

Sealfies, seals and celebs: expressions of Inuit resilience in the Twitter era

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Abstract

On March 2, 2014 the host of the Oscars, Ellen DeGeneres, established a new record on Twitter when the “selfie” that she posted, featuring a group of ‘A-list’ celebrities, re-circulated approximately three million times. The events also produced the “#sealfie” campaign, an unprecedented outpouring of contemporary Inuit political expression. Sealfies, pictures that began to appear on Twitter on March 26th, 2014 of people – Inuit and otherwise - wearing sealskin clothing, eating seal meat or standing beside freshly killed seals, emerged in response to Degeneres’ support for the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and their anti-sealing stance. But what began as a whimsical rejoinder to the sensationalized tactics of animal rights activists became a serious campaign to “counter the impact of colonialism and... explicitly protect and preserve identity and culture” of the Inuit. Drawing on the social movement literature on social media and activism as well as the postcolonial literature on “resilience” we situate the #sealfie campaign in the broader historic struggle between anti-sealing activists and their opponents.

On March 2, 2014 the host of the Oscars, Ellen DeGeneres, established a new record on Twitter when the “selfie” that she posted, featuring a group of ‘A-list’ celebrities, re-circulated approximately three million times. As part of a pre-negotiated deal with the smartphone company Samsung, DeGeneres was awarded \$3 million¹ to distribute evenly to her charities of choice, namely St Jude’s and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)², in exchange for promoting their product on the show. DeGeneres’ selfie not only raised millions of dollars for charity, it also inspired the “#sealfie” campaign, an unprecedented outpouring of contemporary Inuit political expression. Sealfies, pictures that began to appear on Twitter on March 26th, 2014 of people – Inuit and otherwise - wearing sealskin clothing, eating seal meat or standing beside freshly killed seals, emerged in response to DeGeneres’ support for the HSUS and their anti-sealing stance.

Both the timing of DeGeneres’ highly publicized donation, which coincided with the Humane Society of the United States’ launch of their annual anti-sealing campaigns, and DeGeneres’ own explicit statements describing the Canadian seal hunt as “one of the most atrocious and inhumane acts against animals

¹ Samsung pledged to donate a dollar to charity for every time the photo was retweeted. The photo thus raised \$3 million.

² Fortune.com accessed Aug 14, 2014.

allowed by any government”³ meant that at least some of her followers drew a link between the \$1.5 million donation and specific efforts to end the seal hunt. In response, a young female fan from Nunavut, Inuk teen Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss, attempted to engage in a dialogue via social media. Imagining DeGeneres as her audience, Enuaraq-Strauss uploaded “Dear Ellen” to YouTube on March 23, 2014. At the time of writing, it had garnered more than 58,000 views and almost 780 comments.

Some scholars argue that social media’s contribution to activism is mainly as a means to circulate information. Building on this argument, we find that for indigenous peoples this enables communities to control the content of information that is about them (Niezen 2009), that social media may further provide an opportunity for groups to assert their own identity (Iseke-Barnes 2002), and that it widens and deepens engagement in their activist projects (Iseke-Barnes and Danard 2007). In this paper, we examine a case study in which Inuit in Canada’s Arctic asserted that the seal hunt has contemporary cultural, economic, and social relevance via social media sites. Using the platforms of YouTube and Twitter to bring together images, texts, as well as facilitate dialogue across Northern communities and beyond their borders, Inuit were able to engage with and dispel myths, outdated claims, and point to the ongoing relevance of seal hunting. Taking inspiration from Prins’ (2002) use of the concept of ‘primitivism’, by which we mean the tactical use of stereotypes about indigenous peoples by indigenous peoples to advance their own political objectives, we argue that Inuit have deployed ‘sealfies’ on YouTube and on Twitter in order to counter the narrative about seal hunting. Against a multi-decade, multi-million dollar set of campaigns designed to pressure governments to ban most aspects of the commercial seal hunt, the #sealfies tweets, for example, counteract the aesthetic impact of morally shocking images such as bludgeoned seals (Mika 2006) used by anti-sealing activists with images that depict the cultural and practical necessity of seal hunting for the Inuit. Facilitated by these platforms and the media interest they generated, Inuit activists confronted anti-sealing activists by pointing out the role of the Inuit in the commercial seal hunt, the subsistence wages provided at one point by Inuit participation in the hunt, and subsequent poverty as a result of government bans and the dramatically reduced dollar value of seal meat and pelts.

In the following sections we use the events surrounding the Oscar-night ‘selfie’ and the subsequent ‘sealfies’ to briefly retrace the history of anti-seal hunt activism and to explore the ways in which social media are increasing the capacity of Inuit to have a voice in the forces that impact upon their lives.⁴ We

³<http://www.ellentv.com/2011/04/06/stop-seal-hunting-in-canada-now/> Last accessed, April 24, 2014.

⁴Our analysis is based on the results of searches conducted on the Twitter site for tweets between March 2, 2014 and April 17, 2014, a close examination of Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss’ YouTube video and the comments directly linked to that video, as well as the online comments of the coverage of the #sealfie phenomenon by the Huffington Post, CBC, Business Insider, Al Jazeera, Global News, and the Vancouver Observer. Consistent with Edwards et al.’s (2013: 9) statement that “[a] field-building approach must be implemented if we are to understand the

engage with the literature on social media and activism but we also draw on the concept of resilience as it is used by Tousignant and Sioui (2009) and Kirmayer et al (2007) in reference to the facing of adversity, to the emergence of moral strength and optimism, and to the (strategic) use of a rhetoric of hope to describe initiatives in First Nations and Inuit communities that counter the impact of colonialism and that explicitly protect and preserve identity and culture. The self-authorship afforded by social media facilitates an expression of resilience in a public forum to be shared in a space that can be described as, “a new geography of identity formation” (Niezen 2009:45). Of particular interest for this paper is the way in which the #sealfie campaign served as an activist project with the dual purpose of countering a colonial narrative entrenched within anti-sealing campaigns as well as signalling to a global audience that the Inuit are resilient and persist in living off the land. Of particular importance in the contribution of the Inuit perspective on seal hunting – a perspective that includes the commercial seal hunt – is to highlight the contemporary role of seal hunting in Inuit identity, as evidenced in the material circulated on social media.

Anti-seal hunt activists have maintained pressure on governments, publics, and hunters themselves for over forty years. They have kept the seal hunt controversy in the public imagination and on government agendas largely as a result of their media campaigns, by attracting attention with celebrity photo-ops (see image 2), and at the inter-governmental level of economic trade talks between Canada and the EU. During this period, efforts to justify ongoing support for a commercial seal hunt have avoided engaging in the moral and emotional methods occupied by the anti-sealing activists, but have instead used scientific data and government-issued assurances that the seal hunt is carried out humanely. Inuit hunters who have relied on seal hunting for both personal sustenance and commercial gain have been sufficiently included at the intergovernmental level to be given exemptions to bans on bringing seal products to market, but, as we will demonstrate below, they have still been subjected to the wide-sweeping political, economic, and emotional effects of anti-sealing campaigns. The #sealfie response, which quickly emerged as a far-reaching campaign on its own terms, is a novel move to engage in methods that invoke and inspire emotional and moral reactions, as well as defend the right to practice traditions. In this recent campaign, they demonstrated the salience, continuity, and importance of seal hunting in their communities. In so doing they also highlight this as a cautionary tale for animal rights activists whose campaigns may pit the rights of animals against the rights of indigenous peoples, an insurmountable binary for animal rights groups.

mechanics of this new phenomenon beyond the specifics of individual cases,” this paper focuses on text, images, and the prominence of particular individuals in the creation of an Inuit-produced counter-narrative about the seal hunt over social media.

History of the seal hunt controversy in Canada's North

Though opposition to the seal hunt stretches back to concerns raised by a Canadian branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in the 1950s, the 1970s and '80s represent the peak of anti-seal hunt activism (Wenzel, 1987; Jasper and Nelkin, 1992; Barry, 2005). The explosion of opposition to the seal hunt in the 1980s coincided with the expansion of both the environmental movement and the North American animal rights movement (ARM). The organizational capacity and activist networks of the ARM combined with the powerful, emotive images of (white-coat) seal pups produced a highly successful, though controversial, global animal rights campaign (Zelko, 2013). In Canada, a somewhat stunned backlash against the campaign eventually arose, led in large part by the fur industry and the Federal Fisheries Ministry (Barry 2005). Effective lobbying by the Inuit Tapirisat (now, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami or ITK) became important in ensuring that the eventual European bans of seal products in 1983 and 2009 excluded the pelts harvested by indigenous hunters. In spite of this sanctioned recognition, however, throughout the counter-resistance to anti-sealing activists, this distinctive Inuit voice was muted by the strident voices and strategic political ploys of both the animal rights activists and Canadian politicians.

Two organizations, Greenpeace and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), were at the forefront of the late 20th century campaign to end the seal hunt. IFAW, which began as a single campaign in the 1960s known as "Save the Seals" and later developed into the International Fund for Animal Welfare, became the most vocal and enduring opponent of the seal hunt. Combined with Greenpeace's well-honed media savvy, the organizations attracted international media attention. The images of teary-eyed and bludgeoned seal pups, the vilification of the sealers, and the parade of celebrities, including Brigitte Bardot, Paul McCartney and Pamela Anderson, launched the campaign into the international spotlight (Harter, 2004; Marland, 2014). The anti-sealing movement, while initially Canada-based and supported, rapidly drew strength from environmentally concerned individuals and organizations in the United States and Western Europe. As George Wenzel (1987: 200) argues, the anti-sealing organizations became emboldened by their own success and what began as an argument about conservation was transformed into "a de facto animal rights position, condemnatory of any human exploitation of any seal species."

The ensuing battle between environmentalists and animal rights activists on the one side and proponents of the seal hunt on the other was geographically focused on activities in Newfoundland and Labrador. In the context of a depressed east coast fisheries and the perception of environmentalism as an elitist preoccupation, these tensions were often framed as the result of a battle between environmentalists and working-class men (Zelko, 2013; Marland, 2014). Between the imagery skilfully deployed by both activists and a counter-discourse that used a nationalist sentiment to support an industry relevant to the east coast economy from politicians, the story of the Inuit's financial dependence on the seal hunt was almost completely absent. The animal rights

organizations so convincingly framed the issue as an act of unnecessary cruelty and ruthlessness that public pressure eventually led to the 1972 US ban on seal products and the 1983 European Economic Community ban on seal pup skins and products. Both of these moves effectively closed the market for all sealskins. In Newfoundland and Labrador, where the seal hunt has been a marginally important economic booster to communities ravaged by the decline in the cod fishery, Alex Marland (2014: 75) argues that “opposing activists has become an invented tradition...that symbolizes a social cohesion among sealers, non-sealing Newfoundlanders, and Canadian politicians.”

The political implications of the controversy, therefore, have stretched far beyond the sensationalism of the media images, playing an enduring role in policies within Canada and trade relationships between Canada and the EU. The controversy inspired the 1984 Royal Commission on Seals and the Sealing Industry, from which a 1986 report formed the basis for Canadian legislation that banned the hunt for seal pups and installed measures to ensure that the adult hunt followed humane methods. These measures were sufficient to appease the World Wildlife Federation (WWF), the Audubon Society, and the Ontario Humane society, convincing them that the hunt could be sustainable and humane and that the government would enforce these measures. While IFAW (and additionally now People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA) remained committed to their campaigns, many of the organizations that originally opposed the hunt no longer maintained an anti-sealing platform. The Report also noted that while the Canadian public had concerns about the perceived cruelty of the hunt, there was support for the *indigenous* seal hunt, concluding that:

Seals are a vital resource for the Inuit for economic, social and cultural reasons. Sealing is the most economical means of maintaining adequate nutritional levels in most northern communities. Increased use of imported foods will result in substantially poorer health and extra costs which the Inuit can ill afford. ⁵

Because the original EU ban in 1983 applied only to white-coat and black-hooded seal products, in 2009 the European Parliament took aim squarely at the remaining Canadian industry, voting to expand the ban to the sale of all commercial seal products.⁶ When the Canadian government turned to the World Trade Organization to overturn the ban, the WTO upheld it, arguing that the embargo “fulfills the objective of addressing EU public moral concerns on

⁵ P 45 of summary of report

⁶ See “Council Directive 83/129/EEC of 28 March 1983 concerning the importation into Member States of skins of certain seal pups and products” <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31983L0129> and the 2009 statement of the European Commission on the Seal Hunt http://ec.europa.eu/environment/biodiversity/animal_welfare/seals/seal_hunting.htm See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8033498.stm>

seal welfare.”⁷ Furthermore, it was not just the WTO that rejected the proposal; in 2011, more than 100 members of the 753-member European Parliament signed an open letter vowing to oppose a new economic trade agreement between Canada and the EU unless Canada abandoned its appeal to the WTO.

Both the 1983 and 2009 EU bans held an exemption for Inuit produced pelts and other products, but as Harter (2004: 100) explains: “in terms of media relations, the sealers had been outdone.” The NGO sector had “enjoyed an almost complete victory in its campaign to ban the hunt” and as a result, the original ban led to an overall decline in the value of seal pelts. This was not surprising; activists had picked the seal hunt in part because of its media potential. As Frank Zelko (2013: 247-8) argues in reference to Greenpeace, “from the beginning, the campaign was based on an uneasy blend of ecology and moral outrage...when combined with the possibility of direct confrontation between swilers⁸ and protesters on the stark ice floes, it proved to be an irresistible opportunity for grabbing media attention.” And despite the Inuit exemptions, Wenzel argues that “lost within the strident tones of southern protest and counter-protest was the impact a highly emotional and politicized anti-sealing campaign would have on aboriginal, especially Inuit, access and use of ringed seals.”

As the Inuit sealing industry collapsed with the entire industry, it took with it the revenues that supported isolated Inuit communities with few additional opportunities for economic development. As Collings and Condon (1996: 255-256) demonstrated in their study of the Arctic community of Holman (Ulukhaktok), prior to the seal product ban:

[M]ost Inuit families...were able to make a comfortable living from a combination of seal hunting, fox trapping, and skin crafts manufacture...The collapse of the sealskin market at the end of the decade brought tremendous changes to Holman and other Inuit communities across the Arctic....Hunters once able to support themselves completely by hunting and trapping were suddenly unable to do so.

Household, family, and community economies not only suffered from the collapse of the sealing industry, but in their eyes responsibility for these economic consequences fell squarely on the activists. This resulted in long-term animosity toward and distrust of animal rights and environmental organizations. In this regard, Collings and Condon (1996: 255) quote one individual (James):

⁷ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-wins-partial-victory-in-challenge-of-eu-ban-on-imported-seal-products/article15583922/>

⁸ A ‘swiler’ is a term for a Newfoundland and Labrador seal hunter.

Greenpeace really ruined our native way of life, man. They really ruined our traditional way, the way we used to be. It's our way of life and how we used to be. OK, I'm out of the talk now, I'll be quiet. I don't hunt. I don't do anything.

This animosity endures to the present. During the most recent 2014 sealing confrontations, Terry Audla, National Inuit Leader and President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), drew attention to this frustration, writing that:

Inuit rely on the Canadian East Coast seal hunt for its shared market dynamics and the opportunity to sell seal pelts at fair market value. Activists have known (but never acknowledged because it's bad for business) that their campaigns to make sealing evil and seal products untouchable have negatively impacted us along with other remote, coastal communities who have few other economic opportunities.... All we want is a means for survival and an economic generator that incorporates our deep respect for the land and sea and the wildlife with which we share it.⁹

In part due to these dynamics, the predictions of the 1984 Royal Commission on the relationship between anti-sealing and the health and welfare of Inuit communities appears to have been fulfilled; in 2012 the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food declared that 70 percent of Nunavut households with Inuit preschool children are food insecure and even more recently, the Council of Canadian Academies has shown that hunger in the North is a result in part from the fact that the cost of hunting is now out of reach for most families. As a columnist for the *True North Times* recently wrote to reflect this frustration in Northern communities, "Seals are cute but starvation is ugly."¹⁰

As such, there is a great deal of hostility that has quietly burned under the surface toward the anti-sealing activists where impoverishment, suicide, hunger and substance abuse are regularly perceived as related to the decline of the industry.¹¹ Today, organizations that took part in the charge against sealing in the seventies and eighties have become more self-reflexive. Greenpeace, for instance, now remains silent on sealing, having stated that there are more pressing environmental issues.¹² Breaking from its American counterpart, the Canadian Humane Society issued this recent statement in response to the #sealfie campaign, reasserting support for the Inuit seal hunt:

⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/terry-audla/sealing_b_5214956.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

¹⁰ Luckhardt, Natasha, "Seals are cute but starvation is ugly" *True North Times*, March 29, 2014

¹¹ Collings and Condon 1996; Wenzel, 1991; Borre, 1986

¹² "More urgent things to do: Greenpeace abandons seal hunt protest" *Canada Free Press*. April 26, 2004. <http://www.canadafreepress.com/2004/tgro42604.htm>

We have never opposed the Inuit subsistence seal hunt that occurs in Canada's North. Animal protection groups oppose the commercial seal slaughter, which occurs in Atlantic Canada and is almost entirely conducted by non-aboriginal people.¹³

When the #sealfies began to surface in March 2014 they were not, therefore, simply an expression of the right to hunt. They expressed feelings of anger against what Taiaiake Alfred (2013) sees as central to processes of neocolonialism in the indigenous communities that strip away traditional culture, livelihood and connection to the land. In this case, the instrument of animal rights protest is perceived as all the more frustrating because it is seen as taking place so effortlessly from the comfort of Hollywood and the urban centres of North America. Having expressed the frustration that animal rights activists have at least passively pitted the rights of seals against the rights and cultures of indigenous peoples and their inability to counter this, Audla further states:

This may seem like a cynical opinion of people proposing to give a voice to the voiceless, but they have proven to be the greatest of tricksters -- exploiting a cause for money while silencing and starving an already marginalized population. Living off the land and sea, as Inuit need to do, gives us a distinct connection and perspective to our world unlike any other population. We know exactly where our food comes from -- mostly free-roaming, nutrient-dense animals. The land quite literally keeps us alive because it feeds and clothes us and often also pays our (rising) bills.

Restrictions on the seal hunt that came into effect at the end of the 1980s created economic hardships on the Inuit, as Audla points out, as well as the east coast hunters (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011:201). The Government of Nunavut estimates that the EU seal ban cut worldwide sealskin prices in half, from about \$60 a pelt to \$30¹⁴ and, despite subsidies, real income in Inuit households has fallen significantly. As Nuttall (1990) argues,

Animal rights groups have frequently depended on public opinion for the success of their sealing campaigns, but little sympathy has been shown for the people for whom such opposition has precipitated cultural disintegration (240).

13 Goodyear, S. "Humane Society respond to sealfies, says it supports Inuit hunt" Canoe.ca April 9, 2014. <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/2014/04/08/21590731.html>

14 "As local fur demand rises, mysterious drop in Nunavut seal harvest: Number of sealskins harvested has fallen by more than half since EU sealskin ban in 2009" CBC News December 18, 2013. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/as-local-fur-demand-rises-mysterious-drop-in-nunavut-seal-harvest-1.2468737>

As the statement from the Canadian Humane Society demonstrates, support for Inuit seal hunting delineates subsistence from commercial activities. When Inuit defend their right to access markets for the products of their hunt, animal-rights groups have in turn questioned the necessity of seal hunting for subsistence purposes and have argued that the “Inuit are no longer regarded as caring about the animals they hunt” (Nuttall, 199): 241). In an article published by Finn Lynge, former member of the European Parliament for Greenland and former Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference Environmental Commission, he writes about the effect of the EU ban on seal products on the Greenlandic Inuit: “They undermine our culture, because if we cannot market our products then we have no economy, and if we have no economy, people cannot go on living as trappers and hunters” (1995: 490). Speaking specifically to the notion that Inuit can now rely on food imported from the South he says,

In the Arctic, you cannot subsist on what you import from the south.. the economy does not work that way” (1995: 491). Speaking broadly to the EU ban on commercial seal products, he said: “... of course the French people should be aware that these attitudes threaten entire cultures in foreign lands (1995: 492).¹⁵

Social media and indigenous identity

Unlike earlier decades where Inuit resistance to the discourses of anti-sealing has been subordinated to the nationalist discourses and trade negotiations of the Canadian Federal Government, the capacity of Inuit to counter animal rights activism has recently been enhanced by their use of social media. Recent real-world events and scholarly research emphasize the near-revolutionary impact of new media technologies in all realms of life, particularly the political, leading Manuel Castells (2012) to dub the era the “Internet Age.” Beginning in large part with the Zapatistas’ use of the Internet to garner global support for their uprising in 1994, the last two decades have also shown that web-based networks include indigenous populations who are eager to use digital technology in powerful ways (Niezen, 2009). From the Blogs of the Igorots to *Virtual Powwows* to the role of internet networks in the mobilization of *Idle No More*, we see the increasing complexity of indigenous expressions of identity, culture, politics, and resilience online. This reflects one of the ways in which the “articulation of collective being...has been brought back from an imposed condition of oblivion and forgetting” (Niezen 2009: xvi). Our case study here contributes to this growing body of literature on indigenous engagement with digital media, emphasizing how the classic barriers of geographic, political and economic marginalization can be displaced by digital technologies. We also demonstrate how these digital voices have the capacity to honour and rejuvenate cultural practices and identities and thus show their resilience.

¹⁵ Nunavut Premier Peter Taptuna and Greenlandic Premier Aleqa Hammond met on June 30, 2014 and “pledged to fight the European Union seal product ban” (<http://www.cbc.ca/m/news/#!/content/1.2699100>).

With the explosion of online activity, scholars continue to debate the measurable impacts of cyberactivism. On the one hand, despite the exponential expansion of the political applications of digital media, observers often accuse users of “slacktivism,” suggesting that individual actions such as signing an online petition, joining a Facebook group, “liking” a political post or changing one’s profile photo to publicize a cause lacks any significant consequences. Malcolm Gladwell (2010: 45) in particular argues that the commitment and risk apparent in social movements like the civil rights movement simply isn’t present in internet mediated actions: “The kind of activism associated with social media isn’t like this at all. The platforms of social media are built around weak ties.” Moreover, authors such as Morozov (2011) have argued that in as much as activists are able to mobilize resistance online, authoritarian governments are equally able to use technology to stifle dissent and monitor civil society groups. Clay Shirky (2011: 7-8) argues, however, that the detractors may be correct but “the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively.” Many, he suggests, “have used social media not as a replacement for real-world action but as a way to coordinate it.”

Building on Shirky’s assertion that communication networks and social media in particular play a role in activism, we also look to scholarship that takes this notion further. We do not presume that activism must inevitably ‘take to the streets’, but rather contribute to an investigation of the extent to which a transformative effect occurs as a result of the circulation of content on digital media due to its complex network architecture. In this literature, digital media are seen as offering *affordances*, or ways in which they enable or support actions that have “democratic uses and outcomes” (Dahlberg 2011: 857). Specifically, these *affordances* include the reduced costs for “creating, organizing and participating in protest” and the fact that participants are not required “to be co-present in time and space” (Earl and Kimport 2011: 10). Much of the promise of digital media is, therefore, that they are as well-suited to economically disadvantaged and/or geographically disparate populations as they are to any other population. As such, scholars such as Edwards et al (2013) at the *Digital Activism Research Project* have worked to substantiate anecdotal evidence for the impact of digital media through a systematic and comparative investigation of social media outcomes. They make a credible, albeit cautious, claim that digital activism has very real potential to produce tangible political outcomes when effectively used by activists in a favourable context.

The study of activist models that diverge from classic examples of meetings, marches, rallies, and protests highlight the role of digital media in the creation of communities, identity, as well as personal and collective empowerment. These approaches are particularly important to our understanding of the use of digital media by indigenous peoples. In this sense, the questions that guide our project are not simply about whether or not social media can increase political participation or produce concrete political outcomes, but also about what occurs along the way, how such processes can result in the creation of “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 2000), “informational utopics” (Juris, 2008) or how,

as Ronald Niezen (2009:45) writes, “the internet is mapping a new geography of identity formation.” These online communities may eventually contribute to political outcomes, but are also destinations, notable for the global solidarities and identities they create and/or reinforce. Manuel Castells explains the way in which such many-to-many dynamics of social media may be simultaneously personal and political:

[The] condition for individual experiences to link up and form a movement is the existence of a communication process that propagates the events and the emotions attached to it. [...] In our time, multimodal digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history. [...] the networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement. (2012, 15)

These multi-modal networks thus provide a platform for forms of authorship that bring expressions of indigenous identity to a wide audience (Landezulis, 2006; Niezen, 2005, 2009; Petray, 2011). Many of the scholars studying in this area (Landzelius 2006a; Niezen 2009, 2005; Prins 2002) argue that access to the Internet is allowing indigenous populations to counter the colonial discourses that have shaped their lives. As Prins (2002: 70) writes, the Internet “enables tribal communities and individuals to represent themselves and to do so largely on their own terms and according to their own aesthetic preferences.” Additionally, the Internet holds the capacity for “new expressions of indigeneity” (Niezen 2009: 45) that may enhance political power. On this latter point, Niezen adds:

The internet’s displays of collective being can be seen as free-flowing manifestations of a new stratagem of release from political domination, one that emphasizes the virtues of repressed heritage and public expression of strivings towards renewal, self-expression and self-determination. (ibid.)

It thus facilitates self-authorship, but it also provides a platform for networked communication. With specific reference to Inuit populations, Tomiak and Patrick (2010) examined the effect of Inuit migration to urban areas on their own sense of ‘Inuitness’ - their personal and collective Inuit identity given that they reside “outside of traditional homelands” (128). Focused on the City of Ottawa because of its large Inuit population, they make the point that “the telephone and the internet, including email, webcam, and instant messaging have become part of maintaining their ‘rootedness’ by communicating with friends and relatives in the Arctic” (129-30). The focus on the connections facilitated by communication technology between Inuit in disparate locales is important, Donna Patrick (2008: 101) argues, because of their significance in redefining, expanding, and enriching notions of Inuitness.

Social media sites thus link Inuit to each other across great distances and, when their content is broadcast outside of personal relationship circuits, Inuit also draw a public eye to salient political issues within their communities. The far-reaching potential of sites such as Twitter, Blogs, Facebook, Instagram, and others that foster user-produced content make possible tactical moves that foreground material and discursive evidence of political projects, including images, texts, and hyperlinks that convey an anti-colonialist stance. In response to Iseke-Barnes and Danard's (2007) concern that internet content may give the illusion of value neutrality, indigenous peoples and Inuit in particular may use the capacity of social media to lay claim to their own stories and put out their own messages. Adopting Jackson's (2006) assertion that we come into being by telling our own stories, social media sites may be viewed as platforms that foster a "sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson 2006: 15). The entries - text, photos, videos - constitute living archives, sometimes in the style of journalists and sometimes as witness testimonials, that altogether render the voices of the Inuit louder by virtue of transforming "private" viewpoints into "public" accounts.

In order to understand the role of social media in these methods of activism, the Web is understood to have the capacity to facilitate communication, to overcome the need for co-presence and to assemble multiple perspectives and voices. The action potential of social media thus includes the dissemination of news and testimonials to a wide audience. The technology also fosters a continuous circulation of updates and new links within the network, as social media may meet a need for time-sensitive, multi-nodal, and multi-media communication.

Furthermore, the dissemination of information as a form of resistance for the Inuit collapses the effect of geographical and political marginalization. Without social media, the range of options available to small, geographically isolated communities in the North is limited to media that circulate locally (radio, newspapers, magazines, and television) or for Southern news sources to take an interest and circulate news more broadly (Roth 2005). As Lim (2003) points out, when individuals and grassroots organizations disrupt the efforts of a small, powerful group to restrict the flow of knowledge and information they engage in a process of democratization. In the case study examples below, we explore the possibility of advancing this process via social media.

Tweeting the counterpublic: voicing opposition and expressions of resilience

The contrast of the images and messages originating from the anti-sealing activists and the Inuit "#sealfies" reveal several interesting things about the narrative that each group seeks to tell. As this case study reveals, social media postings can be densely packed to stir cognitive and emotional reactions. The anti-sealing campaigns' repeated use of images depicting the Newfoundland and Labrador hunt in progress, for example, show recently killed seals in pools of

blood and of skinless cadavers on the ice. Their goal is to offend the audience and “raise such a sense of outrage that individuals are inclined to react politically in response to them” (Mika 2006: 919). Messages on social media, such as the one included below from the Sea Shepherd Twitter feed, use a ‘moral shock tactic’ to stir strong reactions and recruit viewers to their cause. The platform is intimate – we hold social media in our hands and it is where individuals follow news feeds, friend activities, and try online dating (van Dijck, 2013; Jones and Ortlieb 2008). In this particular tweet, the text and photo work together to highlight a tragic death and assign political responsibility (to Member of Parliament Gail Shea, then Minister of Fisheries and Oceans). Designed so that anyone using the search term #SealHunt will encounter this tweet, we can easily access pictures of dead and dying seals on our smartphones, on our home computers, and in our classrooms; in turn, they can easily reach us (Morozov 2011).



As Jasper and Poulson (1995) argue, the circulation of images such as this one operate on both emotional and cognitive levels in order to build political consciousness. They work as “condensing symbols” (497) - functioning quickly due to the power and efficiency of the images that revolt and sadden us. For anyone removed from the process of animal harvesting, the graphic depiction of the half-closed eyes, blood, and lifeless bodies disrupt complacency (Mika, 2006). These images are effective if they illicit a sense of outrage on the part of the viewer so that they become involved in some sort of political action (Jasper and Poulson, 1995), or if the viewer develops some level of emotional investment in the life cycle of seals.

The goal of triggering strong emotional resonances has a long history in the anti-sealing movement. In previous decades, before the ban on hunting white-coats, very young seal pups featured prominently in campaign media materials. Anti-sealers mobilized emotional reactions, for example, by explicitly “turning seals into cuddly babies” (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011: 192):



In the early years of circulating images at rallies, on billboards, and other platforms that required drawing supporters in to hear about their campaign, organizations exploited the image of the infant seal and its large, dark tearing eyes, its clean white fur, and fat, vulnerable body. The success of these campaigns was measurable: “Prices for sealskins tumbled from 1965 to 1968, with media portrayals of an inhumane hunt contributing to market turmoil” (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011:197). With the launch of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) in 1969 in order to specifically end the seal hunt, “Soon, cuddly whitecoats were everywhere: on posters, in pamphlets, as stuffed animals” (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011: 197). The powerful appeal of the cherubic white-coat thus became a rallying point. In 1977, Greenpeace and IFAW “pulled off a publicity coup by flying in French actress Brigitte Bardot – a photo of her cuddling a whitecoat was splashed on the cover of *Paris Match*” (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011: 198; Emberley, 1997).¹⁶ These images were “juxtaposed with other images of baby seals bludgeoned to death and scattered over the ice floes off the coast of Labrador in Canada” (Emberley, 1997: 1-2). Therefore, the early campaigns made intimate connections with potential supporters by likening seals to human infants. The physical appeal of very young seal pups was effective in capturing the attention of North Americans and Western Europeans.

¹⁶ Photo Source: Dancing Star Foundation. <http://www.dancingstaranimalrights.org/brigitte-bardot-foundation/> Last accessed August 30, 2014.

The efforts of Greenpeace and IFAW successfully instilled potent master frames in a broad-based public reaction to hunting for seals (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011). In the early 1980s, while Greenpeace sprayed green dye on the fur of the white-coats, IFAW took out ads in European newspapers “asking readers to write to European Parliament members and call for a ban on the import of whitecoats and ‘bluebacks’ (nursing hood seals)” (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011: 200). The physical appeal of the young seal pups had a lasting effect: the success of this campaign meant that the European Parliament was flooded by somewhere between three and five million postcards (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011). On the heels of this achievement, IFAW increased pressure by lobbying consumers and supermarkets to boycott Canadian fish products. The cumulative effect of these victories resulted in the ban on hunting whitecoats and bluebacks, as well as hunting any seals from large offshore vessels (ibid.). Furthermore, the powerful effect of pairing Brigitte Bardot with a seal pup began a trend that continues to this day, where trusted celebrities volunteer and/or are recruited to lend their credibility to the cause. For example, Martin Sheen, the actor who played the U.S. president on the television show “The West Wing”, provides a voice-over on the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society website calling for an end to the “annual ritual of blood and slaughter of the innocents” (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011: 202).

Most recently, in 2011, American celebrity Ellen DeGeneres made her stance on the seal hunt clear with this posting on the website for her show, www.ellentv.com. The links embedded in the posting take the viewer to PETA’s fundraising page in specific support of ending the seal hunt.

Stop Seal Hunting in Canada Now

04.06.11 :: Filed Under: [Ellen's Picks](#)



Seal hunting is one of the most atrocious and inhumane acts against animals allowed by any government. Canada is allowing the slaughter of a record number of seals in their 2011 hunting season, which is going on right now. The seals are often younger than 3 months old.

This has to stop. To my friends and fans in Canada: please help put a stop to this. Follow the link below to [make a donation and send the message that killing innocent animals is wrong](#).

Thank you for your support.

[Click here!](#)

Other celebrities, such as Kaley Cuoco-Sweeting¹⁷, took advantage of the attention garnered from the Oscar night tweet and subsequent interest in the

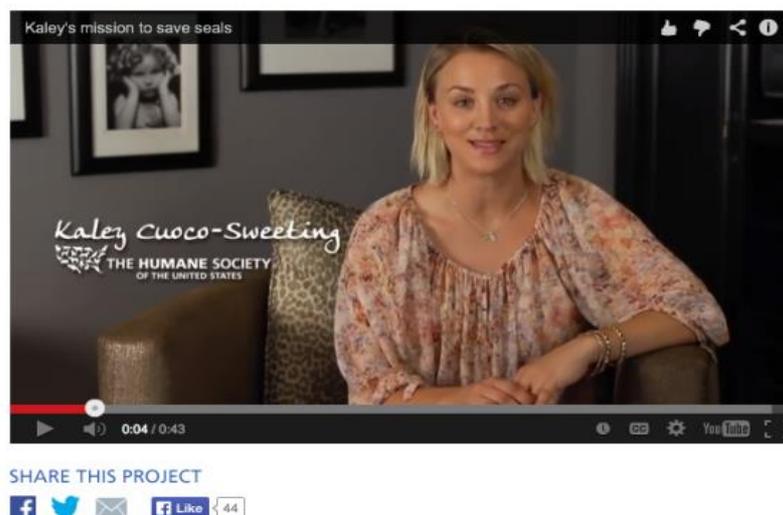
¹⁷ Cuoco is best-known for her role in the “The Big Bang Theory” television series.

Humane Society of the United States. In the immediate aftermath of this awareness, they highlighted their own endorsement of the Humane Society's efforts to raise funds to pressure the Canadian Government to end the seal hunt. Cuoco-Sweeting posted this tweet on April 15, 2014:



She then posted the following video on the website of the Humane Society of the United States to assist with fundraising, pleading: “We can end this brutal slaughter, but we need your help.”

Kaley Cuoco-Sweeting's Protect Seals Fundraiser



In contrast, reaction to Ellen DeGeneres' explicit support for the Humane Society of the United States and their anti-sealing work mobilized Inuk teen

Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss to take to social media site YouTube. As mentioned above, Enuaraq-Strauss' video drew attention to her own message and also inspired others to voice their views on social media. In her homemade video which runs for 6:57 minutes, Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss introduces herself as an Inuk and says that she wants to educate Ellen about the seal hunt. "We hunt to survive. Yes, we make clothing out of the seal fur, but that's because it's warm and it's not three million dollars." Two minutes into the video she says, "Even now that we have been assimilated into a Western society, traditional food is still a thing that is sustaining families who cannot afford to go to the grocery store. Because food security is a big issue in the North... approximately 70% of people living in Nunavut reported food insecurity in 2010." She goes on,

So, when you said, 'Seal hunting is one of the most atrocious and inhumane acts allowed by any government' personally, I was hurt!.. Suddenly, a huge part of your fan base is targeting us, as a people, for practicing our own rights and traditions as an indigenous group...I want to speak up for indigenous people worldwide who have been oppressed, because to take away such a vital part of who we are, it's detrimental to our culture. It's oppressive... To raise money to fight against us? I'm a little bit insulted. And hurt.... Like I said, I understand. But now I want to help you understand. If Canada were to ban the seal hunt, so many families would suffer. Would face harsher conditions and wouldn't be able to afford the proper clothing for the Arctic environment we live in. And even more so, another part of our culture would have been killed... I hope that I have helped you understand my way of life.

Inspired by Enuaraq-Strauss' video, Laakkuluk Bathory initiated the Twitter feed "#sealfies" in order to reinforce this perspective. Her first tweet went out on March 26, 2014:

 Laakkuluk W. Bathory @Laakkuluk · Mar 26
Make a #sealfie to stick it to animal rights activists who don't know the consequences of their words. @TheEllenShow





Laakkuluk W. Bathory
@Laakkuluk



Following

Tune in to Al Jazeera's coverage of the [#sealfie](#) at 3:30pm [#Iqaluit](#) time. Many of us contributed! [#ajstream](#)
stream.aljazeera.com/story/20140408...

↩ Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite ⋮ More

 The Stream

On the hunt for survival

A Canadian Inuit campaign defending seal hunting reveals a community in crisis.

[View on web](#)



News outlets, such as The Huffington Post, CBC, Business Insider, Al Jazeera, Global News, and the Vancouver Observer covered the #sealfies movement. As all of the online versions of the story include a section for comments, an analysis of the comments revealed several interesting trends. By looking at both the news comment sections and the comment section on Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss' YouTube video, we found that the issue drew the attention of an international audience and commentors indicated that they were from Europe and the US (including Hawaii), in addition to being from Canada. Members of other indigenous communities expressed a sense of solidarity and support for the Inuit in defence of the sealhunt for both personal and commercial uses. Inuit from across Canada as well as from Greenland strongly endorsed the #sealfie campaign. Seal hunters from Newfoundland and Labrador similarly expressed support for the Inuit in their efforts to raise awareness about the sustainability of the seal hunt.

Based on a thematic examination of the content of these comments, several patterns clearly emerge. Respondents argued that there was a clear distinction for them between maintaining culture and tradition, as well as engaging in activities that are about subsistence rather than commercial interests. Those experienced with seal hunting argued that seals are killed humanely. Many commented that it was hypocritical to be against the seal hunt, but to generally support an omnivorous diet. This image, for example, was circulated:



Finally, commenters brought up the relevance of voice and locatedness, posing the rhetorical question: what does someone who lives in California know about the lives of Inuit communities in Northern Canada? The most common expression of support for the Inuit delineated traditional practices for subsistence purposes from an engagement in a commercial hunt.

The emergence of leadership

One of the key features of internet organizing is that its network structure means that movements can emerge almost instantaneously yet be highly decentralized. Unlike off-line movements, loosely connected activist networks wage effective campaigns without a headquarters or formal leadership; it is the networks that become activated through communication technologies that enable political organization and do not necessarily require the charismatic leadership so characteristic of off-line activism. At the same time, activists who served as important nodes in the social-movement network frequently found themselves with new leadership roles, becoming a kind of “digerati” among

activists (Brockman, 1996). Just as in other online campaigns, a small number of Inuit activists became prominent in the creation and circulation of the #sealfies, within the news stories, and were engaged in the comment sections of the news stories. Women mentioned previously, such as Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss and Laakkuluk Bathory, stood out within the movement, as did Inuit filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril (who posted this on April 8, 2014):



Consequently, however, many of the individuals who were most prominent in posting and commenting on #sealfies were on the receiving end of a negative backlash. None quite to the degree as musician Tanya Tagaq. Tagaq's difficulties began when she posted this photo of her daughter and a dead seal:



Though the offending posts were removed following cyberbullying charges, Tagaq experienced an almost daily barrage of tweets and messages that were abusive. The most extreme of these had photoshopped the image Tagaq had posted of her infant daughter near a dead seal and depicted her baby being skinned.¹⁸ Another individual tweeted: “Pretty SICK 2 take a pic of a baby laying next 2 a bludgeoned baby seal then actually POST it 4 all 2 see.” Others posted death threats and suggested an online petition demanding her child be removed from her care. Tagaq didn’t back down from the backlash and worked with a Canadian police force to ensure charges were brought against one poster. The

¹⁸ “Tanya Tagaq Shuts Down ‘Sealfie’ Cyberbully With Police Help” *Huffington Post*. June 12, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/06/12/tanya-tagaa-sealfie-cyberbully_n_5488324.html; “UNCHARTED: Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq talks Animism, Pixies and #Sealfies” <http://www.chartattack.com/features/uncharted/2014/05/29/uncharted-tanya-tagaa/>.

media attention Tagaq received from the events reinforced her commitment to her activism, effectively appointing her as a key spokesperson for the movement. In a recent interview she used the occasion to draw the link between the #sealfies and broader issues related to the seal hunt:

We don't get a tonne of money from the natural resources that are being extracted from Nunavut, but we do have one resource and that's seals. We eat them and we always have and there are plenty of them, but for some reason there's a level of discrimination happening that one of the smallest minorities on the planet isn't allowed to reap the benefits from their own resources. It just seems like there's a lot of oppression happening from too many sides.¹⁹

Discussion and conclusion

The appearance of Inuit, young and old, wearing sealskin clothing in traditional and contemporary designs in photos on Twitter operate on a number of levels, including what Prins (2002) describes as invoking a tactical 'primitivist' approach. Consistent, for example, with the position adopted by the anti-sealer activists to support Inuit subsistence seal hunting, but not commercial hunting, the appearance of sealskin clothing, meat, and cadavers that comprised the #sealfies campaign simultaneously comforts and disrupts. Presented in forms in which non-Inuit viewers expect to see the Inuit, the presence of fur, meat, and freshly harvested seals are both consistent with the 'primitivisation' of the Inuit and interrupt historical attempts to marginalize their participation in the debate. For those creating and circulating #sealfie tweets, the Inuit and their allies, "primitivism" becomes a paradox (Prins 2002) such that the "exotic imagery" (ibid.) is deployed in service of the expectations of colonialism and simultaneously engages in a subterfuge of resistance. The #sealfies tweets turn clothes into political symbols (Dauvergne and Neville, 2011; DeLuca, 1999) to represent cultural resistance to colonialism and continuities of culture and identity in the face of pressure to change. At the same time, they conform to racist assumptions about people who maintain 'pre-modern', subsistence lifestyles. The Inuit "use the construct of primitivism in their political efforts" (Prins, 2002: 60) through the use of photographs and text via social media in order to advance awareness of their resilience in maintaining their identity and practices. By showing people outside of their community the ongoing significance of seal hunting, they demonstrate their autonomy, self-determination, and advocate on their own behalf. These images directly appeal "to the romanticism of primitivist imagination" and enables them to "represent themselves on their own terms" (ibid.: 70).

¹⁹ "UNCHARTED: Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq talks Animism, Pixies and #Sealfies"
<http://www.chartattack.com/features/uncharted/2014/05/29/uncharted-tanya-tagaq/>

By demonstrating the practical and symbolic value of sealskin clothing via photos of themselves wearing sealskins and by engaging in debates on social media, Inuit are able to show and defend their culture. In an interview with Cousineau (1998), Zacharias Kunuk said of his own work: "... how could we... sew clothing... if our culture had died out?" (cited in Wachowich 2006: 134). In that interview he asked rhetorically how he and his colleagues could accomplish what they have accomplished "if we were all dropouts and drunks?" (ibid. 135). Their desire to demonstrate this resilience in various ways, including in filmmaking, Kunuk says, shows their culture "from an Inuit point of view, not as victims but with the skills and strength to survive 4000 years with our identity intact. Inuit culture is alive" (ibid. 135).

Inspired by Wexler's (2009) discussion of 'cultural identification' amongst indigenous youth (269), we extend her concept to include cultural *resilience*. We therefore build upon the notion of 'recognition' of one's cultural attributes, including "beliefs, values, practices, norms, traditions and heritage" (269) and highlight the continuity of these attributes within Inuit communities. The #sealfies tweets demonstrate the semiotic power of the sealskin as a way to show the everyday, ongoing relevance of the seal hunt. Their symbolic power as evidence of a living culture has been incorporated into a social movement in order to "demonstrate ethnic unity, to dramatize injustice, [and] to animate [their] grievances" (Nagel, 1994: 167) in the form of wide, sweeping discriminatory policies supported and endorsed by far-removed Hollywood celebrities.

In the introduction to this article we argued that the anger evoked by the anti-sealing campaigners within indigenous communities serves as an important cautionary tale for activists. And indeed, our ongoing research consistently encounters the damage done by this campaign in the North; Greenpeace, and environmental NGOs in general, remain unwelcome participants in the civil society of the North.²⁰ In some communities the name Greenpeace was even used as a slur against anyone who showed seemingly excessive compassion for animals. As principal interlocutors on environmental issues, this is unfortunate. At the same time, many animal rights activists have become acutely conscious of this critique and are forging a pathway to recognize the overlap of indigenous and animal rights agendas. The delineation of subsistence and commercial seal hunting as practiced by the Inuit into 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' categories on the part of these NGOs has been at the very least racist and patronizing, and at the most politically and economically devastating. As Inuit assert their own voices in conversations about resource development, land and marine animal preservation, food security, and political autonomy, they may benefit from the contributions of civil society groups with technical expertise in these areas. Historical distrust must be addressed, however, before southern NGOs will be accepted at the table.

²⁰ For discussion of this please see Scobie and Rodgers 2013.

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