

## **Digital Campus Culture: Diversity, Inclusivity and Social Media**

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### **Abstract**

Social media platforms provide environments in which students from diverse backgrounds socialise, debate and share knowledge. At the same time, the value of such environments can be undermined by various forms of aggression and bigotry. Problems of online bullying, harassment and incivility present particular challenges for universities striving to foster an environment that is welcoming, inclusive and respectful. A range of official and unofficial online environments have become extensions of institutional culture, yet they cannot be regulated in the same manner as physical campus environments. This paper examines ways in which modes of racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice are propagated, normalised and sometimes challenged within universities' social media spaces. These groups show a marked difference in levels of debate and interpersonal engagement, such that in some cases, instances of racism, sexism and homophobia can lead to critical deliberation, while in others such bigotry goes unchecked.

### **Introduction**

Like so many university campuses around the world, ours has been undergoing significant changes in recent years. Brick and mortar buildings are increasingly displaced by glass and steel, reminiscent of a downtown financial district. Building renovations favour a shift toward open office spaces. Departmental reception areas are emptied and locked away behind shutters as non-academic staff are absorbed into centralised administration and student engagement hubs. Reflecting the characteristics of a shopping mall, commercial franchises come and go with increasing rapidity as our student customers are provided with the eateries and retail experiences the surveys tell us they want. And the campus is becoming increasingly virtualised. Tiered lecture theatres still privilege top-down knowledge 'transmission' but the students sitting inside them invariably inhabit 'blended-learning' spaces: laptops open, they follow along with the PowerPoint slides that they (and increasingly the institution) demand academics post ahead of lectures. No matter if they miss something or zone out while

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attending to status updates: lecture recordings will be posted online shortly afterwards (again, increasingly mandated under university policy) onto the newly acquired (commercial) online learning management system. Our university has been cautious about full-scale virtualisation. It hasn't replaced face-to-face lectures with online courses and has thus far dabbled only tentatively in the 'MOOC-space'. But the university campus is increasingly a blended environment: there is still physical co-presence, though students and even staff are increasingly selective and strategic about timing their visits in the face of constraints on parking, public transport and physical space; and there is a growing digital 'campus' – not only the formal spaces of University web pages and online learning platforms, but also informal spaces for student discussion, chatter and merely 'hanging out', which emerge at the very time when ostensibly 'non-productive' hanging-out spaces are disappearing from the physical campus and the experience of university study is becoming increasingly atomised.

This paper looks at an example of a digital campus environment created by students themselves – a public Facebook-based campus gossip site – that boasts more than 25,000 members (making it perhaps the busiest 'place' on campus), but which remains largely invisible to most staff working at the university. The site follows a social media trend that is now common across university campuses internationally. Apart from providing a space to hang out, chatter, and have a laugh with other students, this public gossip site (which we will refer to simply as 'Hearsay') functions in part as a means to comment on and critique the institution and its staff. Individual lecturers are the subject of a kind of surveillance (or, perhaps, 'sousveillance'), and exposure – sometimes critical, sometimes positive and sometimes neutral. Indeed, this is how Hearsay came to the attention of this paper's authors. On separate occasions, photographs of both authors (taken without their knowledge in lectures) have been circulated on Hearsay. One was a case of completely benign humour, but the other was more problematic. During an advertising studies lecture on the idealisation of masculinity, the lead author was photographed in front of a large projector screen displaying an image from a Calvin Klein advertisement featuring a male model wearing only his underwear. This photograph was posted with the caption 'lecturer really wants the D[ick]', which then cued a torrent of 'likes' and comments (numbering in the hundreds), all identified by students' real names (as opposed to anonymous), including some disturbingly misogynistic responses, such as 'she wants him to fuck her right in the pussy'. When called in to discuss the incident, the student who had originally posted the photo and caption seemed genuinely unaware that there were any ethical problems with posting images without consent or making sexualised comments about a staff member. It was intended, he said, only to be a moment of harmless fun. This apparent indifference to norms of civility or respect prompted us to investigate in more depth how Hearsay was functioning as a space for the development of a digital campus culture. Struck by a confronting array of sexist, homophobic and racist material running through the forum that strongly challenges our aspirations for an inclusive campus culture, we nonetheless attempted to approach it with a critical but open mind, open to both the problematic

implications and potentially positive potentials for the development of critical reflection and dialogue among students.

## **Background**

### *Social media and civility*

Before considering our specific case study, it's important to acknowledge that what we are looking at has a much larger social, historical and institutional context. Discussions of civility and public discourse in online spaces cannot be divorced from the confounding conditions afflicting contemporary public life. To refer to this historical condition as 'neoliberal', a term that now admittedly carries excess baggage, is a necessary first step in sketching out the wider context. Henry Giroux (2011), for example, situates new media spaces in the context of a wider decline of 'public values' not only within a neoliberalised society in general terms but also within an increasingly privatised, commoditised and instrumentalised education system. For Giroux, new media spaces are not merely an important barometer of such a decline, but also the potential site for a revitalisation of a 'public pedagogy'. Such a dialectical premise also resonates with the goal of this paper, that is, not simply to diagnose symptoms of a putative cultural decline on our campuses but also to point up potentially progressive aspects of the online campus culture under consideration. Most importantly, though, we remain mindful of the larger social context for both the symptoms and progressive potentials we identify.

Commonly diagnosed 'symptoms' of public discourse in social media spaces populated by young adults include an allegedly narcissistic culture that encourages competitive exhibitionism and aggressive displays of entitlement (Carpenter 2012). Often this is framed in largely media-centric and/or psycho-centric terms as a problem of disinhibition facilitated through (relative) anonymity, asynchronicity and group behaviour (see Santana 2014, 22; Rowe 2015, 122-3; Reader 2012). For our purposes, these traits of a 'dissociative imagination' (Santana 2014, 23) need to be seen as not simply originating with personalised screens and platform interfaces, but also situated within the broader social structuring of competitive individualism.

The same holds for more positive perspectives on young people's online interactions in terms of the performativity of identities and social bonding (see boyd and Ellison 2008, 219-220): neither media-centric nor psychological perspectives are especially valuable if abstracted from the historical context of a neoliberal culture that actively cues young people to view themselves both as consumers (of education, of information, of online 'airtime' etc.) and as personal brand managers.

This, then, is the vital context for considering 'civility' in social media spaces and for any consideration of how social media may be reshaping notions of civility among our students. Certainly we do not think it productive to begin from a preconceived and rigid model of civility that can be used as a yardstick for assessing (or, more realistically, as a

stick for beating) the kinds of interactions we see emerging in the digital campus culture. Rather than simply lamenting a loss of traditional values of civility, we recognise that civility itself is historically and culturally conditioned and dynamic, and we acknowledge that new media platforms (again, as part of a wider social context) may be contributing to normative shifts and, indeed, to a culture of greater reflexivity as social media participants openly contest those norms as part of their day-to-day interactions. New media scholar Zizi Papacharissi (2004) rightly emphasises that, if reducing civility to politeness and ‘good manners’ is always unhelpfully restrictive (not to mention ethnocentric and power-blind), such an impoverished definition is especially inadequate for the digital age. New media spaces – and this will be relevant to the present case study – offer the potential for a multiplicity of ‘civility norms’ to proliferate. This, of course, can be a source of misunderstanding and conflict but also potentially an opportunity for voices that do not easily fit a dominant culture of civility (as reflected, for example, in the traditional public spheres of party politics, legacy media or the university seminar room). The shift from face-to-face to screen-mediated interaction may provide (with obvious caveats) a relatively ‘safe’ space for heated disagreement and passionate argument to emerge (Papacharissi 2004). Such discussions point to a distinction (which is easier to discern in theory than in practice) between what Chantal Mouffe (2005) has termed an *agonistic* public culture on the one hand and, on the other, an *antagonistic* one premised on a libertarian and social Darwinist ethos, lacking in constraints on abuse, harassment or the reinforcement of racist, misogynistic and/or homophobic language. As Papacharissi (2004) reminds us, impeccably polite conversations can be wholly uncivil if they allow for stereotyping and denigration (267). Yet it is also true that ‘unruly’ public spaces (Goode et al 2011; Braun and Gillespie 2011), devoid of normative constraints on respectful language, can be more uncivil (and harmful) still. But rather than focusing unduly on etiquette, the concept of ‘dialogic civility’, which emphasises engagement and an orientation to opening up and keeping open productive lines of conversation (Langett 2013, 288), is a useful one to keep in mind for our purposes.

### *Social media in universities*

Social media spaces such as that under investigation here are a mixed blessing for higher education institutions. On the one hand, social media is seen as vital not only for marketing, disseminating information, and increasingly for teaching and learning, but also for ‘building campus community’, for ‘strengthening student-to-student interaction’ and for fostering social capital (Davis et al 2012, 11; see also Selwyn 2009). On the other hand, they pose significant challenges when they sit beyond institutional control. Whether driven by concerns to cultivate an inclusive and healthy campus ethos or to protect against reputational damage to an institution or any of its individual students, there are strong reasons for a university to seek some means of oversight of even the unofficial social media spaces populated by its students. It remains unclear whether a social media space that is not hosted or moderated by an institution, but which identifies users as students of that institution, can really come under its jurisdiction in

terms of disciplinary action, and there remains a paucity of best-practice literature on the topic (Daugird et al 2015, 97; see also Lenartz 2012). (Boundaries can be further fuzzied, of course, by questions surrounding academics and teachers engaging with students in unofficial online spaces [see, for example, Veletsianos & Kimmons 2013, 46-47; also Bateman and Willems 2012, 62-63]). Yet the challenge lies not only in determining jurisdictional boundaries, but also in identifying instances of 'misbehaviour' or incivility worthy of intervention or disciplinary action. While explicit and egregious instances of racism, homophobia or harassment may be relatively straightforward to identify (assuming institutional surveillance or reporting mechanisms are in place), the problems of digital campus culture may be more insidious in nature. Indeed, normalised forms of 'casual' denigration and 'microaggression' within digital campus culture may be a bigger, if less visible or sensational, issue. A study by Tynes et al., for example, discerns a climate of racism within US online campus environments fostered through three main types of microaggression: 'microinsults (rudeness and insensitivity, demeaning a person's heritage), microassaults (explicit racial derogation and discriminatory behavior), and microinvalidation (excluding or negating experiences)' (2013, 104).

Before proceeding, we need to point out that we remain agnostic on the question of whether institutional 'interventions' are either feasible or desirable. There is good reason to be skeptical about direct surveillance and disciplinary regulation of student-initiated social media spaces. On a practical level, it is likely that heavy-handed interventions and surveillance would simply precipitate migration to new online spaces not yet under the institutional gaze. And ethically, weighing student privacy against the need to maximise student safety (as any institution would, in principle, be expected to do with all corners of the *physical* campus environment and surrounding areas) need not result in an impasse; robust reporting and support mechanisms would likely prove more productive than direct policing of online spaces. But other kinds of intervention are also possible, such as education and awareness programmes intended to empower students to have rewarding but 'safe' experiences of online debate and conversation on the one hand, and to sensitise students to the implications of 'casual' bigotry or microaggression on the other. However, it is not within the scope of this individual paper to evaluate the effectiveness of such policies.

### **Cultural Politics and Social Media**

In order to engage with these questions of policy in relation to the online cultural politics of tertiary institutions, the idea of a campus needs, as discussed above, to be extended beyond its conventional physical manifestation, but still deeply connected to the real-world campus and its policies, practices and politics. The digital campus is a complex extension of the traditional campus, functioning as an additional space, an alternative space, an experimental space, and a reflective space that needs to be engaged with as part of the existing institutional culture. Academic and popular writing has largely focussed not on the potential value of these spaces, but on their perceived

dangers. Student-initiated social media spaces provide students with opportunities for engagement, debate and community-building, but also for aggression, discrimination and exclusion. The outraged coverage of various social media scandals suggests that what students are choosing to do with those opportunities is largely negative, and that the social media technologies that enable these anti-social behaviours are a cause for grave concern – positing negative behaviour as an inevitable end-result of these technologies and their architecture. However, as with the material campus, questions of articulation and representation are inextricably linked to embedded power hierarchies informed by gender, class, ethnicity, religion and nationality. The privileges and prejudices of those real-world hierarchies that influence day-to-day interactions inevitably inform online interactions in similar ways.

There have been notorious instances in the United States of discrimination, bullying and outright threats on student-initiated social media sites. For example, racist posts proliferated on Yik Yak at Colgate University in New York in the wake of the murder of Michael Brown and the rise of the #blacklivesmatter movement in 2014. In November 2015, police arrested a student at the University of Missouri for making threats to lynch black protestors that he posted on Yik Yak. The campus gossip site Bored@Baker was likewise used to threaten student protestors, as well as to post a rape guide targeting a specific female student, who was subsequently sexually assaulted. Concerns about public and personal safety grow with every media story about the aggressive and threatening use of social media, and the role of social media in enabling or even encouraging aggressive behaviour, for example the Loyola Marymount campus shooting threat posted on JuicyCampus in 2007, just four months after the site launched. More recently, a terrorist threat at the University of Southern Mississippi and the threat of a campus shooting at Indiana State University returned issues of campus safety and social media to the spotlight. Personal safety concerns are highlighted through instances of individual abuse and threats – at Rowan University a sex tape was filmed and posted on Yik Yak without the consent of the female student involved, and a lecturer at the University of Maryland Law School was threatened with rape if she did not stop talking, as were feminist protestors at the University of Mary Washington.

These examples stand in stark contrast to the explicitly stated aims of the student-initiated social media sites that are popular on the digital campus, such as campus gossip and campus confession sites. Yik Yak, College ACB, bored@ and JuicyGossip, prominent examples of campus gossip sites (anonymous campus-based message boards), all emphasise the humour and casual entertainment value of the online interaction, while discouraging any harmful or malicious content. Yik Yak has a set of guidelines for posting that specifically prohibits bullying ('defaming, abusing, harassing, stalking, and threatening others') and lewd, obscene, or offensive content. Yaks are purportedly monitored, removed if in breach, and repeat offenders are suspended for the good of the community. How closely the content is monitored is questionable in light of some of the content that remains, for example posts claiming 'I hate porchmonkeys' or 'All blacks are part ape' that featured in a Fox News story about Yik

Yak that asks, 'Does [this] app bring out the worst in people?' ('How Yik Yak Is Being Used for Cyberbullying' 2014). Similarly, when 72 women's and civil rights groups sent a letter to the US Department of Education calling for federal guidance on how colleges dealt with the abuse and harassment happening on anonymous campus social media platforms, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported a number of examples of abusive posts that passed Yik Yak's monitoring system, such as those with misogynistic portmanteaus like 'feminazis' and 'femicunts' and word manipulation like changing 'rape them in the mouth' to 'grape them in the mouth'. While users may have developed ways to work around the monitoring system, the Yik Yak system itself is built, as was JuicyGossip, on the idea that the First Amendment right to freedom of speech is paramount and that monitoring and intervention should therefore be minimal. Brooks Buffington, one of Yik Yak's founders, argues that 'making all comments anonymous is critical to maintaining users' privacy, encourages less-inhibited commentary, and allows the best posts to rise to the top' (Koenig 2014). Nonetheless, Yik Yak has introduced innovations such as geo-fences around schools as additional forms of protection in response to concerns over bullying and public safety.

Bored@ was first of the campus gossip sites, launched in 2006. JuicyGossip ('Always Anonymous ... Always Juicy!'), one of the most notorious, started in 2007 and closed in 2009 due to a lack of revenue, following student protests and its subsequent ban by a number of educational institutions. These early iterations featured many of the now-conventional aspects of campus gossip websites and apps – anonymity, localised communities, and feedback mechanisms such as comments and votes – as well as expectations and models for content that prioritise humour and entertainment. However, it also heralded a trend towards aggressive and prejudiced content, with attacks targeted at both groups and individuals. JuicyGossip founder Matt Ivester admits he 'didn't think too much how, when people are anonymous, it can get much more vicious than it ever would in person' (Kingkade 2015). User-regulation features that are intended to address concerns about threats of violence, bullying and racism appear to have had limited effect on reining in the darker sides of the gossip sites, and the instances of bigotry, harassment and abuse have continued in the latest gossip sites such as Yik Yak. Indeed in *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, Danielle Keats Citron calls campus gossip sites 'cyber cesspools' (2014, 51).

Resistance to JuicyGossip came first and primarily from students, then staff, and then from the institutions themselves, who attempted various responsive measures, such as banning certain sites from campus servers. In response to the racist posts on Yik Yak at Colgate, staff tried a more engaged response, dubbed 'the Faculty Yak Back', which mobilised staff to inundate Yik Yak with positive messages in an attempt to push back against the negativity. The attempt had some initial success, but the Yak environment rapidly returned to its usual focus on 'sex and poop', according to Professor Geoff Holm, one of the Yak Back organisers who calls Yik Yak 'the Internet equivalent of the truck stop wall' and questions how campus communities can (or cannot) control that (cited in Kingkade 2015). Although comprising the minority of posts on most campus sites and

apps, the discriminatory, threatening and sexual posts and protests in response garner ongoing attention in the popular press. The coverage raises questions about how universities are managing this aspect of the tertiary experience, with potentially significant institutional brand value at stake.<sup>1</sup> The social media policies that most institutions have in place cover official uses and sites, not unofficially affiliated groups and sites, such as student-administered Facebook groups or Yik Yak herds. Where does institutional control/intervention sit, and what is the difference? For example, universities in Aotearoa/New Zealand have legislated their commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. How can institutional policy that promotes diversity in this area be practically applied in a neoliberal para-institutional social media environment that espouses 'colourblindness' and embraces the fallacy of 'the level playing field'?

Are these spaces a barometer of public values, or the place in which those values are tested? After two years of sociological research on College ACB, Andrea Press argues that 'with these forums, we're getting a finger on a pulse of how racist many students are . . . we're seeing a side of people that is often kept hidden' (Kingkade 2015). In addition to racism, the sexism in the digital campus positions these gossip sites as the 'new bathroom wall', reinforced by the persistent scatological fascination that characterises many of the sites. The anonymity of the platforms does seem to amplify this – on YikYak, for example, there are posts that it is hard to imagine students would attach their name to, e.g. 'I love really long, peaceful shits', 'When a guys snapchat story lasts longer than he does' and 'Wanna have sex with me I've got a big dick'. It is worth noting again, however, that these kinds of yaks are part of a much larger community commentary and engagement that includes posts from the entirely mundane ('Is the library open tomorrow?') to the deeply heartfelt. The community commentary, engagement, connection and support tend to be overlooked in the exclusive (albeit justified) focus on the negative online activity. For example, in response to an Auckland herd yak 'Depressed AF #iwokeuplykdis', other students replied with supportive messages, such as 'I'm sorry to hear that man, I hope it gets better soon' and 'Same I know how you feel'. If nothing else, there is an imagined community being constructed in these spaces, created partly in opposition to other tertiary communities, nationally and internationally, in a way that reinforces a specific local community and campus identity. The critiques of narcissistic exhibitionism (and aggression) in social media outlined above need to be considered in the context of these online communities, and the ways in which previously marginalised voices gain agency within those communities should not be discounted in the discussions about how to moderate the more damaging dimensions of the digital campus.

### **Hearsay**

The Hearsay Facebook campus group is an interesting variation on the campus gossip sites discussed above, since it features almost all of the conventions that Bored@ and JuicyCampus established a decade ago but with one crucial difference: the posts are not anonymous. It is a public Facebook group that members join under their own names,



and all posts and comments are therefore clearly identifiable. While the asynchronous and group behaviour dimensions of the 'online disinhibition effect' discussed above are still in place, anonymity, the feature most targeted in debates around online aggression, is missing. The degree to which this mitigates aggressive and bigoted behaviour makes Hearsay a useful case study in the campus gossip site arena. While increased online aggression is theoretically enabled by anonymity, and would therefore logically be mitigated by the risks of identification – potential shaming, persecution, and even prosecution – the question of digital performativity also shifts when the posters are identifiable. The online performance is about self-presentation, about performance and performativity, in which identity is both communal and highly individual. The competitive exhibitionism becomes more complex in the negotiation of power within communal online spaces that are about contestation as much as they are about bonding. For example, the cult of the individual that underpins and perpetuates neoliberalism is strongly in evidence in online conversations that predominantly feature a refusal to acknowledge that privilege and success, disempowerment and failure might be the result of anything other than individual merit (or lack thereof). Attempts to acknowledge a broader social/political/historical context of institutionalised injustice are easily dismissed by using a neoliberal discourse of meritocracy. These aggressive displays of entitlement are built on explicitly constructed social media identities, where names and profile photos are attached to every post and comment.

Yet there are moments of passionate engagement and discussion, sustained debates about critical issues, and very moving expressions of community solidarity and support that suggest that on the virtual campus Hearsay is playing a highly experimental but deeply significant role in the campus experiences of contemporary tertiary students. How much involvement should the institutional powers have in monitoring or policing those environments? How might we weigh the dangers and damages of abuse and discrimination against the rights to free speech, to safety, and to privacy and respect? And how might we potentially work towards increasing the positive community role of these spaces while simultaneously mitigating the potential aggression and replication of prejudice?

In observing the Hearsay site over 18 months, certain trends became apparent in terms of the ways that the content is regulated, individual identities are performed, and conceptions of community identity and values are both contested and constructed. For example, in a competition to design the group's new banner, one of the leading contenders had the slogan 'Real Stories, Real Students'. However, the image accompanying this slogan was of graffiti reading 'Read this if you're a cunt'. This seems to sum up the contradictory impulses of campus gossip sites such as Hearsay, pulled between the desire for meaningful engagement and sense of community, and scatological impulses, narcissistic tendencies, and entrenched prejudices. Hearsay, with more than 25,000 members, illustrates the importance of online interaction on the digital campus – the sense of shared identity, shared concerns and experiences, as well as shared values. The posts where debates flare about these values are illustrative of the

level of investment students have in them and the community to which they are attached.

The high value placed on humour is a recurring source of debate. Humour is very culturally specific; the tripartite structure of comedy necessitates an understanding of who's telling the joke, to whom, and what the joke is about (Gillespie 2003, 93). Jokes often rely on an insider knowledge, something affirmed by the derision with which Reddit style posts are greeted on Hearsay. Recycled content is instantly rejected, and with it any sense that this particular digital campus community is not unique and special. Although it is a large public group, there is still a clear sense of who belongs, who doesn't, and what it means to belong. In testing and enforcing those boundaries, the site will often resort to stereotypes as a way of affirming or challenging existing power relations. This inevitably leads to instances of casual racism, sexism and homophobia – posts that illustrate the ways in which humour is used to dismiss prejudice as well as justify and normalise existing power relations. These moments permit a convergence of systemic racism and sexism with symbolic racism and sexism – both overt and inferential – thereby contributing to an online environment that encourages, or at least normalises, discrimination and aggression, including microaggression. The constant and casual use of words like 'pussy', 'cunt' and 'faggot' is one of the most overt ways in which microaggression is normalised. It is important to note, however, that these comments do not always go unchallenged. There are regular attempts at intervention by students who object to the prejudice and question the assumptions that underpin these aggressive displays of entitlement. While these objections seem to have little success changing the attitudes of the original posters, who dismiss them as political correctness, they have nonetheless triggered extensive debates on some occasions, and ensure that the cultural politics of the group remain contested. As with the physical campus, racism, sexism and homophobia feature most commonly in displays of prejudice, as illustrated by the examples discussed below.

The casual engagement/entertainment discourse that underpins the campus gossip sites, framing them as 'tools for observational comedy' and campus commentary (Kingkade 2015), produces an environment where humour can be used as justification/excuse for sharing racist 'jokes' and ideas, as well as the casual use of racial slurs. The easy use of the term 'nigga', for example, is rarely commented on. Memes featuring black men with captions such as 'ADONBILIVIT' are fairly common in the comments section. These instances of overt racism are built on a structure of default whiteness in which inferential racism plays an ongoing part, in which an us/them discourse is perpetuated, reinscribed and rarely questioned. Stereotypes abound around marginalised groups that encourage the unquestioning acceptance of the status quo, such as, 'If they've never seen white people, they've never seen technology'. In a classic example of 'the linguistics of domination', one post reads, 'non-whites speaking English more fluently than whites' followed by a surprise emoji, indicating disbelief that English is not the exclusive realm of whiteness, and revealing assumptions about the linguistic abilities of people of colour (Shohat and Stam 1994, 191). Another post

showed a picture of a very small hole in a campus bathroom wall with the caption 'Asian glory hole'. The insulting stereotype being deployed in this case is an effective cultural flattening of vastly diverse groups of people and these casually shared stereotypes serve to normalise and naturalise a Eurocentric discourse of superiority, preserving white privilege by marginalising, denigrating and disavowing the Other. Yet these discourses are not unchallenged, and there are instances where the group uses humour as critique as well; a post that quoted a comment made by another student that Australians are 'inherently racist. It's just part of who they are' was met with a range of very aware replies, such as 'Thank God we're not racist like those backwards, kangaroo-boffing inbred salty hicks'.

There are more serious debates taking place in the discussions as well. When there was a post claiming that a student was allegedly assaulted by a staff member on campus, the discussion thread showed an array of responses that illustrate the cultural politics at play in the group as a whole. There were the inevitable attempts at misogynistic humour, such as Student X, who tried to narrate the instance as a pornographic story of a desperate student 'with her cleavage hanging out' and a lecturer who 'hasn't blown a load in months' that ends with him choking her 'to the point where she can't even get a breath out'. Several students objected and asked that Student X '[p]lease show the faintest amount of humanity and respect to the victim by not making disgusting trivialising jokes' and querying whether he realised that 'the victim could easily see your messages. Are you seriously this socially stunted?' In what appears to be the dominant pattern in these interactions, the next response was a dismissal of the objections by one of the self-appointed moderators: 'Go back to tumblr'. This dismissive insult is one of a small set of commonly recurring ones that are used to invalidate the objections and shut down debate. The other two commonly used put-downs are accusations of political correctness and of being a social justice warrior (SJW). That these are considered derisive and insulting is a reflection of the neoliberal campus environment where competitive individualism is celebrated, and of a New Racist social environment where ideas of a meritocracy and a 'level playing field' predominate. Disturbingly, there also seems to be a shift even further right among some students into a neoconservative attitude, actively pushing back against restorative justice measures and cementing the discourse of 'special privileges' that the right have constructed regarding institutional equity measures. There is fierce resistance among these students to the idea of white/male privilege suggested by the 'social justice warriors'.

Any mention of feminism or race in a post inevitably triggers heated debates about gender and racial politics, with some serious and some facetious contributions (for example, posting pictures of a capybara as a way to shut down an extended argument between feminists and men's rights activists). What is evident in those instances is the amount of diverse opinion, the level of contestation, and the importance of debate to students in the digital campus – even though those overtly political posts are the minority of the posts in the group (with most posts focussing on the mundanity of campus life). What is also apparent is that there are issues of power in terms of the

differing level of influence students have. There are certain high-profile members who have constructed very clear personae for themselves that they perform in the group, and they have acquired high numbers of followers over the years. Interestingly they are all white men, and are the self-appointed moderators of content and behaviour within the group. Like any Facebook group, Hearsay has admins who can, and very occasionally do, remove posts and ban members. However, the majority of the moderation is managed by the group members themselves, particularly the very high-profile members, and they have developed an organic set of rules and expectations that are enforced via replies in the comments thread that range from outright derision and mockery to active aggression. For example, there is strong pushback against anyone posting lost and found messages, with posters regularly being told to ‘fuck off’ since such posts lack any entertainment value. Nonetheless, there is a strong sense of community that manifests in various ways: warnings about traffic wardens are encouraged (a reflection perhaps of the interests of the dominant members in the group) and complaints about the misuse of shared space are met with support. Laughing at people is seen as crucial part of maintaining that sense of community, but the rules of the group require that to be done anonymously; while people post under their own names, they are not permitted to name other students that they talk about, especially not to name and shame them. However, attitudes towards privacy and anonymity are somewhat complicated when students can and frequently do take and upload photos without the permission (or even knowledge) of the subject.

Questions of anonymity have been debated within the group, and while the photographs are largely seen as unproblematic, the lack of anonymity when posting is seen as playing a part in controlling the level of toxicity that has characterised so many of the anonymous campus gossip sites. There are still ad hominem attacks, but there also seems to be a heightened degree of identification, sympathy and solidarity when students know and recognise the person posting. There is the expected disinterest and dismissal when posters are not recognised, and when content is judged unworthy by the agreed group standards for humour and cynical observations of campus life. The disagreements that occur, particularly regarding gender, sexual and racial politics, have so far not reached the level of vitriolic abuse evident in anonymous groups such as those discussed above. Ideas and values are certainly still contested, though, in sometimes quite confrontational ways, and there does appear to be a level of prejudice that is deemed ‘acceptable’. It is of concern that the most antagonistic and aggressive responses are always targeted at the so-called social justice warriors when they promote equity and challenge entrenched privilege and prejudices. While it is essential to focus on these antagonistic dimensions of the interaction, it is equally necessary to understand the ways in which these sites provide students with agency, a sense of independence, and an opportunity to experiment with and negotiate boundaries. The online campus community is a site not just of aggression and discrimination, but also of affirmation and support. Questions about how to manage the negative aspects of digital campus groups need to start by focussing on those positive elements and how to

amplify them. As an organic group with a very large membership, there are shifts in the cultural politics; as norms are contested, the site at times tends more towards the antagonistic, but there are also moments when it is arguably more agonistic.

## **Conclusion**

Original Hearsay Post: ‘The grade you receive from any professor does NOT define your true intelligence. It’s just a filtering system that shows how obedient one is to control’.

Hearsay could be seen as merely a reflection of institutional, social and cultural values, but it seems more like a space where those values are put to the test. Although the orthodoxy is largely accepted and endorsed, this is not without discussion and debate, and there are frequent moments of carnivalesque rebellion against the status quo. Certain posts and comments provoke concerns about prejudice and discrimination, but these instances should be seen as symptoms of diversity and inclusivity at a broader and institutional level. The institutional context matters; online campus culture is an extension of, reflection of, and contributor to the physical campus and institutional culture, policy and politics. As students are spending more time in their tertiary experience on the digital campus, universities need to engage more and more with that digital extension to the physical architecture. Concerns over toxic content will continue to grow, as will questions of how best to respond. The censorship of JuicyCampus did little to reduce the popularity of campus gossip sites, and may well have contributed to it. Attempts at banning the sites appear to have had little effect on their popularity or content, and there has increasingly been a shift towards more positive engagement, encouraging debate and discussion as well as greater moderation and accountability for operators. Social media platforms function as part of the digital campus in both an official pedagogical capacity as well as an unofficial social capacity, in which their para-institutional position creates concerns over the inability of the conventional systems to control, influence, or even monitor the interactions that are taking place. These concerns in turn raise questions about the rights and responsibilities of the institution in these virtual campus spaces, as well as opening up discussions about the potential of the virtual campus in terms of student experience and engagement. Students may find that the unofficial forums of the digital campus provide them with agency, a voice that the bureaucratic structure of the traditional university has largely denied them, but how they use that voice should continue to be a concern for educators, for institutions, and for the student communities themselves.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the negativity directed towards Stuebenville High School after the high-profile rape case involving students from the school.

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