffe's broader proposition is that 'far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence' (Ibid., p. 103). According to Mouffe, the method for achieving this is to multiply opportunities for speech; democratic individuals can only be made possible by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values (Ibid., p. 96).

We can apply this understanding of democratic participation and engagement to lessons from citizenship scholarship that, since at least the 1990s, has considered the cultural component of citizenship (see Turner 2001; Stevenson 2001; Hartley 2012; Miller 2007) along with Isin and Nielsen's notion of 'acts of citizenship' (2008). Broadly, citizenship has in recent times come to include performative and cultural dimensions. That is, while online

civic engagement is often equated with participation in *political process* or *policy formation* (Mossberger et al. 2008; Coleman et al. 2009; Hindman 2008), there are other ways people enact forms of citizenship – for instance, in the complex practices, experiences and meanings associated with digital cultures and activities, which serve also as spaces for negotiating forms of ‘cultural citizenship’.

The term ‘cultural citizenship’ implies that points of cultural reference become central markers for citizenship beyond place of birth or nationality, and that these points of reference are fluid and contested (Hartley 2012). We want to emphasise the idea that markers of identification and civic participation derived from cultural practices, traditions and affiliations can also operate as forms of provocation, whether to belonging or exclusion, aggression or celebration (Miller 2007). Conceptualising citizenship as emergent through acts of expression, sharing and exchange better incorporates the political, ethical, cultural and aesthetic qualities of a wide variety of forms of engagement, including provocation, passion and intensive (digital) civic participation. The difficult balance here lies in addressing the kind of civic responsibility that might apply in any context (mediated or face-to-face) in which vitriolic expression or explicit racism remains exclusionary without rejoinder. Trolling, bullying and racist social media activities can fall within this remit, but in very different ways and through circumstances that require more specific analysis.

Though it is perhaps not what the aforementioned theorists had in mind, it is the argument of this paper that racist provocation and anti-racist counter-provocations – as they operate in relation to one another in social media spaces – have the potential to generate ‘agonistic’ publics and productive acts of citizenship. In particular, it is important to keep in mind that forms of vitriolic contest, as media theorists have argued, intensify and sustain productive social media exchange and political engagement on platforms such as YouTube (McCosker 2014; McCosker et al. 2013). In light of this, there is a strong argument to be made that regulating social media content neglects the potential for these forums to generate agonistic publics through which acts of cultural citizenship and solidarity may emerge. This has some resonance with an emerging focus in anti-racism research on ‘bystander anti-racism’, which is broadly defined by Jacqueline Nelson, Kevin Dunn and Yin Paradies as follows:

... action taken by a person or persons (not directly involved as a target or perpetrator) to speak out about or to seek to engage others in responding (either directly or indirectly, immediately or at a later time) against interpersonal or systemic racism. (Nelson et al. 2011, p. 265).

In elaborating on the forms that such interventions might take, Nelson et al. ‘outline a case for the wider social benefits of hearing racist talk and witnessing bystander anti-racism’ (Ibid., p. 264). Significantly, in discussing the potential of these acts to shift social norms ‘towards intolerance of “everyday racism”’, they argue that confrontational and provocative actions of bystanders may serve an important and productive function (Ibid., p. 280). Despite strong support for these theories and associated interventions, there has been little examination of bystander anti-racism across social media platforms; where attention is directed to those platforms, it is mainly to push site owners to simply remove racist content, or to lock down or remove commenting, rating and sharing facilities.

Racist Rants on Australian Public Transport and YouTube

While racism is increasingly affected by the affordances of social media platforms, the productive potential of these platforms is often overshadowed by the desire to eradicate all forms of conflict or passionate, aggressive and vitriolic exchange. The cases analysed here play out the supposed threat of unchecked racism and conflict online, but we argue that they

also demonstrate potential for a ground-up anti-racism through social media acts of citizenship that are generative of dynamic, contested – even if confronting – networked publics or micro-publics that have the potential to generate anti-racist action (Keane 1995). In a pre-social media era, John Keane used the term ‘micro-publics’ to point to the formation of dynamic, small-scale social movements around do-it-yourself communication technologies (1995). We might conceptualise the social media-enabled cosmopolis as being comprised of many emergent and often contested ‘micropublics’ in a way that emphasises their heterogeneity and relational character. We see this in action in some of those prominent incidents of racism or cultural conflict that flow into and through social media platforms. But, as we hope to demonstrate, this augments and reshapes the operation of racism and counter-racism in mainstream, commercial or public broadcast services and publications.

To begin with, we can think about these dynamics through the events of a sustained and terrifying verbal attack in 2012, by two male passengers on a French tourist on a Frankston line bus. The attack was recorded by at least one passenger and uploaded to YouTube. The video depicts a woman who is singing in French being told by a passenger to ‘speak English or die motherfucker’. The woman is then threatened by the man, who tells her he would cut off her breasts if she didn’t stop singing, highlighting the gendered and violent nature of the threat. Another seemingly unrelated passenger joins him in the abuse.

In the recorded part of the incident, other passengers did not appear to directly challenge the perpetrators. This is understandable, given the visceral and intimidating nature of the abuse and the potential for violent escalation. One witness to the event underscored the danger, saying ‘the main thing was just to get away’ (Burns 2012). Viewers can see a window being smashed at the end of the video. In the weeks and months following the incident, the intensity and violent force of this late night incident was amplified and sustained by its circulation through social media and the broader debate and discussion that followed through news media and particularly in the comments field of the video and through its movement across Facebook’s interconnected personal networks.

Significantly, due to its rapid spread and its strong public reaction, the video was used as evidence against one of the perpetrators of the violence, leading the man to be charged and later jailed (AAP 2012). This demonstrates the effectiveness of social media engagement not only as a place to ‘witness’ acts of racism, make claims for justice and enact citizenship, but also in practical terms: to provide evidence that make such acts prosecutable.

The bulk of the interactions that flowed through the comments field, and continue to flow now well after the event, were highly critical of the verbal assault. By far the most popular YouTube version of this video was one produced with voiceover commentary, uploaded by CheckPointComedy.¹ The video brings attention to the broader problem of racism through a remixed parody-documentary format interspersed with raw video footage of the rant. It attracted over 4 452 400 views and more than 37 000 comments. The scale of the commenting public that has formed in relation to the video warrants attention itself for what it reveals of the potential for participation that social media offers. The video maker’s passion, along with the use of humour, asserts an alternative voice of inclusive national citizenship, encouraging a younger public to take action by sharing the video. The young narrator’s comments below are instructive in this regard:

I want people to share this video for two reasons. Firstly because although we like to think we live in a culturally inclusive society, sadly this kind of stuff isn’t that uncommon. I know I’ve copped my share for being brown and all my ethnic friends have a story or two. It’s a thing in this country, let’s not pretend it’s not. And secondly so this video gets back to these three in

¹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hp6J6PF47CM>).

particular. I want you guys to see this in the sober light of day so you can see how truly pathetic you are. Fuck you!

Combining several different modes of address, the creator of the video engages in an ‘act of social media citizenship’ and opens up a sustained space for affirming anti-racist sentiment. In doing so, he makes a claim for a more inclusive public, as an Australian citizen, as an ethnic minority Australian, and as a claimant who has himself experienced this kind of abuse. However, this is by no means a unified public decrying the racist and violent acts depicted.

Some continue the vitriolic, bigoted and aggressive tone of the perpetrators, and this is cause for concern for many. For example, a comment – which itself acts as a provocation which other people respond to and condemn – posted a year and a half after the incident ridicules the perpetrators of the abuse using the following racist, sexually explicit and offensive language:

White Australasians are the lowest of the fuckin low. Their [sic.] like the Alabama of the Southern Hemisphere...a bunch of red neck, **** assholes with no education whatsoever. It's better for non-whites to stay the fuck out of that shithole. Who the hell would wanna be treated like her? And she's white. Let these red necks live in their ignorant oasis. (PopCan 2014)

As we have done elsewhere (McCosker 2014; McCosker et al. 2013), we wish to highlight the place and logic of provocation/counter-provocation as it operates in the initial racist rant and violent acts, in the act of videoing and uploading the event to YouTube, in its remix and humorous overlay, in the myriad acts of sharing and responding, and perhaps most significantly in the tens of thousands of comments posted to the video. The specificity of each of these sites of civic action is vital for understanding the boundaries of the kinds of digital citizenship that might be enabled or curtailed across social media platforms.

Considering the benefits, but also the concerns, of bystander anti-racism, we would argue that this case study highlights the potential for social media spaces to provide an alternative public forum where obstacles are minimised and the role of bystander anti-racism is extended beyond the immediate scene. In these circumstances, social media plays an important ‘witnessing’ role, but it also opens up a space for rejoinder, by encouraging a new public to form, to claim and assert rights, and assume civic responsibility for these actions without fear for personal safety.

New Zealand and Australian Flash Mob Hakas

There are even broader reasons for considering the productive capacity of even vitriolic and aggressive contest within the interactive fields of social media platforms such as YouTube, where rich and nuanced expressions of cultural citizenship are able to play out. A second case study extends the analysis above, and highlights a potential cultural pedagogy and active affinity as forms of cultural citizenship derived from responses to racist provocation. In 2011 and 2012, a number of flash mob Maori hakas were performed in New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere in the world. Initiated by troupes performing for the 2011 Rugby Union World Cup hosted by New Zealand, the hakas were performed in public as surprise events and – in typical flash mob fashion – videoed and uploaded to YouTube. Many of the videos have been viewed by millions and commented on by tens of thousands of YouTube users.

We analysed the comments field for a flash mob video of the Maui Potiki haka performed at Sylvia Park, a shopping centre in Auckland, in 2011. In the three month observation period there were 1 242 368 views and over 2600 comments, and we coded a sample of 1448 comments to examine qualities of passionate expression, provocation and counter-provocation.

Again, while there was an overwhelming flow of positive sentiment and cultural pride, video comments were peppered with aggressive, vitriolic, racist provocation, followed by equally vitriolic reactions from those trying to win back expressive control of the 'tone' of the comments field. Much of the vitriolic provocation seemed carefully constructed to initiate ongoing reactions and to draw attention. This type of provocation, often thought of as trolling, in this case mostly took the form of racial bigotry and came from individual commenters framing their provocation in a way that directly counteracts the cultural pride more commonly expressed. The producer of one flash mob haka video filmed in Sydney in late 2011 responded to the flow of racist vitriol a year later, and in measured tones emphasised the idea that negative comments are a form of defacement:

I am very disappointed with the actions of some people's comments on here, it shows a great lack of respect for what people believe in and where they are from whether it be by birth or by heritage, if you do not like the video or the comments other small minded little pieces of crap have made then don't respond and leave my page. I don't come and deface your videos and crush something that you are proud of so don't do it to mine (Ljkennedy1 2012).

Defacement, however, carries a suggestion of private ownership of the space that is not accurate or helpful. Typically, responses take the form of counter-provocation or conflict. With the Silvia Park video, what struck us as more interesting than most typical examples of racist provocation and bigotry was the consistent attempt to collectively engage in transformational dialogue, a kind of pedagogy of Maori culture and history. A good example was where a long exchange followed a provocation connecting Maori men with domestic violence: '...and when they get home, they take it out (for real) on their partners, children...!' (elgar104 2011). There were many responses, many of which were equally vitriolic and aggressive, but all worked to transform the tone of the exchange back toward the celebratory acts of cultural expression displayed in the video. For example:

@elgar104 People who consider this attention seeking probably have no culture or traditions to learn from. I am no a Maori but I can see the passion these guys have when they do it (Jandalkingz, September 2011).

@jandalkingz Back you up there bro, this is New Zealand and if haterz in here have issues than migrate to Australia, simple. This is about passion and these boys have given a glimpse into our heritage (Joeydudester1, September, 2011).

So many exchanges like this, which might seem to begin and often continue as simply abhorrent, aggressive and racist expression and exchange, are expressions of cultural citizenship that also enable a *plurality* of acts of citizenship. These are a set of processes and acts that give rise to anxieties and risk, but are also sought out by, and we would argue are crucial to, social media participants enacting forms of identification and cultural citizenship within emergent and ephemeral – but contested – micro-publics.

Adam Goodes

There is clearly a different kind of force at play when participants in publicly mediated racist exchange are able to leverage the reach, attention and legitimacy afforded by mainstream commercial and public news media through television, radio and newspapers. As a point of significant contrast to the previous two cases, we compare such a situation in which a racial slur against Adam Goodes, a well-known and respected Indigenous AFL player, became the

focus of broadcast news media attention, owing to the nature of the offense as well as Goodes' celebrity status and significant media profile.

In 2013, during the opening match of the AFL's Indigenous Round, a 13-year-old member of the crowd directed verbal abuse at Goodes who was near the boundary, calling him an 'ape'. Goodes immediately brought the incident to the attention of a nearby official, and was visibly hurt and struggled to continue with the game (Johns 2013b). He took the matter further after the match and, in his statement through broadcast news channels, explained his dismay at the public attack on him, saying 'I turned around and when I saw it was a young girl and I thought she was 14, that was my initial thought, I was just like "really?". I just thought how could that happen?' (Johns 2013b). This incident highlights the complexity with which racism enters a society and is normalised until the meaning of insidious, racist terms become dispersed, invisible to some who would voice them. At the same time, the Goodes incident demonstrates that such taunts are no less deeply felt by those groups who cannot forget the original meanings of the terms, and the personal and community-wide legacies they have left. However, it also indicates the significance of the media channels through which such expressions are made, encountered and responded to.

In this case it is clear that through his celebrity status and his access to broadcast media channels of communication, Goodes has a particular capacity to amplify attention and respond in a way that the ordinary, *individual* users of social media of the previous case studies do not have. This affords him significant power in being able to shape the public narrative. In the uses of YouTube described above, there is only the sense of larger, multiple or pluralistic publics competing through exchange. Recognising the particular force and focussed attention that broadcast media afforded him, Goodes and others (such as AFL boss Andrew Demetriou) were quick to move attention away from the girl who made the racist slur to the broader context of public education and cultural change. In his press conference the next day, Goodes explained that it was now about education for the girl and for society (Windley 2013). While for Goodes this meant taking a stand for himself, his family and his community, and telling people 'that a simple name, a simple word, can cut so deep', he did not blame the girl and asked for the public to give her support, just like he had received. Goodes put it as follows:

I just hope that people give the 13-year-old the same sort of support because she needs it, her family need it, the people around them need it. It's not a witch hunt. I don't want people to go after this young girl.

To this end, Goodes called for education instead of naming and shaming 'so it doesn't happen again'. But the very step of making this public appeal for clemency demonstrates the difference between his ability to leverage mainstream media to communicate an anti-racist message to a mass audience and the ability of the young perpetrator, or other participants in instances of racial abuse in an AFL football crowd, to leverage mainstream media to make their voices heard, or to enter into an open exchange where such provocations may be raised or addressed, perpetrators condemned or educated, victims supported.

Goodes' ability to garner the resources of commercial and public broadcast news is also supplemented by his role as ambassador for the Australian Human Rights Commission's 'Racism. It Stops With Me' campaign launched around the same time. The campaign used high profile public figures such as Goodes to promote the idea of a shared responsibility for anti-racist practice (Australian Human Rights Commission 2013). All of these factors alter the dynamic and structures of voice through which racist provocation and counter-provocation operate, as well as the broader effects they might have. In particular, when we consider which social media actions may provide the greatest breakthrough in terms of encouraging mass

participation and equality of access, it is not always those examples which are completely free of vitriolic exchange that are most productive. At the time of viewing (23 October 2014), the 'Racism. It Stops With Me' YouTube site had 697 subscriptions and 259 452 views. The comments field had been disabled, so it was difficult to tell how much overall traffic the site had had from its publication on 23 May 2013 to the time of writing. When contrasted with the other videos discussed in this paper, it is nevertheless clear that the videos posted by ordinary users and the reasonably unchecked flow of comments and video responses that such videos may invite are often more sought-after and discursively productive than those produced by media industry professionals.

We argue in light of these dynamics that the media sites and tools through which expression and exchange occur must be of foremost consideration when devising strategies to combat racist activity. In particular, we argue that locking down the interactive capacities of social media platforms is not necessarily the most effective response.

Conclusions

To conclude, our aim in this paper has not been to downplay the existence of harmful expressions of bigotry and racism in online forums, but simply to move toward a notion of contested publics that might be able to accommodate – that is, not to celebrate, nor to eradicate – forms of passion and conflict, even where aggression and bigotry are involved. Incidents such as those depicted in the YouTube examples described above demonstrate the complex role of social media platforms in documenting racism and making it visible, but also social media's role as an enabler of new micro-publics and from-below 'acts' of cultural citizenship.

Our concern is that in much of the anti-racist and digital citizenship literature and policy manoeuvring, this kind of content and exchange is simplistically considered harmful and is often removed or shut down by site owners (VEOHRC 2013). This approach ignores the productive potential of even aggressive and conflict-ridden exchanges to provide new opportunities for young people in particular to make claims and take responsibility as citizens, in ways that embrace what Hartley describes as the right to act up and the 'right to dance' (Hartley 2012). Though such a position might suggest a defence of the 'right to be a bigot', we wish to shift the attention from individual acts of bigotry and consider instead the capacity of social media platforms to make bigotry visible to a wider public, and to encourage forms of exchange that may be productive of anti-racist bystander action and acts of social media citizenship. We also wish to contrast these examples with the wider capacities of mainstream commercial and public broadcast media to provoke through racist expression and effectively draw attention – and respond – to racism. Care must be taken not to conflate the two media contexts, and to take into account where they leverage off and inform each other.

In the cases we have examined there is an evident capacity for agonistic – that is, contested but inclusive and sustained – micro-publics to persist, from which productive expressions of cultural citizenship, solidarity and anti-racist practice can emerge. But there is equally potential for great social harm. The point is to ensure that the foundations are in place for agonistic contest and productive publics with expressive capacities that not only bring to light racist sentiment, but are also empowered to respond.

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