

Political Affairs

# The implications of social media in Indigenous rights and advocacy

A qualitative analysis of Indigenous discourse online and in mainstream media

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## Abstract

Indigenous communities and those who live in remote areas face significant challenges in participating in decision making with respect to their communities and the environment around them. This research seeks to explore the implications of social media in Indigenous activism, specifically how social media can be used as a tool to spread awareness at both the national and international level; and whether these movements can lead to policy adaptation in the government. Social media has become increasingly accessible over the last 20 years and allows a greater population of people to seek information in short periods of time. As a result, the political participation amongst marginalized communities has increased through the development of their own platforms to speak on issues not adequately covered in mainstream media channels. Through the lenses of colonialism and contact theory, I hypothesize that social media movements normalise the participation and storytelling of Indigenous communities in mainstream media, pushing for the change of policy agenda-setting within the Federal Government. This article analyzes the background and outcome of the Canadian grassroots movement #idlenomore the magnitude of which social media protests can enable in-person political participation, the participation of Indigenous communities, policy creation, and portrayal in mainstream media.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Idle No More, Indigenous, activism, social media, Dakota Access Pipeline

## Introduction

Since its creation, social media has played an integral role in the mobilization, communication, and organization of rights movements across the world (Richez, Raynauld, Agi, & Kartolo, 2020, p. 1). Social media has become the main platform to influence individuals, with highly effective advertising campaigns for businesses, celebrities, and politicians alike. Prominent politicians have been able to use social media to promote campaigns, and current governments use it as a communicative policy instrument. Additionally, marginalized communities have also taken to social media, using it as a platform to amplify the Indigenous perspective through the transmission of knowledge to broader audiences. The wide-reaching landscape of social media has encouraged Indigenous storytelling through a decolonial lens and has attracted masses of people, Indigenous or not. However, while social media networks have encouraged Indigenous communities to speak out on policy and rights issues, research has found that “Indigenous people disproportionately bear the brunt of practices of trolling, cyberbullying, and other forms of digital violence” (Carlson & Frazer, 2020, p. 1). In turn, this has created a whole new platform in which Indigenous peoples are exposed to further marginalization and the potential spread of misinformation.

Social media has become one of the main networks through which Indigenous communities can spread awareness of important issues affecting the communities.

The INM movement demonstrates how online movements can mobilise and encourage substantive discussions on the effects of settler-colonialist ideologies. Social media creates a platform “between government and society where information and ideas are circulated and challenged and where citizens harness the power of public opinion to influence the state” (Burrows, 2018, p. 1118). Indigenous activists also share research and their perspectives, through Indigenous knowledge, on how society may be able to move forward in a more ethical and conscious effort, thus recognizing the importance of reconciliation with Indigenous communities. The potential for wide-reaching recognition through social media and mainstream media allows activists to harness these “communicative affordances to practice a politics of visibility, cultivate solidarity, diffuse an Indigenous consciousness, enforce dominant governments’ trust and treaty responsibilities, and remind many of the irrevocable injustice of colonialism” (Duarte, 2017, p. 1). This article will explore the impacts of social media and its ability to apply pressure on the Federal Government to affirm and align policy agenda-setting with Indigenous rights issues.

## Literature Review

### Social Media

Over the years, social media has increased the accessibility to global communication and information resources, through online social activism and political

mobilization. Social media has provided platforms to marginalized communities to gather, share knowledge, and mobilise politically (Richez et al, 2020, p. 1; Duarte, 2017, p. 1). These online channels have expanded the access by which Indigenous communities can mobilise quickly and without significant barriers to entry. As Duarte (2017) states, “Indigenous peoples by definition regularly lack a direct means of political participation via local and state or provincial government agencies—for example, through voting, lobbying in competitive numbers, and campaign donations” (p. 2). The ease of access to social media allows grassroots protests and other forms of decentralized mobilization initiatives can be promoted and coordinated, regardless of normally important factors such as time and financial resources. (Raynauld, Richez, & Morris., 2018, p. 629). In turn, these resources enable Indigenous communities to participate politically through decolonial open-access networks.

Another perspective of social media in the context of Indigenous rights is the rise of online education, as well as increased accessibility to the cultural and historical knowledge of Indigenous communities. Using social media, Indigenous movements can cultivate an educational role while “simultaneously connecting indigenous youth with elders and other community members and fostering recognition of indigenous orientations to social and natural relationships” (Raynauld et al., 2018, p. 629). The internet has empowered Indigenous groups to revitalize language and tradition, spreading awareness of these customs to a

widespread audience online. Furthermore, a rise in the use of social media can also be related to an increased awareness of sociopolitical issues. Online platforms have allowed for “individuals who may not have imagined themselves as ‘political’ in the sense of being an elected official or direct-action protestor post and repost politicised images, phrases, narratives, and survival stories within their digital networks of belonging” (Duarte, 2017, p. 2). The integration of social media platforms into political activism encourages those with no formal background in politics to self-educate and mobilise politically.

## Idle No More

The Idle No More (INM) movement emerged in Saskatchewan in 2012, in reaction to the introduction of Bill C-38 and omnibus Bill C-45 that were introduced by the Canadian Conservative Government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper. These bills included substantial changes to environmental development processes, and essentially eliminated the consultation process with Indigenous communities (Richez et., 2020, p. 3; Raynauld et al., 2018, p. 627). The proposed legislation failed to honour Indigenous sovereignty or treaties with respect to environmental protections of waterways. While the movement initially began as a rally against the environmental policy changes, it also incorporated other elements of Indigenous rights and policy, including the socioeconomic disparities as a result of the historical wrongdoings of the government and colonialism (Raynauld et al., 2018, p. 4). The online presence of

#idlenomore subsequently developed into in-person rallies across Canada in over 10 Canadian cities on December 10, 2013. At its peak in 2013, the INM movement gained significant media attention due to Chief Teresa Spence's hunger strike and protest at the Canadian Parliament, where Harper agreed to improve Canada-Indigenous relations and consultation processes on a nation-to-nation level (Gottardi, 2020, p. 7; Raynauld et al., 2018, p. 4). The peaceful blockades ultimately led to a meeting on January 11, 2013 between the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the prime minister.

Originally, the #idlenomore hashtag was created to help Indigenous communities connect with each other to peacefully protest these bills. As a result, the Idle No More movement developed a "national network of Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies and turned to international forums such as the UN for support" (Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2016, p. 24). As Raynauld et al. (2018) also state, "they have facilitated multidirectional INM-related information flows and social interactions, thus contributing to the rapid expansion, diversification, and transnationalization of this protest movement" (p. 627). The INM symbolises a deeper purpose of social media, one that establishes social media as a platform for the creation and broadcasting of grassroots movements. The Idle No More movement encompasses elements of Indigenous sovereignty as well as environmental and sacred land protection, through the peaceful dismantling of colonialism within current policy frameworks (Gottardi, 2020, p. 7).

## Mainstream Media and Indigenous Rights

Political communication research has expanded to the effects of news media content on political cognition through studies of agenda-setting and framing, with an emphasis on political campaigns (McCallum, Waller, & Meadows, 2012, p. 103). As Burrows (2018) states, "media should provide safe spaces where marginalized groups are protected and empowered to challenge the status quo and seek redress if required" (p. 1118). This statement is further supported by Richez et al. (2020), who also argue that marginalized communities have "leveraged these platforms' structural and functional properties to make their voices heard and be active politically outside more institutionalized paths of political and civic engagement" (p. 1). Online networking channels have enabled marginalized communities to access and develop their own platforms over the years to vocalise their perspectives, separate from the mainstream media. With the growing influence of social media, news emanating from these networks are often eventually relayed in mainstream media channels. Given the complexity of Indigenous rights and policy, Sloan-Morgan and Castleden (2014) suggest that mainstream news sources "effectively deny or denigrate the inherent [and Treaty] rights of [Indigenous] people. [In doing so] the media exert a powerful and direct impact on public policy" (p. 4).

In Western societies today, many people are aware that the outward expression of racism and negative stereotypes are unacceptable. However, racism is still prevalent today through microaggressions and oppressive systems. A particular variable that would influence the role of government in progressive legislation is the doctrine of Individualism. In their study of attitudes towards Indigenous peoples, Lashta, Berdahl, and Walker (2016) note that individualist attitudes have the “belief that it is an individual responsibility rather than government responsibility for economic well-being, and the belief that economic success or failure can be attributed to individual ability and effort” (pg. 1246). This builds onto the bias that host citizens (in this case non-Indigenous peoples) believe that they must compete with others for jobs, government benefits, and scarce resources. In a 2012 survey looking at attitudes towards Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan, found that while many residents are empathetic towards Indigenous peoples, many people are opposed to increasing funding for Indigenous communities (Atkinson et al., p. 3). The fear of increased taxes, or increased competition in job markets has led to a reluctance amongst non-Indigenous groups to promote Indigenous rights issues, specifically online. This illustrates that while more people are accepting of Indigenous peoples, there are still gaps in what is considered negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples.

## Shortcomings

The limits in this study are consistent with what other researchers in the field have also acknowledged. As social media is a relatively new area of research, the research regarding its effects is limited, especially within the focus of Indigenous communities. There are few cases of Indigenous activism that have a significant amount of published research that identify patterns in the media, as well as a great number of Indigenous online movements have appeared in the last five years. As a result, there is “limited understanding about how those voices are heard at times of major policy debate, and whether increased participation in digital media necessarily leads to increased democratic participation” (Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2016, p. 24). Furthermore, another limit of this research is the potential for bias in the debate surrounding Indigenous issues. As with any topic on the internet, there is a certain awareness for the misinformation on a topic, increasingly more so if not from a reliable news source and regarding a recent topic.

Another limit within the field, and one that deserves further recognition, is the lack of Indigenous peoples in mainstream media and academia. For example, the 2011 Canadian census showed that “almost one-half (48.4%) of Aboriginal people had a postsecondary qualification... [whereas] almost two-thirds (64.7%) of the non-Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 had a postsecondary qualification” (Statistics Canada, 2011, para. 2). This is also particularly relevant to mainstream media

and poses a potential risk to the methods in which Indigenous stories are delivered, as mainstream news sites tend to appeal to a variety of political opinions, including those that are not in favour of certain Indigenous movements. This may enable biased perspectives or the spread of misinformation as information is indirectly conveyed to readers. Furthermore, Indigenous storytellers that curate media, often find it difficult to reach a significant audience. Once barriers are overcome, “Indigenous participatory media producers themselves [still] identify a lack of listening as a crucial challenge” (Dreher, 2016, p. 34). Marginalised groups often have limited channels of influence with ministries, bureaucracies, and the mainstream media, which lead to limited reporting on Indigenous rights issues (McCallum et al., 2012, p. 104). As well, through the analysis of mainstream media news sources, it is important to note that some of the information within these articles may be false, or biased. To mitigate this as a negative influence on the study, I analyze the articles solely based on its inclusion of any references to social media.

## Conceptual Framework

### Settler-Colonialism

The concept of colonialism, or settler-colonialism has been at the center of Indigenous rights and policy discourse. Often, the concepts of Imperialism and Colonialism are often used interchangeably. Settler colonialism can be defined as “a

particular colonial formation; a ‘structure rather than an event’ that is about land and dispossession; it is ‘premised on the securing’—the obtaining and the maintaining—of territory” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 402; Comack, 2014, p. 457). In Canada, colonial policy was centered around the assimilation and dissolution of Indigenous languages and cultures, most notably in the *Indian Act of 1876*. As Grimwood, Muldoon, & Stevens (2019) argue, “under settler colonialism, these structures, which include cultural norms and practices that are institutionalized through laws and social discourse, advance a ‘logic of elimination’, one that perpetually seeks to dissolve Indigenous societies and title to lands in order to allow for the construction and continuation of a colonial society on the expropriated land” (p. 234). Indigenous communities use social media to facilitate cultural preservation and change, while redirecting the colonial narrative to one inclusive of Indigenous knowledge (Carlson & Frazer, 2020, p. 1; Lupien, 2020, p. 3).

### Contact Theory

One of the theories commonly used in attitudes towards Indigenous peoples is Contact Theory. This theory hypothesizes that increased intergroup contact (between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities) decreases harmful attitudes towards another group (Denis, 2015, p. 218). There have been limited studies done in Canada establishing patterns with Contact Theory and attitudes towards Indigenous communities. For the purpose of this research, we will assume that Indigenous

communities and Immigrant communities are both marginalized groups that often face the same kinds of negative attitudes in society. In Mähönen, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Finnell's (2010) study, they found that increasing the normative pressure of youth regarding their views towards immigrants results in more positive explicit attitudes (p. 182). Wu, Hou, & Schimmele's (2011) study concludes that "the end result is that former in-group boundaries become less relevant for self-identification and social relationships. This process of de-categorization weakens in-group/out-group boundaries to a point where people begin to resituate themselves as individuals, instead of members of particular ethnic groups" (p. 377). Furthermore, this theory can be applied to the concept of online activism as the application of constant advocating and media presence online may inherently normalise Indigenous narratives, potentially leading to more positive attitudes amongst non-Indigenous communities.

## Methodology

To further explore the effects of social media activism in mainstream media and Indigenous policy, I will be using an interpretive approach through case study analysis. Through the current documents published on #idlenomore, as well as news headlines in mainstream media from the period of the protests, this essay will seek to gather some insight on the influence of social media, and to what extent it can be an effective tool in the narrative of Indigenous discourse. This research paper will seek to analyze the impact of Indigenous-led

movements, such as #idlenomore, and whether these movements can garner enough attention through the media to lead to policy change. Through the qualitative analysis of various online platforms, the research will not seek to answer the proposed question, but potentially fill in the gaps of the discourse of recent Indigenous rights movements and its efficacy to relay information to influence policy.

It is important to establish that the foundation of this paper is based on the concept that culture is established through a view of identity that is both dynamic and interconnected (Raynauld, et al., 2018, p. 631). The analysis of previous case studies and the analysis of randomly chosen mainstream news articles published throughout the period of protest will help determine if and how the social media movements are mentioned in mainstream articles, and if those movements lead to eventual policy change. For the analysis of #idlenomore, 5 articles were randomly chosen from each of the news sources: Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, CBC, CTV, and Global News. The articles also followed criteria that they were published between October 1, 2012, and October 1, 2013, as the Idle No more Movement began in November 2012. I analyzed these articles to find direct mention of social media, whether it was noting the context or noting the role of social media.

To break these questions down, I aim to gather info that will attempt to demonstrate a pattern on the following 2 questions:

1. To what extent does social media play a role in mobilising Indigenous activism?
2. Do social media protests lead to a change in policy agenda-setting?

## Results

I found that many articles on #idlenomore published between October 1, 2012 and October 1, 2013 directly mentions the role of social media within the protest. For example, CBC, a publicly funded mainstream news network, mentioned the origins of the movement in the article titled “9 questions about Idle no more”. The author noted that #idlenomore hashtag is “being used to spread information about the movement and to organize its actions” (2013). As well, the CTV news article “Idle No More: Understanding the growing aboriginal protest movement” mentions the online origins of the movement, and how it has developed to in-person rallies (Mulholland, 2012, para 10). Furthermore, in a news article posted on April 10, 2013 by Global News, describes the #idlenomore hashtag as being “morphed into a rallying call for demonstrations denouncing policies, condemning the state of the relationship between First Nations and the government” (Lindell, para. 2). It is also interesting to note that both of articles previously mentioned included discussions on the progression of a social media hashtag developing into in-person protests and rallies.

On the other hand, there were still a few articles on the #idlenomore movement that did not specifically mention the

movement’s social media origins. The Globe and Mail’s January 16, 2013 article titled “Idle No More protests, blockades spread across country” does not mention the context of the protests but focuses on the in-person protests spread across the country. Furthermore, it is important to note that this article did mention the aspect of #idlenomore being a grassroots organization, which can be indirectly tied to the social media roots. For the point of this research essay, it does not fit the criteria for implying the role of social media in the movement but illustrates the contrast of the grassroots Indigenous movements protesting policy decisions. The Toronto Star’s (2013) article on #idlenomore focuses on the history and context of Indigenous rights, tying the Idle No More movement to historical treaty signings. Although the author does not directly mention the use of social media, he draws similarities to the history of settler colonialism and how it perpetuates today as “cutting aboriginal people out of the decision-making process around land use is an unacceptable change to the already strained alliance that this country was built on” (Erickson, para. 8).

## Debate

Although the realm of social media remains a relatively new field of study, the lack of research in this field inherently demonstrates the lack of direct storytelling of the protests through Indigenous perspectives. The accessibility of social media and modern technologies “provide democratic means for these grassroots social movements to be heard and

empowered” (p. 10). In both cases, the grassroots movements originating from online protests gained awareness from political leaders. To an extent, this research also corroborates with Dreher et al.’s (2016) conclusion, describing mainstream news sites “as a constraint on the capacity for the diverse range of Indigenous voices to be heard by political leaders” (p. 35). The general points of these rights movements are widely reported but often do not include direct Indigenous perspectives or content from the original media posts. Furthermore, these articles are often not written by Indigenous peoples or activists associated with the movement. It can be argued that this may be detrimental to the cause, as it could lead to dominating smaller news sources, or Indigenous voices.

This analysis aligns with Richez et al.’s (2020) study, in finding that online movements influence decision making in federal and provincial governments. The rise in media attention of Idle No More was found to be correlated with “a larger volume of questions related to Indigenous Affairs during the QP in the House of Commons” (p. 10). Given that an increased social media and mainstream media presence leads to an increase in parliamentary discussions, Dreher et al.’s (2016) analysis holds, in that the “challenge for Indigenous participation in policy-making is not so much a lack of opportunity for voice, but rather the uncertainty of being heard in the key spheres of influence” (p. 34). It would be interesting to further analyze the role of political parties and the subsequent effects on Indigenous rights policy. The findings of this research demonstrate that social media activism

garners significant media attention and the attention of governments but does not necessarily lead to long-term changes in policy. As well, this points to a further topic of discussion on how social media movements affect Indigenous participation in formal political events, such as voting.

## Application to Present Context

Through the analysis of mainstream news sources, it has been demonstrated that the INM movement played a crucial role in applying pressure on the federal government to modify current policy agenda-setting. But how can this apply in today’s context? Since 2013, INM has rallied Indigenous peoples and allies to support other movements with respect to Indigenous rights and environmental protection. For example, the movement called on Indigenous peoples and “Canadians of conscience” to support Wet’suwet’en and their opposition to the TransCanada Coastal Gaslink pipeline project in 2019 (Marshall, 2019). Furthermore, Idle No More has also advocated for other significant movements, including #defundthepolice, the ‘cancellation’ of Canada Day, and justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The movement has its own website, where individuals can access information for demonstrations, as well as educational resources on culture, laws, and Indigenous traditions. INM has been able to cultivate and foster a community for Indigenous peoples and allies alike.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has enabled marginalized communities to mobilize politically, through their own storytelling to bring Indigenous issues to the forefront of mainstream media. Lupien (2020) argues that social media can “provide tools for cultural positioning and survival, for countering essentialized understandings of indigeneity, as well as for new expressions of culture and identity (p. 8). Through the analysis of online Indigenous rights movements, specifically through #idlenomore, I found that online activism can influence policy agenda-setting, and incremental change within the Federal Government. The findings of this research corroborated with Richez et al.’s (2020) findings, stating that while INM garnered significant media and government attention, it did not have a short-term effect on policy outcomes under the Conservative government (p. 10). Online movements are promising, in the sense that they are more sustainable than in-person rallies and uphold and maintain vocalisation of Indigenous issues.

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Another aspect of media attention on social movements is the ways in which social media can promote rights issues. Social media is widely used, and more accessible than in-person rallies. It gathers international communities to narrate their own stories, in an anti-colonial narrative. As a result of this analysis, I conclude that social media activism normalizes the anti-colonial narrative and allows for large flows of information in attempts to dismantle harmful narratives. As social media grows more accessible, more people can rally and protest, share informational documents surrounding Indigenous rights, and encourage normally apolitical communities to participate in national politics. Tying in contact theory, this increased flow of information relates directly to the increased mainstream media attention, leading in the normalisation of Indigenous narratives in the media. This makes non-Indigenous communities more aware of the actions of the government, and encourages their participation in online movements, cultivating a more positive image of Indigenous peoples.

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