Democratising the Digital Divide: Civics and Citizenship curriculum, Australian Aboriginal communities and social media

The idea of what constitutes core literacy skills continues to evolve. The importance placed upon the function of social media in the new Civics and Citizenship curriculum reflects the expanding myriad of competences Australian citizens require to live and work in an increasingly digital society. This paper explores the particular facet of an assumed ubiquity of social media engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and the problems this poses for participation in both democratic processes and higher education. It addresses the implications for Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with restricted internet access on their capacity to fulfill their civic responsibilities and to develop the digital information literacy skills required for employability. Finally, this paper outlines the parameters of a program of research that will explore how new and social media might be used to increase the participation of Australian Aboriginal youth in formal education and, by extension, how this contributes to civic engagement.

Introduction
As the idea of what constitutes core literacy continues to expand to incorporate a myriad of forms of competence, the scope of the terrain for the deployment of those literacies, particularly those of the citizen, is being, arguably, increasingly narrowed. At a time when democratic public life seems to expose a generic civic illiteracy, the revival of core democratic competencies, capacities and commitments seems desperately necessary. While this is not the place to enter into a thorough and detailed exploration of the arguments about the narrowing of the civic role, the work of Henry Giroux provides an important illustrative example:

[E]mptied of any substantial content, democracy appears imperiled as individuals are unable to translate their privately suffered misery into genuine public debate, social concerns, and collective action. This is a form of illiteracy that is no longer marginal to … society but is increasingly becoming one of its defining and more frightening features (Giroux, 2011, p. 86).

Many civically oriented educators have called for the development and enactment of curriculum and pedagogies that might facilitate the re-emergence of a genuine citizenship education in schools, and across a wider range of public and cultural pedagogical spaces. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that the whole basis of what is
called the critical pedagogy movement has the revitalization of a democratically-competent citizenry at its core. From this perspective, civic literacy contains a very high level of utopian imagining:

The ability to observe, to compare, and to evaluate, in order to choose, through deciding, how one is to intervene in the life of the city and thus exercise one’s citizenship, arises then as a fundamental competency. If my presence in history is not neutral, I must accept its political nature as critically as possible. If, in reality, I am not in the world simply to adapt to it, but rather to transform it, and if it is not possible to change the world without a certain dream or vision for it, I must make use of every possibility there is to not only speak about my utopia, but also to engage in practices consistent with it (Freire, 2004, p. 7).

The contemporary Australian situation presents an almost unique opportunity for a nation to consider the concept of citizen as it prepares to implement a national curriculum in Civics and Citizenship for the first time ever. The area of citizenship education is a notoriously undervalued one in the formal school curriculum in many parts of the Western world, and Australia has been no exception. There is some hope that this status situation might change as Civics and Citizenship is included in the Australian Curriculum project, albeit as one of the final three areas to be developed and implemented. Under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), a draft national curriculum in Civics and Citizenship has been developed (ACARA, October 2012), released for community consultation purposes (ACARA, November 2012) and re-drafted for final release by the end of 2013. As a landmark document in this particular area of the formal school curriculum in Australia, the Civics and Citizenship curriculum presents for the first time a national view of what constitutes schooling for the essential learnings of active citizenship orientations and capacities, and for civic competence, and provides some idea of what might be the scope of civic literacy. As to whether the significance of the area is to be genuinely addressed remains to be seen, given the fact that a notional 20 hours per school year is recommended to be devoted to the formal study and achievement of the anticipated and expected curriculum outcomes.

The focus of this paper is not, however, on the minutiae of the curriculum or the missed opportunities, but on one aspect of the curriculum that would seem to reflect an acknowledgement that the scope of civic literacy has broadened considerably over
the past few years; this paper looks at some of the problematics accompanying the importance placed upon the function of social media in the life of the citizen. Here, I use the term “social media” to mean a collection of internet websites, services and practices that support collaboration, community building, participation and sharing (Junco et al 2010). Social networking sites, which fall under the collective term social media, include those where the user sets up a profile, creates formal connections to people they know, communicates and share preferences and interests with others (Gunawardena et al, 2009). An essential feature of these sites is the capacity for user-generated content to enable sharing, co-creating, co-editing and co-construction of knowledge.

The importance of understanding and being able to critically engage with social media is acknowledged in the new Civics and Citizenship curriculum. At present, the expectation of formal educative experience with social media is typically mediated along the lines of age. It is the concern of this paper to highlight another of what might well be several other axes of inclusion/exclusion that have been glossed over here, or perhaps not considered at all. The particular facet of an assumed ubiquity of social media engagement that I would like to explore a little further here is that between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. I will then outline the parameters of a body of research that is set to be undertaken in 2014. The proposed research will explore how new and social media might be used to increase the participation of Australian Aboriginal youth in formal education and, by extension, how this contributes to civic engagement.

**The Current Situation**

The importance of critically understanding the functions of this form of civic communication (social media) in the lives of young people is apparent on an almost-daily basis. By way of example, at the time of writing, the Australian Labor Party is reported to have secured the services of a number of political advisors from the United States of America in its quest for re-election in the upcoming Commonwealth elections. The primary strengths of these foreign advisors reside in their success in utilising social media in the recent campaign for the re-election of Barak Obama:
All three played pivotal roles in the 2012 campaign when the Democratic Party out-boxed the Republicans using ever-more sophisticated social media and comprehensive field operations to see off what initially looked like a strong challenge from the popular Mitt Romney… Mr McMahon, who had also been campaign director for the Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean in 2004, is regarded as a pioneer in the use of emerging social media platforms to organise grass-roots campaigns. (Kenny, July 31, 2013)

The contemporary importance of social media in the civic sphere is acknowledged throughout the proposed new Civics and Citizenship curriculum, making critical engagement with these communicative forms both an area of study and of skill development. For example, in the draft years 3-10 curriculum reference is made to the place of social media in the lives of students in years 7-10:

In Years 7 and 8 students develop understanding of Australia’s political system, with particular emphasis on representative democracy, the role of the constitution, and a critical perspective on the influence of the media, including social media, within society (ACARA, May 2013, p. 7).

The proposed Year 8 curriculum content includes:

How citizens can participate in Australia’s democracy, engage in debate, express their opinions and take action about issues in Australian society through the electoral system, the use of traditional media, social media, contact with their elected representatives, lobby groups and direct action (ACARA, May 2013, p. 27)

One of the content areas in the Knowledge and Understanding sections of the Year 9 curriculum outline is “how citizens’ choices are shaped at election time through public debate, the media, social media, opinion polls, advertising and political party campaigns” (p. 30). Finally, in the elaboration of the type of content to be covered in the Year 9 focus on the operation of law in contemporary Australian society, social media finds a place: “examining factors that can undermine the application of the principles of justice, for example, bribery, coercion of witnesses, trial by media, or social media and court delays” (p. 31).

The curriculum outlines a set of five skills that will enable students to be active and engaged citizens. These include, questioning and research; analysis and synthesis;
collaborative problem-solving and decision-making; communication and interpretation. Familiarity with and competence in the use of various forms of social media is constituted as a communication skill. Communication involves presenting ideas in oral and written form; critical reading, debating, writing and listening; applying empathic and social skills; using both traditional and social media (Twitter, blogs, Facebook and so on) and the internet in socially constructive ways as communication tools in modern democracy. (ACARA, October 2012, p. 9)

The same shaping paper describes typical features of the life and stages of development of students to provide some guidance to teachers looking to develop classroom pedagogical activities derived from the curriculum, and reflects the view of the student that formed the basis of the curriculum development. From this perspective, it is considered that social media form such a significant part of the habitus of the years 7 and 8 student (i.e. 12-14 years of age) that they warrant a specific focus:

In Years 7 and 8 students will have the opportunity to develop their understanding of the local and national, with a greater emphasis on regional and global perspectives than in Years 5–6. Students learn to make independent judgments about information and develop some understanding of a range of political systems, with particular emphasis on liberal representative democracy, the role of constitutions, and a critical perspective on the influence of the media within society, including social media (ACARA, October 2012, p. 13).

As the Civics and Citizenship Curriculum document suggests, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and, in particular, social media usage, is increasingly implicated in what it means to be socially, economically and politically involved in 21st century society (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2013). This does, however, form a divide between those who possess the resources, education and skills to reap the benefits of the information society and those who do not.

**The Digital Divide**

Peter Radoll (2011) has described something of the Australian indigenous side of the “digital divide”: 
There has been much research on the concept of a “digital divide which has separated society between “haves” and “have nots”…. The 2001 and 2006 Australian census data show a gap in household ICT adoption between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households of approximately 69%.

The National Broadband Network (NBN), which is currently being rolled out across Australia, will potentially reduce the disparity in terms of internet access between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households. Internet access, according to the most recent census data, was available in 20% and 60% of households respectively, and this figure was substantially lower in some remote areas. (Rennie et al, 2013). While these statistics present a picture of haves and have nots, they do not tell us how those with internet access currently utilise the technology or if this population would choose to access the online environment if it was available.

Issues thus arise when we consider the importance that is being placed on social media in the Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum. A specific set of skills, education and resources are required to benefit from the digital age, which will be referred to as digital information literacy skills. Digital literacies have been defined as the capabilities that individuals require to live, learn and work in a digital society (JISC, 2013). A recent report developed by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) highlighted the value that employers place on graduates who can communicate effectively via digital media and who can critically judge the validity and reliability of online information. The cultivation of these skills is, however, impossible if one does not have access to the internet, as is the case in many Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. According to Johnson and Oliver (2013), there is a need to find ways to improve the literacy levels of Indigenous learners, particularly those in secondary school who are looking to enter the workforce or the Higher Education sector.

While the cultivation of digital information literacy skills is necessary for employability, it is, more immediately, inextricably tied to one’s capacity to fulfil their civic duties which include exercising the right to vote. Although secondary school students cannot legally vote, those under 18 years of age should not be automatically discounted as they have the power, through conversations with peers.
and parents, to influence the social political debate. The Australian Government has voiced its commitment to engaging with citizens through technologies such as social media. In the 39 days since Rudd’s return (at the time of writing), over 100,000 Tweets have mentioned the term ‘election’ (Gothe-Snape, 2013). If this is indeed to be an election that is “fought in the trenches of the internet”, as is being claimed (Tsitas, 2013), then the assumed ubiquity of the internet and social media usage by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians could, potentially, be quite problematic.

The power of social media in politics is undeniable. We need only recall the shot of President Obama embracing his wife following his re-election in 2012, which became the most re-tweeted image of all time, to understand the power of Twitter and the social strategy that President Obama perfected during this campaign. Whilst it is anticipated that the use of social media will facilitate greater participation by young people in the 2013 election process, for those who do not have access to the internet, this represents a severe disadvantage. The Australian Bureau of Statistics recently recorded internet subscriptions in Australia in excess of 12 million. Of this figure, 11,890,760 Australians have a Facebook account and 1.8 million a Twitter account. It comes as no surprise then that, for the first time in Australia, the showdown between Rudd and Abbott will be broadcast via the Seven network and questions will be submitted by the audience via Facebook.

Channel 7 in conjunction with Facebook [will] host this first debate between the Prime Minister and Mr Abbott…[to] ensure that millions of voters have the opportunity to both participate and watch both leaders debate the issues of importance to them and our nation’s future (Scarr et al, 2013).

Whilst this proposed format assumes a ubiquity of internet and social media access between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, it also presupposes that all Australian citizens have the digital information literacy skills required to process the information that is disseminated via social networking platforms; skills which they will require in order to effectively participate in the 2013 election.

Civic literacy, according to Freire (2004, p. 7) is “the ability to observe, to compare, and to evaluate, in order to choose, through deciding…” In order to choose, one needs both access to information (the internet) and the ability to discern the meaning of that
information (digital information literacy skills). The ability to comprehend spoken language, print, visual and, more recently, digital texts, is a core 21st century skill-set that extends beyond participation in democratic processes, although this is particularly important in the current political climate. Citizen choices are shaped at election time through public debate, the media and social media. Without access to this information, or an ability to discern the quality and relevance of information that is received, it is very difficult to make an informed choice about which candidate best represents one’s needs. The Civics and Citizenship curriculum will, for the first time, include social media usage as a core competency required of all Australian citizens.

Social media is all about participation.

From the grass-roots perspective, successful participation is often based on the feelings of functioning interaction (listening and being heard), openness in the sense of inclusiveness…and a feeling that the engagement has an effect (Nakki et al, 2011, p. 23).

Engagement with social media is thus inextricably tied to formal civic responsibilities, particularly but by no means limited to, the right to vote. Henry Giroux (2011) voiced his concern that,

democracy appears imperiled as individuals are unable to translate their privately suffered misery into genuine public debate, social concerns, and collective action (p. 86).

Social media, however, which enables individuals to give public expression to their private concerns whilst retaining a degree of anonymity, addresses this issue of participation. In this Australian federal election year, social media competence will profoundly affect one’s ability to engage politically in particular. As the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader launch into their respective campaigns via various social media platforms, the ability to discern the information that is being disseminated via these channels will greatly determine whether or not one can make an informed decision about which candidate best represents one’s needs and interests. However, beyond such formal civic engagement, the ability to analyse, synthesise, evaluate and draw conclusions is a necessary skill set in the 21st century.
Digital information literacy refers to a set of 21st century skills outlined by the Laboratory for Innovative Technology in Education at the University of Houston (2013). These skills include the ability to
effectively analyse and evaluate evidence, arguments, claims and beliefs;
analyse and evaluate major alternative points of view; synthesis and make
connections between information and arguments; and interpret information
and draw conclusions based on the best analysis.

Whilst these skills facilitate successful participation in formal civic events, such as an
election, they are also required to live, learn and work in a digital society. Higher
Education institutions have recently acknowledged the importance of producing
graduates who can access and utilise quality digital resources, based on the relevance,
currency and credibility of the information. There is no reason, however, why the
cultivation of these skills should not commence in secondary school, and the
introduction of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum denotes the beginning of one
such initiative.

The issue, however, is that Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
are currently underrepresented in the education sector, which most likely will have the
unintended consequence of widening rather than bridging the gap in terms of the
realisation of core literacy skills. In 2008, 37% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander People aged 18 years and over had attained a year 12 or skilled vocational
equivalent qualification. Although this is double the rate that was recorded in 1994
(16%), it is still well below the national average. This figure is substantially lower in
the Higher Education sector. Only 5% of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Peoples will continue on to complete a Bachelor degree or above. There is
also a disparity in attainment of higher levels of education between those living in
major cities and those living in regional and remote areas. In 2008, adults living in
major cities were three times more likely to have attained a Bachelor degree or above
(9%) as those living in remote areas (3%). In contrast, non-Indigenous Australians
were four times more likely to have attained a Bachelor degree or higher (24%).

Under-representation in the education system and inadequate access to Web 2.0
technologies contributes to the high levels of social and economic disadvantage that
Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often experience. However, McCallum & Papandrea (2009) advise that researchers must avoid being trapped in a binary logic that unquestioningly privileges the benefits of access to technology and assumes minimal access will result in exclusion from its benefits (p. 1234).

Although, it cannot be denied that, in an increasingly digital age, anyone, irrespective of race, age or gender, who does not possess digital information literacy skills is going to be severely disadvantaged. Currently, educational attainment translates to employment. Only 18% of Indigenous adults with below year 10 educational achievement are employed full-time. Among adults with a year 12 or equivalent qualification, the unemployment rate for Indigenous adults is still more than two and half times that of non-Indigenous adults (10.4% and 3.6% respectively). However, 63% of Indigenous adults who have completed a Bachelor degree or above are employed full time. According to McCallum and Papandrea (2009), Indigenous Australians living in remote communities face considerable obstacles in accessing and using the internet. Overall, they have poor and inadequate access to internet technologies and most currently lack the prerequisite knowledge and skills for more intensive use (p. 1245).

As such, the gap between those who do and do not possess the digital literacy skills required to gain employment is going to become more profound. In order to “close the gap” in terms of employment, we need to find ways to retain Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the education system.

One possible way to increase participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Higher Education is by integrating new and social media technologies into the curriculum. The digital revolution has created alternatives to traditional ways of teaching and learning that may well connect with Australian Aboriginal orientations to learning. According to Eady, Herington and Jones (2010), the use of Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogging, Facebook and Movie Maker, have proven effective in improving the digital literacy skills of Indigenous adult learners. Indigenous students’ learning preferences have been thoroughly documented. Learning through observation and imitation as opposed to verbal instruction, learning through trial and feedback, visual-spatial learning, contextual learning and spontaneous rather than structured learning (Yunkaporta, 2010) have been observed among Indigenous student cohorts.
Harrison (2010) similarly observed that Australian Aboriginal pedagogy favours indirect rather than direct orientation to learning, while Marker (2006) found that Australian Aboriginal pedagogies are intensely ecological and place-based, drawn from the living landscape within a profound ancestral and personal relationship with place. As such, adopting new and social media technologies that allow Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to maintain connections to land and country may provide a way forward, even if those bonds are mediated virtually.

Web 2.0 applications, specifically social networking sites, may provide a mechanism by which to improve the educational outcomes of Australian Aboriginal students in remote locations. Providing services through Broadband networks could assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to live on country without having to suffer disadvantage as a result of that choice (Rennie et al, 2013). A number of initiatives are currently underway with a particular focus on increasing Indigenous participation in a digitally networked society. Brady and her colleagues (2008) explored the potential benefits of smartphones in terms of the development of cognitive and literacy skills. They observed a propensity for texting among a predominantly oral community and found that some participants in the study were texting up to 100 messages per day, which was referred to as ‘yarning through text’. They concluded that

in rural and remote Indigenous communities, mobile technology is actually encouraging writing among those previously disenfranchised by traditional forms of literacy (p. 392).

Other educational initiatives are underway, including the Australian Government’s Digital Education Revolution, which aims to prepare students for further education, training and to live and work in a digital world (DEWR, 2009). Moreover, the Teaching from Country Project, an initiative of Charles Darwin University, is a distance education program in reverse. Aboriginal lecturers and elders in remote locations use hand-held cameras to teach Higher Education students located in cities about their communities and culture. Using freely available Skype technology, the students and Aboriginal elders can ask and answer questions as they would in a traditional classroom (Calma, 2009).
Research suggests that people learn by doing. In a series of stakeholder interviews undertaken by Laura Ganley (2010), time was spent exploring how Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use smartphone technology. It was found that trial and error plays a key role, as does on the ground support. The practice of using ICTs in education and/or the workplace provides the exposure that one needs to become familiar and competent with new media technologies (Johnson & Oliver, 2013). In the new Civics and Citizenship curriculum Shaping document (2012), the need to engage with technologies in order to use them effectively was acknowledged:

Students develop ICT capability as they learn to use ICT effectively and appropriately to access, create and communicate information and ideas…ICT capability involves students in learning to make the most of the technologies available to them, [&] adapting to new ways of doing things as technology evolves…

Ganley (2010) similarly concluded, following her observation of ICT usage in Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities, that any use of technology was good use. The fact that people were using technology to communicate was considered good for literacy and education, irrespective of what the technology was being used for. Despite these initiatives, there is little, if any, extant literature reporting on the use of new and social media by and in Australian Aboriginal communities, and by the youth of those communities in particular. Moreover, the potential benefits of web-based applications and social networking technologies for improving the digital information literacy skills of Indigenous individuals is yet to be explored. With this in mind, a program of research is underway that will explore the ways in which Australian Aboriginal youth utilise forms of social media. This will inform the development of a suite of resources (aligned with the Civics and Citizenship curriculum) that will, potentially, enhance the digital information literacy skills of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students.

The need to develop digitally literate graduates who can function in an increasingly digital world is irrefutable. Universities therefore have an obligation to provide students with opportunities to engage with digital technologies and utilise digital resources. Evidence suggests that prolonged and supported use of web-based applications improves a range of cognitive and literacy skills and is associated with enhanced motivation, civic engagement, school achievement and employability
(Johnson & Oliver, 2013). As such, and in order to achieve parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, educational initiatives are required that will prepare all students, regardless of race, age or gender, to live, work and contribute to a digital society. Concerns have been raised, however, regarding the push for catch up in ICT use by Indigenous communities as merely a continuation of the march of cultural imperialism and we, as researchers, must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of a paternalistic approach which assumes that what is good for non-Indigenous urban communities must also be good for remote Indigenous communities (Taylor, 2012).

**The Research Project**

Any work in such a context—whether developmental, educational or research-oriented—must of necessity be undertaken within a culturally sensitive framework. The project with which I am involved as a Co-Investigator—a largely indigenous ethnographic study entitled *Building Cultural Resilience and Renewal: Australian Aboriginal Communities and New Digital Technologies*—will focus on the impact new, largely digital, forms of media are having on Australian Aboriginal communities and cultures. The research project has the dual aim of contributing to both the Australian Government’s *Closing the Gap: Indigenous Reform Agenda*, particularly in the areas of education and well-being, and to Australian Aboriginal cultural resilience and renewal. Working within a culturally sensitive research framework, the three projects that constitute a program of research will focus on indigenous people’s use of new media, including social media, for personal, cultural and educational purposes through a largely indigenous ethnographic approach. The three projects—overlapping and contiguous—recognise the diversity of the conditions and locations under which Australian Aboriginal people live and, in order to avoid the essentialising of the Aboriginal experience, the projects will work across urban, regional and remote locations. Project 1 takes advantage of a unique opportunity to track and document the experience of a community having internet access switched on. This work will be undertaken by a doctoral student attached to this project who will work on the ground in remote northern indigenous communities as they are connected to the internet for the first time. Project 2 involves an audit by survey followed by the use of more selective and focussed data gathering about the usage Australian Aboriginal communities and individuals make of new media and social media. A particular focus here is on the ways in which Australian Aboriginal youth utilise forms of social media.
with a view to contributing to the development of more effective educational vehicles. Project 3 looks to case study the work of two media and technology experts as they work in culturally-respectful ways to open forms of new media to Australian Aboriginal communities. While these types of roles can be seen as patronising, or as examples of neo-colonial practice, this research aims to illuminate more collaborative ways of working with and for indigenous communities.

Mitigating the effect of disengagement with the formal education system—evidenced through statistics of truancy and the consequent lack of formal schooling achievement—is the underpinning rationale for this research project. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are under-represented in the education sector; a disparity that also translates to higher unemployment statistics. Without internet access and the introduction of initiatives that will enable Indigenous Australians to develop the same literacy skills as non-Indigenous Australians, this gap is likely to increase. This body of research, which will leverage the opportunities created by the National Broadband Network, will, potentially, facilitate engagement with social media technologies, as articulated in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum, with a view to cultivating Indigenous students’ digital information literacy skills, while contributing to social betterment generally.

**Conclusion**

The Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum details a set of competences that are required to live and work in a digital society, including the proficient use of social media technologies. There are, however, problems accompanying the importance placed upon social media in the life of the citizen; namely, the assumed ubiquity in social media usage by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This article looks briefly at the disparity in internet access between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households and highlights the affects that this access (or lack of) has on one’s ability to participate in both democratic processes and higher education. In order to address the so-called “digital divide”, and equip Indigenous peoples with the digital information literacy skills required to participate in an increasingly digital society, this paper outlines a body of research that is set to commence in 2014. The imperative of this research is to seek cultural benefits from the realisation of Ivan Illich’s (1970)
decentralising call to “de-school society”, to draw out the democratic possibilities new forms of communication and engagement present, and to give life to the nation curriculum’s view of a digitally-connected citizenry.

References


