

Indigenous digital life

Every day, billions of people connect online. But for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, digital spaces can also be places where racism, harassment and exclusion are experienced in new and harmful ways.

Distinguished Professor Bronwyn Carlson has transformed understanding of what it means to be Indigenous online. Her research has shown that digital platforms are not neutral spaces. They can amplify colonial power, racial violence and exclusion, while also providing powerful opportunities for cultural connection, political participation and community building.

CHALLENGING THE DIGITAL INCLUSION NARRATIVE

When Professor Carlson began this work in 2010, Indigenous peoples were largely absent from academic and policy discussions about the internet. The dominant focus was on digital access, assuming that getting people online was the primary challenge.

Her research fundamentally shifted that conversation. It demonstrated that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were already using digital technologies to maintain culture, organise politically and strengthen communities. The critical issue was not simply access, but the quality, safety and equity of their online experiences.

Over more than a decade, Professor Carlson and her team documented the disproportionate levels of online racism, cyberbullying, hate speech, image-based abuse and impersonation experienced by Indigenous peoples. Their work also showed how platform design, moderation systems and algorithms can reproduce offline inequalities in digital environments.

DRIVING NATIONAL POLICY AND INDUSTRY CHANGE

Professor Carlson's research has influenced government policy, digital regulation and technology companies across Australia. It has:

- informed parliamentary inquiries into racism, hate and violence
- shaped the work of the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, including advice to major platforms such as Meta, TikTok, Bumble and X
- reframed the national conversation on digital inclusion through the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, shifting the focus from access to infrastructure, affordability, cultural safety and Indigenous self-determination
- informed the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children by recognising digital safety as a critical violence prevention issue
- underpinned the eSafety Commissioner's landmark report *Cool, Beautiful, Strange and Scary: The Online Experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, which shifted policy away from individual notions of online risk towards recognition of the structural conditions shaping Indigenous digital life
- advanced Indigenous Data Sovereignty and ethical digital governance through membership in Maiam nayri Wingara and leadership in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEVAW).

EXTENDING THE CONVERSATION

Professor Carlson has brought these issues into public debate through articles in The Conversation, national media, podcasts and her landmark book *Indigenous Digital Life: The Practice and Politics of Being Indigenous on Social Media* (2021) – the first scholarly book dedicated entirely to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander digital life.

Today, her research continues to shape emerging debates around artificial intelligence, Indigenous data governance and digital accountability. As governments and technology companies grapple with the future of AI, Professor Carlson's work continues to ensure that Indigenous peoples are not simply included in digital futures, but are helping to define them.

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