Contested Publics: Racist Rants, Bystander Action and Social Media Acts of Citizenship

Anthony McCosker and Amelia Johns

Abstract
While social media tools enable new kinds of creativity, cultural expression and forms of public, civic and political participation, we often hear more about the harms that arise from instances of trolling and ‘aberrant’ online participation, including racist provocation. In media and communications research these issues have been framed in a number of ways, usually focussing on new tools for civic engagement, political participation and digital inclusion. Government policy has been steadily shifting toward potential regulation of social media ‘misuse’ in relation to appropriate forms of ‘digital citizenship’. It is in this evolving context that we consider several instances of cultural or nationalistic provocation and conflict in which social media platforms (YouTube and Facebook in particular) have been central to the social dynamic that has unfolded. We examine the recording and uploading of racist rants and associated bystander actions on public transport in Australia and elsewhere around the world. In this paper, we will contend that whilst racism remains an issue in uses of social media platforms such as YouTube, this focus often overshadows their productive potential, including their capacity to support agonistic publics from which productive expressions of cultural citizenship and solidarity might emerge.

Contested Publics: Racist Rants, Bystander Action and Social Media Acts of Citizenship

While social media tools have been understood to enable new kinds of creativity, cultural expression and forms of public, civic and political engagement, we often hear more about the harms that might arise from instances of aberrant online participation, including cultural conflict, racism, misogyny and bullying. 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 or platform moderation (e.g. Dibben, 2012; Pakham, 2012). Governments have been steadily expanding the scope of regulation for social media misuse in the guise of ‘cyber-safety’ and digital citizenship policies, and by increasing pressure on service providers to remove ‘offensive content’, but also under more constructive policies of social inclusion.

In this evolving context we consider instances of racist provocation in which social media platforms have been central to the dynamic that has unfolded. Racist rants and associated bystander actions have been recently recorded on public transport in Australian cities and uploaded to YouTube, echoing a number of similar cases across Europe and the UK. Through social media circulation a broader public exchange is enabled, mostly condemning the racist sentiments of those recorded, albeit often expressed in equally provocative, racist and misogynist language. These cases demonstrate some of the affordances of social media sites in contexts of public conflict, their ability to extend anti-racist publics beyond the specific time and place of the racist act, whilst also highlighting the counter-provocative nature of these interactions. Both cases play out the supposed threat of unchecked racism and conflict online, but we argue that they also demonstrate a potential
for a ground-up anti-racism through social media acts of citizenship that are generative of dynamic, contested – even if confronting – micro-publics. Our contention is that 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.

**Participation, Racism and the Question of Digital Citizenship**

The way participation in online activities and platforms is understood can itself help to frame responses to racism and help to rethink anti-racism strategies. In media and communications research, participation has often been aligned with the use of new technologies for civic and political engagement and forms of digital inclusion from either optimistic or sceptical perspectives (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Mossberger et al., 2008; Hindman, 2008; Penman and Turnbull, 2012). Questioning the role of new media in improving social inclusion, Penman and Turnbull develop a useful framework that considers the processual elements that might enable and promote hospitality, friendship and relationality in what Silverstone calls an adequate ‘mediapolis’ (Penman and Turnbull, 2012; Silverstone, 2007). These questions and approaches are even more pressing in relation to what are often considered simply antagonistic and ‘anti-social’ forums for participation that are enabled by new communication technologies.

Also addressing issues of participation, inclusion and exclusion, public debate and government policy has been mired in problematic notions of ‘digital citizenship’ in order to promote rational, civil, ethical and profitable forms of internet and social media use. Digital citizenship has 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: 1). This reflects the common moral or ethical positioning in governmental and educational programs and social media codes of practice. We think this account and the common policy approaches to digital citizenship need to be reconfigured to better account for both individual and collective acts and experiences of digital participation, and that there is an important temporal and cultural component in the ongoing processes and activities of ‘becoming’ a digital citizen.

Broadly, citizenship has in recent times come to include a significant cultural component. That is, while online civic engagement is often equated with participation in political process or policy formation (Mossberger et al. 2008; Coleman and Blumler, 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 more contested (Hartley, 2012). 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). 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. But as we have shown elsewhere in relation to social media exchange around flash mob performances of Maori hakis and the 2011 UK riots, provocation and counter
provocation, as forms of often vitriolic contest, can intensify and sustain productive social media exchange and engagement with public events (McCosker, 2014; McCosker and Johns, 2013).

Isin and Nielsen’s notion of ‘acts of citizenship’ is helpful here in shifting citizenship from the institutional designation of a state, or a priori subject position, toward the processes, events and practices through which political subjects are created, which are also ‘social, political, cultural and symbolic’ (2008: 17). Acts of citizenship, they argue, ‘disrupt habitus, create new possibilities, claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones’ (2008: 10). 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. This can include the use of vitriolic or aggressive expression and exchange – those forms of ‘acting up’ that are often condemned as aberrant misuses of social media sites.

This is not to say that accounts of inflammatory and persistent online racism such as those described in a recent report by the Victoria Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2013: 26-29), could in and of themselves constitute ‘agonistic’ forms of democratic engagement much less productive ‘acts of citizenship’. These and other government and non-government reports take seriously the potential individual, social, psychological and health impacts of ‘cyber-racism’ (AHRC, 2011); in particular, such acts are thought to significantly undermine basic human rights and protections, and the ‘sense of citizenship and belonging’ that participation in social media forums might otherwise encourage (Dunn et al., 2009). And yet, if we shift the focus from individual perpetrators and victims of online racism to the ‘anti-racist publics’ and acts of civic responsibility and solidarity formed around these expressions, there is a strong argument to be made that regulating social media content neglects the potential for these forums to generate counter or anti-racist publics, through acts that are often equally passionate and vitriolic in tone. This has some resonance with an emerging focus in anti-racism research on ‘bystander anti-racism’ broadly defined as:

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: 265)

In elaborating on the forms such interventions might take, Nelson et al. ‘outline a case for the wider social benefits of hearing racist talk and witnessing bystander anti-racism’ (2011: 264). Significantly, in discussing the potential of these acts to shift social norms ‘towards intolerance of ‘everyday racism’, Nelson et al. argue that confrontational and provocative actions of bystanders may serve an important and productive function (2011: 280). But there has been little examination of bystander anti-racism across social media platforms; and where attention is directed to those platforms, it is mainly to push site owners to simply remove racist content.

The aim here is not to downplay the existence of harmful expressions of online 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 celebrate, but nor seek to eradicate – forms of passion and conflict, even where it involves aggression and bigotry. 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-your-self communication technologies (1995). We might consider a notion of the social media enabled cosmopolis as many emergent and often contested ‘micro-publics’ in a way that emphasises their heterogeneity and relational character. And we see this in action in some of those prominent incidents of racism or cultural conflict that flow into and through social media platforms.

Racial provocation and counter-provocation
In April 2007, following a number of widely publicised racist rants against people of minority religious, ethnic, cultural or national background, which were filmed on public transport in Melbourne and Sydney and uploaded to YouTube, Australia’s Race Discrimination Officer Tim Soutphommasane wrote that while racism cannot be entirely eradicated from society, it is time that onlookers confronted acts of public racism as a matter of civic responsibility (2013). This reflects an emerging empirical and theoretical focus in anti-racist and social policy research on ‘bystander anti-racism’ identifying bystander action as a powerful anti-racist response owing to such actions arising from the everyday social contexts in which racism is normalised (Nelson et al., 2011: 264; VEOHRC, 2013). It is the everyday, self-regulated and ground-up nature of these acts that is understood to increase their capacity to ‘unsettle’ and disrupt racist social norms in ways that have benefits for the victim, the perpetrator and the bystander, as well as enacting more enduring forms of social and behavioural change.

Soutphommasane points out that one of the most harmful aspects of racism for victims is the silence of other members of the public who are witness to such acts. This is supported in the literature, where the effect on victims of bystander action is the feeling of ‘not being abandoned by their peers in public’, as well as having their ‘sense of citizenship, belonging, and community (to the nation, locality, organisation, or company) affirmed’ (Nelson et al., 2011: 280). The effects of these actions on the perpetrator are also outlined, with bystander inaction being identified as having ‘false consensus effects’ whereby people who sense themselves to be in the majority feel freer to express such views publicly (Nelson et al., 2011: 269). And yet there are a number of obstacles to bystander anti-racism in public situations that are cited in the literature and in Soutphommasane’s article. Primarily, these obstacles relate to fears of violent retaliation from the perpetrator, the perception that speaking up might escalate the conflict, and ‘impression management’ (Nelson et al., 2011: 271). One study identified that gender role prescriptions particularly inhibited women from speaking up (Hyers, 2007).

These dynamics are illustrated by Soutphommasane with reference to a sustained and terrifying verbal attack by two male passengers on a French tourist on a Frankston-line bus, recorded by at least one of the passengers and uploaded to YouTube (‘Mob’s Racist Abuse Against French Girl on Bus in Australia’, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oxVlP4pYc0). The video depicts a woman who is singing in French being told by a fellow passenger to ‘Speak English or die motherfucker’. The woman is then threatened by the man, who tells her he would cut her breasts off if she didn’t stop singing, highlighting the gendered and violent nature of the threat. In the recorded part of the incident passengers did not challenge the perpetrator, with one man even joining the tirade. Soutphommasane stops short of claiming that there is an obligation for members of the public to stand up to these actions, particularly 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). We would argue that this example 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.

The more recent case of a woman who racially abused a man of African background on a Melbourne train, however – telling him that her grandfather had gone to war to keep the country free of people like him – was met with a very different response (‘http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPJUraxAb1g’). Instead of remaining silent, a large number of angry passengers confronted the woman, rejecting the version of Australia that she claimed to represent and supporting the victim. The exchange shows the woman’s surprise when her views are loudly denounced by the majority, including by a man who tells her: ‘if this is your country then I don’t want to live here’. The victim of the abuse later claimed that it was ‘beautiful’ that the train stood up for him and supported his right to travel freely through the city without being subjected to racial abuse (Zielinski, 2013). One thing of note in the video, which points to a very different dynamic being generated through social media, arises from the complex interactions occurring between the immediate scene of the racist act, the bystander response to this act and bystander reactions to being filmed and having their responses potentially uploaded, viewed and evaluated by a wider public. Certainly the presence of the camera seems to alter the social context in which bystanders respond, with one man addressing the camera directly, saying ‘Apologies, this is not the Australia that she represents’. This highlights the amplifying effects of social media for victims, perpetrators and bystanders, for whom action or inaction is located and evaluated in relation to new webs of rights and responsibilities (flowing across and between multiple intersecting publics), and new sites and scales of struggle, answerability and identification (Isin & Neilsen 2008).

This awareness of the extended possibilities of witnessing and participating in ‘bystander anti-racism’ is most evident, however, in the interactions occurring in social media forums. On YouTube, one version of the video (‘http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4wWqfRzp_M’) attracted over 400,000 views at the time of writing, but continues to generate attention and discussion with more than 4,000 comments to date. A comprehensive analysis of the user responses to the videos is beyond the scope of this paper, but within the comments field, there is an overwhelming emphasis on anti-racist expression and dialogue, despite some comments that seek to continue the rant. For instance, one user responds to an anti-racist post saying: “stupid australian racist people” In YOUR OPINION they are “racist” you’re just saying that because they are White. Anti-racist is just a codeword for anti-White (Alpha Rabbit, November, 2013). Explicitly racist comments seemed to be in the minority, but even anti-racist expression was problematised in some cases by the aggressive nature of the counter-provocation: ‘omfng someone punch that bitch out’ (Justine Turnbull, November, 2013).

Despite the often vitriolic, bigoted and aggressive tone of these responses, however, by far the most popular YouTube version of the attack on the French tourist was an edited piece with voiceover commentary produced and uploaded by CheckPointComedy (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hp6J6PF47CM). The video brings attention to the broader problem of racism through a remixed parody/documentary video intercut with raw video footage of
the rant. The video, which has attracted 4,452,402 views and more than 37,000 comments, uses humour to disarm the acts of the racists, to assert an alternative voice of inclusive national citizenship, encouraging a younger public to take action by sharing the video:

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 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 citizenship’ and opens up a sustained space for affirming anti-racist sentiment. In doing so, he makes a claim, as an Australian citizen, as an ethnic minority Australian, and as a claimant who has himself experienced this kind of abuse, for a more inclusive public.

**Conclusions**

Incidents such as these demonstrate the complex role of social media platforms in both documenting, promoting and countering racism and intolerance. In particular, they demonstrate their role in generating and sustaining public attention around racist acts and enabling anti-racist action. Largely, however, these platforms are not regarded as legitimate spaces of democratic dialogue and participation. Unfortunately this is reflected in much of the anti-racist and digital citizenship literature and policy manoeuvring, where rather than supporting these interactions, content considered harmful is removed and complainants redirected to official anti-racist websites (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)

We have argued against the case that by allowing such exchanges to take place, YouTube and other social media sites provide a platform for unchecked racism in a way that should never be tolerated. In the examples examined there is an evident capacity to support agonistic – that is, contested but inclusive and sustained – micro-publics from which productive expressions of cultural citizenship, solidarity and counter-racist practice can emerge.
References


