

## Empowering rural communities through social media

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Our final speaker today is Alison Fairleigh, who's a rural mental health activist and a prolific tweeter. I know that because I feel like I know her well from watching her tweet. Alison was recently announced as the Rural Woman of the Year for Queensland. She's an advocate for better mental health for people who live in rural and remote areas and is based in Ayr in North Queensland.

She's familiar to many people as a tweeter, as I suggested, and is a strong advocate for using social media for good purposes. So I can't think of anyone better qualified to talk about empowering communities through good use of social media, other than Alison Fairleigh. Please give her a warm welcome.

Alison: Okay I am going to try and keep this short and sweet because I know that there's a lot of people coming after me and a lot of programs, but it is such a genuine honour and privilege for me to be here today.

I really want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Karuna people. I'm particularly inspired by Uncle Lewis O'Brien, the Karuna elder, who welcomed us to Country here on Sunday afternoon when he brought the leaves from delegates all over rural Australia. Because when he introduced that to us, he said that they brought with them the personal stories of each individual who brought those leaves. And today what I'm going to be talking to you about is inspired by personal stories.

I am a mental health consumer. I live with mental illness. I hope that doesn't scare you; it doesn't scare me, although it did in the beginning. I feel very comfortable talking about my mental ill-health and my journey through it. And I've used social media as a vehicle, a platform to reach out to people in rural Australia to raise awareness and hopefully save lives.

I'm going to be talking a little bit about that to you today. I live in a world of people possibilities, so we're going to get to see a lot of rural faces in my presentation today. I was tweeted this morning by some people who said, "Alison, shine the light for rural people," and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Now, some people say to me—and they've said to me here at this conference—that they wonder why social media is so popular. And the simple answer to that is that social media is about real people doing real things in real time. And as human beings, we really like that. I think it buys into that whole sort of, "What's the neighbour doing," gossipy sort of background, but it's more than that. Social media is a place where people can network, they can advocate, they can share information, and it's become an incredibly powerful tool for people in rural and remote Australia.

In the past we relied on lobby groups and on political representatives to be our voice, but suddenly we've been given this amazing platform to speak for ourselves, and it's been helping to turn the tide a little bit. You see, if it wasn't for social media, I wouldn't be standing here on this national stage talking to all of you today. So it is a very, very powerful tool. And I want to show you a few people who've become unlikely rural activists as a result of social media.

Let me introduce you to Michael Trant. Michael is a farmer in Western Australia. His property is near Geraldton. And he started a Twitter hashtag called "HadAGutFul." Now, if you know anything about "bush-inese," that's a very easy way for people out in the country to say, "Gee, I'm really fed up with something. I've just had a gutful." And look, I'm not standing here to say whether I'm in support of live export or not. What I'm saying is that social media gave those people who were most affected by the ban on live exports a voice to speak for themselves.

Michael brought together a campaign around the Twitter hashtag called “HadAGutFul,” where he organised for over 2,000 farmers, farm workers, truck drivers and industry supporters from all over rural and remote Western Australia to come together at Fremantle on Sunday the 18th of November 2012, to counter a bridge protest that had been set up by Ban Live Export supporters. Now, it was a colossal effort for him to bring this together. If it hadn’t been for social media, they would not have had that opportunity. Social media enabled them to get their voice heard, to get it onto a national stage, because often as a minority group, it’s really hard to be heard over the voices of other interest groups.

Michael is a prolific blogger, and if you get the opportunity, I really encourage you to visit his blog called “Farmer’s Way of Life.” He blogged about the day and this is what he wrote. “Something was in the air, something electric like the moment before the lightning hits and the thunder rolls. When your hair stands up on end and your arm raises goose bumps. You could smell it, like rain on the horizon, or the dust of a thousand country cars as they weaved their way through the unfamiliarised bitumen roads of Perth. If you build it, they will come... and come they did.”

This one hashtag created on Twitter has since continued to the point where Michael was given an individual meeting with the Minister for Primary Industries, Joe Ludwig, in Western Australia recently. It’s been a very powerful thing and drawn an entire community of people together.

Another example of a very successful minority group using social media, what I term the “Indominatable Knitting Nanas against Gas,” now these are senior women who have used social media to express their dismay, their disheartenment, around the coal steam gas industry that is developing in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales.

So it’s not just young people who are using social media as a way of reaching into a community and building responses, it’s elderly people as well. It is something that’s accessible to all age groups. Now, the Knitting Nanas have used this as a way to unite a community of people to peacefully protest against exploration and mining in their communities, but it’s become a global phenomenon. It’s something that’s being taken up in other parts of the world as well. I find that incredibly inspirational.

A third example of a very, very successful minority group coming together to address questions that affect them directly is “Ask an Aussie Farmer.” It started as a Facebook page and has a Twitter account that accompanies it, and it was started by farmers who were really concerned about the fact that people in urban areas were asking other urban people about how food and fibre was produced, and were often getting the incorrect information and using that information against farmers in a really unfair way. So these guys decided: “Okay, we’re going to put aside time every single day, every week, to address questions that come to us in relation to food and fibre, so that we’re not going to be relying on other people telling our stories for us.”

But by far, for me, the most successful and surprising campaign has been the success story of a young vet science student from New South Wales, who lodged a single-handed David-versus-Goliath battle against the supermarket giant, Coles. Now I don’t know if you’ve been following me on social media, but if you have, you’ll be aware of the fact that I have been an incredible advocate for our dairy farmers, particularly in Queensland and New South Wales where the dairy industry has been hit humongously by the \$1.00-per-litre milk pricing.

Coles decided that in response to a bit of negative media that came out, that they would develop a YouTube video and they called it the “Our Coles Brand Milk Story,” and they did it in infographic style. And when this video came out on YouTube, I personally was devastated, and so were many other rural advocates and the dairy industry, because we made the incorrect assumption and we feared that consumers within urban areas would swallow the Coles story hook, line and sinker.

But then out of nowhere, this amazing thing happened, Cassandra McDonald—none of us had ever heard of her—she was so angered about the misinformation and half-truths presented in the Coles video that she decided to develop the perfect rebuttal. And she made her own infographic-style animation

video and all she did was use an artist's pad, she got her colouring pens, set up a video above it, and she made what she calls, "The Truth about the Supermarket Milk Price War." Now, to date, Coles' video has only received 7,000 hits on YouTube—thank goodness—but Cassandra's has, when I last checked, received 17,000.

So the true story is getting out there. Minority people within these rural and remote areas of Australia are being given a voice.

Now at the Mental Illness Fellowship of North Queensland, where I work, we have a school-based mental health education program called "Living Proof: Positive Stories of Mental Illness." A lot of people mistakenly believe that a diagnosis of mental illness is a death sentence, and it is so very, very wrong. And it often precedes the fact that people are afraid to go and get help because they don't want to get this label. They don't want to have it around them. So what we've been doing at the Mental Illness Fellowship has been taking people with a lived experience of mental ill-health into rural and regional schools to share their personal stories of recovery.

I'm one of those people. I go in and I share my story as well. Now, we frame our presentations around, "Okay, look, these are the signs and indicators of mental illness. This is what mental illness looks like and where you can go for help and how you can help a friend." But none of that information becomes real until we frame it with our personal stories. Now, I've done a lot of these school presentations, and what I've noticed is that no matter what the age, whether we've got an 18-year-old or an 80-year-old who's going into that classroom, the minute we start to tell our personal stories, the young people listen, they stop. They're engaged, they're connected and they are learning. And this really demonstrates the power of personal stories.

So we then took this to social media and we've been able to get an enormous response, particularly via Twitter, in sharing these personal stories with a much wider audience. And one of the great things about social media is that it can give rise to people who would normally not be given a voice. Now, who could ever have imagined that someone like me, a mental health consumer in a very small rural community in North Queensland, could stand here before you today to tell you about the empowerment that comes from social media.

I live with post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder. Major depressive disorder came as a result of me not getting help for post-traumatic stress disorder. I didn't recognise it, I didn't see the signs, I didn't know what was happening to me. I thought it was a personal weakness. And it was almost seven years before I sought professional help, by which time I'd developed depression as well. So it was the double-whammy. Then I had to go through that whole process of recovery. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have got help so much sooner and saved myself a lot of heartache.

But I realised when I went up to North Queensland and I was in this very small community that there are many, many people like me. Stigma and fear stop people from getting help. So I decided, that if we were going to try and break down this fear-based discrimination within rural communities around mental health, that someone needed to start the conversation.

So I opened up a Twitter account, got cold feet and closed it. Then I thought, "Okay, come on Alison, you can do this." I gave myself a pep talk, it took me about two months, and I started a new Twitter account. And then I started a blog in conjunction with the Twitter account. And I began to share small snippets of my journey of recovery.

The idea about this was just to hopefully engage a few people in conversation around rural mental health. What happened for me was phenomenal. The stories resonated with urban and rural people alike. It tapped into an incredible need area out there in rural areas, and I'm still blown away by the response from just one single person using social media to tell their story. It has paved the way for me to stand here before you today.

People have begun to trust me, and that's been an extraordinary privilege for me as a part of my journey as an advocate for consumers. They've seen me share my struggles, and as a result I get regular tweets, messages, emails—particularly from farmers and farming families—sharing their struggles; and sadly, a lot of stories of loss from suicide. And this has truly driven me to be very proactive in promoting rural mental health—not just to promote it through social media, but to become proactive in the community to make change.

Recently I've been awarded the 2013 RIRDC Rural Woman of the Year for Queensland. I was given that opportunity because of my advocacy with rural mental health, and because I put forward a proposal to develop a cultural competency training package that I'm going to pilot with the Townsville-Mackay Medicare Local, all based around farmers and fishers. Help prepare the people who have been given the responsibility to find the gaps and fill those, with the knowledge that they need to effectively and successfully interact in farming communities.

But the fact that people have been so open with me about their struggles with mental ill-health, has demonstrated to me that there is an undeniable opportunity for social media to help improve the health and wellbeing of people in rural and remote Australia.

We live in a world today where people have largely lost trust in big corporations and multinationals. Figures that have given to us show that 90 per cent of people say they trust peer recommendations over that of advertisements. In fact only 14 per cent of people will trust an advertisement from a company. Now, what you guys can do—and this is my challenge to each and every one of you—is that you can cultivate extensive personal connections through social media. If you can take to the fact that people in remote settings now have the capacity to interact and contribute content on social, environmental, political and economic conditions that have an impact on their health, then that makes you, in my opinion, a very wise organisation indeed.

You see, the key stakeholders in all of this discussion that we're having over these four days are the people—the people of a bright rural future. The stakeholders are the patients, the stakeholders are the consumers, the stakeholders are the communities. We know what works for us. It's like Dougie was sharing with us earlier, give *us*, empower *us* to help ourselves, that's what we're asking of you as medical professionals, as service providers. Because we are not alone. We are a community of amazing vast people, and you can tap into this through social media very effectively.

Now, what I've done is I put our call out throughout Queensland and the rest of Australia through social media and asked for people to share their stories with me, to send in photographs of people who use social media to tell their personal stories. I was inundated. So I haven't been able to include them all, but I've put these photographs into a short video presentation that I'm going to give to you now, and that will be the end of my presentation.

But what I hope you see are that these are really amazing, incredible people of all age groups, from all over rural and remote Australia, and we all want to be well.

[Music]

We made plans to kiss the sun at night.  
Hopeless dreamers, hopeless types.  
Shedding skin you show your beauty scars.  
Don't forget me or who you are.  
You know this don't feel right.  
Who knows what we feel?  
I just met you; I can read your thoughts.  
What they tell me is what I want.  
I'll keep you guessing, keep you wanting more.  
Because where we're going, no one knows.

You know this don't feel right.  
Who knows, this could feel right.  
I just met you; I swear I read your thoughts.  
So don't forget me or what you want.

[Music]

Light up the stage, make your move, give me something.  
So I can dance in your light and to your rhythm.  
Soon it unfolds who we are in this masquerade of stars.  
Tear off the mask; the face you hide is what I'm missing.  
We made plans to kiss the sun at night.  
Hopeless dreamers, hopeless types.  
One was turning; one was standing still.  
I won't forget what was promised here.  
You know this don't feel right.  
Who knows what we feel?

Thank you.