

# Connected Activism: Indigenous Uses of Social Media for Shaping Political Change

**Marisa Duarte**

Arizona State University  
Marisa.Duarte@asu.edu

## Abstract

Prior studies describe digital tactics as specific strategies actors apply within broader repertoires of contention, specifically in social and political contexts. A comparison of EZLN, Idle No More, and the ongoing Rio Yaqui water rights movement reveals the kinds of community knowledge work that has to happen prior to and around activating digital tactics in Indigenous rights movements, including choices in messaging and discourses of Indigeneity, targeting of movement opponents, and selection of digital tools and techniques. Activists harness these communicative affordances to practice a politics of visibility, cultivate solidarity, diffuse an Indigenous consciousness, enforce dominant governments' trust and treaty responsibilities, and remind many of the irrevocable injustice of colonialism. Designing methodologies that account for specific Indigenous social and political contexts as well as the affordances of various digital environments is part of the future work of Indigenous media theorists.

**Keywords:** Social media; Indigenous peoples; methodology; activism; social movements

## 1 Introduction

Indigenous peoples utilise social media for a number of reasons—from the utilitarian, to the political, to the politically transcendent. I am most interested in those studies that reveal the digital tactics and strategies that destabilise colonial power and hopefully, decolonise. Discerning these strategies requires a distinct intellectual project. This project would, at an epistemic level, account for the real-time exigencies of Indigenous peoples in specific geopolitical locations while also retaining sensitivity for the ways Indigenous actors conscript networked digital systems, devices, and web platforms—especially SNS (social networking sites)—to satisfy everyday life information behaviours. Applying such a framework to three cases of Indigenous social movements online—Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) activism, Idle No More, and Rio Yaqui water rights advocacy—reveals that while SNS are far from being egalitarian participatory democratic spaces for Indigenous peoples, they offer a compelling set of communicative affordances. Activists harness these communicative affordances to practice a politics of visibility, cultivate solidarity, diffuse an Indigenous consciousness, enforce dominant governments' trust and treaty responsibilities, and remind many of the irrevocable injustice of colonialism. I argue that understanding Indigenous digital repertoires of contention from an Indigenous perspective allows us to not only decipher the significance of political and social connections forged via digital tools, but also helps us to understand how particular digital tactics relate to the needs and goals of particular Indigenous movements.

## 2 Framing Indigenous Uses of Social Media

There is a thread in the literature around Indigenous uses of digital technologies that asserts the following colonial logic: Indigenous peoples as canaries in the cage of modernity suffer the onslaught of neoliberal technologies and therefore digital technologies are socially detrimental for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These arguments hinge on one of four colonial and neoliberal desires:

- 1) The desire for Indigenous ways of life to serve as a salvo for the pathos, alienation, and uncertainty of a contemporary networked social order;

- 2) The desire for fresh stores of Indigenous knowledge (IK), also coded through intellectual property institutions as Traditional Knowledge (TK) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK);
- 3) The desire to position Indigenous peoples as a straw man for another unarticulated argument about the totalitarian (or genocidal) potential one (someone? anyone?) might be afforded through orchestrated conscription of digital networked technologies, and/or;
- 4) The fear of a viral Indigenous cyber-terrorism.

As Indigenous scholars examining social media, we have a responsibility to interrogate and correct the colonial logics at play here. We conscientiously weave together insights garnered from general Internet studies with insights from Indigenous scholars. We choose which epistemologies to foreground and when. These epistemic approaches may come from the foundations of science, technology, and society studies, or they may be grounded in specific Indigenous experiences, such as when Subcomandante Marcos (2002) describes building networks 'from below', Two Horses (1998) describes gathering around the electronic fire, or Waitoa, Scheyvens & Warren (2015) explains e-whanaungatanga (de Leon, 2002; Two Horses, 1998; Waitoa, Scheyvens & Warren, 2015) Ultimately I hope that we are able to discern the digital repertoires of contention (Tarrow, 1998) that help us destabilise oppressive regimes, decolonise our own communities and practices, and create the conditions for healthier forms of governance and diplomacy.

Recent literature suggests that social movements online follow one of three approaches—collective action, collective action with connective capacity, and connective action. (Earl and Kimport, 2013) Collective action movements are largely organised off-line, and may use digital tactics to support on-the-ground tactics, such as collecting signatures for petitions. Organisers in these kinds of movements often do not leverage social media to mobilise support for campaigns, persuade publics, or disseminate key messages and discourses. When collective action organisers do leverage social media in these ways but still retain a brick-and-mortar institution, they increase the political capacity of their movement over all. Distinct from the dynamics of brick-and-mortar institutions, many actors convening across many SNS form the emergent and ephemeral dynamics of connective action movements. The digital tactics employed there may or may not map over to institutional participatory political processes, such as voting, voter registrations, and campaign fund donations, yet they provide spaces for collectively imagining alternative social and political visions, naming social phenomena, processing tragedy and trauma, and correlating personal experiences to social and political forces.

Indigenous peoples by definition regularly lack a direct means of political participation via local and state or provincial government agencies—for example, through voting, lobbying in competitive numbers, and campaign donations. SNS become compelling mobilising grounds for Indigenous connective activism. Individuals who may not have imagined themselves as 'political' in the sense of being an elected official or direct action protestor post and re-post politicised images, phrases, narratives, and survival stories within their digital networks of belonging. These images and phrases contribute to the construction of specific activist causes such as #SaveOakFlat or #SOSBlakAustralia, as well as to broader imaginaries about both meaningful Indigenous survival and quality-of-life amid the crush of neoliberal social and political rules. (Mercado, 2015; Sweet, Pearson & Dudgeon, 2013)

In this sense Indigenous activist uses of social media comprise one tool in the greater array of Indigenous repertoires of contention. The digital tactics that Indigenous activists employ to achieve specific political goals become part of the greater interplay of forces shaping place-based decolonisation efforts. Prior studies note how marginalised groups' social media discourses strengthen in-group solidarity, raise awareness of neoliberal forces—classism, types of racism, poverty, immigration processes, etc.--shaping the lives of marginalised peoples in different locations, and provide individuals with the speech tactics needed to navigate tricky political moments. (Mercado, 2015; Clark, 2014) Crafting social media studies that frame the

local Indigenous political context can help us better understand the kinds of impacts that specific digital tactics have. This also raises the level of academic discourse about Indigenous uses of digital technologies from one that romanticises notions of the anti-technological or pre-modern Indigenous subject to one that positions Indigenous connective activism as a decolonisation strategy. From there we can begin to conceptualise Indigenous activist uses of social media as both digital tactics and also as a way of knowing.

## 2.1 Three Indigenous Social Movements Online

In the mid-1990s, Castells (1997) predicted that the circulation of ideas and the material constraints of the network society would afford identity-based movements with the potential to raise awareness of their exigencies, and gather resources to stage local coups. Castells was in part inspired by the Zapatistas' 1994-1995 savvy uses of the Web to acquire support for their claims against the Mexican state. Since then, many Indigenous movements have utilised web platforms for political causes.

Thinking about how to layer and interweave digital network effects into the existing land tenure, political, economic and social constraints shaping Indigenous social movements requires a distinct intellectual project. It means identifying conceptual frameworks that allow for Indigenous explanations of the particular geopolitical exigencies shaping local social movements, in addition to identifying sociotechnical frameworks that explain digital tactics within a greater repertoire of contention. It also means thinking about the impacts and effects of Indigenous social movements in real-time but also across relevant webspheres, such as the blogosphere, Facebook, vlogs, etc.

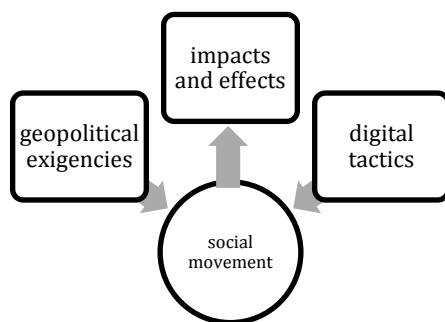


Figure 1. Framing digital Indigenous social movements

Indeed, taking this approach into account reveals the distinctive features of a range of digital Indigenous social movements. A comparison of EZLN, Idle No More, and the ongoing Rio Yaqui water rights movement reveals the kinds of community knowledge work that has to happen prior to and around activating digital tactics. It reveals constraints around the kinds of messaging and discourses of Indigeneity that become part of certain movements, but not others. It also reveals how the target of select movements in turn has an effect in shaping ascription to certain kinds of Indigenous discourses. This is meaningful in that it helps us better appreciate the nuanced nature of Indigenous activism and political participation as challenges to Indigenous autonomy and political participation manifest through different social, political, and economic structures in different countries.

## 2.2 Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN)

In the late 1980s, a group of urban Marxist intellectuals visited Mayan communities in the Chiapas highlands. Their goals were to foment a land-based proletariat struggle. However, meeting and living with Mayan community and Frente de Liberacion Nacional (FLN) guerrilla leaders helped them realise the conditions shaping political, social, and economic life in Chiapas. The Marxists had not taken into consideration the historicity behind Mayan philosophies and goals, goals designed to strengthen resilience within the Chiapas mountain homes and fields. Over time, Mayan leaders and area liberation theologians worked with the

Marxists, exchanging ideas until they formulated the foundations of what would become the EZLN. While the initial goals were to protest and through direct action challenge the unjust policies of the neoliberal and technocratic Mexican government, in particular as these were manifesting under the aegis of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), within a year, after a short-lived violent series of battles and cease-fire, the EZLN shifted the battle to a war of 'ink-and-Internet.' (Froehling, 1997) Their digital discursive strategies proved so effective in such a short amount of time that movement opponents would for years thereafter identify the Zapatistas with a challenging sociological neologism: cyber-terrorism.

The EZLN is widely cited as the first social movement to effectively use digital tactics for collective organising. At first, their digital tactics included use of a static website as well as electronic mailing lists, or listservs. The enigmatic spokesperson Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos utilised these platforms to disseminate EZLN communiqués. EZLN supporters, inspired by the anti-neoliberal messaging, Indigenous philosophical wit, and calls for a radical new hope promoted the site from their own webpages, and forwarded EZLN emails. By the time MySpace launched in 2003, the EZLN had already shaped the networked websphere, with NGOs connecting to each other by virtue of shared connections with the EZLN. (Garrido & Havalais, 2003) Organisations and individuals donated cash, volunteer time, foodstuffs and other material goods to the emerging caracoles and centros de gobierno that the EZLN initiated after negotiating with the Mexican government for a Zapatista autonomous zone. In time, many EZLN and ally groups popped up in MySpace, Facebook, via YouTube and other SNS. Zapatistas used streaming radio, email, and other digital modes for communicating under duress. Through the 2000s, allies in different countries—including groups as diverse as Rage Against the Machine, WTO protest organisers, and indymedia—referenced Zapatista logics, discourses, and lessons 'from below.' Scholars identified the paradox of the anti-neoliberal Zapatistas conscripting the very globalising technologies of neoliberalism—social media circuits and consumer web platforms—to distribute powerful communiqués while acquiring in turn political support in their Indigenous campesino "war against forgetting." (Wilson, 2007)

Scholars first approached the Zapatistas from a range of vantage points that stretched disciplinary logics and explanatory principles. They described Zapatista political phenomena as performative at times, adopting language from cultural studies to identify digital revolutionary aesthetics and mimesis. At other times scholars tested rational choice explanations of guerrilla politics against emerging post-structural explanations of social movements and political change, or alternatively used the case of Zapatismo to ground theories about peasant rebellions. While Chicana/o studies scholars recognised a familiar approach to Mexican-state Indigeneity, it took a while for some strictly US and Canada-based Native studies scholars to allow for this new brand of Indigenous discourse to shape what would eventually become a stronger Native and Indigenous critique of neoliberal and neo-colonial approaches to globalisation and settlement.

Far from the physical site of violence, endurance and protest, many scholars overemphasised the network effects of this 'cyber-warfare.' Zapatista comandantes theorised a direct relationship between Mexican neoliberal trade policies, past and present colonial injustices, and Indigenous campesino rights to self-govern. While EZLN communiqués did reference specifically Indigenous visions of global democracy, on-the-ground goals included the design of caracoles and centros de gobierno that often operated via a consensus based approach to governance rather than Euro-American participatory democratic approaches. Tactics of using masks and the guerrilla practice of switching bravos and pacíficos—or the front-line rebels and peaceful campesinos—also emerged from a need for hierarchical military tactics. A keen understanding of the corrupt nature of the Mexican government's presidential elections and enforcement of court rulings also prevented EZLN authorities from embracing statist approaches. Thus when we consider the real-life political, social, and economic exigencies of the Zapatistas and neighbouring Indigenous campesinos in Chiapas, we can better understand how Zapatista conscription of SNS and other digital tactics perhaps did less to drive recognisable democratic participation mechanisms, such as voter registration, campaign fund donations, and lobbying to support widespread participation in a Zapatista-led Freirian

concientização, a transborder transnational grassroots anti-neoliberal agenda-setting, and a multi-point peer-to-peer digital transmission of an Indigenous campesino vision of regional peace-making and economic stabilisation in spite of extreme poverty and disenfranchisement.

### **2.3 Idle No More**

Over fifteen years after the EZLN shifted to a war of 'Ink-and-Internet,' First Nations peoples at the Canada-US border were experiencing the government condoned corporate natural resource extraction and border violence against Native and Indigenous women that now characterise Indigenous experiences of NAFTA. In 2011, the then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper drafted a series of bills and amendments divesting First Nations sovereign command of lands and waterways. The party's goal was to support the extraction of oil from various tribal lands and border zones, including the environmentally detrimental installation of pipelines such as the KeystoneXL pipeline, highway expansion, and associated infrastructural projects. Crafted into a single large omnibus bill, the Assembly of First Nations leadership had little time to respond. Furthermore, many First Nations environmental justice and Indigenous rights activists had reason to be skeptical of the AFN's political and economic clout. Like any elected officials, tribal elected officials can on occasion buy into corporate ventures that they hope will strengthen tribal enterprise, but that can at the same time divest tribes of their control over natural resources and legal rights to access those resources. (Coulthard, 2014)

This is precisely why Indigenous participatory politics manifests in tactics and strategies that can sometimes culminate in the formulation of distributed social movements. In the autumn of 2011, three Native women activists and a non-Native feminist environmental justice activist crafted a series of teach-ins as well as a web campaign that would appeal to Indigenous activists and environmental justice supporters. They named the movement Idle No More. (McMillan, Young & Peters, 2013) Digital tactics included flash mob prayer rallies at locations defining neoliberal reach, including highways, busy city intersections in financial districts, shopping malls, and border crossings. They also developed image macros and supported the use of Facebook groups and Twitter hashtags, allowing activists in many different places around the world to re-post, share, re-tweet, and index Idle No More. The rapid and widespread dissemination of information and summaries about happenings around Idle No More--including the text of the C-series of bills, legislative changes, lobbying groups, and the status of Chief Theresa Spence's (Attawapiskat) hunger strike--allowed educators and journalists in many places to host teach-ins and write independent media stories. While Facebook newsfeeds and Twitter accounts revealed a string of protests in both the US and Canada through December and January of 2012 and 2013, the major media outlets such as CNN, the BBC, and the CBC did not pick up on spread and intensity of Idle No More protests until well after activist groups had self-organised into diffuse action-ready coalitions.

Similar to the EZLN, Idle No More activists had a very clear message for the top executive branch leader of the country. While the EZLN in the early days demanded a Zapatista autonomous region, and an end to specific violent neoliberal trade policies and actions in Chiapas, Idle No More activists demanded recognition of First Nations treaty rights in their lands and waterways, as well as the total repudiation of the proposed conservative party amendments to the Indian Act. However, Idle No More activists made sure to distinguish between their goals and AFN goals, precisely because of the likelihood of AFN cooptation by the Canadian government and private interest ventures. Likewise, Idle No More activists crafted calls for specific participatory actions—protests, 'no' votes, petitions, etc.—within a greater discourse of anti-neoliberal environmental justice, global Indigenous rights, and most especially, justice for missing and murdered Aboriginal women and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal women and children.

These interlaced discourses contributed to the networked discourse of global Indigenous solidarity perhaps initiated in the websphere by Zapatista activists many years before. Digital solidarity for Idle No More emerged through Maori Facebook groups, UK-based environmental justice groups, Indigenous feminist groups, and in many places far from the

Canadian border states and First Nations homelands. From within First Nations tribal circles, Idle No More efforts revealed the distinctions between the modes of effective political participation afforded to Aboriginal women and the mostly male elected officials of the AFN. (John, 2015) While Chief Theresa Spence would experience a great deal of criticism for waking sleeping giants, a few years after the first Idle No More flash mobs President Obama vetoed the construction of the KeystoneXL pipeline, and Canadian Prime Minister Harper definitively lost his second election run. The Senate tabled the proposed amendments to the Indian Act in 2013. Meanwhile, Idle No More digital activism continues to bring awareness to issues around environmental justice, such as the recent court order for Shell Canada to pay over \$800,000 to assist with the clean-up and restitution of a spill bordering Aamjiwnaang First Nation.

As with the early efforts of the EZLN, it has taken a while for scholars to decipher Idle No More's network effects in particular with regard to political participation not only in Canada but also with regard to the AFN's parliamentary relationship. What is clear, however, is that Idle No More represents a case of mediatised political participation across a diffuse and flexible feminist grassroots leadership not only in Canada but also in the Canada-US border states. Idle No More reveals the limitations of participatory democracy as it plays out in tribal council chambers, through council meetings and elections, the AFN, and the Canadian parliamentary process. It also revealed how Indigenous activists and allies in many different places and social positions orchestrated assemblages of SNS, devices, various web platforms, and independent media channels to organise quickly and effectively, circulating messages, memes and actions that destabilised colonial efforts across First Nations lands.

## **2.4 Rio Yaqui Water Justice**

Idle No More and EZLN reveal both the limitations and the stakes of activist uses of social media to further Indigenous social movement goals. On the one hand, strategic uses of websites, independent media communiqués, listservs, SNS, digital streaming radio, vlogging, image macros, and memes can contribute to raising awareness of the particular exigencies around Indigenous social movement goals. Conversely, as the Zapatistas know, *concientización* does not only occur in the world of 'ink-and-Internet.' The very nature of Indigenous decolonisation movements of all stripes requires violent upheaval, the taking up of arms, witnessing bloodshed, and willingness to destabilise oppressive government efforts at pacification. As Idle No More feminist activists know, widespread awareness and understanding of social movement goals does not mean that tribal elected officials or federal elected officials will listen to or respond to activist demands. Finally, there is the concern about how to shape solidarity for Indigenous social movements through online spheres, in particular as on-the-ground political realities reduce opportunities for healthy and productive participation of allies.

The ongoing Rio Yaqui water rights movement in northwest Mexico reveals some of these dimensions as well. For centuries, the Spanish agricultural and eventually Mexican government industrial authorities appraised the Rio Yaqui valley and underlying aquifers as the key to national agricultural settlement and economic development. (Radonic, 2015) Surrounded by rocky desert highlands and saline coastlines, the Yaqui River valley is the sacred homeland of the Yaqui people. The Yaqui people are the only Indigenous people in Mexico to have achieved something akin to reservation status by the Mexican government, and have been rudely named the only Indigenous people who were not conquered in Mexico. Such a dubious naming is not without the weight of history. In 1898, the Mexican government initiated a genocidal campaign against all Yaqui people, resulting in significant loss of life and leadership for the eight pueblos and the exile and enslavement of many Yaqui families. The campaign laid the foundation for the Mexican government's regular practice of treaty-breaking, privileging of private corporate settlement and natural resource extraction in Yaqui lands and waterways and similar to what is happening at the Canada-US border, criminal lack of attention to the environmental and physical health and wellbeing of Yaqui women, children, and families. While the governors of the eight Yaqui pueblos and the Sonoran governor frequently negotiate uneasy peace agreements, the Mexican state continues to condone agricultural and industrial

settlement of Yaqui lands without abiding by proper consultation processes, and sometimes through military force.

Thus in 2010 when a group of young Yaqui men posted a YouTube video of Mexican military personnel beating them for filling barrels of the only potable water in the Rio Yaqui for miles, the story caught fire. Environmental justice activists, Yaqui youth, anti-militarisation activists, anti-neoliberal activists, Indigenous rights activists, human rights activists, and independent media journalists had been watching the unfolding story of the illegally constructed Novillo dam, the Independence Aqueduct and its effects in Rio Yaqui. Additional dams were nearing completion in spite of environmental impacts reports that clearly noted high quantities of pollution by private land developers, industrial engineering companies, and food companies such as Bimbo Breads. Activists noted how the Nestlé Company was pumping hectares of water from dams—intended for purification and bottled water sales in cities—even though none of the eight pueblos had potable water, and local residents could not even eat the vegetables grown from non-potable water due to high industrial waste contaminants. (Jaime Leon, 2015; Tortuga Azul and Herrera Rivas, 2015) Concerned activists developed coalitions between such campaigns as the No al Novillo movement, the #JusticiaYaquis movement, and the #Namakasia movement, all of which utilised digital tactics to address layers of injustices.

Over time, digital tactics included use of email listservs to organise and share news, use of Facebook Groups, Youtube channels, and Twitter feeds to distribute communiqués from the Yaqui governors in Sonora, development of static webpages, participation in independent media programs, and organisation of border and interstate highway blockade flash mobs and city protests similar to Idle No More, with the distinction that the Rio Yaqui activists asked long-haul truckers and tractor drivers to park their vehicles as blockade posts, rather than using human chains and prayer rallies. Documentary filmmakers began developing short projects, some of which are at the end of production and are being distributed through community viewings in the border states.

Digital tactics have been steadily mounting since 2010, garnering popular support as well as the attention of Greenpeace activists and United Nations investigators. Two different groups in the Yaqui autonomous region filed lawsuits against the state of Sonora. One group filed on behalf of the tribe, noting how the state and private development partners began building dams and associated infrastructure without proper legal consultation with the eight pueblos. Another group, concerned that that lawsuit would not result in an expedient impact, filed a separate suit in partnership with corporate land developers. Meanwhile, Mexican authorities took two of the lead activists into custody and detained them for an entire year, releasing evidence that one of the activists may or may not have been arrested not for civil disobedience but rather, for a series of unrelated criminal charges. Activists began to be concerned that UN investigations would privilege human rights solutions over Indigenous rights approaches, leading to increasing theft of Rio Yaqui water from the peoples' sacred and legal homelands. While the messaging via SNS has shifted and spread, and with some activists fearful of being surveilled by Mexican government authorities, the pressure to disseminate news about this latest round of low-intensity warfare in and around Yaqui territories in Sonora is increasing.

While it is clear that neoliberal policy dynamics are shaping illegal Rio Yaqui water extraction and pollution in a manner similar to events surrounding the proposed Canadian oil pipelines, Rio Yaqui activist uses of social media differ from those of Idle No More activists. This is in part because the processes and techniques that afford Indigenous peoples' political participation in Mexico differ from the processes and techniques in Canada. While Rio Yaqui activists are working with larger Indigenous activist networks in Mexico, the governors of the eight Yaqui pueblos initially signed peace accords with the governor of Sonora, rather than at the federal level with Mexico. This shifts the locations of contestation for Rio Yaqui activists. The Spanish/English language divide also has an effect in the reach and dissemination of news and discourses about Rio Yaqui water rights. Other than in Arizona, few US and Canada Indigenous activists are aware of the Rio Yaqui justice efforts. The distinct but potentially coalitional #IdleNoMore and #Namakasia movements are not referencing or indexing each other.

The split is not only linguistic but also cultural as references to Indigeneity differ in these border regions. For example, the Yaqui people of Sonora are known for distinguishing themselves politically from the Zapatistas. In the early days of forming the Zapatista autonomous zone, the EZLN requested the support of Yaqui guerrilla fighters from Sonora and from the Yaqui tribe in the United States. While some men did join the EZLN, many chose not to under the advice of elders who cautioned them that the Zapatistas would eventually give Mayan land to rural campesinos who had no interest in supporting Yaqui ways of life. Elders reminded Yaqui youth then, as they do now, that Yaquis are only Yaqui when speaking Yaqui and living in connection with the Yaqui sacred homeland. In that sense, Rio Yaqui water rights movement discourses of Indigeneity are not always intended to be as encompassing as EZLN discourses of global Indigenous solidarity, nor are they as transferrable to associated causes as Idle No More discourses around women's rights. The set of goals and Indigenous discourses surrounding the current #Namakasia movement and associated Rio Yaqui justice movements are so precise and specific that in many ways, the activist uses of social media are likewise more pointed and oriented to address specific structural violence and sectors of the population within Sonora. The goals are not like that of the EZLN, wherein Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos inscribed years of visions about a global Indigenous solidarity, an Indigenous space for a global participatory democracy, and anti-neoliberal practice through a series of cyber-communicues. The goals are more akin to Idle No More, whose leadership were employing digital tactics to both spread awareness about a specific policy issue and set of practices while also distinguishing themselves from the political participation methods advocated through the AFN. In Rio Yaqui, the Rio Yaqui justice movements digital tactics match the geopolitical terrain, where activists must on one hand support the Yaqui-only leadership of the eight pueblos within the autonomous zone while also fostering regional solidarity among a diverse number of actors, from landowners, to activist Mexican youth, proletariat workers and campesinos as well as the middle-class environmental justice activists, independent journalists and other fierce critics of the Sonoran governor.

## **2.5 Indigenous Uses of Social Media: Visibility, Solidarity, Consciousness, Trust, and the Reminder of Irrevocable Injustice**

By the time Mexico, the U.S. and Canada signed NAFTA, the EZLN had already consolidated an internal political vision, developed modes of governance that fused Mayan philosophy and know-how with urban Marxist and liberation theology approaches, and practiced a land-based mode of sustenance in the mountains of Chiapas that would ultimately ground the Indigenous campesino autonomy movement for many years to come. The ways that Zapatistas disseminated narratives and comunicués about their political exigency via the Internet inspired leftist activists in many parts of the world (Wolfson, 2012). Speaking through the voice and public image of Subcomandante Marcos, many members of the EZLN expressed the need for a global information network through which Indigenous peoples and many others seeking liberation from the yoke of neocolonial and neoliberal government policies could connect with each other, establish solidarity, and continue through direct action the fight 'from below' (Ponce de León, 2002; Ruggiero, 1998).

Since that time the leaders of many leftist activist organisations, independent journalists, and media theorists have studied EZLN media activism to learn about the ways network approaches amplify social movement opportunities for participatory action. A fascination with Indigeneity and the relationship between social media and political organising began to shape arguments in social theory literature. Lacking insight into the nuances of Indigenous peoples movements and multiple forms of governance, and also assuming that more voice and visibility naturally lead to more opportunities for democratic participation, social movement theorists and media theorists alike conflate social media participation with democratic participation. (Carpentier, 2011; Waller, Dreher & McCallum, 2015; Wolfson, 2012) Leftist activists also regularly conflate Indigeneity with anti-neoliberalism and anti-racism among other agendas. Many people presume that all Indigenous peoples have political goals and visions akin to Subcomandante Marcos.



However, activists, scholars and journalists who joined Subcomandante Marcos' in the struggle 'from below' in Chiapas learned that non-democratic forms of governance, subsistence living, Mayan philosophies, campesino practical knowledge, limited capital means, and restricted political participatory mechanisms shaped the struggle in specific land- and flesh-based ways. (Wolfson, 2012) The Indigenous aspects of online social movements became concrete, material, real, undeniable, muddy, bloody, uncomfortable, painful, lived, embodied, traumatic, and transformative. This is probably best exemplified by the experiences of those who survived the 1997 Massacre of Acteal, in which a paramilitary group with alleged connections to the ruling political Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI, shot and brutalised 45 people, including women and children, who were praying in a Catholic church in Chiapas. Those who died were members of Las Abejas, a pacifist group who supported the EZLN and their use of nonviolence. Beset by colonial and neoliberal logics, political influence, and lack of evidence, the court case continues to haunt the survivors, as well as the Mexican justice system. Thus when as social theorists we consider the relationship between Indigenous uses of social media and Indigenous peoples opportunities for political participation, we must centre that which is distinctively Indigenous. In other words, we cannot safely presume an association between Indigenous activist uses of digital media and fair and just governmental recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights.

At present, Indigenous peoples are Indigenous not simply as a matter of neoliberal identity politics, but rather because they are the necessary 'Other' to the formation and reproduction of modern Nation-States, especially Settler-States. The authorities of nation-states, even those most generous with regard to multicultural liberal philosophies, find it difficult to undo generations of social and legal policies that prevent Indigenous peoples—as opposed to atomistic individuals—from direct meaningful engagement with nation-state authorities, dominant political parties, and state and provincial representatives. The kinds of political participation that the state affords Indigenous peoples are already circumscribed in such a way as to prevent dismantling of the state's economic neoliberal colonial apparatus. Mass media and corporate news outlets may occasionally include or represent Native voices in a turn to a politics of representation, but this is not equivalent to, nor does it inherently lead to, the consent of the governed in an informed democracy. (Dreher, McCallum & Waller, 2016) As researchers we can ask, what happens when Indigenous people's uses of social media allow specific Indigenous political actors to move in, around, and through neoliberal power structures?

Additionally we have to foreground the very material challenges of Indigenous life in particular because social media and Internet studies scholars hailing from technologically advanced countries may have a very limited understanding of Indigenous peoples' political and social conditions. For example, at present activists working within the eight Yaqui pueblos located in northwest Mexico are organising a transnational Indigenous water rights campaign through social media, and yet none of the pueblos have potable water. Many of the women who are leaders of local Idle No More efforts are working through various family and community crises as the increasing rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women compound existing high rates of domestic violence and abuse. Essentially we have to remind our non-Indigenous colleagues that to nation-state authorities, forms of violence in Indigenous communities is considered allowable and to be expected, a necessary sacrifice in the long march to neoliberal progress and "democracy for all."

We also have to continually conceptualise how Indigenous peoples uses of social media are grounded in not just contemporary political exigencies, but also in the tribal philosophies, spiritualities, traditions, and historical legacies of peoples with memories reverberating through eras well before the founding of modern nation-states. On many occasions, Indigenous leaders' political goals may be in direct counterpoint to many tenets of contemporary Euro-centric forms of democratic political participation. Thus, as recent research in political uses of Black Twitter reveals that participants have to 'be Black' to meaningfully engage in the Black blogosphere (Clark, 2013), I argue that if as social theorists we seek to understand Indigenous online spheres, we have to be Indigenous, able to meaningfully engage, decipher, and catch on

to the coded language, turns-of-phrase, significance of political connections, and deeper philosophical meanings embedded in Indigenous uses of social media.

Finally, we have to remember that Indigenous people's uses of social media will cohere to the specific political demands of specific Indigenous groups in specific geopolitical locations. Taking that perspective allows us to align with Indigenous theory and research that discerns, envisions, and articulates the functionality of decolonising forms of governance, political economies that defy neoliberal exploitation, and customary laws grounded in the wisdom of time-tested tribal philosophies and worldviews.

Comparison of the abovementioned movements reveal how Indigenous uses of social media support visibility of Indigenous social movements and issues, promote solidarity for particular struggles and views, foment Freirian processes of consciousness-raising, and enforce the government-to-government trust underlying peace agreements and treaties. Indigenous uses of social media also intentionally disrupt and destabilise participatory processes of oppressive governments. Messaging and discourses produce community unsettling and factionalization that in many ways is a reminder of the layers of irrevocable injustice that Indigenous peoples have suffered in the making of neoliberal nation-states. Indigenous uses of social media are thus inherently destabilising for dominant government processes. This is not a bad outcome; rather it reveals the further work we must do as scholars seeking to understand and respond with good heart to the social and political exigencies of Indigenous peoples.

### 3 Conclusion

In 2001 Garrido and Havalais (2003) conducted a network analysis of the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico, looking for patterns around their working hypothesis: that the identity-based EZLN was shaping flows of information around justice-based causes in the websphere. Their analysis revealed the degrees of connectivity—nodes, distance, and association—between the EZLN website and those of NGOs affiliated within the EZLN web network. At the time of the analysis, many network scientists had not yet embraced the 'rough edges' (Munster, 2013) of network analysis and conceptualisations, where links may not be equivalent to two-way reciprocal flows of information, and where flows of information may or may not be equivalent to the real-life flow of material resources.

Beyond the clean linearity of network diagrams the messiness of life emerges: the human condition as it bleeds, so to speak. Since the identity-based Indigenous media studies of the late nineties, researchers devoted to understanding the relationship between Indigenous uses of social media and Indigenous political goals have noted what community leaders have known for a long time. The expression of strong mediatised Indigenous voices does not ensure that dominant government authorities will accordingly listen or act in a just manner. Effective political participation for Indigenous peoples vis-à-vis nation-states still requires significant structural changes. Meanwhile, Indigenous activists, entrepreneurs, educators, and many other leaders must effectively and strategically push however they can from whatever digital/social/political position they hold, the embodiments of decolonisation and perpetual performers of radical change.

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