Seeking to be heard: The role of social and online media in advocating the Uluru Statement from the Heart and constitutional reform in Australia

Daily newspapers, radio, television, and social media usually portray Indigenous peoples in the deficit mode of humanity. We are overrepresented as always lacking, dysfunctional, alcoholic, violent, needy, and lazy, whether we are living in Illinois, Auckland, Honolulu, Toronto, or Brisbane.

(Moreton-Robinson, 2015, xiii)

Indigenous peoples have historically been positioned through a racialized lens of exclusion and bias, as Moreton-Robinson describes above. In Australia, distorted narratives of Aboriginal peoples continue across a range of platforms and speak to Indigenous peoples’ wider marginalisation and exclusion (Carlson, 2017; Carlson and Frazer, 2015; McCallum et al., 2012). Bias – whether demonstrated through inclusion, exclusion, or how content is presented – reflects power imbalances that often silence or distort presentations of some groups, while prioritising and legitimising the voices of others (Entman, 2007; Thomas et al., 2019). Entman (2007) explains three core types of media bias, all of which can be identified in relation to media discourses surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

*Distortion* bias refers to presentations that distorts or falsifies reality. This may be the result of an author’s conscious decision to misrepresent information. Distortion bias may also be expressed inadvertently through a failure to address and acknowledge the socio-cultural position from which such information is being interpreted and reported. *Content* bias is when the media presents partial accounts that prioritise the views of certain groups and neglects to include the voices and perspectives of those who may contest and offer different readings of the same account. *Decision-making* bias refers to editorial decisions that alter accounts so that presentations may collectively produce a narrative that adheres to the media conglomerate’s overall vision and agenda, which is often targeted towards a certain demographic and readership.

Throughout this paper we explore how social media – and other forms of digital and technological expression such as music, webinars, and online forums – have both fuelled ‘deficit’ readings of Indigenous populations, but also presented platforms on which media bias is countered and resisted through amplifying Indigenous voices and agendas. Our discussion centres on public responses to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which calls for constitutional reforms that would enshrine Indigenous people’s participation within decision-making processes over matters pertaining to their lives, cultures, and self-determination. We
demonstrate how politicians and mainstream media have attempted to undermined the campaign’s progress. In response however, increasing numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people – inclusive of activists, journalists, academics and lawyers, amongst others – are embracing social and online media as means to deny and counter their exclusion. We argue that social media has become an integral component of socio-political activism and the wider campaign to promote awareness and call for the implementation of the recommendations outlined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its accompanying reports.

What is the Uluru Statement from the Heart?

In 2017, some 250 Indigenous delegates attended the federally funded First Nations National Constitutional Convention on the lands of the Anangu people in the Northern Territory, Australia (Appleby and Davis, 2018; Larkin and Galloway, 2018). The convention built on community consultation that included 13 regional dialogues run by the 16-member Referendum Council, appointed by the Australian Government. The Council documented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ perspectives on the following five options for constitutional change (Davis et al., 2018; Referendum Council, 2017):

1. Inclusion of a statement recognising Indigenous peoples as Australia’s first population.
2. A mechanism for enshrining Indigenous Voice within decision-making.
3. Changes to section 51 of the constitution, known as Race Power.
4. Abolishing Section 25 of the constitution, which enables States to ban voting, based on a person’s race.
5. Legally bind the Racial Discrimination Act within the constitution, preventing its potential circumvention or suspension by the federal government.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart was the culmination of this work (Davis, 2019b). It identified the need to enshrine a ‘First Nations Voice’ in the constitution and argued that this would form the foundation upon which all other reforms would build. This would secure Indigenous peoples’ involvement in political decisions concerning their interests and rights. In order to achieve this first step, however, parliament would need to legislate a representative body that would constitutionally guarantee and protect an Indigenous voice (Martin, 2018). As we discussed throughout this paper, this has been met with great opposition and has been a deeply politicized issue.

The Uluru Statement also calls for a ‘Makarrata Commission’ to supervise agreement-making and truth-telling between all levels of government and Indigenous peoples. The proposed Commission would operate like a non-binding tribunal and enable parties to share information so that they may work together (Rubenstein, 2018). Similar processes are being pursued in South Australia and Victoria (Hobbs et al., 2019; Hobbs and Williams, 2018) and have been established in New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa.
In reference to the 1967 referendum, which brought about constitutional reform that recognized Indigenous peoples as Australian citizens, the Uluru Statement concludes with, ‘In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future’ (Referendum Council, 2017). The Uluru Statement offers a new path, built on centuries of continuing cultures, activism, survival, resistance, and countless failed policies and interventions. The Statement is a gift to the Australian people, for the benefit of all Australians. It provides a means to address the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations across a range of outcomes and presents an opportunity to embrace the vast knowledge, experiences, and wisdom that Indigenous peoples have to offer. This is documented in Appendix D of the Final Report (Referendum Council, 2017) handed to the Australian Government, which cites the work of Galarrwuy Yunupingu (2016: 28):

    Acknowledge that we have survived the worst that the past had thrown at us, and we are here with our songs, our ceremonies, our land, our language and our people – our full identity. What a gift this is that we can give you, if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way.

The Referendum Council’s report was delivered to then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten on June 30, 2017. The report recommended a referendum to ask the public whether a representative body should be included in the constitution, in what would be a demonstration of the public’s desire to accept Indigenous peoples ‘in a meaningful way’. The Council were fully aware that some members of the public would likely oppose legal reforms relating to Indigenous sovereignty and constitutional reform out of fear of interfering with existing governing and parliamentary structures. They therefore reassured its readers that the ‘proposed Voice would not interfere with parliamentary supremacy, it would not be justiciable, and the details of its structure and functions would be established by Parliament through legislation that could be altered by Parliament’ (Referendum Council, 2017: 38).

The proposals presented are consistent with articles in the UN’s Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Australia has acceded, and are supported by numerous surveys conducted by research organisations such as the Centre for Governance and Public Policy (Ford and Blumer, 2016). The report’s release provided an opportunity for the Government to declare its support and justify its decision on evidence and a community-driven mandate. This, however, was not the case. The Government stated that the proposal, including establishing a ‘Voice to Parliament’, would not be supported (Prime Minister et al., 2017).

**Political reactions and the emergence of bias**

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rejected the Uluru Statement in October 2017. Despite maintaining political rhetoric of ‘working with’, ‘collaborating’, and ‘co-designing’ new paths forward with Indigenous peoples, Turnbull had the political power and backing to disregard the recommendations presented by the Referendum Council. The Turnbull government based
its rejection on the notion that the reforms were ‘radical’ in nature and not ‘saleable’ to the public. It was therefore deemed as having no realistic prospect of passing a referendum (Wahlquist, 2017b). This demonstrates a paternalistic attitude that suggests the government’s decision was done in the interests of Indigenous peoples and that the overwhelmingly White Government ‘knew best’ when it came to Indigenous affairs. Senator James Paterson suggested that the reform’s so-called likely defeat would be detrimental to its cause (Brennan, 2017), and was therefore not worth pursuing.

In various forums, articles and webinars, Indigenous scholars and activists such as Megan Davis noted that Turnbull’s outright rejection denied wider debate within the parliamentary process. Entering the bill into parliament would create a dialogue centring on the need, benefits, design, implementation and counterarguments for the proposed reforms. Such debate would be recorded in parliamentary records be reported through media outlets, provoke national discourse, and hold parliamentarians accountable to the views they hold and the reasoning behind them. As the government denied this process, alternate means of promoting community awareness and encouraging discussions pertaining to The Uluru Statement have been sought. Social media has played a significant role is facilitating such dialogue, providing a platform upon which members of the public can engage the topic and responds to government inaction.

Reform was further obstructed when politicians such as Ken Wyatt, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, questioned whether constitutional recognition through ‘a Voice’ was necessary or even desired by Indigenous peoples (Anderson et al., 2017). Whilst the government expressed intention to ‘consider’ a Makarrata Commission – a formal process of agreement making between Indigenous and non-Indigenous representatives – many Indigenous commentators responded that this, without constitutional reform, did not go far enough. Representative organisations such as the Darkinjung Land Council urged Indigenous peoples to walk away from minimalist reforms (Brennan, 2017). The co-chairs of the Referendum Council went as far as saying the government should either implement its recommendations or reject the notion of constitutional reform altogether (Davidson and Murphy, 2017).

Senior Indigenous and legal voices criticized Malcolm Turnbull for rejecting the Uluru Statement in favour of a symbolic model of constitutional recognition, calling it ‘a despicable act of mean-spirited bastardry’ (Wahlquist, 2017c). Mainstream media (Viellaris, 2017) reported that Turnbull voted against the submission because a referendum was ‘too ambitious’ and would not get majority support (Wahlquist, 2017c). This was met by condemnation from senior members of the opposition, such as Bill Shorten, who used social media to argue that the Prime Minister’s response was one of ‘disrespect’ and that he should ‘lecture a lot less, and listen a lot more’ (see Figure 1).
When Scott Morrison became Prime Minister in 2018, he also rejected the call for a Voice to Parliament. In a Radio National interview on 26 September 2018, Morrison stated there would be no policy change. Like Turnbull before him, Morrison claimed a Voice would constitute a ‘third chamber’, compromising Australia’s parliamentary and legislative process (Karp, 2018). Journalist Fran Kelly questioned whether the Voice was a third chamber, and Morrison replied: ‘It really is. People can dress it up any way they like but I think two chambers is enough’ (Prime Minister of Australia, 2018). Morrison’s comment illustrates the distortion bias that emerged in mainstream discussions about the Uluru Statement and redirected the narrative in a way that created doubt and conjecture. Indigenous peoples and other commentators turned to social media to have their voices heard in an effort to confront and call out deceptive rhetoric. Indigenous MP Linda Burney described the ‘third chamber’ claim as dangerous ‘scaremongering’ with the potential to undo bipartisan support for reconciliation (see Figure 2). Lawyer Gabrielle Appleby pointed out the ‘idea [of a new chamber] is not what was being discussed at the dialogues in the lead-up to Uluru and that wasn’t what was being discussed in the working groups’ (Wahlquist, 2017a).

As mainstream coverage grew, politicians and commentators faced increased pressure to revisit their previous statements. MP Barnaby Joyce, for example, was criticized for publicly misrepresenting the Voice (Koziol, 2019) despite never having read the Referendum Council’s report. Joyce deemed a referendum ‘unwinnable’ and claimed it was not supported by the majority of Australians (Wahlquist, 2018). In 2019, Joyce stated that if he got it wrong, he apologized, but said the debate needed to move forward (see Figure 3). Moving forward, however, required continuously refuting the lies and misinformation being circulated to obstruct an honest discourse. Both distortion and content bias were evident in mainstream discussions about the Voice to Parliament. Individuals such as Matthew Rimmer, Professor of IP and Innovation Law at QUT, used social media to call out those, such as Barnaby Joyce and Peter Dutton, who persistently misrepresented the Voice as a ‘third chamber’ (see Figure 4).
Several senior government figures, including Morrison and Turnbull, were accused of lying and making sensationalized and misrepresentative statements (Career Education, 2017; Pearson, 2017b). This led to questions about what advice the government was listening to and the degree to which information was being manipulated for political gain. A statement issued by The Law Council of Australia in 2017 (Law Council of Australia, 2017) highlights the government’s attitude (and often disregard) to the rule of law.

In response, lawyers’ groups across Australia began to issue media releases and statements to support the reforms and call out misconceptions. In 2018, the Law Council described the Voice to Parliament as an essential component of Indigenous self-determination that ‘provided direction for a more unified and reconciled nation’ in a way that did not affect ‘the structure or operation of a bi-cameral federal Parliament’ (Law Council of Australia, 2018; see also Bailes, 2018). Prominent litigators such as Murray Gleeson AC QC and Robert French AC issued statements that distinguished a Voice to Parliament from a Voice in Parliament (Dolar, 2019). The proposed Voice would provide Indigenous peoples with an opportunity to participate in the parliamentary possess and contribute to debate before policy was voted on. Chief Justice Martin of Western Australia pointed out that enshrining the Voice would begin to redress the major consequences resulting from Indigenous peoples’ exclusion and lack of acknowledgement within the constitution (Martin, 2018).

The Uluru Statement is based on community consultation and extensive work by constitutional lawyers and professionals from many disciplines (Karp, 2019; Martin, 2018). Empirical data and legal groundwork highlight the need, benefits, and justification for a Voice to Parliament. Yet the public narrative surrounding its implementation is often drowned by a cacophony of White noise that deems its prospects as ‘radical’, ‘un-saleable’, ‘too ambitious’, and ultimately ‘unwinnable’. Indigenous voices and perspectives have been excluded from mainstream discourse while the dominant messaging demonstrates widespread distortion and content bias.
A 2017 survey of community attitudes by the Centre for Governance and Public Policy however, demonstrates that 71 per cent of people surveyed supported recognition of Indigenous peoples within the constitution (Centre for Governance and Public Policy, 2017: 3). A significant number of respondents supported ‘a change to the Constitution that would see a representative Indigenous body established to advise the Parliament on laws and policies affecting Indigenous people’. The majority of respondents said there ‘should be formal agreements between Australia's governments and Australia's Indigenous peoples to recognise their rights’ (Centre for Governance and Public Policy, 2017: 3). These findings are consistent with other surveys (Ford and Blumer, 2016; Zillman, 2017). Reconciliation Australia’s reconciliation barometer survey has indicated that support for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to parliament has significantly increased from 77 per cent in 2018 to 88 per cent in 2020 (Reconciliation Australia, 2020).

A discourse of deceit shrouded the way the Prime Minister and government spoke about the proposed Voice. Regardless of whether the Voice was named as a ‘third chamber’, the government maintained rhetoric that discredited and undervalued the voices of both Indigenous peoples and the wider Australian public. Biased reporting fuelled false narratives. When not maintaining its own deception, mainstream media often failed to analyse and scrutinise the mistruths presented by politicians and public figures, leaving their lies, distractions, and efforts to control the narrative unfiltered. Media outlets demonstrated decision-making bias through careful and deliberate selection of information. Many voices were excluded. The media were gatekeepers who controlled what content the public should read and what perspectives were deemed irrelevant.

A major concern is that by filtering and censoring the Referendum Council’s report and focusing on the Prime Minister’s public statements, mainstream media denied the public their right to participate and gain a ‘more critical understanding of politics [and] conflict’ (Kaempf, 2018: 103). Public conversations revolved around whether the Voice constituted a ‘third chamber’, even though academic and legal representatives clearly stated it did not. As illustrated by MP Kerry Chickrofski’s appearance on the ABC’s The Drum on 10 December 2018, the conversation continuously framed the reforms as vague, disorganized, convoluted, and unwinnable (see Figure 5).
Answering back through social media

Indigenous people and other activists have used social media to respond to mainstream commentary about the Voice to Parliament. Indigenous people were early adopters of social media. Through its ability to distribute information across space and time, social media provides a mode of communication, a way to express support, and a means of affirming identity (Carlson, 2013; Carlson and Frazer, 2015; Kral, 2014; Thomas et al., 2019). Indigenous uses of social media include practising culture, distributing information (Carlson and Frazer, 2015), countering racism and stereotypes (Petray, 2013; Wilson et al., 2017), and asserting Indigenous agency (McQuire, 2019; Norman, 2019; Pearson, 2017a). Social media provides a mechanism for activism by mobilising people and a method for challenging bias and exclusion.

Despite high rates of social media use, Indigenous Australians are generally portrayed as anti-technology, not technologically inclined, or lacking in technological expertise (Callinan, 2014). This, in itself, is a telling form of bias. As Indigenous peoples’ uptake of social media has increased, so have their followers and the sites dedicated to amplifying Indigenous voices. The Twitter account belonging to @IndigenousX, for example, had 61,100 followers as of 14 August 2020. On the same date, author Anita Heiss (@AnitaHeiss) had 32,400 followers, whilst lawyer and academic Megan Davis (@mdavisqlder) had 21,500. Social media accounts belonging to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples increasingly link others to Indigenous accounts; this is a grassroots approach to extending networks and dialogues (Carlson, 2016) that challenge mainstream media’s exclusion and bias of Indigenous content and perspectives.

Alongside the growing influence of social media is a surge in Indigenous peoples publishing online. Increasingly, articles by Indigenous Australians are appearing in digital outlets such as The Guardian, The Monthly, The Saturday News, The Conversation, and Croakey. This coincides with a growing body of scholarly work that focuses on Indigenous peoples’ social media use (Carlson, 2013; Carlson and Frazer, 2015; Dreher et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2017; O’carroll, 2013; Thomas et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2017).
Through social media, Indigenous peoples are attempting to make themselves visible on their own terms. In doing so, they counter dominant narratives of cultural homogeneity and highlight the diversity of Indigeneity. Indigenous peoples explore their realities and identities whilst exposing stereotypes, distorted portrayals, and countering narratives that seek to exclude or mystify their identities and realities (Carlson, 2017; Carlson and Frazer, 2015; McCallum et al., 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2020). In essence, many Indigenous peoples are using social media platforms as a mechanism to exercise agency and ‘talk-back’ (bell hooks, 1989; Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Nakata, 2006) in ways that demands their recognition.

Using social media, Indigenous advocates maintain pressure on media outlets and governments through challenging their exclusion from public conversations and using it as a platform for discussions about why reform is needed. Social media has become a type of conduit, propelling the debate into broader discourses (see Figure 6). Journalist Stan Grant argues that a new approach to addressing Indigenous disposition is needed and must be positioned within a political reality where Nation State and Sovereignty are accepted as embedded ideologies (see Figure 7). It is through having difficult conversations embedded in truth that the ‘great Australian silence’ in its many forms can be exposed and replaced with an Indigenous Voice and a unified Australian chorus (see Figure 8). Social media facilitates such discussions and helps spread awareness and knowledge of constitutional reform amongst diverse populations.

Figure 6: @ABCthedrum, ‘With the Australian people…’, 2018. Twitter

Figure 7: @ABCthedrum, ‘#ICYMI: A lot has changed…’, 2018. Twitter

Figure 8: @DrRimmer, ‘Award-winning director…’, 2019. Twitter
Reaching and engaging diverse cultures through language

Coinciding with NAIDOC 2020, the Uluru Dialogue alongside the UNSW Law Centre collaborated with SBS Radio in an effort to translate the Uluru Statement into 64 languages (Power, 2020). Available as both written statements and recorded podcasts, the translations reiterate that ‘the Uluru Statement from the Heart is an invitation to all Australians’. Approximately one in five Australians speak a language other than English at home, with one quarter of the population being born overseas. Social media plays an integral role in building awareness, educating, and mobilising a significant migrant population whom are often overlooked and disengaged from what is commonly seen as a domestic political issue.

The Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA), the peak body representing peoples with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, has expressed its support for the Statement and the role translating it into different languages will play in promoting its wider recognition. The podcasts reinforce FECCA’s own endeavour to build greater capacity for migrant communities and organisations to learn more about First Nation peoples and cultures, and in doing so, build better relationships (FECCA, 2019). It seeks to legitimise migrant community’s engagement by reiterating that reconciliation is something that affects us all.

Kerri-Lee Harding, the Executive producer of NITV Radio suggests that the translations build common ground between multicultural and Indigenous communities, stating, ‘I think there is a connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from multicultural communities as we all know what it's like to feel like we're a minority’ (Dunn, 2020). Davis also frames the translation as a form of respect and acknowledgment of the importance of language, stating ‘I think the translation project is really important because, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we know that your language is fundamental to who you are as a human being and what your culture is’ (ibid). While the translations create a sense of shared experience between culturally diverse Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, it also emphasises the reality of colonisation by including English as just one of the many translations offered. English is as much an introduced language as Swahili, Sinhalese or Spanish and was equally introduced and imposed upon pre-existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, each of whom have their own languages and dialects.
The translations however, move beyond the mere dissemination of information and contains agency, or what anthropologist Alfred Gell (1992) calls the ‘technology of enchantment’. They aim to provoke an emotive and engaged response. The podcasts encourage a broader consciousness of the eternal presence and place of Indigenous peoples in Australia. The accompanying audio production, with its inclusion of clapping sticks, stomping feet and harmonies, positions the translations within a specifically Indigenous context. The translations highlight Australia’s ethnic diversity, which grew in conjunction to European arrival, while the words and creative production reiterates that the land upon which such groups arrived always was and always will be Indigenous. Listening to the Statement in any one of the 60 plus languages is a powerful experience, regardless of whether one speaks the language. It reiterates Indigenous sovereignty whilst speaking to our shared humanity

**Calls for greater accountability**

Music has long been a mobiliser of people and a means of generating public awareness and response to socio-political issues. Protest songs, particularly those of the civil rights movements in the 1960s have historically exposed injustices, promoted human rights, presented visions of a unified future, and held those in authority to account. June 2020 marks 30 years since the release of Yothu Yindi’s 1991 Indigenous rock anthem, *Treaty* – a protest song rivalled by no other in Australia’s history. The song was remarkably successful with the remixed version being the first song by an Aboriginal artist to chart in Australia and the first pop song sung in Yolŋu Matha language. Mandawuy Yunupingu (Corn and Yunupingu, 2009: 71), who co-wrote the song with Yothu Yindi and non-Indigenous artists Peter Garret and Paul Kelly, states that,

This song was written after Bob Hawke, in his famous response to the Barunga Statement of 1988, said that there would be a Treaty between Indigenous Australians and the Australian government by 1990. The intention of this song was to raise public
awareness about this, so that the government would be encouraged to hold to his promise.

The Barunga Statement declared Yolŋu and all Indigenous people’s right to self-determination, demanding their recognition by the Commonwealth through the negotiation and signing of a treaty. The Statement was presented to Hawke during the Barunga Sport and Cultural Festival in 1988, the year of Australia’s bicentenary. Surrounded by the paintings of the different language groups of the area, the Baruwnga statement is just one of many documents that have incorporated Indigenous icons, designs and materials as means to embed its message in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems. It continues the practice of the Yirrkala bark petition of the 1960s and is mirrored in the Uluru Statement where the document is surrounded by the creation stories of the Anangu people, the traditional owners of the land upon which the Statement was conceived.

The Barunga Statement declares that ‘we call on the Commonwealth Parliament to negotiate with us a Treaty or Compact recognising our prior ownership, continued occupation and sovereignty and affirming our human rights and freedoms’ (Yunupingu and Rubuntja, 2020: 317). After meeting with Elders and Leaders, Hawke publicly declared that, ‘there shall be a treaty negotiated between the Aboriginal people and the Government on behalf of all the people of Australia’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1991). Hawke followed this by committing to ‘expect and hope and work for the conclusion of such a treaty before the end of the life of this Parliament’ (ibid).

By 1990, the government had failed to meet its self-imposed deadline and the promise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of having a Treaty signed. Upon Hawke’s passing on 16 May 2019, commentators such as Darumbal and South Sea Islander journalist Amy McQuire took to social media to recognise his contribution in creating a national discourse around racism, but nonetheless highlighted his failure to deliver the reforms promised (see Figure 10). Through retweets and referencing news and political archives, social media provides a space upon which commentary, assessment, and evaluation of the past can take place as a means to provoke a dialogue that contextualises and responds to the present. In this case, McQuire provides her views of the continuing failure to deliver on Treaty, as well as an inability of contemporary politicians to remain open and honest about the existence of racism.

In the song Treaty, Yothu Yindi captures the flippancy of political rhetoric and the often-empty words of politicians by singing, ‘Words are easy, words are cheap. Much cheaper than our priceless land. But promises can disappear just like writing in the sand’. In a 1992 interview, Mandawuy expressed that whilst he was aware that many of their listeners would likely miss the song’s political message, he would be pleased if it just reached a few. In here lies the optimism and persistence of Indigenous activism that continues today in relation to the push for the implementation of the Uluru Statement. For Yothu Yindi, as with many contemporary Indigenous artists, music simultaneously serves as a platform of resistance as well as inclusion.
and collective participation. Mandawuy described his motivation as being to ‘develop and create impact for our culture, involve people from Western civilisation in our world view. And music has a universal language that can convey that’ (Mitchell, 1993: 301)

Thirty years on, Midnight Oil have released a collaborative project with First Nation artists titled the Makarrata Project. In their song First Nation, Peter Garrett, the band’s lead, sings alongside Indigenous artists Jessica Mauboy and Tasman Keith addressing the continuing theme of failed promises, asking ‘When we gonna start the conversation? When we gonna start the celebration? When we gonna end the exploitation? When we gonna say the word ‘invasion”? Out loud. We're waiting. Still waiting. Nation within the nation. Still waiting. Nation within a nation.’ All profits from the records’ sales will go to organisations that campaign for the implementation of the Uluru Statement.

Like Treaty before it, the Makarrata Project is collaborative with Indigenous voices featuring and driving each song. This culminates in the album’s final track where Indigenous representatives Aunty Pat Anderson, Stan Grant, Troy Cassar-Daley, Ursula Yovich and Adam Goodes read out the Uluru Statement from the Heart in its entirety. Like the translations of the Uluru Statement produced by SBS, the Makarrata Project uses background music to provoke an emotive atmosphere that amplifies the voices and words of the Statement – emphasising its agency as a living document and a community-driven campaign.

**Embracing diversity and creating a unified front**

Historically, Indigenous populations have had to respond to changing social and environmental circumstances. This has been the result of external factors such as climate change and the impact of settler-colonialism, as well as internal factors guided by their own agency, choice, and autonomy. More recently, social media has enabled fast, expansive, and immediate responses to numerous socio-political issues as they arise, creating greater mobilisation and organisation amongst widespread populations (Petray, 2015). The current COVID-19 pandemic has been just one of many upheavals Indigenous populations have had to face.

The numerous challenges associated with COVID-19 has had significant impact on how information is encountered, shared, and disseminated. Social distancing, for example, has led to the cancelation of many in-person events and gatherings, which has resulted in greater uptake of social media and online platforms. Many activist and community organisations have embraced these as a means to mobilise people and share ideas, spreading information in ways that potentially reach diverse and new audiences.

Due to COVID-19, numerous in-person conferences and speaking events, planned prior to community lockdowns and restrictions on travel, have had to be conducted as webinars and discussions on platforms such as Zoom. The prospect of reaching diverse audiences has encouraged organisations to facilitate discussions previously unplanned. In a recent publication exploring Australia’s transition to a post-COVID-19 society, Dawson and McCalman (2020,
Introduction, para 10) note the positive outcomes that have come from the uptake of digital and social media:

One of the good things to emerge from Australia’s pandemic has been the explosion of discussion, webinars and talks as we Zoom across institutional, geographic and cultural borders. This national conversation must grow… What matters is that we learn from each other, find some common ground, and focus on the reconstruction.

Although the pandemic has significantly dominated public discussion, and understandably gained much media attention, it has not detracted from the urgency and necessity of campaigning for constitutional reform. Social media and digital forums have enabled activists to transcend social distancing restrictions and continue to promote national conversations pertaining to the Uluru Statement. In the lead to NAIDOC week 2020, for example, the Indigenous Law Centre at the University of New South Wales in partnership with the Uluru Dialogue, held a three-part Uluru Dialogue Webinar Series focusing on ‘Voice, Truth, and Treaty’. The conversation had over 1000 live attendees and is continuing to be streamed online (Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2020). This, along with the numerous other dialogues promoted through social media networks and archived on platforms such as VIMEO and YouTube, demonstrates its potential to bring people in direct contact with knowledgeable spokespersons such as Professor Megan Davis, Noel Pearson, Dr Dani Larkin and Pat Anderson. It enables the public to become more informed and demonstrate their willingness to engage, participate, support, but most importantly continue the conversation about constitutional reform.

Conversations such as these are part of a wider movement that is gaining momentum through an inclusive campaign launched in May 2020 by Noel Pearson known as From the Heart (2020). This initiative has embraced social media as a means to ‘build awareness of the Voice to Parliament’ and call for the implementation of the Uluru Statement (Markham and Sanders, 2020). The campaign includes a website that provides a social networking hub, offering stories on grass roots initiatives with aim of engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, and in doing so increase public awareness by establishing a space where participants can share ideas.

*From the Heart* provides a tool kit that educates the public as to the most effective ways to utilize social media as means to grow awareness of the Uluru Statement through mobilising people and networking ideas. The tool kit, created by Yorta Yorta scholar Summer Finlay, aims to increase social media literacy so that diverse populations can be reached in a cost-effective manner, while a unified voice is forged. Warraimaay scholar Grieve-Williams (2020: 34) writes of social media’s potential to unite diverse peoples, each whom situate their agendas and areas of interest within their own specific contexts:

> the diversity of our campaigns, and the media activism that accompanies them, now need once again to develop to another level of organization. It is time for one united
front and a concentrated campaign in order to break through the hegemony of settler colonial racism and restore sovereignty.

Through the use of hashtags, links, replies and reposts, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have enabled Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices to interconnect and speak to one another. Individual viewpoints are maintained as the ‘unified front’ and ‘concentrated campaign’ Grieve-Williams speaks of is reinforced. The From the Heart campaign encourages community dialogue pertaining to the Uluru Statement by creating networks that are linked by common themes connected via hashtags such as #UluruStatement and #VoiceTreatyTruth. This means that ideas, strategies, success stories and challenges may be shared across different sectors of society whilst influential spokespersons can spread the messaging of constitutional reform in relation to their respective field and expertise. The use of emoticons, which are often attached to social media posts have also proven effective in branding and congealing a campaign’s messaging. In the case of the Uluru Statement, such branding has centred around the image of red, yellow, and black hearts.

Recently, From the Heart launched its ‘Uluru Statement Canvas’ where members of the public can sign and upload a photo, putting a face alongside a written note declaring the reasons behind their support for the Uluru Statement. The 2,320 peoples who have thus far signed the canvas formulate a living digital community, reminding viewers of the Uluru Statement’s grass roots origins, which arose out of the regional dialogues with Indigenous communities. Additionally, it provides links to each signatory’s own social media accounts providing the potential for further outreach and conversation. The campaigning facilitated by From the Heart articulates that constitutional reform, in and of itself, remains community-driven and can only be enacted through a referendum that is supported by the voting population. The Uluru Statement invites all Australian citizens to walk with Indigenous peoples for a better future. Social media is one means through which ‘the trek across the vast country’ can be navigated until its goal of constitutional reform has been reached.

**Conclusion**

The portrayal of Indigenous peoples within mainstream media is often mediated through racialized lenses and beliefs, which influence how the wider public comes to ‘know’ the Indigenous ‘other’ (Langton and Bowers, 1993). Public discussions about the Uluru Statement and the proposed Voice to Parliament illustrate the ongoing struggle to dismantle wider structural and systemic inequalities that exist, and are so often maintained through the media. Active efforts to distort the Uluru Statement and misrepresent the proposed Voice to Parliament demonstrate the bias and exclusionary practices of mainstream media, social commentators, and elected politicians.

While social media offers an opportunity for alternative views to talk back, having their voices heard remains a challenge. Bias, distortion, and exclusion remain invisible to many media
consumers, across all media platforms. Echoing the work of scholars such as Edward Said (1979) and Benedict Anderson (2006), Kaempf (2018: 103) calls for a more critical engagement with digital media:

… citizens and societies need to become more media-literate and take an active interest in the politics of media technology. We need to be far more aware that looking behind the screens of our computers and phones reveals technological processes and political dynamics that – knowingly and unknowingly – determine which images we see and which we don’t and how this shapes our understanding of politics and conflict.

This year marks four years since the gift of the Uluru Statement from the Heart to the Australian public. Indigenous peoples and other Australians have not lessened their passion for justice and reform (Davis, 2018b; a; 2019a; Synott, 2019b; a). During this time, numerous events have transpired, exposing the government’s lack of commitment and progress in regards to making the systemic changes needed to support, resource, finance and enshrine Indigenous self-determination (Davis, 2020; Fredericks and Bradfield, 2020b; a; Grant, 2020; Perkins, 2019). This is most visible through the continuing poor outcomes for Indigenous peoples despite 10 years of ‘Closing the Gap’ and new targets that extend to 2063 (revised down from 2093) (Holland, 2018). Disparities have also been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fredericks et al., 2020), whilst increased Black Lives Matter activism has pointed to the continuing call for wider systemic change and accountability (Jash, 2020).

Through social media, Indigenous advocates and increasing numbers of the public display their commitment to the reforms that will bring about real change and positive outcomes for Indigenous self-determination. The power of social media lies in its ability to transcend the barriers of space and time, allowing participants to take an engaged participatory role in the spread and uptake of new ideas and reforms. Through creating links, reposts, replies and hashtags, activists are increasingly able to reach diverse audiences, access new information, and deliver messages through a variety of mediums – directly commenting on the past, present and future. Social networks are a necessary part of holding others and one’s self to account. In order to open a truthful and engaging conversation about what constitutional reform truly entails, we must continue to challenge the lies and distortions often projected on Indigenous peoples and reflexively consider our role and responsibility in advocating meaningful constitutional change.
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