

Bond University

Dispute Resolution Review

Volume 4 Issue 3

2025

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THE POLITICS OF VOICE AND THE RE-INTEGRATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: WHAT DOES ANTHROPOLOGY HAVE TO OFFER?

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Abstract

In the context of Australia's 2023 referendum to recognise an Indigenous Voice to Parliament within its Constitution, we witnessed increasingly polarised discourse among advocates for both the Yes and No campaigns. Tailored news fed people radically different information about the Voice. Online forums—both those advocating conspiracy theories and those offering more mainstream advocacy—filtered out important contextual information and thus operated as online echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. Consequently, online forum users mostly only encountered (and contributed) information filtered to support a given worldview.

Such extreme polarisation challenges complacent assumptions about the reach and operation of the public sphere. Yet bridging disparate worldviews is integral to the method and practice of ethnography. Drawing on examples of polarised discourse arising in the Voice debate, we outline how anthropologists can contribute to reinvigorating dialogic engagement and bridging divergent discourses within the public sphere. We reflect on everyday encounters, the importance of re-entangling contexts, negotiating vulnerability and dignity in ethnographic encounters, the limitations of anthropological practice, and the value of collaborating across disciplinary and practice boundaries.

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I INTRODUCTION: THE VOICE REFERENDUM AS POLARISING ISSUE

In 2023, Australian domestic politics was dominated by the prospect of a national constitutional referendum in which Australian voters would be asked to decide on instituting a permanent First Nations advisory body to the Australian Parliament, to be called the Voice to Parliament. The date for the referendum was not set until 30 August 2023, with the referendum date set for 14 October 2023.

The public discourse that ensued across the nation in relation to The Voice referendum was widespread, diverse and intense. As anthropologists with an interest in polarisation, we were each keen to record and reflect on how Australians navigated discussion of opposing views in the public sphere. In particular, we sought to consider what anthropology might offer public discourse, which we perceived as increasingly polarised. The following excerpts from discussion threads on social media platform X in August 2023 give some sense of the range of views and emotions that the prospect of the referendum evoked. It should be noted that the below are not representative of the wider discourse, rather they are provided to illuminate how opposing opinions were navigated in some discussions.

A discussion thread on social media platform X on 23 August 2023, which referenced the forthcoming Voice referendum, received 15.6K views, 179 reposts and 775 likes. The author, whom we identify as ‘C1’, provides their profile description as: “Conservative, no pronouns, anti-woke, St Kilda¹ die-hard” (X, 23 August 2023). A transcript of the thread follows.

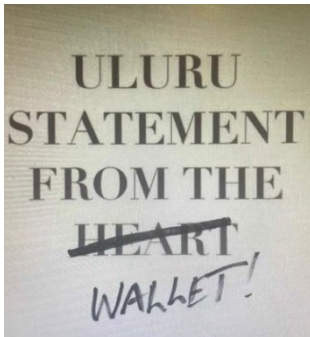
Figure 1: A de-identified excerpt from a discussion thread on social media platform X (2023a) showing the author’s profile description



C1: Albanese² will announce the date of the Voice referendum in South Australia. SA is the swing state that will decide the referendum. Come on South Australians, Vote no to the Voice.

¹ St Kilda is the name of an Australian Rules Football team (and also the name of a suburb of Melbourne).
² Anthony Albanese, leader of the Australian Labor Party, has been Prime Minister since 2022.

Figure 2: Image from discussion thread on social media platform X (2023a)



C2: Vote Yes

C1: Never

C3: Nothing to do with money.

C1: All to do with money.

C4: In order to implement Agenda 2030,³ the LNP and ALP⁴ need to divide us. Both sides work together to put us into green ghettos... Elders want the right outcome. They are not divided into left vs right. Listen to the Elders & come together as one. (X, 23 August 2023)

Another post on social media platform X several days later, which presented a contrasting view on the Voice referendum question, received 5605 views, 55 reposts and 233 likes. The author, whom we describe as 'C5' gives their profile description as: "#IStandWithDan Dan is my idol. Musician and hospo worker. Guitar teacher. Pro-Vaxx. Labor Voter! F*** Murdoch. Victorian proud. Cats. Footy. Cooking. Vote Yes" (X, 2023b).⁵ A transcript of the post follows.

³ Agenda 2030 is a UN sustainable development agenda adopted in 2015. Since the COVID pandemic conspiracy theorists have postulated that the agenda is evidence of a secret plot by elites to enslave global populations, iterations of the theory differ; in some the conspirators are a Jewish cabal, in some they intend to feed enslaved populations insects, and in some the plot include a plan to emasculate men.

⁴ LNP refers to the centre-right parliamentary coalition of the Liberal Party and National Party; ALP refers to the centre-left Australian Labor Party, currently the party in government (since 2022).

⁵ 'Dan' refers to Victorian Labor Party leader and State Premier at the time, Daniel Andrews. 'Cats' is the nickname of an Australian Rules Football team, the Geelong 'Cats'. The hashtag '#IStandWithDan' references a highly polarised debate about Victorian lock-down measures introduced under Daniel Andrews' leadership as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3: Post on social media platform X (2023b), showing the author’s profile description



C5: Dutton⁶ canned The Voice proposal on day 1. As he does with ANY proposal from the Labor government. Dutton has a political motivation for this referendum to fail, and that is to deliver a bloody blow to Labor. His motivation for spreading all this negative crap hasn’t got anything to do with sincerity or caring for the dilemma of our First Nations people. The types this negative crap [h]as brought in are hate groups. Anti-vaxxers, Anti-LGBTQI, Anti-multiracialism, MAGA vibing trigger happy wannabe Floridians. Climate change deniers. All the gross stuff. Now the hard-core conspiracy theorists are out with the write ‘yes or no’ crap. There are conspiracy’s [sic] being thrown around about the AEC with MAGA type accusations towards them. Ffs [for fucks sake]. Dutton did this. And so has the Murdoch media like they did with the U.S. with the “big lie” crap on the 2020 election results. We are better than this Americanised crap. Let’s stamp it out by sending Dutton, racists, and the trash LNP loving media a message. And Vote Yes to The Voice. (X, 2023b)

⁶ Peter Dutton has been leader of the Opposition in the Australian Federal Parliament since 2022.

Figure 4: Cartoon entitled 'The Peter Dutton Statement from the Heart' by Jon Kudelka (Originally published in "The Saturday Paper, 21/1/2023, and re-published with C5's X post)



Leading up to Australia's October 2023 referendum on recognising an Indigenous Voice to Parliament within its Constitution, we witnessed increasingly polarised discourse among advocates for both the Yes and No sides. Many of us found the extreme discourse polarisation a challenge to our complacent assumptions about the reach and operation of the public sphere as a space of rational argumentation. More disturbing was the sense that many people no longer converse at all with those they disagree with. Reflecting on this, we (the authors) started to wonder, does that mark a shift in practices of sociation mediated in part by new forms of technology, or have we for too long been deluding ourselves into thinking our familiar epistemic bubbles constitute a broad, open public sphere?

As the Voice referendum neared, we observed ourselves and others around us refortifying our own sense of being right. Drawing attention to the absence of reasoned debate and the importance of doing something about it met with blank looks, defiant self-justification or despair. The subsequent failure of the referendum to be passed further deepened this sense of despair for many. What were we—and they—doing wrong? Why did we all find it so hard to engage in reasoned debate? And was this something new, aided and abetted by our ever-evolving communicative technologies?

We found ourselves struggling with our tacit assumption that anyone concerned with logical coherence and fairness would draw similar conclusions to ours about the validity and value of the request from the majority of Australia's Indigenous people for constitutional recognition and an Indigenous voice to parliament. It was easy to take the next logical step into a judgemental stance that anyone who reached a different conclusion must be misguided or ignorant of the facts. From such a stance, the problem appears as an informational deficit which could be rectified by disseminating relevant information and engaging in conversation and debate. Yet there was stark evidence around us in our own experiences and in the national press that

conversation and reasoned debate were not occurring, and persuasion was proving ineffective. Polarisation seemed almost to be naturalised and becoming more deeply entrenched. We found ourselves ever more disenchanted with our assumptions, yet uncomfortable with the alternative that those with different views were irredeemably different and that engaging in discourse with them was futile. Yet we were not willing to concede that polarisation was inescapable, nor unbridgeable. What could we as anthropologists contribute based on our disciplinary history of engaging in communication across cultural divides?

It became increasingly clear to us that as long as we view participation in public discourse as a zero-sum quest for a singular truth, the endpoint will be further polarisation. How else then might we frame our participation? What if we were to view contributions to public discourse—even those containing what we might see as disinformation—as ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen, 2008)? This simple shift to considering contributions to public discourse as socio-political communicative acts rather than as truth statements both spells hope, and poses a challenge: How might this shift in perspective illuminate ways of bridging disparate worldviews in polarised debates? And what can the method and practice of ethnography contribute to that project? Our response to these challenges draws particularly on our anthropological training and experience. Yet we are mindful of the limitations of anthropological practice, and reflect also on ways of enhancing collaborative engagement across discipline and practice boundaries.

II UNDERSTANDING POLARISATION IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC DISCOURSE

It is necessary first to establish what we mean by ‘polarisation’. Discourse can be considered polarised when each interlocuter’s discursive frame is so far distant from the other that there appears to be no common understanding of the facts relevant to the subject of discussion and few or no shared values. This may not be as intractable as it seems. While divergent views on what is a relevant fact are often a point of departure, these point to divergent frames of interpretation and value systems. One of the insights of transformative mediation practice is that as disputants start to listen better, they can begin to see and acknowledge common or relatable values, despite holding to differential expressions of those values. Where such recognition occurs, it starts to create a bridge (Cloe & Goldsmith, 2011, pp. 150-152). That requires a willingness to engage in open listening, and skilled guidance. Without these, dialogue is difficult to achieve. In the Voice debate, for example, surface disputes over facts referenced divergent interpretive schemas and values. Some people saw the amount of money already spent on redressing Indigenous disadvantage as a relevant factor in opposing the Voice, while others did not see its relevance to the question of constitutional recognition (Phillips 2023; Lewis 2023). Failure to achieve bridging dialogue in such polarised discourses, we argue, is not reducible to an intractable clash of values or factual disagreement. Bridging requires learning to communicate

despite and across lines of difference. While this is an age-old human challenge, it appears to be exacerbated by the way our present-day technologically-enabled modes of communication shape our spheres of interaction.

People draw on both experiential and ideological factors when deciding which facts are relevant to a given subject. As philosopher and ethicist C. Thi Nguyen argues, people increasingly experience ‘ideological separation’ and exist within epistemic ‘structures of exclusion’. He differentiates two distinct such epistemic infrastructures: epistemic bubbles—environments in which relevant information is omitted, including by accident; and echo chambers—environments in which new relevant information is pre-emptively discredited, and people are subject to systemic informational isolation via the manipulation of trust (Nguyen 2020). Nguyen uses this distinction to explain different responses that people make to challenges to their worldview. Where people’s experience is mediated through the lens of an epistemic bubble, introducing new relevant information may improve dialogic engagement—“popping the bubble”—and even lead to agreement on underlying facts and values. Conversely, people who communicate within echo chambers tend to discredit new information and leverage it to amplify prevailing narratives around their preferred version of relevant facts and values (Nguyen 2020).

Reflecting on the 2023 Voice discourse through Nguyen’s frame, we observed advocates of the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ vote constructing discursive architecture indicative of both epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. Did this distinction tell us anything useful about the state of public discourse or the failure of the Voice campaign?

III THE EXPERIENCE OF A YES CAMPAIGNER—TIM’S REFLECTIONS⁷

I think the Voice discourse illuminates the degree to which Australians have become accustomed to epistemic separation. I felt the impact of this first-hand when doorknocking and telephoning as part of the official Yes23 campaign. I was struck by how both the adamant ‘Yes’ supporters I was campaigning with and the adamant ‘No’ supporters we sometimes met labelled the views of the ‘other’ as erroneous and therefore not accessible to discussion. At best, they might invite refutation, but not consideration. When I asked one interlocutor what the key factor underlying their decision to vote ‘No’ was, they responded:

What? Are you campaigning for Yes or are you trying to persuade people to change their vote?

Another interlocutor was adamant that he would have loved to vote ‘Yes’, but:

⁷ This and the following sections derive from a conversation between the authors. We have retained the informal conversational language but aggregated our respective contributions to the conversation under separate headings.

No-one's explained to me, to the Australian public, how this will work. ... I want [Prime Minister] Albanese to explain how this is going to work, the details.

This person was not interested in letting me or my companion respond to these challenges in any way.

What was more disturbing for me was encountering a similar unwillingness to entertain dialogue from some members of the Yes campaign. We expect our ideological others to close their ears, but not our peers. On one occasion, I was telling another campaigner how I was disillusioned with the narrow focus of campaigning. This took a turn I was not expecting.

Tim: You know, I've found campaigning unsatisfying. I want to have dialogue with people and have more opportunity to listen to them. Like, I was told off by a fellow campaigner when I was doorknocking and suggested to someone who was inclining 'No' that they shouldn't just read the information we gave them but should look at both sides.

Other: You're naïve. How can you advocate that people read disinformation? The no campaign is all lies.

Tim: Yes, there's misinformation and disinformation, but it's not all misinformation and disinformation. People will be more inclined to listen if we don't tell them just to read what we give them.

Other: You're very naïve.

Tim: You've got to engage people as people to reach them emotionally.

Other: There's only one set of facts. You can't tell people to read lies. You've got to convince them with the facts.

We broke off before I could explain my view on how offering vulnerability builds trust, or that anything short of respecting people's autonomy and intelligence does not invite, but closes down, the possibility of dialogue. Or, that disagreement over facts can be the starting point for an open conversation of discovery about divergent experiences and worldviews, and this can build respect and uncover unexpected convergences of concerns and values.

It was not the disagreement, but the put-down that bothered me. I did not expect agreement, but I did expect a peer to hear me out and hoped that they would at least ponder the disjunct I was alluding to. If they would treat an ally with contempt, how would they expect to reach through to anyone else?

Another time, at a public information session about the Voice referendum hosted by my local council, one of the audience members afterwards remarked lamentably that people from the 'No' side would have been too scared to attend such a public forum, assuming that it would be mostly attended by supporters of the 'Yes' side.

These are anecdotal snippets, and I do not have the thicker context of any one snippet to draw strong ethnographic insights. Yet they illustrate a troubling complacency about the absence of a dialogic public forum.

I have been thinking a lot about what ethnographic method can contribute to the process of bridging divergent discourses. Undertaking a cross-cultural

research project is a key rite of passage in anthropological training at the PhD level. Traditionally, this has involved relocating to a strongly differentiated cultural setting where the ethnographer can make few grounded assumptions about local social and cultural practices and must undergo an immersive learning process. At the same time, this experience is meant to defamiliarise the everyday experiential world of the ethnographer's home culture. This relocation—to a setting that is sufficiently distant and different—is meant to create a moment of difference and naivety that impels the ethnographer's ability to probe novel social and cultural frames. Indeed, as ethnographers our primary mode of engagement is naive probing. We do not see ourselves as being there to dispute the other's worldview, even if our very presence and our probing do disturb local frames of reference.

When I tried to frame my experience and observations of the Voice referendum debate as a Yes23 campaign volunteer through this understanding of the ethnographic lens, I was confronted by the realisation that we seem to find it far harder to extend the same kind of naivety and openness to difference and defamiliarisation when confronting 'close' others. While anthropologists have increasingly begun to focus on ethnography in home culture contexts, this often means undertaking ethnography in marginal communities within the home-culture context which are clearly differentiated from the ethnographer's own cultural milieu, a classic example being Phillipe Bourgois' ethnography of crack dealers (Bourgois, 1995). Ethnographer and reader alike can suspend judgement and accord a guarded respect and endearment to otherness that is both confronting and clearly demarcated. My experiences and observations as a volunteer for the 'Yes' campaign, however, prompt me to pose the question: What happens when the other is so close that we cannot let go of our assumptions? And where we are ourselves tacitly implicated in a politics of disdain that we fail to see? Or where we refuse to treat our differences as equivalent?

IV THE PERSPECTIVE OF A CONSPIRACY THEORY RESEARCHER—PASCALE'S REFLECTIONS

Tim's question resonates in the study of conspiracy theories, because describing something as a "conspiracy theory" is typically a way to discredit the information as implausible, and calling a person a "conspiracy theorist" (or "cooker," in the vernacular levelled by the Australian Prime Minister at a fellow member of parliament⁸) is most often a way to paint that person as an unreliable source of information, and by corollary to paint their opinion as irrelevant.⁹ The reason some conspiracy theories (and conspiracy theorists)

⁸ Blair Jackson, "Cookers': Anthony Albanese's Swipe at LNP Senator Gerard Rennick, Peter Dutton over Conspiratorial Childcare Posts," *News.Com.Au*, August 11, 2011, <https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/cookers-anthony-albaneses-swipe-at-lnp-senator-gerard-rennick-peter-dutton-over-conspiratorial-childcare-posts/news-story/a9b5ac314d46519642a5e7e48ee7f343>.

⁹ Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

are treated with such disdain is because certain types of conspiracy theories are:

“... first and foremost forms of political propaganda ... political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda.”¹⁰

It must be noted that in Tim’s vignette above, the alleged “facts” advocated by his interlocutor were *also* being promoted first and foremost to promote a political agenda. In Tim’s example, neither the discussant advocating ‘factualness’ nor the other advocating (alleged) ‘disinformation’ occupy a politically neutral (moral) high ground.

Citizenship arises not only from formal membership or legal status, but also from political, social, and cultural practices and acts which (re)produce people’s relationship with societal institutions.¹¹ By debating alternative explanations of events, ‘truths’ and ‘facts’, people promoting political agendas on all sides of the referendum debate—including people promoting conspiracy theories—are enacting their citizenship by participating in the political social and cultural practices which continue to (re)produce their relationships with each-other, parliament, the media, and First Nations. But it can reasonably be said that some conspiracy theories and disinformation are politically problematic because they contradict the generally accepted values of liberal democratic societies (Cívik & Hardoš, 2020). The question then becomes one of judgement, because a conclusion that some conspiracy theories are problematic implies that some positions in a polarised debate *should* be countered. The idea of taking a position on what is or is not ‘problematic’ or what should be ideologically ‘countered’ is a deeply uncomfortable proposition for cultural anthropologists, who more often seek to understand (rather than discredit) alternative worldviews.

Netherlands-based sociologist Jaron Harambam (2021) says countering conspiracy theories with facts is misguided on three counts:

...debunking conspiracy theories is not possible (can scholars actually know the real truth?), not professional (is taking sides in truth wars what we should do?), and not productive (providing more “correct” information won’t work as knowledge acceptance is not just a cognitive/epistemic issue). (Harambam 2021)

People do not only believe in conspiracy theories because they constitute the most believable explanation for a circumstance or event. People may also engage with conspiracy theories as “...an expression of identity, belonging and subcultural allegiances,” in part because they feel estranged from the “producers and adjudicators of knowledge” (Harambam 2021). Harambam (2021) advocates building safe and productive discursive spaces, which he

¹⁰ Cassam, 7.

¹¹ Sian Lazar, ed., *The Anthropology of Citizenship; A Reader*, First (West Sussex UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013); Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, eds., *Acts of Citizenship* (New York USA: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

calls “deliberative knowledge platforms,” as a means to build more productive public dialogue.

I find much in Harambam’s argument compelling, but suggest there are circumstances in which the benefits of deliberative dialogue must be balanced against the propensity for some disinformation to cause harm. For example, in the lead up to the Voice referendum I found online content that referred to the antisemitic New World Order conspiracy theory and projected violence into democratic dialogue. The following is from a blog on the *Substack* platform.

The actual war is terrifyingly real: the true warmongers are the Transnational Globalists¹² ...

The ‘Voice to Parliament’ is their “secret weapon” against the Australian people—a deceptive Trojan-offering (stuffed with Globalist-inspired United Nations agendas) to be wheeled within the walls of our Federal Parliament to ultimately rape, pillage and overthrow our lands and nation from the inside ...

This is the current war, this is the scope of the present battle, and these are the aspirations of the Globalist Invaders—and we might fight!

This is WAR! (Reason, 2023)

Treating text such as this author’s blog as dialogic engagement, without acknowledging the ways in which their text is strategically designed to escalate targeted hostility towards certain groups of people, creates a risk of overlooking narratives that have potential to cause significant social harms, and real-world violence.

Conspiracy theories such as the New World Order can be understood as weaponised strategic narrative (Madisson & Ventsel, 2021). In this context, democratic deliberations remain a necessary, but insufficient response.

V REFLECTIONS FROM A MEDIATOR—TIM’S PERSPECTIVE

A public forum is not the place for trying to counter the narrative or engage in a factual debate about the grounds for or against vitriol such as that embedded in the New World Order conspiracy theory. Is that not, ultimately, Harambam’s point? A factual debate fails to address the reasons and motivations for identifying with a particular group or discursive position. Nevertheless, it should be possible to ‘read’ shifts in the incidence and reach of conspiracy narratives as meta-signals about social injustices, and failures of fairness and reasonableness. Why not invite open dialogue about the everyday experiences of inequality or other issues that motivate people’s receptivity to such rhetoric? What stands in the way of holding an open conversation—where people need not fear having their ‘belief system’ attacked—about everyday issues like employment needs, housing needs, etc. that underpin people’s disenfranchisement?

¹² A code word for Jewish people

By not considering the meta-signalling aspects of conspiracist rhetoric, we are likely to reify the signals and miss what people are trying to say by and through their actions and rhetoric—as acts of citizenship. They may not be able to articulate readily what they mean, either. We are equally if not more prone to overlook our own vulnerability to epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, particularly when we feel our positionality is justified by reason. This is where ethnography can provide a powerful means for surfacing the tacit knowledge, values and emotions that constitute the lived experience of social differentiation.

The experience of having one's belief system attacked or threatened is not conducive to open and generous communication. It is difficult to acknowledge the humanity of another when you yourself do not feel heard, particularly if it is that other who is not listening. Central to transformative mediation theory and practice is that parties in conflict need to be empowered to move out of their self-absorbed state of alienation from themselves and each other. The experience of conflict or disagreement, whatever the cause, diminishes effective communication, but does not destroy parties' "fundamental ability to move—with assistance, but of their own volition—from weakness to strength or from self-absorption to recognition of others" (Folger & Bush, 1996, p. 270). The mediator's belief in the disputants' underlying competence and decency is critical in paving the way for disputants to see and respond to opportunities for recognition of their opponent's perspective (Folger & Bush, 1996, p. 270). Methods from transformative mediation and allied facilitative practices such as Deep Democracy¹³ provide practical ways to make diversity of perspective an asset in shaping community and community interactions.

VI SHARED CONCLUSIONS—THE POTENTIALITIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

We have exposed some critical questions arising in part from the disturbing experiences we have each related from our engagements with the Voice debate and from our reflections on anthropological methods and practice. We have each been struggling in different ways with how to bridge the impasse that seems to be there within either highly polarised discourses or between separate sealed discourses. Within this impasse communication across difference appears impossible. Pascale voices concerns that engaging with extremist discourse might shape our shared society in undesirable ways. But is that not what being *in* society is all about: that within any given polity or community, *how* we talk through and about our differences is formative of society—as both the process and outcome of sociation?

Nguyen's (2020) distinction between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers is helpful in understanding the factors that frustrate productive dialogic engagement—particularly in explicating the range of responses to attempts to bridge epistemic separation—but it also has limitations. Nguyen describes ideal types that provide models for our thinking, but which are

¹³ See article by Myrna Lewis in this issue

difficult to differentiate in real time. He also paints epistemic separation as somewhat a-historical. On the contrary, epistemic separation is neither new nor unconditioned by the particularities of social, political and economic contexts. The descent into Cold War following the shaky US, UK and Soviet Union alliance that had seen the defeat of Germany in WWII provides a case in point. What is new is how the particular affordances of new communications technologies shape behaviour, further diminishing people's exposure both to views that differ from theirs and to forums where bridging dialogue is a possibility.

Harambam (2021) astutely observes that the rational/analytical approach is not always an appropriate means to engaging our others in conversation. We are inclined to agree, recognising the value of building partnerships with practitioners from other domains whose practical communication and engagement skills complement ours. As anthropologists we're highly skilled in uncovering tacit knowledge systems and elucidating social and cultural contexts. There's much we can learn from other practices about how to move beyond insights to actionable change.

From re-examining the ground rules of ethnographic encounters in response to the challenge of engaging with close 'others', we argue that the ethnographic moment does not depend on the amount of cultural distance/difference but on our techniques for negotiating a stance of naivety and outsidersness that is meaningful enough to the other that they agree to engage with us. We then use that stance to reframe our assumptions as probing questions. This, we argue, is the crux of ethnographic method regardless of the quantum of distance/difference. And this shows a fundamental way that ethnographic practice provides a model for bridging difficult discourse divides.

There is a challenge that remains. If we can bridge cultural divides in research contexts, can we bring that same disarming approach into our public sphere engagement? We have quite intentionally structured this paper to reflect its emergence out of our extended conversation over a year or more. Its form as much as its content models a commitment to engaged and open dialogue as the foundation of any bridge between the opposing sides of a polarised discourse.

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