

# Online Racism: How online threaded comments are contributing to racism



Caren August, in collaboration with Professor James Liu of the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, examined how online contributors reacted to public comments in order to understand racial discussions in online forums.

## Main research findings

Compared to other contemporary public communication mediums, internet threads were the most hostile, overtly racist, obscene and insulting.

The temporary nature of anonymous postings creates a context where disagreement, polarization and a lack of courtesy become normal.

Subtle racism also becomes frequent, including denial of racism in YouTube threads.

## Relevance of findings to New Zealand

The article leader was critical in determining the amount of racism online in response.

Unmoderated websites like YouTube create an environment that allows for massive diversity of opinion and conduct, including racially charged remarks.

Given the frequency that young people use these sites, it is likely that youths are exposed to race-based comments. Education for children and adults about how to interact using social media is needed.

Public figures, like Paul Henry, can incite both old-fashioned and subtle racism – which still exists in New Zealand. Websites should be moderated to help curb the amount of obscenities.

## RESEARCH

*How online threaded comments are creating a context for people to engage in racism. A closer look at the Paul Henry incident of 2010.*

By Caren August and James H. Liu (in press)

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## Background

Virtual social interactions are creating a new way for individuals to engage in online discussions.

Sometimes, online forums have led to negative outcomes such as racial or ethnic comments, bullying and harassment.

Because online communication is mostly anonymous, highly polarized opinion-based groups form with few repercussions for inappropriate comments.

In 2010, Paul Henry, a top-rated popular TV show presenter and entertainer in New Zealand, triggered two controversial incidents. The current research looks at a threaded discussion of these incidents online.

The first incident occurred when Henry asked the New Zealand Prime Minister on national television if the next Governor General would “look and sound like a Kiwi”, in contrast to the then NZ-born Governor General of Indian descent. The second incident occurred when Henry laughed about Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit’s name, commenting “and it’s so appropriate because she’s Indian, we should call her a dick in shit”.