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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Article

Mediatisation, Marginalisation and Disruption in Australian Indigenous Affairs

Kerry McCallum [1,*], Lisa Waller [2] and Tanja Dreher [3]

[1] News and Media Research Centre, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra, Bruce, ACT 2600, Australia;
E-Mail: Kerry.mccallum@canberra.edu.au
[2] Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia; E-Mail: lisa.waller@deakin.edu.au
[3] School of Arts, English and Media, Wollongong University, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia;
E-Mail: tanjad@uow.edu.au

* Corresponding author

Abstract

This article considers how changing media practices of minority groups and political and media elites impact on democratic participation in national debates. Taking as its case study the state-sponsored campaign to formally recognise Indigenous people in the Australian constitution, the article examines the interrelationships between political media and Indigenous participatory media—both of which we argue are undergoing seismic transformation. Discussion of constitutional reform has tended to focus on debates occurring in forums of influence such as party politics and news media that privilege the voices of only a few high-profile Indigenous media 'stars'. Debate has progressed on the assumption that constitutional change needs to be settled by political elites and then explained and 'sold' to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Our research on the mediatisation of policymaking has found that in an increasingly media-saturated environment, political leaders and their policy bureaucrats attend to a narrow range of highly publicised voices. But the rapidly changing media environment has disrupted the media-driven *Recognise* campaign. Vigorous public discussion is increasingly taking place outside the mainstream institutions of media and politics, while social media campaigns emerge in rapid response to government decisions. Drawing on a long tradition in citizens' media scholarship we argue that the vibrant, diverse and growing Indigenous media sphere in Australia has increased the accessibility of Indigenous voices challenging the scope and substance of the recognition debate. The article concludes on a cautionary note by considering some tensions in the promise of the changing media for Indigenous participation in the national policy conversation.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Political Agency in the Digital Age: Media, Participation and Democracy", edited by Anne Kaun (Södertörn University, Sweden), Maria Kyriakidou (University of East Anglia, UK) and Julie Uldam (Roskilde University, Denmark).

1. Introduction

This article examines the mediatisation of Indigenous politics in Australia. Taking as its case study the state-sponsored campaign to formally recognise Indigenous people in the constitution, the article considers how the changing media practices of both Indigenous people and political and media elites impact on national policy debates. Our concern is the juncture between the mediation of political and policy issues by mainstream institutions of power, primarily established news media organisations, and the 'local' discussion of

public affairs that is increasingly taking place through social media. In the media-focused policy process mainstream media continue to play a key role in reporting politics and are closely listened to by the politically powerful. Oppositional voices, such as the growing chorus of Indigenous opinion critiquing the very concept of recognition (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2010), fight to be heard in the intimate relationship between policy and media (Davis, 2016; McCallum & Waller, 2013). At the same time, a changing media environment has enabled new players and platforms to execute political agency and challenge this established dynamic. We argue this has disrupted how political elites manage public debate, and the way public opinion is understood and acted upon.

The mediated political campaign for constitutional recognition provides an ideal lens to examine how processes of mediatisation operate in the context of core debates over national identity. The debate over constitutional recognition takes place in the context of Australia's complex racial history and the ongoing dispossession, colonisation and marginalisation of Indigenous people and communities (see Attwood & Markus, 2007; Davis, 2016; Davis & Williams, 2015; Dodson, 2012). Australia became a federation in 1901 at the height of racist thought and practice, and its constitution was deliberately drafted to exclude and discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Australia's most successful referendum occurred in 1967, with 90.77% voting in favour of changing the constitution to enable the Commonwealth to make laws for all Australians and to take account of Aboriginal people in determining the population. Despite being held up as 'an outstanding expression of public sentiment' (Goot & Rowse, 2007, p. 27), since 1967 there have been persistent calls for further reform of the nation's framing document to recognise the status of Indigenous people and remove discriminatory clauses (Davis & Williams, 2015). At the same time a global movement and scholarly critique of the politics of recognition has emerged (e.g. Coulthard, 2014; McNay, 2008; Povinelli, 2002; Simpson, 2010). In the Australian context there have been growing calls to acknowledge unceded sovereignty, land rights and a treaty. Aileen Moreton Robinson stresses ongoing Indigenous sovereignty as fundamental, and welcomes 'a future in which Indigenous sovereignty is formally recognised and we are no longer treated as trespassers in our own lands' (2007, p. xi,). A series of government inquiries and committees have advised on the wording and process of the referendum (Australian Government, 2016), which by 2015 had cross-party support. As a key tenet of contemporary Indigenous politics, the referendum invokes unresolved questions at the very foundation of settler colonial Australia.

In 2015 Prime Minister Abbott oversaw a formal consultative process to bring on the referendum in 2017 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of 1967. This political process operated alongside an advocacy and awareness campaign run by the government-funded organisation Reconciliation Australia (*Recognise*, 2016). Together, these processes essentially took the complexity of settler colonial Australian race relations and reconstructed it as a simple political choice. Constitutional lawyer Megan Davis has observed that the common message from media and government has ignored an important facet of the debate:

> 'The mainstream media, by and large, uncritically report on referendum momentum and mostly obsess over any chinks in the bipartisan order of things. The subjects of recognition are all but erased from the process.' (Davis, 2016, p. 76)

However, the mediatised political campaign was challenged by the underlying multiplicity of views and perspectives on what might be changed by the referendum. Furthermore, by the end of 2015 Australia had a new prime minister, opposition to *Recognise* was increasingly vocal, and the move towards constitutional recognition had all but stalled.

This article builds on an ongoing research project that is investigating how changing media institutions, technologies and practices affect Indigenous participation in public debate (Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2016; Waller, Dreher, & McCallum, 2015). Here we consider how the media-related practices of Indigenous affairs policymaking, journalism and Indigenous participatory media intersect in an increasingly fragmented and abundant media environment. We first analyse the mediatised practices of government in the 2015 campaign for constitutional recognition. This is followed by a systematic examination of mainstream news reporting of policy debates and public opinion polls on the recognition issue. Finally, an analysis of social media-driven advocacy opposing or contesting *Recognise* demonstrates the breadth of political discussion and opinion formation taking place outside the dominant spheres of influence. We assess how Indigenous participatory media disrupted the mediatised development of the constitutional recognition campaign and argue that Indigenous resistance via social media had significant, if indirect, implications for policymakers and those seeking to harness public opinion in support of the referendum. Drawing on theories of public opinion, mediatisation and democratic participation, the article offers insights into the relationships between established forums of influence, new entrants to the Australian media landscape and local political engagement in Indigenous affairs.

2. Researching Political Discourse

Our research is broadly located in the fields of political

communication, Indigenous media and social movement studies. We acknowledge our status as non-Indigenous researchers working with the knowledge and innovation of Indigenous media practitioners. We see this article as contributing to our broader research paradigm that works with Indigenous researchers to challenge the colonial mindset and the prevailing discourse of deficit in Indigenous affairs (Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringe, & Fogarty, 2013). In this article we emphasise Indigenous innovation in social media and use the mediatisation framework to focus attention, scrutiny, analysis and critique on non-Indigenous institutions and powerful elites.

Responding to criticism that the study of political communication has become too narrowly preoccupied with politics at the centre (Nielsen, 2014), our research approach considers the broad impacts of media on culture and society. We view politics as incorporating the everyday conversations and engagements with politics that take place outside the formal and traditional avenues of politics (Carey, 1975; Gamson, 1992; Tönnies, in Splichal, 1999). Herbst (1998) conceptualised public opinion as a discursive and contingent phenomenon that is constructed over time by the types of technologies and methodologies available for its assessment. In the late 20th century media content and opinion polls became the dominant technologies for 'knowing' public opinion about a topic. Herbst (1998, p. 138) identified a third understanding of public opinion, '...as something located in local community, something sewn into the fabric of interpersonal social networks' (see also Blumer, 1948; Salmon & Glasser, 1995, p. 452). The digital revolution means that 'reading' public opinion is more complex than ever. But we argue it is time to consider the conversations that take place in digital social networks, and their relationships with polls and news content.

In a 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick, 2013) political communication research is well placed to bridge the divide between a still-influential mainstream media and a burgeoning and transformative digital and social media sphere, where media consumption is increasingly individualised, networked and fragmented (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This is not to imply news media are no longer important to opinion formation and change. We contend news media's framing of reality is crucial to the way policy issues are communicated in the post-mass media era. Our approach echoes calls for a more nuanced, rather than generalising, approach to political communication research to address the complex questions asked in public discourse, such as those about mediatised Indigenous policy. To that end we focus on three interrelated aspects of public discourse about constitutional reform—mediatised policymaking, news reporting, and oppositional campaigns in social networks—to shed light on the media-related processes of all players in

this fundamental issue. We address the following research questions:

1. What were the media-related practices of the Australian government in the campaign for constitutional recognition?
2. What role did institutional news media play in reporting on constitutional recognition?
3. How did Indigenous participatory media engage with and disrupt the constitutional recognition campaign?
4. What are the implications of changing media environments for Indigenous people to engage with mainstream policy and media debates?

To address these questions we developed a project that analysed three bodies of intersecting mediated texts: official government material, news media reports, and Indigenous participatory media discussion. Texts were collected over the 12-month period 1 January to 31 December, 2015, by the chief investigator.

- We first recorded the media-related activities of the Abbott government and the *Recognise* campaign over 2015. We gathered all digitally available reports, media releases and statements emanating from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in relation to constitutional recognition (Australian Government, 2016), as well as promotional material from the *Recognise* website (*Recognise*, 2016);
- Secondly, we mapped the dominant topics, themes, voices and media practices evident in news media coverage of constitutional recognition. Our dataset included 200 national news and opinion texts reporting on the constitutional recognition campaign. News sites included the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (online and television public broadcaster), *The Guardian* (Australia), Fairfax Media (*Sydney Morning Herald*, *Age*, *Canberra Times*), News.com (Herald Sun, Sydney Telegraph), *The Australian*, Sky News, Channel 9 News, and SBS News. We acknowledge a blurring of the boundaries between the online forums and 'mainstream', 'legacy' or 'institutional' media, with Twitter an essential tool of journalism, but contend that the crucial role played by commercial and public service news organisations in negotiating policy debate mean they remain a key site for investigation;
- Our final domain of media practice was Indigenous participatory media. We analysed the growing opposition to *Recognise* in a range of alternative news sites including New Matilda, Croakey and The Stringer, Indigenous media including NITV, National Indigenous Radio Service, Koori Mail, blogs such as IndigenousX and Rantings of

an Aboriginal Feminist, and social media discussion emanating from Twitter and Facebook. We are mindful of the potential risks of exploitation when working with readily available digital trace data, and the need to avoid 'extractive' research without informed consent, so have limited our analyses to publicly available blogs and news sites.

All texts were recorded and coded in a custom-built database to identify key features, and each body of data was analysed inductively using thematic analysis to identify the broad themes inherent in the text. The article concludes by considering the intersections between these three domains of media practice, with a particular focus on the role of new players in mainstream media such as *The Guardian* (Australia).

3. Constitutional Recognition as Mediatised Policymaking

Mediatisation theory helps us to understand how changes occurring in the media landscape were central to the way the constitutional recognition debate played out. Increasingly, the activities of political and oppositional actors are carried out within media and this is both opening up opportunities for a wider range of voices to be heard within the political process, and at the same time limiting opportunities for engagement. Mediatisation refers to the body of theory and research that considers the broad impacts of media on society. While it has been virtually ignored by the dominant US Political Communication journals (Nielsen, 2014) mediatisation has been embraced in European scholarship (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014; Lundby, 2014). Mediatisation relates to '...changes in practices, cultures, and institutions in media-saturated societies...' (Lundby, 2014, p. 3; Couldry & Hepp, 2013). The institutional approach to mediatisation concerns the transformations of institutions, like politics and religion, scrutinising when they adhere to the formats of media for their function and practices in society and culture (Hjarvard, 2014; Flew & Swift, 2015). This branch of scholarship emphasises the changing structural relationship between different spheres of society and micro processes such as 'news logic' whereby routines, priorities and practices of news media are internalised and embodied by policymakers (Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, & Øyvind, 2014). For example, the adoption of increasingly market-driven practices by bureaucracies, the reliance on easily consumed content such as polls and institutionally prepared media content can all be seen as the adoption of media logics in politics and policymaking. McCallum & Waller (in press) found the practices of bureaucrats working in the Indigenous affairs domain changed as the media environment changed and intensified. In major policy debates over Indigenous health and education the ear of senior po-

litical leaders and their bureaucrats was turned towards mainstream media, or attuned to a narrow range of Indigenous voices amplified through mainstream news institutions.

The case study of constitutional recognition builds on this body of research to explore the mediatised practices of political leaders and Indigenous people. Each of our three sites of evidence—policy, news reporting, and Indigenous participatory media activity—provide evidence of how media change—the central tenet of mediatisation—impacts on policy development. In addressing our first question we identify three elements of media-driven government policymaking during 2015: media events, government-funded advocacy, and the commissioning of opinion polls.

3.1. Media Events

Prime Minister Abbott made constitutional recognition a hallmark of his administration. Presenting the referendum process to mainstream political news media was a vital stage in gaining political legitimacy for a referendum. Throughout 2015 a series of high-profile events were held to gain maximum exposure. Standing with Australian of the Year, Indigenous sporting hero Adam Goodes, on Australia Day, the PM pledged in a nationally televised speech to:

> 'Work towards completing our constitution by recognising the first Australians. The spirit of generous inclusion has always marked our nation at its best.' (*The Guardian*, 2015a)

This statement demonstrates that, from the outset, the PM framed recognition as a way of containing Indigenous sovereignties via a politics of inclusion, rather than through an acknowledgement of Australia's ongoing colonial legacy. With bipartisan political support he pushed ahead with plans to confirm a question to take to the people. Debate progressed on the assumption that constitutional change would be settled by political elites and then explained and 'sold' to Indigenous and non-Indigenous voters. The report of a joint parliamentary committee[1] coincided with the Prime Minister calling a summit for July 6 to discuss the timing and the working of the referendum. Attended by a group of 40 secretly selected Indigenous leaders and held behind closed doors at the spectacular harbour-side Sydney residence of the Prime Minister (D. Parker, 2015), the summit was designed to achieve maximum media attention. During the second half of 2015 the PM was increasingly required to manage Indigenous calls for

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[1] This followed a failed referendum to include a preamble in the constitution in 1999, the Report of the Expert Panel in January 2012, and the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition.

more consultation with Indigenous communities and growing evidence of widespread community scepticism about the proposal (Medhora, 2015c).

3.2. Government-Funded Advocacy

The Prime Minister was supported by the non-government organisation Reconciliation Australia through its $15 million *Recognise* awareness and advocacy program (Graham, 2016). *Recognise* is funded by government and private sponsorship to promote community understanding and acceptance of the need for constitutional reform. It worked in tandem with government as an arms-length public information tool; an outsourcing of political function in a form that adopted the logics of marketing to engage the electorate. Throughout 2015 *Recognise* engaged in a comprehensive social marketing program using advertising, publicity events, an interactive website and social media platforms. Public relations tactics included the production of news releases, editorials by the *Recognise* co-chairs, and third party endorsements from celebrities, sportspeople, and businesses elites (*Recognise*, 2016).

3.3. Opinion Polls and the Spectacle of Support

A final element of the campaign was the commissioning of opinion polls to gather quantifiable evidence and publicise public support for the referendum. In May 2015, Reconciliation Australia strategically released the results of a privately commissioned opinion poll that found the majority of Australians would support a change to the constitution to recognise Indigenous people (*Recognise*, 2015a; Sky News, 2015). As discussed later, this poll and others gained widespread, largely uncritical media coverage. Here we observe the commissioning of polls is an established mechanism for representing public sentiment about a policy issue. Polling has also been critiqued as a way of modelling public opinion on issues established by elite agendas in the absence of deliberation (Carey, 1995, p. 392; Lewis, 2001), with little consideration of significant minority groups' opinions. Using polls as quantified 'evidence' for media consumption (Herbst, 1998; Lewis, 2001) may provide the spectacle of community support, but it ignored vital voices in the process that ultimately worked against the campaign.

While it may seem self-evident that widespread community acceptance is a necessity in a census vote such as a referendum, the reliance on media and marketing logics calls for critical analysis. The increasingly commercialised and market-driven nature of government has long been of concern to critical political communication scholars (McChesney, 2015). *Recognise* critic Celeste Liddle (2014a) challenged *Recognise* for its collaboration with powerful commercial interests such as Qantas that have worked against Indigenous

people. A more critical analysis comes from Treré (2016, p. 131) who takes the case of the 2012 Mexican elections to argue that political parties and governments deploy the same digital tools as political activists to 'manufacture consent' for government programs and 'sabotage dissent' against them. He argues 'the algorithmic construction of consent goes hand-in-hand with the undermining of critical voices' (2015, p. 131). While we do not contend that *Recognise* equates to the symbolic violence enacted against the populous in Mexico, we do observe parallels in the use of polling and social media to both model and mobilise Indigenous support. The upshot is that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have been highly visible in the campaign to bring the referendum to fruition, the full range of Indigenous voices was not heard or considered.

4. Reporting Constitutional Recognition

Our news media analysis identified three key features reinforcing the importance of political journalism in the communication of major policy developments: strong parallels between government and media agendas: broadly uncritical support for *Recognise*, and reliance on news subsidies driving news content.

4.1. Alignment of Media and Political Agendas

Over the first half of 2015 Australian journalists predominantly reported constitutional recognition as a political issue. News about the referendum process was decontextualised from reporting of Indigenous affairs more generally, and focused on the process of reaching an agreement on a question to bring to the people. From the Prime Minister's Australia Day speech through to the Kirribilli House meeting in July, national news media attended closely to the activities and priorities of Prime Minister Abbott and the machinations of the campaign with stories such as: 'Path for Indigenous recognition mapped out at historic meeting' (Tingle, 2015). In an article discussing growing frustration with the process of resolving the referendum question in late March, *The Guardian* reported:

> 'Divisions over Indigenous recognition fuels pressure for meeting with PM.' (Jabour, 2015)

As a result of *Recognise*'s advocacy efforts Indigenous faces and voices were highly visible in news media reports about recognition, but they belonged to a small number of high-profile spokespeople. *Recognise* co-chair Tanya Hosch was a prominent and widely quoted advocate, but the main focus of news reporting was on the two prominent leaders, Noel Pearson and Patrick Dodson, as representative of all Indigenous people to negotiate a referendum solution. News media's reliance on these two figures brought attention to

the issue, but also allowed journalists to ignore a wider range of opinions. Journalists' sourcing practices are crucial to who and what gets listened to in Indigenous affairs (Waller, 2013). Journalists look to individuals who represent institutions, from the state to 'experts' and key community representatives, to both generate and verify stories about particular policy issues. When powerful decision-makers and powerful media look at Indigenous issues through the same frame, the range of policy problems to be addressed is limited, and so is the range of possible solutions.

4.2. A Good News Story for Non-Indigenous Australia

In what may appear a divergent finding from the extensive body of literature that shows Australian news media perpetuates racism and amplifies Indigenous failure in a discourse of deficit and negativity (Fforde et al., 2013; Hokowhitu, 2013; Meadows, 2001), our research demonstrates that constitutional recognition was generally framed as a 'positive' news story. News reporting framed recognition as an example of the non-Indigenous community's goodwill towards Indigenous people and readiness to amend a flaw in the founding document, rather than engaging with complex and challenging Indigenous demands, critique and dissent.

Major news outlets published news subsidies supplied by *Recognise* as an additional source of good news. Editorials by co-chair Tanya Hosch (*Telegraph*, 2016) and third party endorsements from high-profile sportspeople and political leaders featured in several news outlets. Conservative oppositional voices were largely portrayed as atypical of widespread community support for the referendum. However, this seeming contradiction supports a body of research that has found Australian news media has a long history of distancing itself from systemic racism by highlighting individual aberrant 'racist' acts while representing the white mainstream as 'tolerant' (Meadows, 2001). A potential outcome is that Indigenous people who oppose constitutional recognition are either silenced or shunned.

4.3. News Drivers, News Events and Polls

The July meeting at the PM's Sydney residence was the most widely reported topic in 2015, generating reports and commentary about constitutional recognition. Stunning imagery of Indigenous leader Pat Dodson in conversation with the prime minister on Sydney Harbour helped to frame the event as a constructive political process. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that:

> 'Political and Indigenous leaders are united in their support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition in the constitution, saying it is an "historical injustice" that needs to be addressed.' (ABC,

2015)

Noel Pearson, who attended the meeting, was scathing about the political spectacle, referring to the event as 'stage-managed' (Medhora, 2015b).

Survey research and opinion polls were prominent sources of news. Both government and media relied on poll results to reflect back to the population its support for the referendum. Hard news stories were driven by the release of polls commissioned by *Recognise* or media organisations. In May the ABC reported on a poll commissioned by *Recognise*:

> 'Australians would vote yes now to constitutional recognition: poll.' (Henderson, 2015)

Apart from the *Recognise* polls, journalists reported widely on an Australian National University ANUpoll (Gray & Sanders, 2015; Medhora, 2015a) and Fairfax Ipsos (Gordon, 2015). Each of these commissioned polls showed high rates of community acceptance for recognising Indigenous people in the constitution despite no question being settled on. Polls were strategically released to coincide with major political events. Ahead of the Kirribilli meeting, *The Australian* published an article based on an exclusive Newspoll:

> 'Two out of three back Indigenous recognition.' (Hudson, 2015)

As Australia's most established and newsworthy opinion poll, Newspoll generated substantial publicity for the *Recognise* campaign. This poll-driven news follows traditional political news values and formats that prioritise poll results as quantified evidence of public opinion (Lewis, 2001).

We conclude that the alignment of institutional news media coverage with the government's mediated policy approach left little room for other perspectives, limiting the range and agency of dissenting voices available to contribute to the conversation over constitutional recognition.

5. The Intervention of Indigenous Participatory Media

Our analysis to this point suggests the reconceptualisation of Indigenous recognition as an elite political issue worked to marginalise a wide range of Indigenous people from the mainstream political communication system. But close examination of the third domain of media practice—Indigenous participatory media—paints a different picture of public sphere activity in relation to the constitutional recognition debate. Throughout 2014 and 2015 an oppositional discourse to *Recognise* emerged through Indigenous-led, alternative and social media. Emanating in local social networks and communities, discussed via established social media networks

and disseminated through the sophisticated Indigenous media sphere, this opposition both reflected and engaged with a national and global discourse challenging the very concept of constitutional recognition.

In recent years the digital and social media space has built on a long, rich and innovative Indigenous community media tradition (see Indigenous Remote Communications Association, 2016; Meadows, 2016). Social media has been crucial to promote Indigenous strength and showcase a diverse range of Indigenous voices (Sweet, Pearson, & Dudgeon, 2013). Indigenous Australians in urban, rural and remote settings are active in social media, with substantially higher rates of Facebook use than the general population (Balough, 2014; Carlson & Frazer, 2015). These networks operate with their own logics, largely outside of the mainstream media and policy spheres. But they have increasingly been used to enable engagement with political debate about local issues of concern. Indigenous media has harnessed political and social networks to express political opinion, engage with institutional media and perform protest, as part of a growing sphere of global social media activism (Bruns & Highfield, 2016; Cottle & Lester, 2011; Hutchins & Lester, 2015; Moscato, 2016; Waller et al., 2015). One significant new player is the media organisation IndigenousX. Established in 2012 as a rotating Twitter account to facilitate the unfettered exposure of a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, IndigenousX has emerged as a fully integrated Indigenous owned and operated online media organisation (Pearson, 2015). Social media also provides a critical mechanism for Indigenous media activists to bridge private and public spheres and to bring a wider range of voices and perspectives to narrow political debates.

5.1. Anti-Recognise Campaigns in Social and Alternative Media

Facebook and Twitter were key sites of political activity as momentum built against the campaign for constitutional recognition. Several Facebook pages were opened including 'Facebook AntiRecognise' and 'Vote "NO" to Constitutional Recognition', each with widespread support (Dreher et al., 2016). With 20,000 followers, the Facebook page of Sovereign Union (2016) is an example of the melding of community forum and platform for activism, where opposition to Recognise has been debated and promoted. Twitter has also provided a forum for the diversity of Indigenous views about Recognise, with humour, advocacy and rapid responses to government activity, particularly through the influential #NoRespect hashtag. In addition, advocacy media such as New Matilda provided a crucial platform for the publication of the diversity of views on constitutional reform.

The July 2015 Kirribilli House Indigenous leaders event proved a catalyst for the growing opinion against the Recognise campaign and most Indigenous opposition took place via social media. In an article for IndigenousX and published in The Guardian titled:

> 'Indigenous community voices must be heard in the recognise debate.' (D. Parker, 2015),

@IndigenousX host Darren Parker captured the growing anger that Indigenous people were being excluded from decision-making processes. Parker's widely disseminated views indicated the level of mistrust in political institutions by Indigenous people. Davis (2016, p. 77) argues that 'Social media captured the overwhelming rejection of the campaign for recognition, and the growing resistance to being 'recognised' by the settler state.' By early 2016 New Matilda reported that 500 Indigenous people had openly rejected constitutional recognition at an historic Victorian government consultation, with the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Natalie Hutchins, admitting that:

> 'Communities consistently express opposition to constitutional recognition.' (Graham, 2016)

Local communities have expressed desire for genuine consultation in plans for a referendum, and for the question to be posed in the context of their concerns. This response supports the First Nations writer Coulthard (2014, p. 152) who argued the cultural politics of recognition maintains rather than transforms the settler-colonial relationship between Indigenous nations and the (Canadian) state, and has advocated 'refusal' rather than recognition (see also Simpson, 2007, 2010).

5.2. The IndigenousX Poll

A significant intervention came with the publication of an online survey by IndigenousX. In response to a heavily publicised Recognise poll in May 2015 that found 87% of Indigenous people supported constitutional recognition, IndigenousX conducted an online, non-random sample survey of the Indigenous community. The results of the poll's 827 Indigenous respondents deviated significantly from four earlier surveys of community sentiment towards constitutional recognition. The survey found that just 25% of respondents supported Recognise, and the overwhelming majority of respondents (67%) would vote NO in a referendum if a question did not introduce specific measures against discrimination. Significantly, the poll showed Indigenous respondents felt most strongly about sovereignty and parliamentary representation—two issues that had been ignored in political and mainstream media representation (McQuire, 2015a, 2015b). Writing for The Guardian, blogger Celeste Liddle stated:

'87% of Indigenous people do not agree on recognition. You'd know if you listened.' (Liddle, 2015)

While the IndigenousX poll can be seen as advocacy polling (*Recognise*, 2015b), the exercise captured the otherwise unheard Indigenous public sentiment at the heart of the constitutional recognition question. Use of the established technology of polling for the measurement of public opinion, and publicity by alternative media such as *New Matilda*, helped move the anti-*Recognise* agenda onto the mainstream agenda. Here was clear, quantifiable evidence that Indigenous people were resisting the constitutional recognition process unless they could be part of it. Social media meant that IndigenousX had an established network to conduct the survey, the technologies to execute it online and the means to disseminate its findings both through its own networks and traditional media channels.

6. New Media Entrants and News Diversity

A key finding of our media analysis is the role played by new entrant to the Australian media landscape, *The Guardian* (Australia). Since it was launched in 2013, *The Guardian* (Australia) has made a concerted effort to listen out for and report diverse Indigenous stories. It provided a platform for the anti-*Recognise* movement through the publication of a series of invited columns by constitutional experts and vocal anti-*Recognise* advocates (e.g. Liddle, 2014a). As a result, its coverage painted a very different picture of the constitutional debate than found in other institutional news coverage. In a 2014 column for *The Guardian*, law expert Larrissa Behrendt identified a diversity of opinion in relation to how the constitution might be changed:

'Indigenous recognition: The concerns of those opposed must be taken seriously.' (Behrendt, 2014)

In April 2015 *The Guardian* reported Indigenous leader Kirsty Parker raising deep concerns. In a column titled 'Is Indigenous constitutional recognition salvageable? We have to hope so' she observed:

'Anyone plugged into conventional or social media over the past week could be forgiven for thinking Australia is on the cusp of settling the matter of appropriately recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the nation's constitution.' (K. Parker, 2015)

In contrast to the favourable coverage of *Recognise* in the majority of mainstream news, *The Guardian* reported widespread disillusionment:

'Indigenous people fear being left out of recognition debate, academic says.' (*The Guardian*, 2015b)

The intersection between *The Guardian* and social media organisations such as IndigenousX is a crucial development in the changing media landscape. By reporting the stories of regular @IndigenousX hosts and publicising the IndigenousX poll, *The Guardian* amplified Indigenous voices, acted as a bridge between social and mainstream media, and provided a platform for otherwise unheard Indigenous perspectives. Its established relationship with *The Guardian* meant the results of the June 2015 IndigenousX poll permeated mainstream media, albeit with little acknowledgement from the legacy press who had, by this stage, lost interest in the campaign.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has examined three interrelated elements of the mediatised campaign for constitutional recognition: the media-related practices of government; institutional media reporting and resistance to *Recognise* in Indigenous participatory media. We considered the implications of each of these for Indigenous people to engage with narrowly defined debates around constitutional recognition, and how the changing media environment is disrupting the exclusive domain of political communication.

The article provides evidence of the nature of mediatised political practice in the *Recognise* campaign and the centrality of pre-packaged news and political marketing to contemporary policymaking. Over the course of 2015 the Prime Minister led the government campaign to resolve the timing and question of the Indigenous recognition referendum. The government relied on a spectacle of community goodwill towards the recognition project, despite clear indications of diverse community opinion on the topic. The political project focused on ensuring that designated 'Indigenous leaders' reached agreement with government on the nature of the referendum question and its timing. It reconstructed constitutional recognition as a simple question of accepting the need for recognition in the constitution, rather than addressing fundamentally challenging questions around Indigenous sovereignties, rights and the legacies of colonialism. Events were designed to attract positive media attention while opinion polls were commissioned and publicised as a key indicator of widespread public support for *Recognise*.

Next we addressed the role of institutional media in reporting on the campaign and found support for the long line of political communication research pointing to the exclusive relationship between media and politics (Blumler, 2014; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). Institutional news media embraced the 'good news story' of reforming the constitution. News agendas largely fell in line with political agendas in the media-driven campaign, with reporting focused on political priorities, debates over proposed models, and

division in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership. In short, Australia's established news media reported on this as a political story. Public opinion polls and media events generated by *Recognise* were a major source of news, reinforcing that established news organisations are increasingly reliant on subsidies from government-sponsored advocacy organisations. As political momentum for the grand symbolic change stalled in the second half of 2015, the campaign became enmeshed in a range of wider concerns about race relations. By 2016, in the absence of sustained political news, most media had lost interest.

Our third research question was: 'How did Indigenous participatory media engage with and disrupt the constitutional recognition campaign?' Drawing on a broad conceptualisation of politics we looked to local Indigenous social media networks and identified these as a vibrant site of social and political discussion about Indigenous sovereignties, rights, and the legacies of colonialism. We identified a powerful opposition that emerged to unsettle the *Recognise* campaign. As a result, this article addresses an aspect of political communication theory that has not been well thought through to date. It challenges the exclusive relationship between news media and politics that has been the focus of so much political communication theory, demonstrating how digital and social media have opened new spaces for Indigenous engagement in political processes from which they have typically been excluded.

An important finding was the role of new media entrant *The Guardian* in listening to and amplifying a wider range of Indigenous perspectives and voices. *The Guardian* (Australia)'s coverage raises a number of questions about the changing media environment in public discussion of Indigenous affairs. It suggests that its 'open journalism' approach has been an important intervention in the scene (Ingram, 2016). As a new player and an outsider to the legacy Australian political media, *The Guardian* was able to challenge the dominant routines and offer a wider range of perspectives on this national issue. It provides valuable evidence of how new media entrants have opened bridges between Indigenous participatory media and the mainstream. Given this amplification of diverse Indigenous voices, political leaders had ample opportunity to listen to the range of concerns over *Recognise*.

Our final question asked, 'what are the implications of changing media environments for Indigenous Australians to engage with mainstream policy and media debates?' While popular media celebrates the value of participatory media with terms such as 'Twitter revolution', our study resonates with the growing body of research that suggests a more complex picture (eg. Dencik & Leistert, 2015). Couldry (2012) sees evidence of successful politics of protest or disruption operating on certain temporalities, but what of enduring 'positive political action' (p. 116)? The multiplicity and interac-

tivity of online politics is frequently associated with protest rather than a long-term fixed political project. Moreover, the transformations brought about by digital media benefit all political actors, so that both political elites and racist movements have enhanced opportunities for voice (Couldry 2012; Dencik & Leistert, 2015). State and corporate actors are well placed to mobilise the social media techniques and appearance of social movements (e.g. Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012; Treré, 2016).

For our own study, we found the changing media environment included increased opportunities for diverse and dissenting Indigenous voices. The *Recognise* campaign was also able to mobilise a sophisticated social media strategy as well as established media advocacy techniques to enlist support and generate largely positive mainstream media coverage. We also found evidence of considerable disruption, whereby Indigenous media and new mainstream media entrants mobilised fundamental critique of the *Recognise* campaign. We argue that changes in the media environment are a significant factor in the increasing incapacity of formal political communication to manage such complex debates over Indigenous sovereignties, rights and the legacies of colonialism. However, longer-term research is required to address the argument that the social media environment enables a politics of protest and disruption, but does not necessarily produce longer-term political transformations.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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About the Authors

Kerry McCallum is Senior Research Fellow in the News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. Her research focuses on the relationships between changing media and policy in Indigenous affairs.

Lisa Waller is a senior lecturer in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Australia. Her research centres on news media and Indigeneity and conceptualizing the place of local news in the digital era.

Tanja Dreher is an ARC Future Fellow at the University of Wollongong. Tanja's research focuses on the politics of listening in the context of media and multiculturalism, Indigenous sovereignties, feminisms and anti-racism. Her current Fellowship analyses the political listening practices necessary to support the potential for voice in the context of proliferating community and alternative media in the digital age.