

Seal Hunts in Canada and on Twitter: Exploring the Tensions Between Indigenous Rights and Animal Rights with #Sealfie

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ABSTRACT

Background In 2014, a Twitter discussion of seal hunting, using the hashtag #sealfie, spurred a digital conflict between two rights movements—Indigenous rights in Canada and animal rights. This digital controversy touches on race, class, and geography.

Analysis The hashtag's life on Twitter obscures the two movements' shared challenges: the undeniably neoliberal context consisting of ongoing economic struggles in northern and remote communities, and the continued loss of wildlife habitat.

Conclusions and implications The authors analyze the #sealfie Twitter content generated between 2014 and 2017, exploring the tensions between the claims of the Indigenous rights and animal rights movements. They probe the failure of Twitter, and more generally social media, to generate a climate of genuine debate, and they consider how such digital platforms can serve as echo chambers for stereotypes and discriminatory discourse.

Keywords Seal hunts; Twitter, #sealfie; Indigenous rights; Animal rights; Social media

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte En 2014, une discussion sur Twitter utilisant le mot-clic #sealfie a entraîné un conflit en ligne entre deux mouvements, l'un sur les droits autochtones au Canada et l'autre sur les droits des animaux. Cette controverse internet traite de race, classe et géographie.

Analyse La présence de #sealfie sur Twitter occulta les défis partagés par les deux mouvements : le contexte indubitablement néolibéral de difficultés économiques persistantes dans les communautés nordiques et reculées et la perte continue d'habitat faunique.

Conclusions et implications Les auteures analysent le contenu associé à #sealfie sur Twitter entre 2014 et 2017, explorant ainsi les tensions entre le mouvement autochtone et celui pour les animaux. Elles examinent l'échec de la part de Twitter, et des médias sociaux en général, de créer un contexte propice à de véritables débats. Elles considèrent en outre comment de telles plateformes numériques peuvent servir de caisse de résonance pour les stéréotypes et les propos discriminatoires.

Mots clés Chasse au phoque; Twitter; #sealfie; Droits autochtones; Droits des animaux; Médias sociaux

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Introduction

In 2014, a debate around animal rights and seal hunting played out in social media with the hashtag #sealfie after the popular television talk show host Ellen DeGeneres tweeted her Oscars selfie (a self-portrait photo). The selfie was a covert fundraising effort for the Humane Society of the United States, a staunch opponent of sealing, and it prompted a backlash from seal hunt supporters.¹ The debate was significant enough to “trend” on Twitter and earn some attention in mainstream media.² The ensuing digital debate highlighted misunderstandings and tensions between these two rights-based movements—Indigenous rights in Canada and animal rights. This debate exposed continued stereotyping of Indigenous peoples, and it suggested that social media, with its condensed-message format, can be both a limiting factor in political debates and a useful, albeit symbolic, tool in mobilizing movements. Although the debate allowed for some key concerns around seal hunting to surface, and made visible the deplorable living conditions in the Canadian North, what remained absent was the larger political and economic context in which seal hunts (and the efforts to ban them) take place, such as the ongoing economic struggles in northern and remote communities, and the continued loss of wildlife habitat.

The capacity of the internet, and particularly platforms that support user-generated content, to advance social movements has been documented since the late 1990s. Early examples of such “cyberactivism” include the 1990s Zapatista Indigenous struggle in Mexico, which was amplified by listervs and linked webpages disseminating content from the depths of Chiapas’ forests (Kowal, 2002), and the birth of Indymedia to offer counter-coverage of the 1999 World Trade Organization’s meeting in Seattle (Kidd, 2003). In the past two decades, ample scholarship has analyzed not only how online platforms facilitate social movements, but also how they help them come into being. Michael Dahlberg Grundberg and Simon Lindgren (2014), for instance, consider how social media platforms generate what they term an “*issue public*, that is a public created ad hoc around a specific issue” (p. 51, italics added). Whereas some online activism may be diluting issues or pacifying activists, leading them to believe that their online engagement contributes more to a cause than it does in reality (Harlow & Guo, 2014), other instances demonstrate how social media activism can be an organizing tool that mobilizes a movement online and helps it to then move offline (Harlow 2012; Raynauld, Richez, & Boudreau Morris, 2017). For example, when the Idle No More movement for Indigenous rights came to the forefront of Canadian politics in 2012, social media played a significant role in helping to put a spotlight on the protest movement and recruiting allies (Callison & Hermida, 2015).³ The ability of platforms such as Twitter to spread messages quickly and widely proved invaluable to the growth of the movement.

Social media have enabled a “proliferation of Indigenous voices” (Waller, Dreher, & McCallum, 2015, p. 25) and the potential to reach multiple audiences beyond only those within the community (Lindgren & Cocq, 2017). Social media have also allowed Indigenous activists to share and preserve community knowledge (Owiny, Mehta, & Maretzki, 2014); to nurture and develop relationships and social economies (Virtanen, 2015); and to create opportunities for collaboration (Farrell, 2017). However, the enthusiasm for this potential should be treated with caution, as the mere presence of

Indigenous voices does not automatically imply political influence (Waller et al., 2015). Moreover, the promise of social media has not evenly benefited all Indigenous communities; it is a promise that can potentially mask continued marginalization, while at the same time allowing racialized stereotypes to be amplified (Otenyo, 2017).

The case of #sealfie illustrates some of the ways the hashtag created what Dahlberg Grundberg and Lindgren (2014) would describe as an “issue public,” connecting Indigenous activists to one another across geography and also to non-Indigenous supporters of traditional seal hunts. At the same time, however, this study shows that the hashtag’s influence beyond the community of seal hunt defenders was limited. Those who opposed the hunt barely engaged with the hashtag and when they did, it was with animosity and no indication that #sealfie changed their minds about sealing.

This article begins with an overview of the #sealfie case. It then briefly situates the case in the contemporary rights landscape and offers some background information on seal hunts, explaining the economic and cultural significance of the practice to communities in Canada. It goes on to analyze Twitter messages associated with this hashtag before discussing the social and political implications of this case.

The #sealfie case

On March 2, 2014, Ellen DeGeneres tweeted her now famous Oscars selfie, a product placement stunt for Samsung Galaxy phone. DeGeneres is an unabashed supporter of the Humane Society of the United States (2018, hereafter Humane Society), and Samsung made a \$1.5-million donation to the organization, which bills itself as “the nation’s most effective animal protection organization” (see <http://www.humane.society.org>).⁴ Since the organization is one of the strongest critics of Canada’s seal hunt, the famous selfie became a flashpoint of contention for defenders of sealing. The crux of their disdain was that celebrities’ power to reach large audiences is a common conduit for commercial antics. A stunt such as the TV host’s can garner more revenue for a brand or product, or—as was the case here—additional funds for organizations. While some organizations may indeed have noble causes, others serve the neoliberal agenda, and sometimes further marginalize already disadvantaged communities. In this instance, the communities under scrutiny, the ones that partake in seal hunts, have neither the reach of DeGeneres’ audiences nor the budget for the type of public relations that the Humane Society boasts.

On March 23, 2014, YouTube user K.E.S. (short for Killaq Enuaraq-Strauss) posted a YouTube video titled “Dear Ellen.” The self-declared video rant was an appeal to DeGeneres and her audience; the video told a story that contextualized the Indigenous seal hunt. Enuaraq-Strauss explained the consequences of DeGeneres’ #oscar selfie tweet, and it noted that spreading a message advocating for the ban of seal hunting posed a challenge to Indigenous rights. In addition to this protest, Newfoundland artist Rodney Mercer produced a portrait of DeGeneres made of sealskin. Both Enuaraq-Strauss and Mercer wanted to introduce another side to the animal rights conversation and encourage a transparent discussion on the seal hunt. Inspired by these actions, on March 26, 2014, Iqaluit filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril posted a picture of herself wearing a full sealskin outfit and used #sealfie. Then, on March 28, 2014, the Inuit mu-

sician and activist Tanya Tagaq posted a “sealfie” on her Twitter account—a picture of Tagaq’s baby next to a seal carcass. The tweet, obviously in support of traditional seal hunts, spurred a flurry of replies and retweets, making the hashtag “trend.”

Hashtag #sealfie quickly emerged as a conduit to creating an “issue public.” The hashtag enabled the Indigenous community, those engaged in Indigenous activism in Canada, and others engaged in sealing to respond with a mode of hashtag retaliation defending the right of Indigenous and coastal communities to hunt seals. The #sealfie hashtag was aimed at DeGeneres’ Twitter account as a surreptitious and tactical attempt to reach broader audiences. In 2014, DeGeneres’ own tweet reached her approximately 25.8 million followers—DeGeneres has a level of public influence that Indigenous users of Twitter do not have.

Initially, the hashtag seemed like it could become a site of some discussion between advocates of traditional seal hunts and proponents of animal rights. However, over time the hashtag evolved to almost exclusively include tweets in support of sealing, both Indigenous sealing in Northern Canada and settler sealing in Atlantic Canada.⁵ Between 2014 and 2016, the hashtag was often used for tweets on settler sealing in Newfoundland and Labrador, where rural-urban and island-mainland tensions were lumped together with Indigenous-settler relations. Whereas those dynamics undeniably share the characteristics of political inequities, misunderstandings, and marginalization, settler sealing emerges from very different historical conditions. Notably, however, Indigenous participants in this Twitter discussion seemed to not be bothered by this, and either simply ignored such tweets or responded to them as a welcomed sign of solidarity. Then, in 2016, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril’s documentary *Angry Inuk* won the 2016 Hot Docs audience award, sparking yet another revival of the hashtag, and refocused it to more deliberately rally Twitter users around Inuit rights and more broadly Indigenous rights.

The context of rights

Following the establishment of the United Nations (UN) after World War II, many nations within the UN called for the creation of human rights standards to protect people from abuses by their governments and to hold these governments accountable for the treatment of people living within their borders. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the then 56 members of the UN, establishing that how a government treats its citizens was no longer merely a domestic concern, but potentially a matter of international concern, and that human rights are interdependent and indivisible.⁶ Since then, the UN has adopted more than 20 principal treaties that expand further on human rights, including conventions to prohibit specific abuses like torture and genocide, and others to protect particularly vulnerable populations, such as refugees, women, and children (Ishay, 2008).

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, elaborates on and interprets human rights to fit Indigenous contexts, laying out a minimum standard to guarantee that Indigenous peoples can survive and thrive, with an affirmation of Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination (including the right to manage their own natural resources, and to have a voice in any decisions regarding developments that take place within their territories). The Canadian

government had previously voted against this declaration but finally moved to support it in 2016, following the 2015 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Yet Indigenous rights in Canada are still poorly recognized (as discussed in more detail below). This situation undermines not only the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples, but also their capacity to maintain ways of living. Further, Indigenous peoples are largely removed from the decision-making processes that determine what forms of economic development are needed to address the needs of their communities (Amnesty International, 2015; Fontaine, 2016; Vincent, 2015).

While lauded by some, this rights framework has also been criticized for continuing to enshrine settler notions of justice, despite the recognition of Indigenous rights. In other words, the dominant legal approach still frames rights through a colonial legal system, or jurisdictional law, as opposed to a “natural law” (Lyons, 1985). Based on Eurocentric constructs of justice, rather than Indigenous worldviews, such a framework risks being one of the tools that “terminate” Indigeneity, in that it fails to recognize Indigenous notions of rights as inseparable from the natural and social ecosystems in which they exist (Henderson, 2000).

In a separate development in recent decades, there has been increased discourse around extending human rights, or similar types of protections and minimum standards of care, to non-human animals (Sankoff, Black, & Sykes, 2015; Wise, 2000). Whereas numerous conventions and regulations at all levels of governance, from municipal to international, have firmly established protection of ecologically fragile areas, species at risk, and biodiversity as a common practice of the twenty-first century, these protections are typically framed as efforts of humans to manage nature. In contrast, activism that focuses on animal rights seeks to place human and non-human animals on an equal footing. For instance, the Great Ape Project, founded in 1993, has recently gained attention as some countries have committed to its principles, which include conferring basic legal rights to great apes (Glendinning, 2008). Scholars have made many connections between the discourse of human rights and that of animal rights discourse; for instance, some feminist writers and academics have argued that in a patriarchal society, both women and animals serve the same function—to be used, dominated, and positioned as a submissive “Other” (Adams, 2000). The animal rights discourse challenges such domination and calls for an end to all exploitation of animals, be it for food, clothing, income, or amusement.

The seal hunt debate in Canada presents an interesting challenge to the rights discourses as it essentially pits one set of rights, that of Indigenous peoples, against another, that of non-human animals. It is, of course, a false dichotomy, as many Indigenous cosmologies connect people and animals as kinfolk, through inseparable and reciprocal links (Coté, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The sealing case is further complicated by the participation of non-Indigenous sealing communities in this debate, typically communities that are—like many Indigenous communities—rural and remote, economically marginalized, and at the mercy of whimsical neoliberal capital and policies.⁷

The context of seal hunts in Canada

Indigenous rights remain one of the most complex issues in what is now known as

Canada. Decades of legally sanctioned and informally practised discrimination, from forced attendance and abuse at residential schools to continued racism, have produced communities that remain culturally, economically, and legally marginalized. Many Indigenous families and communities continue to face impoverishment, inadequate housing, food insecurity, poor health, and unsafe drinking water (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012). There is widespread political and social failure to protect Indigenous peoples' rights to land and resources, or to resolve land disputes (Anaya, 2014). Although the historical conditions of Indigenous communities in Canada are complex and diverse, they have in recent years been greatly affected by neoliberal policies. The laying of pipelines, mining activities, and offshore underwater exploration have all had an impact on the communities that are rarely included in policy decisions that facilitate such practices (Anaya, 2014). These problems are exacerbated in the Canadian North, where attempts to revitalize community economies through traditional practices have faced significant pressures from animal rights activists (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2015). Meanwhile, Indigenous rights continue to be appropriated and co-opted into the settler state agenda (Corntassel, 2007).

Remote and rural settler communities in Atlantic Canada have also experienced economic strife and cultural displacement (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2015). Like Indigenous communities, they have been at the mercy of decades of neoliberal policies (Evans & Smith, 2015). While arguably better positioned to withstand the neoliberal pressures, these communities have not escaped unscathed. They have also witnessed the depletion of natural resources, along with a range of environmental impacts, and economic instability related to the whimsical influence of global capital. Of course, these issues are doubly complex for Indigenous communities in Atlantic Canada, where impacts of industrialization have compounded cultural marginalization (see Pictou Landing First Nation & Knezevic, 2017).

Resource exploration and extraction, and (for instance, industrial harvesting in the form of factory-freezer trawlers commonly used in commercial fishing; see Pauly, Christensen, Guénette, Pitcher, Sumaila, Walters, Watson, & Zeller, 2002), combined with climate change, has led to a great deal of habitat loss on land and sea, making "development" projects a significant threat to animal welfare and rights (Paquet & Darimont, 2010). However, given the "social licence" approach to public relations, animal rights—or, at the very least, animal welfare—issues are also increasingly co-opted into the neoliberal project (Forkasiewicz, 2014).⁸

Against this backdrop is the great controversy of sealing in Canada. The hunts play a significant economic and cultural role in Indigenous communities in the North as well as settler communities in Atlantic Canada (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2016a). Seals are hunted for their flesh (as food), oil, and fur (for clothing). Although highly nutritious (as it is high in protein and iron), seal meat is an acquired taste, with the texture of beef and a fishy flavour. Thus, commercial use of seal meat is limited, though some Canadian restaurants have started to feature seal on their menus in recent years. Also, some companies have been adding seal meat to animal feed. Seal oil is used for nutritional supplements and other products (e.g., shoe polish). However,

seal fur is the main driver of commercial sealing and is featured in high-end fashion designs worldwide.

Indigenous sealing has been around for 10,000 years in Europe and 4,000 years in today's North America (Canadian Sealers Association, n.d.), and settlers have harvested seals in what is now Canada since the early 1500s (Canadian Sealers Association, n.d.). The average sealer today earns between a quarter and a third of their yearly income from sealing (Government of Canada, 2013). The federal government does not distinguish between Indigenous and settler hunters in these income statistics. The 2007 estimates for settler sealers in the Magdalene Islands, Québec, indicated that the average sealer earned about \$7,000 from sealing, for some 25 percent of their annual income (Côté & Pistor, 2007). These statistics suggest that many of those involved in sealing are living with relatively low annual incomes already.

Since the 1970s, the hunts have been a major part of animal rights activism, with involvement of high-profile groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (commonly known as PETA), the Sea Shepherd Society, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and Humane Society International (n.d.), which calls the hunt “the largest slaughter of marine mammals on Earth.” It is of note that organizations with wider environmental agendas, such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, support the seal hunt, and Greenpeace has even apologized for its past opposition. Whereas Humane Society International has repeatedly made statements saying it does not oppose Inuit sealing, the devil here is truly in the details—the society's statements always qualify that it is fine with “subsistence” Inuit hunting, but opposes commercial hunts (e.g., see MacNeil, 2014). Given that income sources in the North are incredibly scarce, this stance is misleading since Inuit in Canada hunt seal both for subsistence (food and clothing) and for commercial purposes.

Similarly, settler sealers have few other commercial opportunities. To illustrate this with an anecdote, the IFAW's documentary *Huntwatch* (Backlund, 2016) captures the IFAW film crew approaching a sealing vessel in Atlantic Canada and speaking with sealers. The film crew asks why sealers do what they do, and one of the sealers responds that they have to, as this is how they make a living. One of the film crew members says, “But it's just pocket money,” to which the sealer replies, looking more worn down than angry, “Pocket money? Maybe for you guys.” Meanwhile, the use of seal images has been a major part of fundraising efforts of organizations like the IFAW (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016; Knezevic, 2009; Troake, 2006). Blood on white snow makes for powerful visuals, and seals always look like they are “crying,” though this is actually a biological response that prevents their eyes from freezing. Opposing the practice of seal hunting is very profitable for organizations in the business of raising money (Arnaquq-Baril, 2016; Knezevic, 2009; Troake, 2007). The cuteness of seals may explain why animal rights groups use the annual harvest of fewer than 100,000 seals in their marketing materials far more frequently than, for instance, the farming of mink. Mink are arguably not as cute as seals, but more than two million of them are killed every year in Canada alone (Statistics Canada, 2012).

In the past decade, the seal harvests in Canada have been significantly less than the total allowable catch set by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (Fisheries and

Oceans Canada, 2016b). The vast majority of the harvest is harp seals, the species highly prized for its fur. A small percentage of the seals harvested are grey seals.⁹ Most of the quotas and regulations around sealing have been in place in Canada since 1971 to manage the scale of the hunts, as these have been accompanied by continued environmental assessments of the practice. Seals are far from endangered, with the harp seal population now estimated at 7.4 million animals (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2016b). Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans indicates that this is nearly six times the 1970s harp seal population (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2016b). Moreover, contrary to much anti-sealing material still showing young seals ("whitecoats") as victims, only adult seals can be harvested.

Despite these facts, activist groups and high-profile celebrities continue to characterize the hunts as barbaric and cruel. This positioning played out in the spring of 2017 when the Canadian government passed Bill S-208, declaring May 20 as Canada's new National Seal Products Day. The Hansard records of the debate on this bill show that Members of Parliament were enthusiastically in favour of recognizing the importance of the seal hunt to sealing communities. In response to the media announcing the news, however, Twitter witnessed tweets like this: "[W]hy not make product from the hides of useless government members that allow this useless, outdated and cruel slaughter" (user @fivo666).

The anti-sealing campaigns have been tremendously successful, culminating with the European Union's ban on the sale of seal products in 2009. This ban has had a significant impact on communities in Canada that had already been affected by decades of resettlement plans and resource extraction. Although in 2015 the European Union granted an exemption to seal products from Nunavut and extended the exemption to the Inuvialuit region in the Northwest Territories, the exemptions have largely been pointless, as the markets for seal products have already all but disappeared in Europe.

The next section turns to specifics of our study of Twitter content around #sealfie between 2014 and 2017, first discussing how we generated data for the study.

Data and methods

Prior to March 25, 2014, #sealfie was scarcely used. After that, increased use made #sealfie a novelty, causing Canadian media to cover the hashtag as "trending" (CBC, 2014). To trace the presence of the hashtag #sealfie on Twitter and the key moments when #sealfie was reported by the media as trending, we generated two data sets. First, we compiled a set of consecutive #sealfie tweets in the three days when the hashtag began to trend. Second, we generated a purposive sample of the most controversial tweets with this hashtag. Looking at Twitter data alone proved to have many limitations, because many key tweets had been removed either by the users or by Twitter (if reported as abusive). Consequently, we decided that the most effective way to understand the hashtag was to use a combination of a small subset of tweets and a purposive sample of what seemed like the most controversial tweets.

The Twitter trending algorithm identifies topics that are popular now, as opposed to longer day-trends in hashtag use. Twitter (n.d.) explains "trends" as follows:

Trends are determined by an algorithm and, by default, are tailored for you based on who you follow, your interests, and your location. This algo-

rithm identifies topics that are popular *now*, rather than topics that have been popular for a while or on a daily basis, to help you discover the hottest *emerging* topics of discussion on Twitter. (para. 3, italics added)

Extending the search beyond Twitter and focusing on a selection of tweets reproduced in other online media, allowed for a qualitative analysis of the most prominent messages associated with the hashtag.

The small subset of tweets is a chronological snapshot of the tweets still available on Twitter that details the origin of #sealfie, beginning with the tweet first associated with the movement. On June 29, 2017, we searched #sealfie on Twitter, through a web browser in incognito mode. The first tweet associated with the #sealfie movement was a March 25, 2014, link to a CBC article posted by @LeilaBeaudoin, NTV reporter from St. John's, Newfoundland. The hashtag had been used before, starting in December of 2012, by users posting pictures of themselves with seals in the background, something that continues to sporadically happen on this Twitter feed. However, the use of the hashtag for political purposes starts with @LeilaBeaudoin's tweet. We selected 100 consecutive tweets (starting with the original @LeilaBeaudoin tweet) that are still available and were posted between March 25 and 27, 2014, ($N = 100$). We analyzed these messages for content, and counted their retweet and "likes." As mentioned, we examined 100 tweets between these dates, omitting all retweets to reduce redundancy, since the retweet count captures the total number of retweets. Out of these tweets, we dismissed six from the analysis: three of these were unrelated to the debate, and three were from spam/bot accounts. The tweets we included in this data set thus total 94 ($n = 94$).

The latter, purposive data set includes a wide range of news coverage of the #sealfie movement on Twitter, including deleted tweets. We collected screenshots of these reproduced tweets and applied discourse analysis to this purposive sample. We also looked through all available tweets associated with the hashtag to ensure our sampling did not omit any other crucial moments in the #sealfie discussion.

Findings

The total number of tweets identified for the first data set ($n = 94$) is a retrospective snapshot of what remains of the publicly available #sealfie tweets. The dates cover the first three days of the increased use of the hashtag on Twitter. Despite the low number of tweets in the sample, Twitter identified the hashtag as historically novel, novelty being a component of Twitter's "trending" algorithm. The number of tweets with #sealfie the year prior (March 24, 2013, to March 24, 2014) was a total of 107. The historical novelty of the hashtag is thus evident (one year: March 24, 2013–March 24, 2014: 107 tweets; three days: March 25, 2014–March 27, 2014: 100 tweets).

In those first 94 tweets the beginning of a movement can be observed, with images and messages demonstrating the Inuit and non-Indigenous use of seal meat and skins. The hashtag began to trend with the March 25, 2014, tweet by @LeilaBeaudoin, the NTV reporter. This tweet read: "Artist uses #Seal fur to create portrait of @TheEllenShow #Sealfie #newfoundland" and linked to a piece about a Newfoundland visual artist, Rodney Mercer, who had produced a portrait of Ellen DeGeneres on sealskin. @LeilaBeaudoin's original tweet garnered a total of 13 retweets and 8 "likes."

@OnThinIce, a project that addresses emergencies and disasters for persons with disabilities in Canada's North, replied to this tweet the same day with "@LeilaBeaudoin #Sealfie is our new favourite #hashtag. Thank you for your cleverness!" What we see in these first tweets are examples of early adopters of #sealfie, as a protest marker against DeGeneres' product placement stunt. After that there was a gradual uptake of the hashtag on March 25, 2014, and then 29 hours after @LeilaBeaudoin's initial tweet, Inuit filmmaker @Alathea_Aggiuq (Alathea Arnaquq-Baril) tweeted her #sealfie, which further boosted the hashtag with 847 retweets and 988 "likes." This tweet launched the #sealfie movement into the "trending" realm, with tweets per day climbing into the hundreds in the days following.

Among the 94 tweets initially analyzed, all tweets were supportive of the human/Indigenous right to hunt seal, and 42 mentioned @TheEllenShow directly in their tweet. Fifty-one of the tweets included a photo, the most popular being a "selfie" with a seal product (boots, clothing). These #sealfies came from outside the Canadian North too; for example, on March 27, 2014, a user from Finland tweeted their support of the #sealfie movement. Later this same day, around 1:55PM EST, #sealfie was trending on Twitter.¹⁰

Although the hashtag was first used by a reporter for a non-Indigenous news source in Newfoundland and used in relation to a non-Indigenous artist, it quickly evolved into a space for dispelling myths not only about Inuit sealing, but also about Inuit life more generally. Moreover, the non-Indigenous origin of the tweets and the hashtag's immediate uptake by Inuit activists, as well as the consequent and continued posting by both Inuit and non-Indigenous activists and supporters, show an interesting political alignment, if not quite an alliance—the creation of an "issue public." These groups of posters do not necessarily join forces on Twitter, as there is no obvious convergence of the discourse taking place. Rather, they coalesce around an issue and peacefully coexist, motivated by the need to dispel myths about sealing, albeit in different historical and geographical contexts.

However, a closer look at the tweets exposes the reductionist nature of Twitter debates, as no real dialogue takes place in relation to #sealfie. Although #sealfie was meant to dispel myths and reveal the sealing communities' perspectives on seal hunting by engaging animal rights activists, the data show that there was little engagement in meaningful conversation. For instance, tweets collected for our purposive sample include a May 15, 2014, tweet by @loridowney3 that contains a meme of the digital feline celebrity Grumpy Cat, with the text "[S]ome people just need a hug ... around their neck ... with a rope." The meme is accompanied by this message: "[N]eed a hug hunters? #sealfie posters? Zookeepers?" This example and others analyzed show little evidence of meaningful engagement. Instead of engaging in conversation, users turn to attacks.

The comments section responding to #sealfie tweets further reveals the backlash that erupted from self-proclaimed animal rights activists. Several tweets were abusive, and many included personal attacks against the users posting "sealfies"—as previously mentioned, most of these have since been reported and removed, although we included them in our purposive sample.

The Tanya Tagaq controversy is perhaps the most startling example of this backlash, making it a key component of our purposive sample. On March 28, 2014, Tagaq

posted the image of her baby next to a seal carcass. The backlash was immediate. Tagaq's "sealfie" has since been deleted by the user. Many replies to Tagaq's tweet were reported as abusive and thus deleted. However, as this was a critical point for #sealfie discussions, screenshots and remnants from the tweet remain online, which we have obtained from news media coverage to include in our purposive sample. We examine this key moment—the one that received the most media coverage—to dig deeper into the #sealfie discussion.

Realizing that some of what follows may be uncomfortable to read, we find it important to demonstrate just how harsh the public discourse around Indigeneity can be. One Twitter user, @PricelessBiach, linked to Tagaq's tweet with this message "Wow ... Pretty SICK 2 take a pic of a baby laying next 2 a bludgeoned baby seal then actually POST it 4 all 2 see." The tweet garnered dozens of replies, including this from @iluvfelines, "This bitch gives Canadian women a bad name!! I find this picture vile and disgusting!! So is the tweeter!!" which prompted @PricelessBiach to reply: "She's absolutely THE most disgusting thing breathing, who doesn't even deserve that privilege, feel bad 4 baby."

Other responses—like this one from @ROCKYC13, "[J]ust when I thought that I've seen it all, a new heartless, mindless, total piece of scum shit comes out of their hole," and, from @Canine_Rights, "[A]nother Inuit tradition we are supposed to be OK with? They are savages plain and simple"—are just a sample of the abuse hurled at Tagaq. This included death threats, calls to have her baby taken from her, and tweets questioning her mental health and ability to be a mother. As the controversy escalated with threats and hate messages hurled at Tagaq, she was forced to eventually remove her original tweet.

While they comprise a minority of the #sealfie tweets and replies, abusive tweets like the ones directed at Tagaq are numerous, although there is no reliable way to give an exact figure. These tweets and replies are supposedly expressing concern for animal rights while positioning themselves as being against "savage" human practices. We by no means suggest that these messages are representative of animal rights discourse, and no formal animal rights organization engaged in such attacks, but the users seem convinced that they are defending animal rights in their tweets. The #sealfie supporters, in contrast, attempt to demonstrate the harsh realities of life in the North, made harsher by the historical and ongoing treatment of Indigenous people by what is now Canada, and assert the Inuit right to maintain traditional cultural practices. While both positions are about rights, the posters seem to be talking past each other. This becomes even more obvious when one ventures beyond #sealfie and finds another hashtag on Twitter, #sealhunt. This hashtag anchors pro-animal rights tweets that push for sealing to end. While in 2016 #sealfie made references to the documentary *Angry Inuk*, users of #sealhunt discussed the 2016 IFAW documentary *Huntwatch* (Backlund, 2016). Neither are talking to the other, with each movement deliberating based on their own source material.

Twitter, thus, offers little opportunity for dialogue. To be sure, #sealfie users have managed to rally an entire movement under this hashtag, a movement that includes Inuit activists and settler supporters of sealing. But the hashtag has failed to change

the conversation with the opponents of sealing. There are instances of earnest attempts to engage the anti-sealing supporters, like the tweet by @LetiaObed on April 20, 2017. The tweet was in response to actor Gillian Anderson's call to the Canadian prime minister to end commercial seal hunts, which stated that "climate change is already decimating ice-dependent seals," in contradiction to the official estimates of seal populations as discussed above. @LetiaObed offered a thoughtful and carefully articulated reflection that included this statement:

There are many people in Canada (native and non-native) who harvest seals and make this a part of their traditional lifestyle and diet ... And we even want to participate in national and international markets and trade this ethical, natural product (meat, skin, oil, etc.). This will allow our currently economically depressed regions in Canada to increase our potential to enhance prosperity ... Encourage and enhance prosperity! End cultural prejudice!

This tweet, however, received no reaction—either from Anderson or anyone else, and had garnered only two retweets by the day we collected a screenshot of it, four weeks later, on May 18, 2017. The tweet has since been removed from @LetiaObed's feed, for reasons unknown to us.

Discussion

The hashtag #sealfie is a site of three notable dynamics. First, the hashtag offers a way for Indigenous activists to organize online and capitalize on what Callison and Hermida (2015) describe as "resonance"—a process that allows for collective identity to emerge as multiple voices converge around an issue, giving rise to an online "issue public" (Dahlberg Grundberg & Lindgren, 2014). The second dynamic, closely linked to resonance, is the strategic alignment of Indigenous and settler sealing communities on Twitter. Although far from enmeshed, these two sets of communities coexist connected by the hashtag, and only occasionally acknowledge each other's presence on Twitter. The challenges experienced by these communities are vastly different, but the threat that animal rights groups present to their practices and livelihoods is the same, producing the ideal conditions for this hashtag to generate an "issue public." The third notable dynamic is where we see the limitations of Twitter, as our study suggests that the nature of tweets can prevent substantial debate from taking place while driving political wedges deeper and failing to challenge the neoliberal order. It is this latter aspect of #sealfie that we focus on in our discussion.

Hawkins and Silver (2017) suggest that "functionalities of Web 2.0" amplified the voices of Inuit communities in the #sealfie case. But the results of that amplification are questionable. The minimal engagement of animal rights activists with the hashtag indicates that the simplified discourse of short social media tweets failed to facilitate meaningful dialogue, with #sealfie generating little more than uptake by those already drawn to the hashtag. These voices were given a platform, but were not heard by those who wield a great deal of power in political discussions of sealing. This finding supports Waller, Dreher, and McCallum's (2015) findings that the mere ability to voice concerns does not imply political influence. Neither Ellen DeGeneres nor the Humane Society of the United States engaged with #sealfie.

Where animal rights activists did engage, they did so as individuals, and not representing the highly organized animal rights groups like the Humane Society of the United States—groups that simply ignored #sealfie, effectively silencing it. The few animal rights activists who did engage did so in a misinformed and anger-fueled manner. Casting sealers as barbarians, the animal rights activists who utilized #sealfie played the role of bigoted, unreasonable trolls who appeared to value animals more than humans. The failure of the broader animal rights community to engage with this hashtag presents a missed opportunity, since leaving the discussion to a handful of activists with extreme views led to the animal rights discourse appearing racist—by default, if not by design. As much as social media can amplify voices from the margins, it can similarly amplify discriminatory positions and stereotypes (Awan, 2014; Dobson & Knezevic, 2018; Lim, 2017; Otenyo, 2017). As Milner (2013) suggests, “[W]hile participatory media can inspire polyvocal engagement with public discourse, they also provide enough customizable information that users can find whatever they want whenever they want it” (p. 2362). These echo chambers, Milner notes, are a result of a boomerang effect, where “the wealth of public discourse on sites like Twitter, reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube might lead users to seek and engage only opinion-confirming content” (p. 2362). Milner describes the rise of 99 percent social media content, which promoted the Occupy Wall Street movement beginning in 2011 and alluded to the notion that 99 percent of the population work to make the top 1 percent richer. Those opposing the movement did not engage with 99 percent social media content, but instead launched “53 percent” social media threads, based on the suggestion that only 53 percent of Americans pay income tax. Instead of debating 99 percent claims, the opponents simply created a parallel discourse that did not require any engagement between opposing opinions. Similarly, #blacklivesmatter—intended to amplify awareness of and discussion about police brutality aimed at racialized minorities in the United States and beyond—saw a reaction in the form of #bluelivesmatter, in support of police forces.

What was strikingly left out of the #sealfie “debate” on Twitter was the wider set of neoliberal policies that continues to both economically marginalize Indigenous as well as rural and remote settler communities, and also cause irreparable damage to wildlife habitat through continued resource exploration and exploitation. Neoliberal policies have a direct impact on animal welfare, with a World Trade Organization panel, for example, ruling that the U.S. could not reject imports of shrimp for using turtle-killing nets (Berger, 1999). Further, some argue that economic interests and promotional culture have appropriated animal rights discourse for a neoliberal agenda, including the promotion of foods such as “free range” eggs and other products that actually come from animals that are still living and suffering in extremely poor conditions (Williams, 2015).

The #sealfie controversy revealed a similar intersection of economic interests, promotional culture, and animal rights discourse, since many celebrities and large corporations align themselves with anti-seal hunt organizations (Lennon, 2010). This gives them the appearance of being environmentally friendly and concerned with the welfare of animals, despite often being complicit in other, much more harmful and

environmentally destructive processes and practices (Bailey, 2007). Chomsky (1989) writes of the “bounds of the expressible” or the spectrums of opinions that are acceptable even when representing “lesser degrees of allegiance to required truths” (p. 48). Put differently, Chomsky suggests that liberal capitalism allows, and even encourages, a range of opinions as long as they do not challenge the premises of the capitalist order. Reminiscent of this, social media in the #sealfie case can reassure us that we live in a society where debate is possible and allowed, but such debates are limited to discussions that do not challenge the fundamental social and economic order. On this point Kahn and Kellner (2004) deserve to be quoted at length:

[T]he new information and communication technologies are indeed revolutionary. To a meaningful extent, they constitute a dramatic transformation of everyday life that is presently being constructed and enacted by internet subcultures. Yet, this transformation has often been a revolution that also promotes and disseminates the capitalist consumer society, individualism and competition ... (p. 93)

The dispute between advocates of sealers’ rights, Indigenous rights, and animal rights is an important ethical debate, but the discourse on Twitter has nonetheless missed the core of the problem, which has to do with how neoliberal policies and practices continue to marginalize Indigenous communities, rural and remote settler communities, and non-human animals—for the benefit of economic capital. The failure of animal rights activists to firmly challenge neoliberal policies and practices and instead focus on a relatively small number of commercial sealers (fewer than 10,000 licences and only about 1,000 “active” sealers in 2016; see Lafrance, 2017) has made them vulnerable to critics who question their intentions. The polarizing politics of sealing thus end up serving as a sleight of hand in the service of neoliberalism. Sealers and animal rights activists are pitted against each other, expending energy on fighting each other’s position, but this also places the much bigger threat of neoliberal practices into the background. The hashtag #sealfie, while undeniably providing space for online mobilization, remains limited in its ability to challenge the greatest threats to sealing communities and particularly Indigenous communities—that of continued human and environmental exploitation.

Conclusion

The #sealfie controversy sheds a critical light on the ability of social media to facilitate sound political debate. This case shows that the oversimplified discourse cultivated in social media can detract activist groups from the systemic challenges. This is not a normative observation—it simply highlights that in this particular case, the fundamental concerns with neoliberal policies and resource development were dropped from the discussion, as the participants in this debate mostly ignored the larger, systemic challenges they face.

Although #sealfie itself generated opportunity, in that it has provided a platform that allows defenders of sealing to come together, it is difficult to assess whether it has had much impact beyond that. Clearly, no deliberative dialogue (see Mitchell & Lim, 2018) took place where opposing views could be discussed, mutually understood, or

reconciled. Indirectly, however, it is possible that legacy media's coverage of #sealfie has helped to raise awareness of the issues surrounding sealing in Canada. The legacy media content considered in this study seemed for the most part sympathetic of #sealfie and especially of Tagaq, but backing up this observation would require a more systematic examination of the media coverage than what we were able to do in this project.

Moreover, it remains to be seen whether any increase in awareness resulting from #sealfie can also lead to political and policy change. As a spontaneous, grass-roots activity, #sealfie may not have much influence in the long run, especially when up against sustained and deliberate organizational infrastructure afforded to social media presence of such entities as the Humane Society of the United States and Ellen DeGeneres.

A deeper interpretation of #sealfie would require us to delve more deliberately into Indigenous-settler relations, histories of colonialism (and its spawn, neoliberalism), environmental justice and environmental racism, and animal rights discourse, as well as the neoliberalization of the broader environmental movement. This is much more than can be accomplished in a single article. However, the case we present here speaks to all of those issues in very practical terms. The ultimate tension here is not so much about human versus animal rights. Instead, it is between the voices of activists whose lifestyles have not been affected by the European Union's seal product ban, and the voices of those who have already lost much after the ban and stand to lose even more with the shrinking fur markets. Obscuring this neoliberal economic reality in online discussions may constitute Twitter's greatest shortcoming.

Notes

1. The terms "seal hunt," "seal hunts," and "sealing" are used interchangeably in discussions of the practice. We use the terms interchangeably here as well.
2. To "trend" on Twitter refers to a hashtag-driven topic that suddenly surges in popularity; see below for more detail.
3. Launched in 2012, Idle No More (2018) is an Indigenous movement in Canada that aims to strengthen Indigenous sovereignty and pressure the Canadian government to respect treaties. See <http://www.idlenomore.ca>.
4. The tweet generated a total of \$3 million (\$1 for every retweet), and Samsung donated the other half of that total to St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.
5. The term "settler" is commonly used to describe those who live in Canada but are not Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, or Metis). This includes both descendants of colonial settlers and more recent immigrants to Canada.
6. Today's human rights documents have many historical precedents, from the Magna Carta in 1215 to the English Bill of Rights in 1689, France's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, and the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights in 1791. These are often presented as the precursors to many of today's human rights documents. However, most of these documents, when implemented, resulted in policy that excluded women, persons of colour, and a range of social, religious, economic, and political groups. In 1919, the International Labour Organization was established as an agency of the UN to oversee treaties protecting the health and safety of workers (Nickel, Pogge, Smith, & Wenar, 2013), starting a move toward more inclusive rights policies.
7. We use the terms "neoliberal" and "neoliberalism" to describe the wide set of practices and policies that have been advanced in recent decades, particularly since the 1980s Reagan-Thatcher era, and even

more so since the 1990s introduction of the World Trade Organization and related multilateral trade agreements. Harvey (2007) has defined neoliberalism as:

[A] theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (p. 2)

8. *Social licence* has in recent years been used to refer to efforts by governments and corporations to align practices and policies with public opinion. It also refers to public relations practices used to appease the public by creating the impression of such alignment (see Demuijnck & Easterling, 2016).

9. Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans is also considering a grey seal cull, though so far no plans have been made to implement one. The reason for such a cull is the ongoing work to recover Atlantic cod stocks, which collapsed in the 1980s. According to Fisheries and Oceans Canada (2016c), "While much research remains to be done, the lack of cod recovery in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence appears to be due to high mortality among larger cod. Predation by grey seals may account for up to 50 percent of this natural mortality, making them a major factor limiting the recovery of this cod stock" (para. 2).

10. Confirmed by @LeilaBeaudoin's tweet: "Pumped to see my #Sealfie hashtag is trending. Exciting. Show your fur people! #sealhunt." Dated 03/27/2014 2:55PM EST.

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