

Amplifying Voices: Social Media and Indigenous Political Movements

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Abstract

From pamphlets to fax machines, activists have found ways to spread their message regardless of traditional media exposure. Recently, voices left out of the dominant narrative have used social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to organize protests as well as spread information about their movements. Whether it is disenfranchised youth in the Arab world or black communities in the United States facing structural violence, social media has amplified the ability of individual voices to draw attention to the problems facing these marginalized communities. Using the same principle, members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and others acting in solidarity, turned a very localized issue, the Dakota Access pipeline (DAPL), into an international controversy in late 2016. Issues facing the indigenous community are left out of traditional media coverage, however through social media, activists brought the DAPL to the attention of the average American. Using this case study, this thesis explores the question: how does social media impact the visibility and efficacy of political movements by indigenous peoples? Using data on the number of Tweets per day discussing the DAPL, Twitter was found to draw attention to on the ground protests, influence mass media like the *New York Times* and impact government response.

Introduction

Feared by the Western powers for his ability to incite proletariat uprisings seemingly in any state, Che Guevara remains, the international symbol of revolution across the world. When Che Guevara united the downtrodden masses in countries such as Cuba, Bolivia and Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United States and other capitalist democracies feared for their own political stability. So in 2012 when US Department of State advisor Alec Ross dubbed the internet and social media as "the Che Guevara of the 21st century", he alluded back to this fear of revolution in the 1960s by repressive regimes. In the context of the Arab Spring, Ross and government officials everywhere watched as social media platforms became catalysts to protests threatening the power of governments across the Middle East. However, just like Che Guevara's ideas, political action facilitated through social media was soon exported across the world.

Whether it is a new democratic youth in Egypt standing up against an oppressive autocrat or black communities seeking to shed light on an unjust system that condones police brutality, Facebook and Twitter have become powerful platforms for users to organize and have their voices heard. Mass, corporate owned media in the West has often represented the ideas of rich, ruling classes. This media system has disregarded the issues that are important to the oppressed and at times seek to even erase the ideas and culture of the same oppressed peoples. With the recent advent of social media, voices traditionally left out of dominant media narratives, now have global platforms to share their beliefs and gain visibility. Specifically, indigenous groups that are systematically excluded from mass media in order to protect settler governments, social media has become a new and omnipotent tool for making their voices heard by a historically deaf public.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The central purpose of this research is to address the question: How does social media impact the visibility and efficacy of political movements by indigenous peoples? Social media has recently been a common political tool for indigenous groups in North America as well as across the world, yet there is little research focusing on the political impacts of using these platforms. In order to analyze social media in this context, two main definitions are needed: visibility and efficacy. For this research, visibility is defined as the number of posts on social media as well as the percent change in posts, specifically on Twitter. Efficacy, using a traditional political science definition, is a citizen's personal belief that their actions can influence politics. Measuring efficacy is based on whether national news outlets cover the issue and if the government releases official statements concerning said issue. Additionally, when looking at the context of the United States, the terms indigenous and Native American will be used interchangeably.

The central case study discussed are the protests surrounding the Dakota Access pipeline (DAPL) on the reservation of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe beginning in 2016. The Dakota Access pipeline was approved by the Army Corps of Engineers to follow along the same path as the Northern Border pipeline, built in 1982.¹ The Northern Border pipeline was built with no large protests and minimal major news source coverage. Contrasted with the Dakota Access pipeline, protests lasted for five-months with major arrests. Additionally, there was significant news coverage by major news sources like the *New York Times* as well as multiple government statements and responses on both the state and federal levels. The case study of Standing Rock

¹ "Northern Border Pipeline Co. Announced Thursday That Mainline Construction..." *UPI*, September 3, 2011.; Stevens, Craig. "On the Dakota Access Pipeline, Let's Stick to the Facts." *Text. The Hill*, September 21, 2016.

suits the question of what impact social media has on indigenous political movements as the only large difference between the lack of indigenous response and media coverage of the 1982 pipeline and that of the 2016 Dakota Access pipeline construction is the usage of social media platforms such as Twitter.

From this research question, two hypotheses arose. The first is: campaigns by activists on social media, will lead to major news sources covering movements and issues they do not normally. For many indigenous groups across the globe, the media has intentionally not broadcasted news stories focusing on issues facing indigenous people. Without a presence in mainstream, mass media, little political attention is given to the pressing, and at times, life threatening situations such as water and land sovereignty. Social media however, can be used as a way for indigenous activists and their allies to circumvent corporate owned media and draw attention to the issues their communities face. Since mass media is centered around growing the news outlet's audience, if the average viewer believes that an indigenous issue such as land sovereignty is important, then according to this hypothesis, major news sources will pick up on that belief by viewers and cover this issue.

Focusing more on the efficacy aspect of the research question the second hypothesis is: an increase in volume of tweets about an issue, will cause government officials to make a statement on that issue. In a democratic society such as the United States, government officials at the state and federal levels are supposed to directly represent the will and interests of the people they serve. If citizens begin to believe that there needs to be action to alleviate problems facing indigenous communities, then the politicians will reflect that belief and try to take action to alleviate their constituent's concerns. The best way to gauge state politicians and federal

bureaucracies' willingness to take on these issues, is through public statements that outline their response to the Dakota Access pipeline.

Background

Social Media

With the dawn of the internet age at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, new communication tools such as websites, blogs, email and instant messaging began to hint at the possibilities of a world globalized through internet connection. It was not until Myspace reached its height of popularity in 2005 did the average internet user begin to understand what sort of connections could be made between far away people on their computers.² Eventually Facebook and Twitter overtook Myspace in popularity and have been the preeminent social media platforms of the past decade with a combined 2.77 billion users around the world.³

Social media platforms, specifically Twitter, was initially designed with the hope of connecting users and making communities. Twitter's mission statement discuss how their platform is designed to help facilitate communication of ideas. Twitter directly discusses how it gives all users the ability to "create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers".⁴ The language Twitter uses to describe its role is inherently anti-establishment as it references circumventing the barriers that some powerful entities might try to implement, in order to stop this free flow of information. Twitter was indirectly designed to fight oppressive power by keeping the ideals of restriction and free sharing of ideas. Social media platforms have been key

² Chokshi, Niraj. "Myspace, Once the King of Social Networks, Lost Years of Data from Its Heyday." *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, sec. Business.

³ "Number of Social Media Users Worldwide 2010-2021." Statista, 2019.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>.

⁴ Fox, Justin. "Why Twitter's Mission Statement Matters." *Harvard Business Review*. November 13, 2014.

in the toppling of governments and organizing protests in traditionally authoritarian states such as was seen in the Arab Spring of 2011 and 2012.

Arab Spring

Social media's ability to incite political change became abundantly clear as the Arab Spring swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 and 2012. Yet the first widely accepted use of social media in forming social movements was the Green Revolution in Iran in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections. Despite the unelected Guardian Council in Iran handpicking which presidential candidates can run in national elections, traditionally the actual voting process is free and fair. A majority of polls running up to the election told of a tight race where opposition candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi were polling closely to incumbent candidate President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad, however, was reelected in a landslide that did not match previous voting and polling data.⁵ Young Iranians then took to the streets over outrage from the apparently rigged elections. In addition, protesters took to Twitter and used it as a tool for both organizing protests as well as reporting news of the violent crackdown by Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The US State Department felt that the power of Twitter was so crucial to the success of Iranian protests that they asked for Twitter to postpone scheduled server maintenance until after the protests finished.⁶ Unfortunately, the Iranian regime brutally put down the protests and many activists are still missing.

⁵ Mebane, Walter R. "Fraud in the 2009 Presidential Election in Iran?" *Chance* 23, no. 1 (August 2, 2013): 7.

⁶ Burns, Alex. "Twitter Free Iran: An Evaluation of Twitter's Role in Public Diplomacy and Information Operations in Iran's 2009 Election Crisis." *Communications, Policy and Research Forum*, November 20, 2009. 6.

Tunisia

Only two years later, widespread protests against corruption and democratic deficits erupted across the Arab world. Inspired by the tactics of the unsuccessful Green Revolution, social media, once again, became the main tool to organize an opposition to various regimes. One of the most potent images shared on social media during the Arab Spring was Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor burning himself alive in December of 2010. After having his fruit cart confiscated for lacking a license and refusing to pay a bribe to a police officer, Bouazizi decided to make a public display of how little opportunity he felt Tunisians had.⁷ The Facebook video of his self-immolation became an emotionally potent image that inspired uprisings across Tunisia.

Many Tunisians felt the same way that Bouazizi did; where they had no way to socially or economically advance under the highly corrupt regime in Tunisia. By sharing the video, sending event invites to friends on Facebook, as well as posting their own feelings about the regime, the opposition became organized. The media platform helped anti-government citizens see that they were not the only discontent Tunisians, but rather that there was a large portion of the population that shared their feelings.⁸ With this newfound solidarity, revolution became a much more attainable reality. Within 28 days of the initial start to protests, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of the country and his 24-year rule of corruption and oppression ended.

⁷ Ryan, Yasmine. "How Tunisia's Revolution Began." *France | Al Jazeera*. January 26, 2011.

⁸ Schraeder, Peter J., and Hamadi Redissi. "Ben Ali's Fall." *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 3 (June 2011): 5-19.

Egypt

Along the same lines as in Tunisia, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak tyrannically ruled Egypt for almost three decades. Despite political dissent, Mubarak held onto power until the Arab Spring in 2011. What started off as small grassroots protests organized on social media, led to the peaceful occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square. The occupation of one of Cairo's main squares took Western media by storm in January of 2011. Mubarak eventually left power due to the use of social media by young, urban, and educated Egyptians. Like in Tunisia, Egyptian protestors used Facebook and Twitter to communicate with other anti-government advocates across the country. It was not just decentralized grassroots groups doing tweeting and posting however, but also the Muslim Brotherhood, a long established and highly influential political opponent of the Mubarak regime.⁹ The combination of grassroots organizing as well as adoption of social media by traditional Egyptian powers culminated in the Tahrir square occupation, where conservative estimates put at least 100,000 protesters there at its height.¹⁰ This protest, facilitated by the use of social media platforms, ended up being the largest ever recorded act of civil disobedience in Egypt.

Native American Issues

Beginning around the same time as the Arab Spring, the Idle No More movement's recent efforts by Native American advocacy groups used many of the same strategies as those employed in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt. As stated in Idle No More's vision statement, "Idle No More calls on all people to join in a peaceful revolution, to honor Indigenous sovereignty, and to

⁹ Howard, Philip N., Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil Hussein, Will Mari, and Marqa Mazaid. "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?" *Project on Information Technology & Political Islam*, 2011, 7.

¹⁰ Keating, Joshua E. "How Do We Know How Many Protesters Came Out in Cairo?" *Foreign Policy*. February 01, 2011.

protect the land and water."¹¹ Through localized organization efforts by grassroots activists, protests and sit-ins spread across Canada, First Nations groups were able to raise awareness about the Canadian bill C-45 that moved to privatize Native lands and threaten tribal sovereignty.¹² Through a social media posts, over 1000 First Nations people as well as allies took to the streets in Ottawa to raise awareness over the problems inherent in C-45. The protest became one of the largest indigenous protests in the modern era and was built out of social media and later inspired a similarly styled campaign for protections at Standing Rock.¹³

Despite the recent and successful use of social media to connect indigenous groups, it is not the first time that indigenous people in North America have organized against a highly unequal system. It would be remiss to not mention the indigenous resistance and freedom fighter groups that have fought back against colonialism for as long as there have been settlers in North and South America. A common phrase that is brought up when discussing this topic is “500 years of oppression, 500 years of Resistance.” As many indigenous scholars point out, Native Americans across the two continents have fought against the systematic destruction of their histories, cultures and lifeways since Columbus initially landed in the Caribbean in 1492. It has not just been in the past 10 years that Native American activists have stood up against structural violence, even though these activists have recently received the most national and international attention.

One of the most prominent activist coalitions that fought for expanded Native American sovereignty was the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. The two main Red

¹¹ “The Vision.” Idle No More. Accessed December 5, 2018. <http://www.idlenomore.ca/vision>.

¹² Pedwell, Terry. “Idle No More vs. Bill C-45: First Nations Leaders Launch National Protest in Ottawa As Movement Grows.” HuffPost Canada, December 21, 2012.

¹³ Nicolescu, Ionut. “Cases for Equality: Idle No More and the Protests at Standing Rock.” *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 27, no. 2 (December 1, 2018).

Power groups were the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) that worked in conjunction with other, more well known, civil rights groups such as the Black Panthers. AIM specifically helped create the ethnic identity of Native Americans that did not broadly exist before Red Power. Until the 1960s, many indigenous peoples did not identify as one whole group in the US. Instead, as had been the case since the first peopling of the continent, social identity grew out of tribal identity, geographic area, language, tradition and culture. As Joane Nagel argues, these extremely diverse groups of tribes began self-identifying as an ethnic group in order to better fight for their rights. As seen in the Red Power and civil rights movements, collective action and unity, can be extremely helpful in advocating for one's rights, despite personal differences.¹⁴ The lessons learned from the power of collective unity are utilized today by indigenous activist groups.

Standing Rock

In the same way that AIM brought attention to Native American civil rights, protests against the Dakota Access pipeline began to dominate the national news cycle. The Dakota Access pipeline project drew heavy criticism after the rerouting of the pipeline path from near the predominantly white city of Bismarck, North Dakota, to less than a mile off of the Standing Rock Reservation.¹⁵ After little consultation with the Sioux tribe's elders, the United States Army Corps of Engineers approved the construction of the oil pipeline from North Dakota to Chicago. In response, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe sued the Army Corps of Engineers for violating the National Historic Preservation Act as well as previous treaties signed between the

¹⁴ Nagel, Joane. *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 10.

¹⁵ Dalrymple, Amy. "Pipeline Route Plan First Called for Crossing North of Bismarck | North Dakota News | Bismarcktribune.Com." *The Bismarck Tribune*, August 18, 2016.

tribe and federal government.¹⁶ The suit was based on belief that the Army Corps of Engineers was too hasty in the approval process and disregarded concerns over oil spills in the main reservation water source, as well as destruction of archaeological sites that belong to the Sioux nation.¹⁷

In protest of the pipeline, the tribal leaders of the Standing Rock Sioux put out calls to action and solidarity to fight the encroachment by government and corporations on tribal lands and rights. To spread the word of this intrusion social media became the main platform for news to be shared and protests to be organized.¹⁸ What drew the most attention to a wide ranging audience was the Facebook phenomenon of “checking in” at Standing Rock with hopes of confusing police tracking of protestors. Despite the local Morton County Sheriff’s Department releasing statements that they were not using Facebook to target protestors, this seemingly small and very easy action spread across the online platform.¹⁹ By “checking in” or posting on Facebook that they were at Standing Rock, any regular person could help the cause of protecting the reservation and their water sources by expanding the visibility of the protests. After just a few days, over 1.5 million Facebook users posted that they were at Standing Rock in a move of solidarity.²⁰

¹⁶ Hersher, Rebecca. "Key Moments in The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight." *NPR*. February 22, 2017.

¹⁷ Meyer, Robinson. "The Law Behind the Dakota Access Pipeline Disaster." *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2016.

¹⁸ Ahtone, Tristan. "How Media Did and Did Not Report on Standing Rock." *Al Jazeera*, December 14, 2016.

¹⁹ Waddell, Robinson Meyer, Kaveh. "Did the 'Check-In at Standing Rock' Campaign Start With Protesters?" *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2016.

²⁰ Kennedy, Merrit. "More Than 1 Million 'Check In' On Facebook To Support The Standing Rock Sioux." *NPR*. November 01, 2016.

While “checking in” should not be confused with the actions by Water Protectors that put their lives and wellbeing on the line in the name of protecting the reservation, the size of the movement was incredibly impressive. Normally, Native American issues get very little visibility in the mass media.²¹ However, by the average American being encouraged to post about the protests on social media, Standing Rock became a national issue. The importance of visibility should not be understated. Learning of the plight of others, specifically a population who is regularly marginalized such as indigenous groups, can empower those who are fighting against oppression.

Literature Review

Standing Rock:

After 500 years of oppression and 500 years of resistance, Native Americans have fought against systematic racism and misrepresentation by the government and press. Now with the advent of social media in the past decade, new, unmediated channels of communication have opened up to allow for activists to continue their fight. Author Nick Estes, PhD, of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, discussed the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline in the context of the historical struggles of Native Americans, and highlights the key importance of social media in this fight. He observed that the #NoDAPL social media campaign was particularly successful in “mobilizing everyday people in defense of Native sovereignty, self-determination, and treaty rights” unlike ever before.²² The ability for indigenous people to let their voices be heard through social media platforms is unprecedented.

²¹ Ahtone, Tristan.

²² Estes, Nick. “Fighting for Our Lives: #NoDAPL in Historical Context.” *Wicazo Sa Review* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 115–22.

As scholar Hayley Johnson argues, social media platforms allow for indigenous people to self-represent and counteract the stereotypes long placed on them by traditional media outlets. Specifically, in the case of Standing Rock and the #NoDAPL, indigenous voices from all over the world were given an avenue to speak out against injustices to an audience that may never have heard anything different than the dominant narrative.²³ Being able to reframe both issues and a people that have long been misrepresented is a huge step in a fight against an inherently unjust system.

Specifically, the ability to reframe the Dakota Access Pipeline debate was the focus of a study by Professors Judith Walker and Pierre Walter. The two academics looked at 164 articles by the *New York Times* articles and 96 *Fox News* articles about the Standing Rock Reservation, Water Protectors and the #NoDAPL. As could be anticipated, there were differences in the portrayal of the protests by the two news sources, but overall the two sources focused on the resilience of Indigenous peoples as well as climate change, water pollution and land rights. In the eyes of Walker and Walter, the social media campaign by Native Americans and allies were able to frame these protests in a more favorable light, rather than allowing damaging trope narratives to take over.²⁴ Social media's ability to allow indigenous activists to self-represent issues that face them every day has a rather unprecedented effect on traditional mass media. By being able to self-represent, underrepresented groups like Native Americans have the ability to frame the conversation that takes place in mass media. This self-made frame allows for significant changes

²³ Johnson, Hayley. "Project MUSE - #NoDAPL: Social Media, Empowerment, and Civic Participation at Standing Rock." *John's Hopkins University Press* 66, no. 2. Accessed October 2, 2018.

²⁴ Walker, Judith, and Pierre Walter. "Learning about Social Movements through News Media: Deconstructing New York Times and Fox News Representations of Standing Rock." *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, June 21, 2018, 1–18.

the dominant narrative and combat negative stereotypes held by the average American audience member.

Communication and Politics Generally:

The audience of mass media is characterized by a public where “many 'hear' but few 'listen’”.²⁵ The writer of the previous quote, Bernard Berelson, was foundational in the creation of field of political communication after the technological revolutions of the radio and television. While social media appears to be a new frontier in political communication, the quote still rings true about how audiences, whether on Facebook or next to a radio, absorb and understand information. The mediums have changed, but many of the principles have not. To further analyze what impact social media has on the political beliefs of the users, one can look to one of the already established, and most prominent schools of thought that govern this field: Agenda Setting theory.

Agenda Setting theory, originally developed by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972, states that the media and their decisions of what they cover shapes, what the general public views as important. For example, in their case study of the 1968 US presidential election, respondents overwhelmingly associated the campaign issues that received the most media attention as the campaign issues that were most important to themselves.²⁶ So the more the public hears about a specific issue through media, the more the public prioritizes that issue. Therefore, the higher rate of news coverage of a problem, the more the public believes a solution is needed.

²⁵ Berelson, Bernard, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee. *Voting a Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1954.

²⁶ McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–87.

At the time McCombs and Shaw conducted this study, the diversity of news outlets and the people who ran them was significantly smaller than today's current media. With the popularity of social media and its use to spread news and information, how do viewers process all the information they consume in the 24-hour news cycle? Donald L. Shaw and David H. Weaver in the epilogue of the 1999 version of the original book *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, discuss an update of Agenda Setting theory for the beginning of the internet age. The pair dub the new theory update as Agenda-Melding; or how the public balances their various sources of information with their own already held beliefs and ideas. The information sources can be categorized in three different sections: vertical media (corporate owned entities with broad audiences such as NBC), horizontal media (peer owned and operated news sources like local news and radio shows), and finally one's own previously held views or knowledge of that topic.²⁷

Internet Media

But how does the internet factor into Agenda-Setting and its offshoot Agenda Melding? Since initial widespread use of the internet, academics have been researching what the possible political effects could be of internet communication. Shelley Boulianne argues that the use of the internet in general points to users having an overall positive outcome when they use it to politically engage.²⁸ For the purposes of this thesis focusing on oppressed groups, she specifically notes that the internet provides new communication methods for those disillusioned

²⁷ McCombs, Maxwell. "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion - Epilogue." In *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed., 145. John Wiley & Sons, 1999.

²⁸ Boulianne, Shelley. "Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research." *Political Communication* 26, no. 2 (May 11, 2009): 193–211

by traditional outlets.²⁹ In fact she is not alone in her beliefs that previously politically inactive groups could begin to be politically energized by general use of the internet; Benjamin Barber, Brian Krueger as well as Michael X. Delli Carpini all agree with this assertion.³⁰ Much of the research and sentiments of the previously mentioned scholars and the ones discussed in the next few pages can be summed up as social media provides new ways to build civil society.

Positives of Social Media:

While the internet has seemingly infinite information outlets from online newspapers to conspiracy theorists on YouTube, social media platforms like Twitter have taken on a disproportionate role in shaping politics online. In the wake of the Arab Spring, political scientists sought to examine what political role social media, specifically Twitter, could play in the coming years. Although many focused on the ability of social media to bring protestors to the streets, Clay Shirky, a widely referenced scholar in modern media studies, thought the impact of social media could be much longer lasting than creating momentary civil disobedience. Instead, social media creates a new space for civil society that allows citizens to directly interact and share ideas outside of traditional outlets.³¹ This new space directly contributes to the creation of civil society in authoritarian states as well as the ability for citizens to interact easily applies in democratic societies, like that of the United States. As interaction between the average citizens

²⁹ Boulianne, Shelley. 195

³⁰ Barber, Benjamin R. "The Uncertainty of Digital Politics: Democracy's Uneasy Relationship with Information Technology." *Harvard International Review* 23, no. 1 (2001): 42–47. ; Krueger, Brian S. "Assessing the Potential of Internet Political Participation in the United States: A Resource Approach." *American Politics Research* 30, no. 5 (September 1, 2002): 476–98. ; Delli Carpini, Michael X. "Gen.Com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment." *Political Communication* 17, no. 4 (October 2000): 341–49.

³¹ Shirky, Clay. "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 28–41.

increase, more social bonds are built which allows for easier political mobilization in the future by these groups.

This new form of civil society and social bonds now dominates how young people interact and share political ideas. Sociologist Brian D. Loader contends that for young citizens, the bonds created on social media have a more significant impact on their political identity than the usual influences of family and environment.³² A significant reason for this shift is the perception among users is that they have been able to build and shape these new networks themselves, rather than having traditional power structures thrust upon them. The drivers of these new communities, according to Kathleen Stansbury, are a small group of social media users that create a framework for discussion and are highly influential in how the community thinks and discusses about an issue.³³ The benefits of creating one's own communication structures should not be understated. Individuals being able to mold their own political communication system has been potent throughout previous social change movements, such as pamphlets in the American Revolution, or the fax machine in the Tiananmen Square occupation in China during the 1989.

Maybe the most important impact of social media and political engagement comes in the form of increased political activity by low income and marginalized populations. In a survey by David S. Morris and Johnathan Morris right before the 2012 US Presidential Election, they found that with increase access and use of the internet, respondents of low socioeconomic status were more likely to know more about politics and in turn vote more than if they did not use the

³² Loader, Brian D., Ariadne Vromen, and Michael A. Xenos. "The Networked Young Citizen: Social Media, Political Participation and Civic Engagement." *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 2 (February 7, 2014): 143–50.

³³ Stansberry, Kathleen. "One-Step, Two-Step, or Multi-Step Flow: The Role of Influencers in Information Processing and Dissemination in Online, Interest-Based Publics." *University of Oregon*, 2012.

internet.³⁴ In a detailed ethnography about the campaign to right the injustices against CeCe MacDonald, an African American transgender woman charged with murder while she was defending herself against a hate crime, Professor Mia Fischer argues that using traditional activist strategies on social media is more effective than in person activism.³⁵ By bypassing traditional news outlets, activists are able to spread point of views that are normally left out of the news cycle, such as that of a transgender, black woman.

In addition to creating new avenues to spread non-traditional news, social media can be used to create collective identities that are key in modern, solidarity based activism. Paolo Gerbaudo & Emiliano Treré contend that the decentralized, collective identities at the center of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring are why the movements became so popular and successful in getting physical protestors into the streets.³⁶ This collective identity created on social media platforms then helps to facilitate the development of individual users as political activists.

Negatives of Social Media:

However, many scholars believe that social media activism has come under fire for creating a space where fighting for social change appears easy as it requires only a few keystrokes or “likes”. Most of the commentary from this position can be summed up by what Malcolm Gladwell refers to as “slacktivism”.³⁷ In the eyes of Gladwell and his likeminded peers,

³⁴ Morris, David S., and Jonathan S. Morris. “Digital Inequality and Participation in the Political Process: Real or Imagined?” *Social Science Computer Review* 31, no. 5 (October 1, 2013): 589–600.

³⁵ Fischer, Mia. “#Free_CeCe: The Material Convergence of Social Media Activism.” *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 755–71.

³⁶ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. “In Search of the ‘We’ of Social Media Activism: Introduction to the Special Issue on Social Media and Protest Identities.” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (August 3, 2015): 865–71.

³⁷ Gladwell, Malcolm. “Small Change.” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010.

social media focused activism is too easy to be equated with many of the great social revolutions of the past. In his eyes, comparing the action of someone posting about an injustice on Facebook or Twitter is an insult to activists who risked their lives for causes in the past, such as African American men sitting at segregated lunch counters in the Jim Crow South. Much of his criticism is based on the essays on effective activism by Professor Doug McAdam, who reviews previous social movements and how they were successful.³⁸ Yet what Gladwell seems to forget is that many of the most successful movements for civil rights and social change rely on convincing people that change is necessary. To be successful, movements do not need every single person to take to the streets in protest, but rather also rely on the average, typically inactive citizen to support them in solidarity in their fights against injustice.

One of the original social media scholars, Merlyna Limm, has echoed many similar sentiments about slacktivism and the problems of political change through social media. In a 2013 study, Limm looked at how Facebook has become a political tool for citizens to organize and fight corruption in Indonesia. Despite the campaign against corruption being fairly effective in accomplishing its goal, Limm was not all that impressed. She concluded that while Facebook allows for the creation of new channels to spread information, the platform is only effective when political narratives are simple and require little action by those sharing and viewing them.³⁹ This conclusion about simple narrative, however, seems to be in line with most past revolutionary movements. Too complicated of a message can dilute a movement to the point of

³⁸ McAdam, Doug. "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer." *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (July 1986): 64–90.

³⁹ Lim, Merlyna. "Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (November 1, 2013): 636–57.

being ineffective and having no clear goal. A simple narrative is key in grabbing the attention of the average citizen and making them believe that change is possible.

In addition to Gladwell and Limm, Professor Marshall Ganz argues that organizing of social movements is not an easy task, but rather takes significant attention and work. In a handbook entitled *Organizing: People, Power, Change*, Ganz tells of how movements are built on 1:1 meetings to build relationships.⁴⁰ While not in the context of social media, the same analysis can be applied to Facebook and Twitter activism. If social change needs face to face interactions to be effective, social media simply cannot provide that direct interfacing and therefore foster weak activists. However, as multiple scholars have pointed out, online communities and friendships are a key way for people to feel connected and interact in the modern world.⁴¹ Despite not meeting face to face, online interactions and friendships can still create the same deep connection that Ganz believes social change is built on.

Similarly, Professor Vincent Miller claims that social media has become a platform for limited solidarity, rather than directly engaged, social activism.⁴² Through use of Facebook and Twitter, users can simply post about an ongoing injustice and or protest and feel as if what they're doing is actively contributing to the fight against said problem. In the eyes of Miller, posting about a problem does very little to actually fix it. Yet the first step to starting a successful social movement is to get the movement's message out to an audience that is unaware of the injustice or the group's reason for formation. The easiest way to do that in the modern era is

⁴⁰ Ganz, Marshall, Dr. *Organizing: People, Power, Change*. Leading Change Network. 15

⁴¹ Seraj, Mina. "We Create, We Connect, We Respect, Therefore We Are: Intellectual, Social, and Cultural Value in Online Communities." *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 26, no. 4 (November 1, 2012): 209–22.

⁴² Miller, Vincent. "Phatic Culture and the Status Quo: Reconsidering the Purpose of Social Media Activism." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 23, no. 3 (June 2017): 251–69.

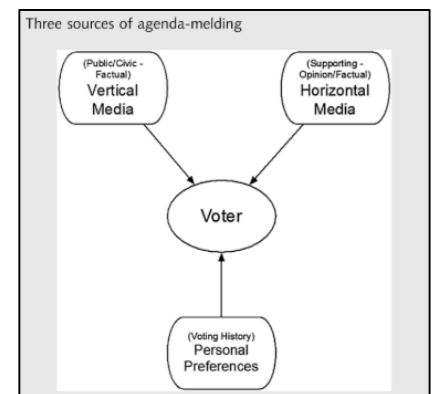
through posting and tweeting on social media, despite this action not leading to direct and immediate change.

Model

Whether social media is a futile tool that gives “slacktivists” the ability to feel like they are making a difference, or building new connections in civil society, there is mutual acceptance from both camps that social media has become a common avenue for political discussion. This new platform for discussion has become potent in starting conversations about politics, similar to how television news has since the 1950s. The parallel of television broadcasting and social media allows for the continued use of the foundational theory of Agenda Setting, however with updates to better reflect the modern times.

Figure 1 - Agenda Melding Model

One of the more significant updates of the Agenda Setting theory was proposed by Donald L. Shaw and David H. Weaver in 1999 and elaborated on in 2018, with an additional graphic, called the Agenda Melding model.⁴³ Their Agenda Melding model illustrates what types of information sources contribute to the formation of a voter’s preferences. As discussed in Shaw’s earlier groundbreaking



work with Maxwell McCombs, whatever stories are covered the most in media, has a disproportionate impact on what the average audience member perceives as important. Shaw and Weaver update this theory by taking a more holistic look at all potential information sources. In their theory, the three categories of information and influence are: vertical media, horizontal media and previous personal preferences.

⁴³ McCombs, Maxwell.

Media and information sources that seek to reach a large and diverse audience in both demographic and region, are classified as vertical media. Examples of this form of media range from TV channels like CNN, Fox News, and NBC to widely distributed newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Shaw and Weaver characterize these media forms as “shouting down from the top of a pyramid to any and all” audience members.⁴⁴ Vertical media has an inherently large power to set the discussion on a certain issue for the whole country because of its wide reach.

Horizontal media on the other hand, is peer driven media that is typically highly specialized and focused. Local news, talk shows, blogs, websites and magazines are all often specific to a certain region, interest or demographic. Since these media sources discuss a very small portion of news and information, by default they have a small scope and just supplement the broad based information given by vertical media.

The final source of information that sways how an audience member thinks, is their voter history and personal preferences. With topics such as immigration, abortion or tax policy, the average viewer already has strongly held beliefs on these issues since they often have strong emotional responses tied with them. Due to this personal history with some topics, vertical and horizontal media may shift the audience member’s views slightly but do not have the ability to radically shift opinions.

As a Pew Research poll from December of 2018 illustrates, social media, a horizontal media source, has become the primary news source for many Americans. 20% of American

⁴⁴ McCombs, Maxwell. “Epilogue: Media Agenda Setting and Audience Agenda-Melding.” In *Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed., 145. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

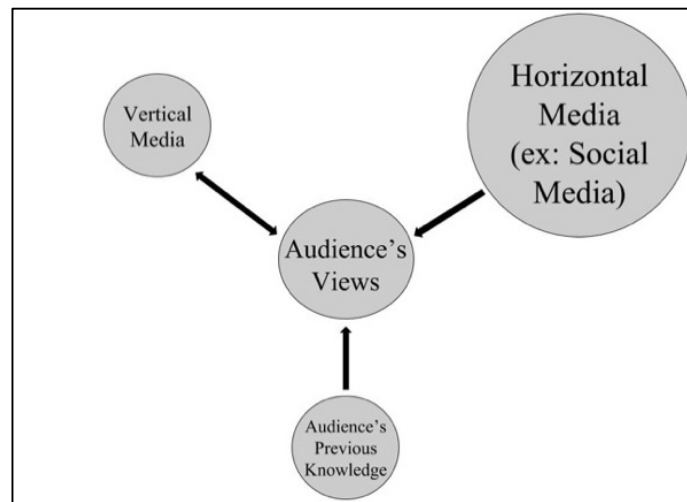
respondents get their news and information most often from social media. This percentage jumps up significantly when looking at the age demographics, as 36% of Americans age 18-29 rank social media as their number one news outlet, which is a higher percentage than any other media source.⁴⁵ The young audience of social media has found an increasingly political use for the platforms, whether its learning new information or using it as a tool for political action. With the initial Agenda Setting and the later Agenda Melding models not taking social media into consideration, there needs to be an update to these two revolutionary models, especially when discussing news events that are only initially covered on social media.

Agenda Setting Through Social Media

The Agenda Melding model assumes that any issue presented is one that has sufficient vertical and horizontal media coverage, as well as the voter having some previous knowledge about the issue. But, what happens when the matter at hand is relatively unknown, such as tribal water sovereignty? This issue, and other ones facing indigenous people, are often left out of the daily news cycle, which leads to very little to no vertical media influence. Also, a citizen may have some predisposition to believe one way or another on a topic such as this, but without facing it, or hearing about it in their daily lives, their stance is likely to be not particularly strong. So ultimately, when a citizen is presented news about a relatively unknown topic through social media, such as tribal water sovereignty, the horizontal media sources have a disproportionately large impact. In order to reflect this disproportionate impact, the Agenda Setting Through Social Media model is proposed and illustrated below.

⁴⁵ Shearer, Elisa. "Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers in the U.S. as a News Source." *Pew Research Center* (blog), December 10, 2018.

Figure 2 - Agenda Setting Through Social Media Model



This disproportionate coverage through social media means that the narratives on the platforms are the ones to initially set the framework of discussion, as well as present the initial and most influential viewpoints. This impact means that social media influencers have the ultimate authority to initially influence how an audience thinks about an issue. If an uninformed social media user only sees news and analysis from a Sioux resident living on the Standing Rock reservation, then they will be informed solely from the perspective of that activist on social media. While the sources of information may change as the situation becomes more important to the general public, their later views and analysis will still be guided by the Sioux activist that introduced the subject to the viewer.

Methodology:

Independent Variable:

Visibility, the independent variable, can be defined as the percent change in posts on Twitter about Standing Rock and the protests. Based on the theory outlined in the proposed Agenda Setting Through Social Media model, an increase in volume of coverage of a topic will

have an impact on what the audience thinks on that issue. Thus, the more tweets there are about Standing Rock, the more visible the issue will be and the more an audience will believe it is important. This means an increase in volume of tweets leads to an increase in visibility of the topic presented in those tweets.

In order to measure visibility and daily percent change, the online platform Social Studio, run by Salesforce, was used to track overall trends on Twitter. Typically used as a marketing tool to gauge user involvement with a product on social, Social Studio can serve much more academic of purposes. By using the search terms: “Dakota Access”, “#NoDAPL”, “Sioux”, both variations “Standing Rock” and “Standingrock”, as well as “water rights”, all tweets using any combination of those terms were pulled by Social Studio and isolated into day by day charts. Using the total number of tweets from each day, the dataset was downloaded, loaded into Excel and percent change from day to day was calculated

Using the number of tweets from each day of the August 1, 2016 to December 31, 2016 timeframe, the total percent change in tweets from day to day was calculated. With the percent change in tweets ranging from -56.58% on September 10 to 667.32% on November 19, the percent change in tweets was highly variable. Taking the percent change, the days of over 100% change were isolated and looked at in relation to the dependent variables that will be discussed further on below.

Unfortunately, due to guidelines outlined by the University of Colorado’s Institutional Review Board, individual tweets cannot be analyzed directly. Instead the aggregate number and daily change were used as the basis for analysis. Despite the inability to look at individual activist and what is being said, the sheer volume and change is incredibly important. Any discussion and coverage by Twitter users and major news sources alike amounts to unusually

high attention on an issue facing an indigenous community. When there are high levels of tweets, the visibility of the fight against the Dakota Access pipeline was amplified, regardless of lacking specific individual voices in the analysis.

In addition to analyzing trends in tweets and percent change, the number of arrests each day was used to gauge protest activity on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. Using press releases and statements by the Morton County Sheriff's office, the number of protestors arrested each day was calculated. Unfortunately, there was a discrepancy in arrest numbers as Morton County reported 569 protestor arrests during this timeframe, yet the press releases only discuss 455. Regardless, the missing 114 arrests would likely only reinforce the trends elaborated on below. These statements are publicly accessible through the site ndresponse.gov, an archival site of government statements run by the North Dakota's Governor's Office.

Dependent Variable:

The dependent variable, efficacy, hinges on the volume and visibility of tweets concerning the Standing Rock protests. Using the platform Social Studio, peaks of activity on Twitter, using the previously mentioned key words, were matched with two different gauges of protest impact: *New York Times* articles and press releases by state and federal officials.

First, on peak activity days, articles written by the *New York Times* on Standing Rock and the Dakota Access Pipeline were compiled during the entire five-month time frame. The number of articles was compared to the percent change in tweets each day to see if any patterns arose. Looking at the day prior to the peak social media acted as a control to see if major vertical news outlets were covering Standing Rock prior to social media campaigns.

The *New York Times* was chosen due to it being one of the most popular vertical news sources not only in the United States but across the world. With a trusted name comes high

online viewership and a large audience. So whatever was posted by the NYT likely reached a large and diverse audience that other similar news outlets would not. This large audience was key to social media advocacy as only a portion of Americans consumed information about Standing Rock through Twitter, but the message and subject from social media was greatly amplified when a vertical media source covered it, increasing visibility and efficacy.

In addition to looking at impact on the vertical media level, the peaks of social media use were lined up with state government statements, specifically by the governor of North Dakota and his administration. Similar to the approach taken when looking at *New York Times* articles, the day of individual press releases was analyzed in relation to the percent change in tweets per day. Looking at the day before a spike was used to decipher whether or not an increase in social media activity was caused by a statement released by local government. If a statement was given in the days after an increase, then social media can be seen as a possible cause of this statement. With the exact same methodology as looking at state level press releases, statements given by federal departments such as the Department of Interior were analyzed. Since federal law and policy trumps state law, the impact of a federal press release can be seen as more significant than those of state lawmakers. If social media campaigns were able to cause government statements at any level, then that means that the work by activists was getting recognized significantly.

Tweets Reflecting on the Ground Protests

Over the course of five months, the number of tweets concerning Standing Rock increased from 340,000 in August 2016 peaked to 3.1 million in November of the same year. Comparing on the per day level, the number of tweets increased over nine fold in just the course of 121 days. On December 4, the peak activity day in the overall five-month span, 549,988 tweets alone were posted. On the average, 500 million tweets are sent per day, which

corresponds to a little more than 1% of total tweets on December 4 were dedicated to discussing Standing Rock.⁴⁶ While seemingly a small percentage of tweets, it becomes significantly more impressive when compared to the size of the Twitter audience. The overall number of Twitter users in 2016 amounted to 246.9 million users across the globe.⁴⁷ These almost 250 million total users would amount to the population of the 5th largest country in the world in 2016.⁴⁸ With that large of a user base, about 1% of tweets dedicated to the controversy of a pipeline located in one of the least populous states in the United States is a significant feat.

Peak Days of Tweeting

From August to December of 2016, thirteen days were looked at due to those days being spikes of daily tweets. To isolate which days count as significant spikes, percent change in number of tweets from day to day was computed and days above 100% change were isolated. These days are included in Table 1, with the daily tweet counts of the previously chosen days as well as percent change.

Table 1 – Peak Days of Tweets

Day	Tweets	% Change
August 11	6,163	154.77%
August 15	13,442	151.77%
September 3	46,906	215.04%
September 4	105,769	125.49%
September 13	70,188	128.17%
September 28	26,278	154.29%
October 10	54,437	403.35%
October 22	26,288	126.50%
October 27	339,642	658.59%
November 14	125,356	184.28%
November 19	188,616	667.32%
November 20	403,611	113.99%
December 4	549,988	327.14%

⁴⁶ “Number of Tweets per Day?” David Sayce, March 3, 2010.

⁴⁷ “Twitter: Number of Users Worldwide 2020 | Statista.” Statista. Accessed February 17, 2019.

⁴⁸ “2017 Revision of World Population Prospects.” New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017.

While the thirteen days that were chosen to be analyzed were not necessarily the thirteen days with the highest number of tweets, they were chosen due to the percent change. In the beginning of Twitter activity in August, the number of daily tweets ranged from around 2,000 up to a high of 33,246 on August 24. When compared to November's range of a low of 25,000 up to a peak of 403,611 on November 20, the daily number of tweets in August would not register. Without analyzing change from day to day, the activity ends up being focused primarily in late November and early December and disregards the significant changes in Twitter usage in August through October.

Events and Tweets Prior to August

On December 9, 2015 the US Army Corps of Engineers opened the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline plan for public comment and began an environmental impact assessment. Released on July 25, 2016, the US Army Corps of Engineers concluded that the pipeline would not "have any significant direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts on the environment."⁴⁹ In addition, an archeological survey, like the environmental impact one, concluded that there were "no historic properties subject to effect."⁵⁰ In response to both of the impact surveys, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe filed suit against the US Army Corps of Engineers on August 4, 2016. Despite the filing of the suit, the number of tweets on that day only changed by 11.59% from the previous day, or from 1968 to 2196 and then declined on August 5 back down to 2082. In the early stages of the protests, the change in daily tweets was negligible and stayed consistently

⁴⁹ Dakota Access, LLC, and United States Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District. "Environmental Assessment: Dakota Access Pipeline Project, Crossings of Flowage Easements and Federal Lands - Project Management Reports." Environmental Assessment. US Army Corps of Engineers, 2016.

⁵⁰ Harnois, Richard D. "Letter from Sr. Field Archaeologist Richard D. Harnois to North Dakota Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Fern Swenson," April 22, 2016.

under 3000, as had been the case for the past many months since the initial opening of the pipeline for comment.

The indications of the magnitude of the protests to come started on August 10 as North Dakota police made their initial arrests of protestors seeking to halt the construction of the pipeline.⁵¹ The next day, August 11, the number of tweets concerning Standing Rock jumped up 154.77% to 6,163 in response to the beginning of protests on the ground. With hopes of stopping the protest from growing any further, the company building the pipeline, Dakota Access, LLC, countersued the tribe on August 15. Dakota Access, LLC's suit was filed because of protestors halting construction activities which had previously been permitted by the Army Corps of Engineers. This escalation of the controversy surrounding DAPL was once again reflected by a change in the number of daily tweets from 5,339 the on the 14th to 13,442, an overall change 151.77%.

The next days of over 100% change, September 3 and 4 were accompanied by a growth of discontent and protests on the Standing Rock reservation. Tribal leadership released a statement condemning the destruction of Native artifacts and land on the 3rd.⁵² During September 3 and 4, response to protests turned violent; videos from that day showed private security holding pepper spray and guard dogs while around 100 protestors crossed from tribal land, to the private construction area.⁵³ The Standing Rock tribe reported six people bitten by the dogs, including a young child and over 30 people pepper sprayed by the private security force hired by Dakota

⁵¹ News, P. M. N. "A Timeline of the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline." *National Post*, October 12, 2016.

⁵² Hersher, Rebecca. "Key Moments in The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight." NPR.org, February 22, 2017.

⁵³ Peralata, Eyder. "Dakota Access Pipeline Protests In North Dakota Turn Violent: The Two-Way : NPR." NPR, September 4, 2016.

Access company.⁵⁴ With the hope of deescalating protests, then-North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrymple activated 100 National Guard troops to stabilize a soon to be volatile situation.⁵⁵ One day after the National Guard was deployed, the District Judge overseeing the Standing Rock Sioux's legal case denied the tribe's request to delay the construction of the pipeline, signaling that Dakota Access Pipeline would proceed unimpeded.⁵⁶

Ten days later on September 13, 22 protestors were arrested after crossing into the construction site again.⁵⁷ Protestors were found chained to construction equipment throughout the site in order to slow down and stop all construction that day. Due to the acts of the protestors, no further work was done that day by construction workers, as law enforcement suggested they leave the site for their own safety. The same day on Twitter, the number of tweets increased by 128.17% to a total of 70,188 for that day. The arrests and Twitter peaks once again fell on the same day as Twitter users reflected the events on the ground and took to the platform to share more news of the protests and police response.

The next spike of over 100% change occurred on September 28 as the number of tweets increased by 154.29%. The same day, 21 protestors were arrested at the two main construction sites of the pipeline. Protestors, some on horseback, crossed onto private property and law enforcement officers responded with armored vehicles and bean bag guns.⁵⁸ September 28

⁵⁴ Gajanan, Mahita. "Pipeline Protest Turns Violent After Burial Grounds Are Allegedly Damaged." *Time*, September 4, 2016.

⁵⁵ Johnson, Eric M. "North Dakota Governor Calls in National Guard Ahead of Pipeline Ruling." *Reuters*, September 8, 2016.

⁵⁶ Heim, Joe, and Mark Berman. "Federal Government Moves to Halt Oil Pipeline Construction near Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Land." *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016.

⁵⁷ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. "Morton County Responds to Protestors on DAPL Worksite | ND Response." North Dakota Office of the Governor, September 13, 2016.

⁵⁸ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. "21 Dakota Access Pipeline Protesters Arrested." Morton County Sheriff's Department, September 28, 2016.

marked the second highest number of arrests as well as the first instances of law enforcement using suppression methods besides pepper spray.

After the refusal by the District Judge to halt construction of the pipeline during the civil suit, activity on Twitter was consistently low until October 10, Columbus Day. In recent years a large movement across the United States has worked to reclaim Columbus Day and rename the holiday as Indigenous Peoples' Day in memorial of the hundreds of millions of indigenous people who have lost their lives, land and ways of life to settler systems. On this day in 2016, there was a 403.35% increase of mentions of Standing Rock and the Dakota Access Pipeline. Despite little change in the situation on the ground, activists and average Twitter users alike took to the platform to discuss the injustices that were currently facing the Standing Rock Sioux people as well as indigenous groups across the world.

A week and a half later on the morning of October 22, an estimated 300 protestors crossed into private property where the pipeline was being built, likely with intent to dismantle or destroy construction equipment. In response, law enforcement formed a line between protestors and the construction equipment and sprayed oncoming protestors with pepper spray. At this point in the protests, the Morton County Police Department had received over 900 officers from 17 counties in North Dakota and two other states to assist the local officers. After a few hours of confrontation, a total 127 protestors were arrested for charges ranging from assaulting a peace officer to trespass on private property.⁵⁹ The same day, the number of daily tweets increased by 126.50% from 11,606 to 26,288.

⁵⁹ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. "Officers Arrest 80+ for Engaging in a Riot at DAPL Construction Site." Morton County Sheriff's Department, October 22, 2016.

Two days after the largest number of arrests to date, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman David Archambault II sent a letter to US Federal Attorney General Loretta Lynch requesting for the Department of Justice to protect the protestors on the ground as well as investigate possible civil rights abuses from the “excessive force” used by the local police department.⁶⁰ By October 22, a total 269 protestors had been detained since the beginning of protests on August 10.⁶¹

The highest percent change in tweets for the five-month span occurred on October 27 as 339,642 tweets were posted, amounting to a 658.59% increase from the previous day. The rise in tweets occurred simultaneously with the heavy handed police response towards the growing number of protestors on the reservation. On the 27th, police arrested 141 protestors and used pepper spray against protestors who were reportedly throwing rocks. Two protestors even fired shots in the general direction of police officers.⁶² Protestors, like the previous few days, had crossed into private property and sought to slow down construction by destroying construction equipment. Some protestors even attached themselves to various machinery and cars with “sleeping dragon devices”, or handcuffs covered in metal pipes, in order to slow down police response at the time.⁶³

Change in tweets, as well as on the ground protests, stayed consistent as there were no arrests or spikes in Twitter usage between October 28 to November 11. However, on the

⁶⁰ Archambault II, David. “Standing Rock Tribe - Request for Investigation to Protect Civil Rights,” October 24, 2016.

⁶¹ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. “Unlawful Protest Activities Call for Additional Law Enforcement Resources.” Morton County Sheriff’s Department, October 23, 2016.

⁶² Thorbecke, Catherine. “141 Arrested at Dakota Access Pipeline Protest as Police Move In.” ABC News, October 31, 2016.

⁶³ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. “Law Enforcement Arrest 141 Protestors Thursday.” Morton County Sheriff’s Department, October 27, 2016.

morning of November 11, a non-peak day, protestors created roadblocks across the highway running by the reservation and construction sites, blocking both local residents and an ambulance from passing. Due to impeding an emergency vehicle, police officers arrested 33 and towed a total 12 cars to clear the highway again.⁶⁴ Three days later, another spike of 184.28% occurred on Twitter, however, there was little to no related activity on the ground at the Standing Rock Reservation. Instead, major protest took place in Bismarck outside of the state capital building. Protestors locked arms and chanted slogans such as “Water is Life” while blocking traffic yet no arrests were made.⁶⁵

The most volatile protests up to this point occurred late on the night of November 19 and early into the morning of the 20th. Over 400 protestors gathered that night on the Backwater Bridge just outside the reservation and engaged in a multi-hour long standoff with law enforcement. Fires were set across the bridge and protestors tried to break through the police line on the other side of the bridge from the reservation.⁶⁶ Law enforcement used what they classify as “less than lethal means” such as tear gas and rubber bullets to quell the situation. Despite police officers on the scene describing the protests as “very aggressive”, only one protestor was arrested. Twitter reflected the increase of protest volatility as the number of tweets increased 667.32% on the 19th and then 113.99% on the 20th. During the two-day time span, a total 592,227 tweets were sent out.

⁶⁴ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. “Law Enforcement Arrest 33 in Dakota Access Pipeline Protest Activities.” Morton County Sheriff’s Department, November 11, 2016.

⁶⁵ ND Response. “Protesters March on ND Capitol Grounds and Block Traffic in Front of Federal Building.” North Dakota Office of the Governor, November 14, 2016.

⁶⁶ Grueskin, Caroline. “Police and Protesters Face off at Backwater Bridge.” *Bismarck Tribune*, November 20, 2016.

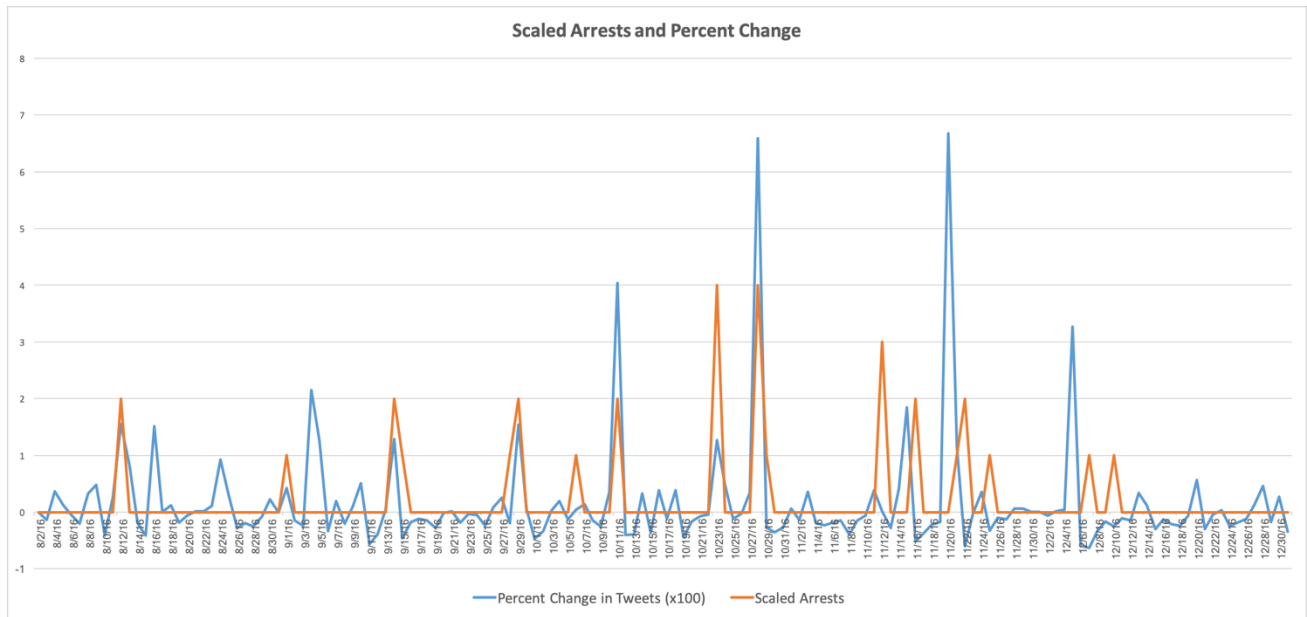
The final peak of Twitter usage occurred on December 4 as the Department of the Army and the Army Corps of Engineers announced that a section of the Dakota Access pipeline was not allowed to cross under the Missouri River outside of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. At this time, the decision was seen as win for the protestors that gathered outside and in the reservation. A total 549,988 tweets were sent out that day concerning both the protests and the government decision. The almost 550,000 tweets, as previously mentioned, amounts of a little over 1% of the total number of international tweets from that day.

Patterns of Tweets

The final number of protestors arrested during the five month time frame amounted to 569, of which only 6% were North Dakotan residents.⁶⁷ By comparing arrests per day with percent change in tweets, a pattern emerges. Days where the total number of tweets increased by over 100% were proceeded or fell on the same day of arrests of protestors, with the exception of four dates: August 15, September 3 and 4 and December 4. The other eight days of over 100% change all fell on days where arrests were made by law enforcement. Even when comparing days of less than 100% change, increases of tweets often falls on the same day as arrests by local police forces. To illustrate the overall pattern of both tweets and arrests, Figure 3 plots percent change in Tweets and arrests per day and includes the table of how arrests were scaled in the figure.

⁶⁷ Brady, Jeff. "2 Years After Standing Rock Protests, Tensions Remain but Oil Business Booms." NPR.org, November 29, 2018.

Figure 3 - Scaled Arrests and Percent Change



Arrest Range (Arrests)	Scaled Equivalent
Less than 9	1
10 to 29	2
30 to 49	3
50 or above	4

Based on this pattern, it appears as if Twitter is most respondent to protests when law enforcement becomes heavily involved. While attention is paid to the protests at Standing Rock, users of Twitter and other social media platforms can easily grab onto events such as the arrest of 121 people in a single day. The ability to easily quantify the size of protests through the number of protestors arrested created a way for users of the social media platform to gauge what exactly was going on the ground during protests, rather than trying to grasp more politically complicated events. Because of this concrete gauge of both police response as well as what is happening in protests, Twitter users can easily tweet about a specific event and unequal police response. Therefore, when law enforcement makes arrests, Twitter works as a magnifier and draws attention to what occurred on the ground in those protests.

Mass Media Response

Coverage of Native American issues by nationally recognized mass news sources has consistently been missing. Whether it is due to conscious decisions to erase the voice of indigenous people, or a side effect of news sources wanting to cover only the dominant narrative, the end result is the same. Natives Americans and the plight they face does not reach the average American viewer as the sources of this information are buried beneath the mainstream media. Despite the lack of visibility through traditional news streams, Twitter and other social media platforms continued to cover these issue, such as the Dakota Access pipeline, regardless of vertical media.

On August 23, 2016, *The New York Times*, released their first two stories concerning the Dakota Access Pipeline and the protests surrounding it. Prior to that day, the *New York Times*, similar to other major news sources, were silent on the growing protests at the Standing Rock Reservation. Regardless of mass media silence, Twitter and its users had already sent out 155,103 tweets since August 1, 2016. When major news sources were not covering the beginning of protests or even the declaration of a State of Emergency by the Governor on August 18, Twitter users, both indigenous and allies, were making sure Standing Rock was being discussed by those non local to North Dakota.

During the three days following the initial two articles, the *New York Times* published two more about the ongoing protests at Standing Rock. One of these articles carried greater significance than the majority of other articles published by the news source doing the five-month period. On August 24, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairman David Archambault II published an op-ed in the *New York Times* which called on both the Army Corps of Engineers as well as the pipeline parent company, Energy Transfer Pipeline, to stop the construction

immediately. Referencing previous illegal land seizures of Sioux land by the Federal government, Archambault built a sympathetic case for why both American citizens and the Obama administration should push back against this threat to the tribe's water rights and sovereignty.

Publishing of an op-ed by an indigenous voice means that the *New York Times* used their international platform to help amplify the ideas and viewpoints of a group that has been consistently left out of the mass media. While Twitter and other social media platforms allow people from outside the dominant narrative to make their voices heard, rarely do large media institutions on par with the *New York Times* do that. By publishing Tribe Chairman Archambault II's op-ed, the *New York Times* followed suit of what has been posted and magnified through Twitter for the past month: the plight of the Standing Rock Sioux and their continued fight for water rights and equal treatment. The choice to allow the Tribe Chairman to speak for himself and his people was an act of solidarity and an act of endorsement of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's fight against the pipeline.

Twelve days after the publishing of the initial *New York Times* articles and op-ed from Tribe Chairman Archambault II, the newspaper and media outlet released two more articles on consecutive days, September 8 and 9. During this period of twelve days, Twitter activity included two peaks of over 100% change on September 3 and 4 and a total 492,120 tweets. At this point in September, the number of articles and coverage by major, vertical news sources was inconsistent. Despite inconsistent coverage by vertical news, Twitter did not drop below 29,000 tweets daily. Usage of social media to discuss the ongoing events at Standing Rock was not dependent on what vertical media published since tweets were consistently sent out regardless of

the publishing of articles. Rather, Twitter usage was respondent to changes on the ground such as arrests.

Over the next month and a half from September 10 to October 26, the *New York Times* released a total nine articles, blog posts and photo collections. During this time frame, Twitter activity included over one million tweets and peaked over a 100% daily change four times: September 13, 28 and October 10, 22. For two of the days, September 13 and October 10, articles were published on the same day while on September 28, one was published the day after. While two of the peaks line up with articles, the other two do not. Once again, peaks of Twitter usage are not dependent on when major media sources like the *New York Times* published articles, but rather fall independently.

Additionally, 200 protestors were arrested during the time frame of September 10 to October 26. Even after 200 were arrested, only two out of the nine *New York Times* pieces published during this period directly mentioned the arrests of protestors. The articles entitled “Neighbors Say North Dakota Pipeline Protests Disrupt Lives and Livelihoods” and “Ranchers Tote Guns as Tribes Dig in for Long Pipeline Fight” on September 13 and October 10 respectively, discussed both arrests on specific days as well as total number of arrests up till the publishing date.⁶⁸ What becomes clear during this time period is that arrests and whether or not the *New York Times* publishes an article are not linked. With 200 arrests but only two articles out of the nine pertaining to arrests of protestors, the newspaper and vertical media source did not focus their correspondence on police response to the protests at the Dakota Access pipeline.

⁶⁸ Healy, Jack. “Neighbors Say North Dakota Pipeline Protests Disrupt Lives and Livelihoods - The New York Times.” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016. ; Healy, Jack. “Ranchers Tote Guns as Tribes Dig in for Long Pipeline Fight - The New York Times.” *The New York Times*, October 10, 2016.

Contrasted with activity by the *New York Times*, Twitter users and tweets were respondent to the daily activity on the ground, such as arrests of protestors. During the time frame of September 10 to October 26, arrests occurred on the same day as three of the four peaks: September 28 and October 10 and 22. Specifically on October 22 as 127 were arrested, 26,288 tweets were sent and an additional 151,116 followed in the four days after.⁶⁹ Twitter users and activists continued to discuss and post about Standing Rock whenever arrests took place on that day and in the days following. The *New York Times* however, did not publish pieces often at this point and the majority, seven of the nine, were focused on topics within the discussion other than arrests and police response.

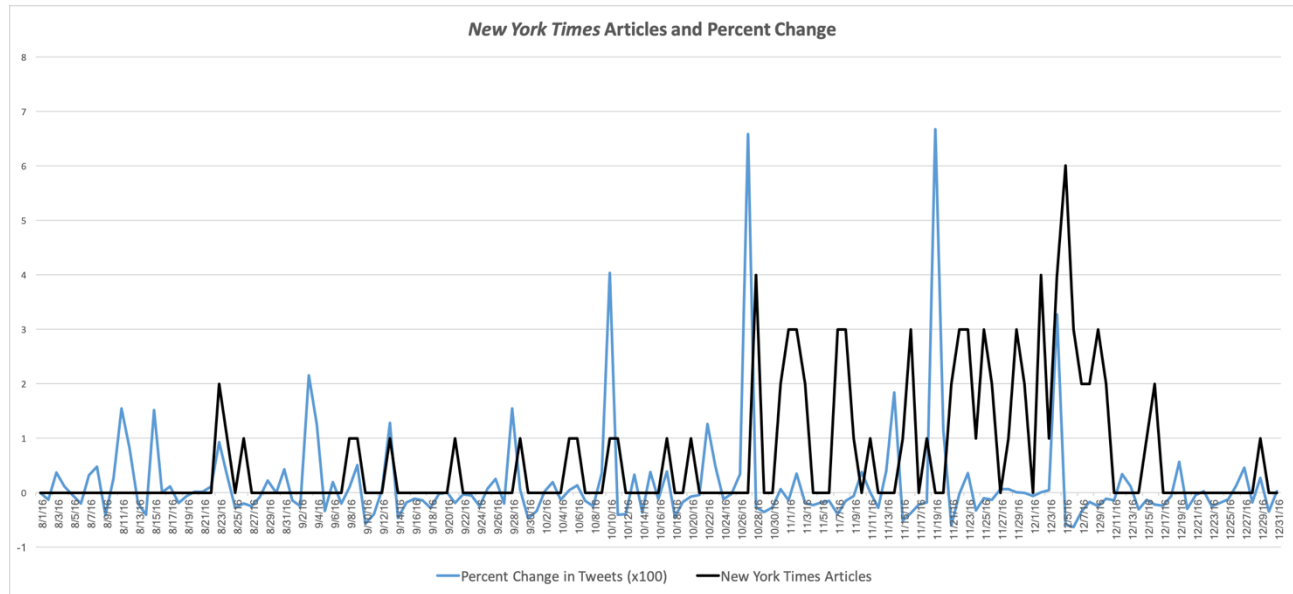
Beginning on October 28 through the end of the five-month period, the *New York Times* published significantly more frequent. The news source put out a piece an average every 4.33 days between the 65-day time period of August 23, the first article, to October 27. However, from October 28 to December 31, the *New York Times* published 78 times during the 65-day period, amounting to a post every 0.83 days. The change in daily published articles was significant due to the increased occurrence of multiple articles a day during the second time frame of October 28 to December 31.

Additionally, during the two previously mentioned time frames of 65 days each, the change in total tweets was similarly dramatic. From August 23 to October 27, 2,165,356 tweets were sent out, amounting to an average 33,313 tweets per day. From October 28 until the end of five-month period, 5,561,926 tweets were sent out, amounting to an average 85,568 per day.

⁶⁹ Kirchmeier, Kyle L. "Unlawful Protest Activities Call for Additional Law Enforcement Resources." Morton County Sheriff's Department, October 23, 2016.

Both Tweets and articles became increasingly more frequent as the protests continued from August to December. This trend can be illustrated by Figure 4.

Figure 4 - New York Times Articles and Twitter

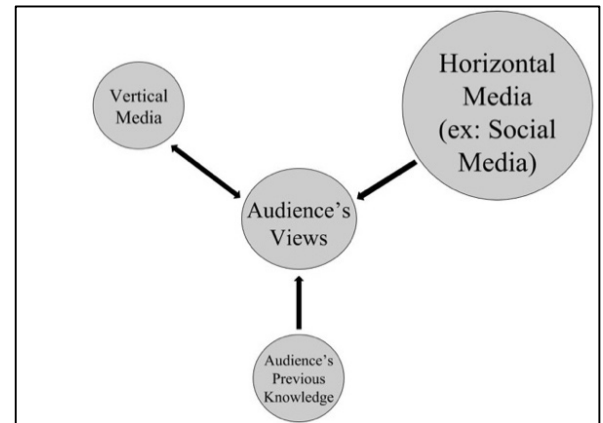


Twitter and mass media viewers became more aware of the protests at Standing Rock as well the plight of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as both horizontal media sources like Twitter and vertical sources like the *New York Times* covered the issue more often during the second half of the five-month protest duration. As the average consumer of both social media and mass media became more aware of the ongoing events in North Dakota, the voices and plight of Native Americans became a part of the national narrative. The number of daily tweets brought an obscure issue of a pipeline in a relatively unpopulated state to the attention of an international news source such as the *New York Times*.

Agenda Setting Through Social Media

Using the new Agenda Setting Through Social Media model displayed to the side, the discussion on Twitter was the first to make an impact on the audience member's opinions. While this did not initially reach outside of non-Twitter media consumers, the Twitter audience was able to directly consume the daily peaks and

Figure 5 - Agenda Setting Through Social Media Model



discussion, prior to vertical media coverage. The role Twitter played in this coverage of the protests against the Dakota Access pipeline has two effects. First, as Twitter users saw up to 15,000 tweets a day in early August about the protests at Standing Rock, users begin to believe what is going on at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation is important. Using the initial theory outlined in Agenda Setting by Shaw and McCombs, the increased coverage an audience member consumes about a specific issue, the more likely they are to believe it is important.⁷⁰ This theory does not outline that the media tells one what to think, but rather it tells one what to think about. Therefore, when a Twitter user sees an increased prevalence of tweets about a pipeline that threatens indigenous sovereignty and water rights, the average audience member of Twitter will begin thinking more and more about why there are protests against the construction of the pipeline.

Vertical media outlets, wanting to garner the attention of viewers will choose news stories that are important to viewers. One way to gauge what potential viewers are interested in is through following social media trends. As a previously mentioned Pew Research survey in

⁷⁰ McCombs, Maxwell.

December 2018 found, 20% of American adults often get their news from social media.⁷¹ These 20% of Americans are potential viewers for vertical media outlets on TV or through websites. So when there are 1.4 million tweets in just two months about a protest against a pipeline in North Dakota, vertical news outlets such as the *New York Times* take notice. The more often tweets are sent out about an issue facing an indigenous people such as Standing Rock, the higher probability that major news sources pick up the story.

From October 27, 2016 on, the average daily tweet level, as previously stated, was 85,568 per day while an article was published every 0.83 days. Both the average level of tweets per day and articles were significantly increased from the first three months of protest. By early November, a media feedback loop had been created between horizontal media sources such as Twitter, vertical sources like the *New York Times* and the consumers of both news sources. Increases in tweets made vertical news sources more likely to cover Standing Rock while, increases in *New York Times* articles made Twitter users believe the events at Standing Rock were worthy of tweeting about.

Expansion of Audience

Another significant aspect of an increase in coverage by the *New York Times* and other vertical news sources was the expansion of what demographics consumed information about the Dakota Access pipeline. In the same Pew Research survey referenced earlier, age demographics were given. For ages 18-29, social media accounted for 36% of the way this age group consumed news, the highest percentage by any news source for the age group. However, for ages 50-64 and 65+, television news was far and above the most consumed at 65% and 81% respectively. For

⁷¹ Shearer, Elisa.

ages 50-64 social media accounted for 14% of news while for ages 65+, just 8%.⁷² The sharing of news through social media is not universal to all age groups as can be demonstrated by the percentage splits.

Despite social media not being commonly used by Americans over 50 to consume news, platforms such as Twitter still play a key role in setting and influencing what current events are covered by the vertical and dominant news sources widely consumed by all age demographics. Social media, as previously illustrated by the Agenda Setting Through Social Media update of the Agenda Setting model meant that while some age demographics do not use social media, the conversation and spotlight that users of the platforms can put on indigenous issues shifts how vertical media, consumed by all ages, chooses to cover the same issues.

Federal Government Response

The height of protests came during the final months of one of the most contentious presidential elections in the United States in recent memory, between Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee Donald Trump. During the middle of the five-month long period of protests at Standing Rock, President Donald Trump was elected on November 8th. Despite Democrats losing the election, the Obama administration pressured the Army Corps of Engineers to block an easement of the Dakota Access pipeline on December 4. The easement signaled a win for many water protectors, protestors and sympathizers to the fight for clean water on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. Despite what was perceived as a decisive victory, the statements and action of then President-elect Donald Trump indicated that this decision was not going to last during his presidency. Just four days after his inauguration, January 24, 2017,

⁷² Shearer, Elisa.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order to expedite the Corps of Engineers' review process, effectively giving construction crews the go ahead to build the pipeline on its current and previously approved route.

Given this context, the movement to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline seems to have had little efficacy. However, this is not the case as protests and social media campaigns amounted to a total eight official press releases and significant shifts in policy stance by federal agencies and the governor's office over the course of the five months.

August 15 – State of Emergency Declared

Five days after the start of protests at Standing Rock in response to the Dakota Access Pipeline, North Dakota Governor Dalrymple declared a State of Emergency in southwest and south central North Dakota. The state of emergency was called due to “unlawful activity” that “could threaten the health, safety and well-being of the general public, protesters and first responders”.⁷³ During former Governor Dalrymple's six years in office, December 2010 to December 2016, he signed 31 executive orders declaring either a state of emergency.⁷⁴ However, 29 out of the 31 related purely to weather and natural disasters such as flooding or wild fires. The remaining two were because of the protests at Standing Rock.

The infrequency of state of emergencies and acknowledgement of emergencies in North Dakota is an indication of the size and power of the protests at Standing Rock. Declaring an emergency grants powers to the Governor and law enforcement well beyond what is afforded to the two groups normally. Almost a month later to further deal with the state of emergency, on September 8, Governor Dalrymple activated North Dakota National Guard to help local law

⁷³ “Dalrymple Declares an Emergency Exists in Southwest and South Central North Dakota.” North Dakota Office of the Governor, August 19, 2016.

⁷⁴ “Executive Order Archive.” North Dakota Office of the Governor. Accessed March 17, 2019.

enforcement. The previous precedent set for activation of National Guard troops to deal with domestic civil unrest highlights the power and intimidation the Standing Rock protests had over the state government at that point.

Historically, the National Guard have been called into to police only the largest protests in United States history such as the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles, the tragic killing of students at Kent State University in 1970, the 1992 riots in Los Angeles in response to the police beating of an unarmed black man, Rodney King and most recently, the 2015 protests in East Saint Louis over the killing of a black high schooler Michael Brown by police officers who were later acquitted.⁷⁵ Given the context of previous state of emergencies and use of National Guard troops, Governor Dalrymple classified the growing protests at Standing Rock as potentially reaching the same levels as some of the largest displays of civil disobedience in recent American history.

September 9 – First Joint Statement

One day after the activation of National Guard Troops, September 9, the United States' Department of Justice, Department of Interior and Department of Army released a joint statement on the events at Standing Rock. The joint statement detailed how the Department of Army and the branch the Army Corps of Engineers "will not authorize constructing the Dakota Access pipeline on Corps land bordering or under Lake Oahe" until further environmental assessments can be made.⁷⁶ The three departments requested at this time that "pipeline company voluntarily pause all construction activity within 20 miles east or west of Lake Oahe", effectively

⁷⁵ El-Enany, Nadine. "Ferguson and the Politics of Policing Radical Protest." *Law and Critique* 26, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 3–6.

⁷⁶ "Joint Statement from the Department of Justice, the Department of the Army and the Department of the Interior Regarding Standing Rock Sioux Tribe V. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers." U.S. Department of the Interior, September 9, 2016.

putting a hold on construction of the Dakota Access pipeline. The press release went further to ask tribal authority to take part in “government-to-government” meetings on how to avoid controversies like this in the future.

The Army Corps of Engineers allowed the same pipeline plans just two months before and then on September 9, the Corps decided to walk back what was already approved. What was outlined in this statement was unprecedented and a leap forward in how the federal government often deals with issues dealing with Native Americans and land sovereignty. This statement came across as a clear “the government hears you and your concerns” since not only was the pipeline temporarily halted, but also that there were new procedures put in place to prevent a clear violation of both tribal rights as well as endangering the water quality for a reservation again. Twitter served a large role in covering the injustices against the tribe as well as protestors since at this time, there had only been five articles by a major news source, the *New York Times*. In comparison, a total 934,747 tweets had been sent out between August 1 to September 9. The almost one millions tweets amplified the message of on the ground protests to a point loud enough for the Army Corps of Engineers to hear.

October 10 – Second Joint Statement

One month after the initial joint statement from the Department of Justice, Department of Interior and the Department of the Army, the same three departments released another statement on October 10. The statement followed up on the District of Colombia’s Circuit Court of Appeals denial of the Standing Rock Sioux’s tribe request for an injunction in their court case against the Army Corps of Engineers. Despite the court’s decision to not halt the pipeline’s construction, the Department of Army and Corps of Engineers once again requested that the “pipeline company voluntarily pause all construction activity within 20 miles east or west of

Lake Oahe”, a request that the Dakota Access company did not listen to.⁷⁷ Speaking directly to protestors, the three departments reiterated that the both the departments and federal law enforcement “continue to respect the right to peaceful protest and expect people to obey the law”.

By going directly against what the Court of Appeals Judge ruled in the case, the Army Corps of Engineers took a stance in support of the protestors at Standing Rock. The statement released by the three departments could have easily strengthened support for the continued construction of the pipeline with little increased controversy, as it was following both their previous decision as well as following the judicial precedent. Despite the ease of staying with the initial decision to allow the construction of the pipeline, the federal government sided with the protestors and encouraged both the protection of those at Standing Rock as well as halting the pipeline. The lobbying efforts by Twitter users to spread the news and message of protests helped contribute to the Departments of Justice, Interior and Army going against the District of Columbia Circuit Court of Appeals and their previous approval.

November 14 – Third Joint Statement

By mid-November, almost four million tweets had been sent out in relation to the pipeline as well as 36 *New York Times* articles. As the protests on the ground grew with a total 470 arrests by mid-November, the attention of the public had fallen on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. With over a month since their last statement despite changes on the ground and popular perception, the Department of the Army and Department of Interior released another joint official statement on November 14 detailing plans going forward in relation to the Dakota

⁷⁷ “Joint Statement from Department of Justice, Department of the Army and Department of the Interior Regarding D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals Decision in Standing Rock Sioux Tribe v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.” U.S. Department of the Interior, October 10, 2016.

Access pipeline. The Army Corps of Engineers in the statement invited leaders of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to discuss and help create plans to “reduce the risk of a spill or rupture, hasten detection and response to any possible spill.”⁷⁸ While these discussion were to take place, the Army Corps of Engineers once again declared that “construction on or under Corps land bordering Lake Oahe cannot occur” until all parties had been heard from and more in-depth analysis was conducted.

In this statement, the Corps of Engineers reiterated the importance of incorporating the tribal leadership in this decision going forward, a stance that is a departure from the initial process to grant the easement of the pipeline and its construction without direct consultation of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. The voices of indigenous people were initially left out of the conversation as they were deemed unnecessary in the first approval process. But, through protests and the magnifying of their message through social media, the voices of the Standing Rock Sioux and their allies became too loud for the federal government to ignore and had to be included in discussion going forward.

November 18 – Governor Dalrymple to President Obama

Four days after the third joint statement by the Department of the Army and Department of the Interior, Governor Dalrymple called on the Obama administration and Army Corps of Engineers’ officials overseeing the pipeline to make a final decision on the pipeline easement. Governor Dalrymple described the ongoing protests and lack of direct action by the federal government as “prolong[ing] the risks to public safety, prolong[ing] the hardships endured by

⁷⁸ “Statement Regarding the Dakota Access Pipeline.” U.S. Department of the Army, November 14, 2016.

area residents” and increasing undue hardship on residents of North Dakota.⁷⁹ Any further delays were deemed by the Governor to be “unjust” and created an “excessive burden” as both law enforcement and residents had over extended their resources.

This statement by Governor Dalrymple comes in direct opposition to the attitudes of the Federal Government. This contrast is due to the different pressures that the two government levels face. The Governor only had to represent the will and feelings of North Dakota residents who have been effected first hand by the protests and their disruption of daily life in the Southwest corner of the state. In addition, the Governor also faced pressure from the pipeline company Dakota Access, LLC as the proposed pipeline was anticipated to bring jobs and revenue into the state.

The Obama administration and federal government on the other hand faced pressure from environmental groups, indigenous solidarity movements from across the world and the pressure of social media activists. The same day as the joint statement by Department of Army and Department of Interior, the number of tweets sent out increased by 184.28% to 125,356 tweets on November 14 alone. In the following week, there were two more peaks of over 100% change: November 19 and 20. November 19 saw the largest percent change during the five-month period of 667.32%. The next day, November 20, saw a peak of 403,611 tweets, the second largest amount of tweets during the five-months of protest. At this point in November, the public became focused on the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Dakota Access Pipeline through magnification on Twitter and other social media platforms.

⁷⁹ “Dalrymple Continues to Press Obama Administration to End Pipeline Delay.” North Dakota Office of the Governor, November 18, 2016.

December 2 – Department of Justice

In the wake of the previously discussed mass protests on November 20 at the Backwater Bridge, the number of tweets did not drop below 120,000 per day. In addition to a consistently high level of tweets a day, the number of protestors on the ground continuously grew. Finally, after months of protests, arrests and aggressive law enforcement response, federal Attorney General Loretta Lynch made an individual statement on December 2, on the Dakota Access pipeline protests. The statement followed up her private meetings with the two leaders of the groups involved, Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman David Archambault II and Morton County Sheriff Kyle Kirchmeier. Attorney General Loretta Lynch's statement began with reiterating the Justice Department's "ongoing commitment to supporting local law enforcement; to defending constitutionally guaranteed speech; and to maintaining strong and vibrant relationships with American Indians and Alaska Natives."⁸⁰

Taking a seemingly neutral stance, the Attorney General discussed the Justice Department's ongoing efforts to keep lines of communication open between law enforcement, tribal representatives and protestors in order "to reduce tensions and foster dialogue". However, despite stating support for protestors and acknowledging the "painful history between the federal government and American Indians", the Attorney General pledged to increase the resources available to law enforcement officials, both federal and local.

December 4 – The Army Corps of Engineers

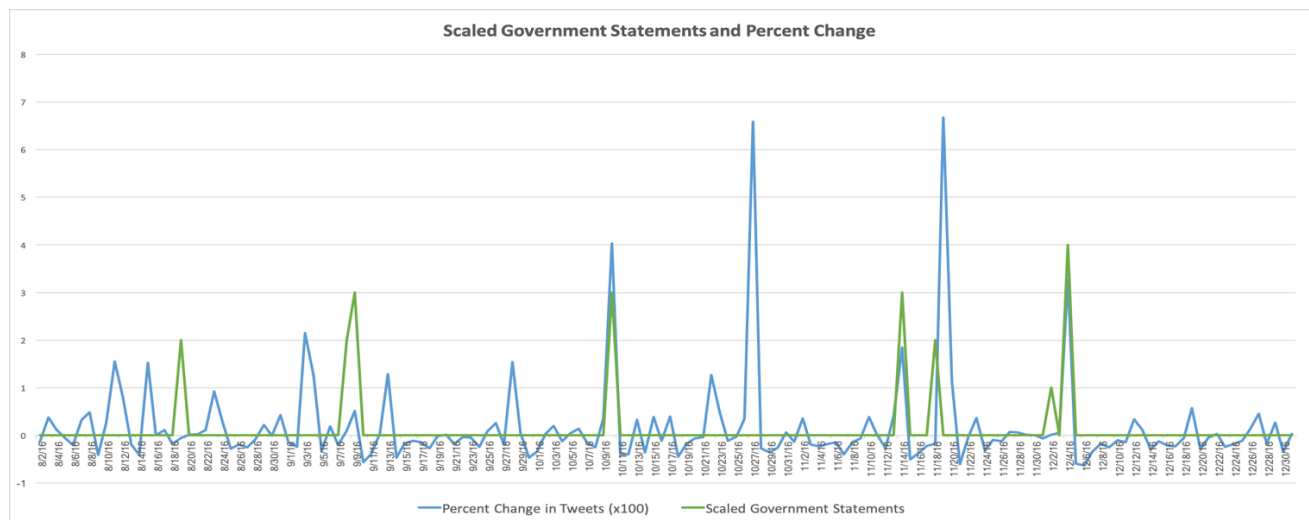
The final government statement for this five-month period was the culmination of the protests and public focus. On December 4, the Army Corps of Engineers decided to "not grant an

⁸⁰ "Statement by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch Regarding the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests." U.S. Department of Justice, December 2, 2016.

easement to cross Lake Oahe”, effectively putting a halt on the Dakota Access pipeline at this time.⁸¹ The easement was not granted at this moment due to the proposed crossing location “meriting additional analysis” as well as “greater public and tribal participation” in the final decision. Additionally, in the statement, Jo-Ellen Darcy, Assistant Secretary of the Army, commended the Army Corps of Engineers for “professionalism in responding to a demanding situation that galvanized tribal communities across the nation”. The Department of the Army recognized how what was once a seemingly cut and dry decision to approve a pipeline turned into a nationwide issue that brought not only tribal nations together, but a large portion of the American public, adding pressure to change their initial decision.

Patterns of Statements and Tweets

Figure 6 - Scaled Government Statements and Tweets



Government Response	Scale
Department of Justice	1
Governor Statements	2
Joint Statements	3
Army Corps of Engineers	4

⁸¹ United States Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District. “Proposed Dakota Access Pipeline Crossing at Lake Oahe, North Dakota.” US Army Corps of Engineers, December 4, 2016.

Through statements from the Departments of Army, Interior and Justice, it becomes apparent that what the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and protestors stood for became a source of pressure on the federal government. Initially when the easement was granted in July of 2016, the tribe's leadership was not a part of the decision making. After five months of protest and Twitter campaigns however, the Departments of Army and Interior reiterated multiple times that the process that led to their initial decision to approve the pipeline needed to be reformed. Whether it be forums held with indigenous leaders, or more impact surveys to analyze changes to archaeology and the environment, the current system circa 2016 was broken and needed to incorporate more voices.

Contrasted with the statements of North Dakota Governor Jack Darlymple, the federal government appeared to be on the side of the tribe and protestors. The three joint statements on September 9, October 10 and November 14 reinforced the Army Corps of Engineers desire to halt construction on the Dakota Access pipeline until the eventual denial of permitting on December 4. For the Army Corps of Engineers to make this decision despite approving the construction of the pipeline just months before, was entirely unforeseen as it broke significantly with precedent.

This complete shift reflects the impact that both the protests and the 7.9 million tweets had on the Army Corps of Engineers. As hundreds of thousands of tweets were sent daily in November, the Federal government began feeling pressure from across the United States that public perception of the situation was favoring the Water Protectors and protestors. In order to reflect the will of the greater population, the Army Corps of Engineers continuously delayed their final decision on the construction of the pipeline until the civil suit had been completed. At

the same time, public momentum to stop the pipeline had grown by late November and early December to a breaking point. The protestors on the ground as well as through the use of Twitter to engage a large audience across the United States, forced a complete shift in policies for how the Army Corps of Engineers consults local populations, as well as how the Dakota Access pipeline should proceed.

Conclusions

In the past decade social media has become a powerful tool of both organization of resistance as well as the sharing of information. Taking the place of previous tools such as pamphlets, radio and the fax machine, citizens under repressive regimes have used both Twitter and Facebook to plan protests, share videos of police brutality and distribute information on state corruption. As seen in the Arab Spring, social media was not a cause for rebellion against autocratic, Mukabarat regimes, but rather a catalyst to the creation of ties between citizens that had not been able to freely share their beliefs in democratic ideals previously.

Nevertheless, social media as a political tool is not just restricted to its ability to challenge oppressive rulers. Instead, social media allows for grassroots political groups to challenge long held dominant narratives and share their voice in a media system that traditionally drowns them out. In the case of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's fight against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the use of Twitter by members of the tribe and others working in solidarity turned a localized issue about water rights into a national debate that demanded government response. By the end of the five-month protests in early December, 569 individuals had been arrested and over almost 7.9 million tweets discussing the protests had been sent. Additionally, the internationally recognized news source the *New York Times* published 93 articles and the Army Corps of Engineers had completely shifted its stance on the Dakota Access pipeline.

The first hypothesis stating "campaigns by activists on social media, will lead to major news sources covering movements and issues they do not normally" is accepted. By comparing peaks of Twitter usage to days that the *New York Times* publishes articles, a pattern emerges: the number of tweets per day is not dependent on whether or not a vertical news source covers the

daily events at Standing Rock. Coverage of the protests happened consistently every day during the five-month period, however the number of tweets per day grew significantly in the second half of the time frame.

As previously discussed in relation the Agenda Setting Through Social Media update of the Agenda Melding model, the influx of tweets about the protests at Standing Rock created a feedback loop where major news sources such as the *New York Times* increased their coverage of the daily events. Major, vertical news sources, took notice of the popularity of Standing Rock on Twitter during the five-month period, and in order to gain more viewers, began covering the ongoing protests. As the *New York Times* and similar news sources covered the localized issue more, a wider audience of Americans began believing that the protests at Standing Rock were increasingly more important.

As the amount of coverage of the fight against the Dakota Access pipeline increased throughout the five-month period and more Americans became aware of the pipeline issue, the question of efficacy comes into play. The second hypothesis, dealing with the question of efficacy, was: “an increase in volume of tweets about an issue, will cause government officials to make a statement on that issue.” While the Army Corps of Engineers did shift their stance on the pipeline in the course of five months due to increased protests and lobbying by various allied groups, the number and occurrence of government statements does not indicate that Twitter usage was a direct cause.

During the time frame, North Dakota Governor Jack Darlymple and the federal Departments of Interior, Army and Justice only released eight statements directly dealing with the ongoing events at Standing Rock. Additionally, out of these eight statements, five of the press releases do not fall on peak days of Twitter usage or within two days after. The timing of

government action appears completely independent of whether or not there is an increase of tweets by activists and allies on the subject of the Dakota Access pipeline.

Regardless of the inability to claim causation of government statements due to Twitter usage, the conversation on the social media platform played an important role in changing the stance of the Army Corps of Engineers. As discussed at great length, social media usage was significant in creating a national conversation about a relatively localized issue facing an indigenous community. Initially, the Army Corps of Engineers granted the easement for Dakota Access, LLC to build a pipeline that crossed an important river right outside the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The decision to allow the pipeline came with no coverage by vertical, mass media outlets.

However, as on the ground protests were magnified through social media, the eye of the American public turned to North Dakota. Environmentalist groups and other allies to the indigenous community proceeded to take up the fight against the pipeline. By mid-September, the Army Corps of Engineers had heard enough of the concerns and political will of Americans acting in solidarity, that they encouraged the company Dakota Access to temporarily halt construction of the pipeline. By December 4, the pipeline was completely stopped all together until further notice by the Army Corps of Engineers. The indigenous activists on the ground had made their voice heard and the federal government had shifted its position. To force the complete change of the federal government's position is a true show of efficacy, despite the lack of direct causation of government statements through social media.

Reforms to Methodology and Study

Due to limitations placed on research by the University of Colorado, Boulder's Institutional Review Board, the names and specific quotes of activists and Twitter users were not

allowed to be included in this thesis. Ideally, this thesis would have included individual voices since the power of both individual and collective voices are highlighted here. However, due to standards surrounding privacy and protections of individuals, the process of getting consent to include individual tweets and thoughts brought up too many barriers. In future research, including selected tweets from peak days and analyzing patterns of rhetoric would be a key addition to this analysis. Being able to compare and contrast the most popular tweets with what indigenous activists were saying about the pipeline and the protests would allow for a deeper analysis into whether or not indigenous voices are completely shaping the conversation, or if attention is just being drawn to an issue facing an indigenous group.

Additionally, Mark Zuckerberg and the social media companies he founded and runs such as Facebook and Instagram are unfortunately not as accessible for research as Twitter allows itself to be. Through the database of tweets on Social Studio, patterns and daily peaks based on key words were easily accessible. Facebook on the other hand, does not publish datasets in easily digestible formats which did not allow for uncovering daily trends. Despite the importance of “checking in” on Facebook in raising awareness to the plight of indigenous people and the protests at Standing Rock, the use of Facebook data was not plausible. Regardless, Twitter activity provides a comprehensive look at what the social media conversation surrounding the protests was, as well as providing this information in an easily digestible format through Social Studio.

Future Study and Impacts

Unfortunately, due to differences of priorities between the Obama administration and the Trump administration as well as then candidate Donald Trump’s connections with the pipeline parent company, Energy Transfer Partners, the pipeline was expedited just five days into

President Trump's term.⁸² Despite the current administration's decision to overturn the Army Corps of Engineers denial of the easement on December 4, 2016, the importance of the protests at Standing Rock and the usage of Twitter is not lost. Rather, as Clay Shirky and Brian D. Loader theorize, the communication bonds created through social networking sites are a modern way to create civil society. The connections forged in the solidarity movement between indigenous groups across the world, environmentalists, Black Lives Matter activists and countless other groups were important factors in what allowed the discussion of Standing Rock to expand past North Dakota.

The decision to expedite the approval and construction of the pipeline did not break these bonds, but rather they currently lay dormant. The true test of social media's impact in magnifying attention to indigenous voices and amplifying voices left out of the media, will come in the future. Twitter was a powerful tool in creating a conversation about the Dakota Access pipeline and how indigenous people are left out of the decision making process when it comes to threats to their health and sovereignty. In this instance, the use of Twitter was successful in drawing attention to topics that major news sources rarely cover, as well as putting pressure on government officials to protect the rights of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe.

However, how will similar issues be dealt with in the future? Previous theorists on the political impact of social media state that the platforms build civil society, a position that is furthered by this thesis. Yet with a constant news cycle and rapidly changing technology, the memory of the protests at Standing Rock will begin to fade in the mainstream collective conscious. Despite this eventual fading, civil society and connections have been built and

⁸² Meyer, Robinson. "Oil Is Flowing Through the Dakota Access Pipeline." *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2017.

mobilized previously so why not again in the future? New forms of decentralized, grassroots media continue to give citizens who have been traditionally left out of important conversations an avenue to spread their voice. Communication technologies will continue to create spaces for indigenous voices to be heard.

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