

Article

## Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism: A Framing Analysis of Canada's #Idlenomore Movement

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### Abstract

The confluence of activism and social media—legitimized by efforts such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Movements—represents a growing area of mainstream media focus. Using Canada's #IdleNoMore movement as a case, this study uses framing theory to better understand how traditional media are representing activism borne of social media such as Twitter, and how such activism can ultimately have an impact in political and public policy debates. A qualitative framing analysis is used to identify frames present in media reporting of #IdleNoMore during its first two months by two prominent Canadian publications. Emergent frames show that hashtag activism as a catalyst for a social movement was embraced as a theme by one of the publications, therefore helping to legitimize the role of social media tools such as Twitter. In other frames, both positive and negative depictions of the social movement helped to identify for mainstream audiences both historical grievances and future challenges and opportunities for Canada's First Nations communities.

### Keywords

media framing; online activism; social media

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

For advocates of digital media as a vehicle for more inclusive public discourse around society's most pressing issues, the growing popularity of social media tools gives reason for hope. While many websites and email campaigns already advocate on behalf of social movements, global activists are being implored to expand their usage of online communication in order to enhance their two-way communication with publics (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). This advent of social media in the Web 2.0 era, including such well-known social networking platforms as Twitter and Facebook, arguably has had the effect of democratizing communication between organizations and stakeholders (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Indeed, the theme of a more democratic form of media runs through both academic and popular accounts of Twitter's rise among activists. A growing segment of social me-

dia usage on Twitter includes individuals advocating for humanitarian causes, environmental problems, or political and economic debates (Beirut, 2009). Hashtag activism, a term that entered the public consciousness when *New York Times* media columnist David Carr (2012) wrote of the phenomenon, gives communicators an ability to streamline their messaging on the micro-blogging social networking platform. The hashtag, a function of Twitter that allows users to cluster their tweets around a single issue or focus, has garnered growing media interest in the wake of well-publicized efforts stemming from the Arab Spring and Occupy movements.

More recently, an example of hashtag activism that has captured, if not the imagination, at least the attention of media, politicians, and the public is that of #IdleNoMore, an activist movement that launched in Canada in November 2012. Tanyo Kappo, an Indigenous activist and law student from the University of

Manitoba, had organized a teach-in in Edmonton, Alberta, to inform the public how a Canadian government bill would negatively impact the country's First Nations (Aboriginal) peoples. In the days since that first usage of the #IdleNoMore hashtag, the movement has become a rallying cry for all of Canada's First Nations peoples and has spread to the United States and internationally to signify the concerns of Aboriginal peoples (Carleton, 2012).

Twitter users used the hashtag to link to media stories about Aboriginal and related issues and engender commentary; it invited individuals to flash mobs, protest events, educational seminars, and other gatherings. It supported activists and community leaders. It also quickly caught the attention of domestic and international media. The National Public Radio program *All Things Considered* (2013, para. 3) dubbed it "a grass-roots indigenous movement...shaking up politics in Canada. Like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, it spread quickly through social media." While the movement came to be characterized as "an eruption of updates and reporting over social media sites" (Ornelas, 2014, p. 5), it also ushered in a new wave of traditional media articles focused on First Nations and Aboriginal issues—particularly in Canada, where the impact of the movement was initially focused and certainly most pronounced.

This study seeks to understand how hashtag activism and online-based social movements impact the reporting of social and environmental issues by the traditional media. Using the #IdleNoMore movement as a case study, it examines how hashtag activists may be reframing debates about public and economic policy in the media in order to change public perceptions and add social and historical context to social and environmental issues. Understanding this trajectory is important as the usage of online activism continues to grow and as the traditional press grapples with social media's role in the public sphere. This study uses media framing to understand what aspects of the #IdleNoMore movement were made most salient. Within political and social movement communication, media framing has been shown to shape environments favorable or hostile to certain forms of public policy or debate. Identifying the saliency of different dimensions of #IdleNoMore provides insight into how the movement influenced broader debates about Aboriginal rights and living conditions in Canada, themselves having an impact on future public policy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Online Mediation of Activism and Social Movements

The interplay of protest movements both online and off factors into much online activism literature. In their

examination of democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory, Carroll and Hackett (2005) maintain that actions such as Internet activism, culture jamming, and media monitoring have transformed the strategy of traditional protest movements, making them more reflexive. At the same time, Valenzuela (2013) finds that in order to effect changes in society, social movements need to bridge the gap between online and offline environments and ultimately facilitate offline forms of citizen participation. Such convergence of digital and offline activism has been credited as one of the key reasons for the success of the 2010 Tunisian uprisings (Lim, 2013).

While some skeptics of social media's confluence with protest movements dwell upon the disparaging concepts of "armchair activism" or "slacktivism," social media assist movements in empowering individuals to carry out activist tasks that were once carried out by centralized organizations (Kessler, 2012, p. 213). Research on the communication practices of social movements both challenges structural views that conceive of alternative media as separate from the broader media field and also shows that communication is becoming more important for contemporary movements (Della Porta, 2013). This assertion complements the perspective that all social movement actions, including strategizing, lobbying, mobilizing, and protesting, involve forms of both online and offline communication (Ryan, Jeffreys, Elowitz, & Ryczek, 2013). In part this positions the social movement as a network that emphasizes diversity of membership, while affording agency for actors assigned to different roles. A social movement's online network emphasizes the mobilization of resources locally, for example, while developing a media narrative at a national level (Conover et al., 2013).

Through online social media, social movement actors have a new means to disseminate self-representations that are not subjected to mass media filters (Uldum & Askanias, 2013). In turn, activists are able to break through preconceived notions or agendas that might provide greater resistance in traditional media spaces. Studies of online civic participation, dovetailing with the notion of activists reaching out to wider publics in online blogs and forums, show that these non-political spaces allow individuals to more fully engage in political activity (Van Zoonen, Vis, & Mihelj, 2010).

An examination of the Popular Association of the Oaxacan Peoples and the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles draws from the concept of transmedia mobilization, itself a combination of transmedia storytelling on different media platforms (Jenkins, 2003) and network communication theories derived from social movement studies. Such an approach allows for the circulation of ideas and frames across platforms while creating a shared social movement identity, requiring collaboration and co-creation across the movement

(Costanza-Chock, 2013). Additionally, new media technologies—upheld as “democratic, high-quality, horizontal communication”—have made more permeable the divide between media producers and audiences, in great part due to the reduced financial and skills-based barriers to accessing them (Della Porta, 2013). Using the example of video-sharing website YouTube, social media emerges as a means to widening the scope of audience but also reinforcing political commitment within a movement (Uldum & Askaniyas, 2013). Along with YouTube, the social networking platform of Twitter has emerged as an increasingly prominent venue for studies of online activism.

### 3. The Role of Twitter as a Platform for Influence and Protest

To some outside the medium, Twitter remains a communication curiosity. Its potential as a medium for virality is not always immediately apparent. Many messages—especially those coming from users with few followers or high privacy settings—will never reach audiences of more than a dozen people. What gives communication on Twitter potential leverage for wider distribution are the tools allowing users to cluster, re-broadcast, modify, or reply to ongoing messages and conversations. At real-time events involving advocacy or protest, live tweeting can serve multiple purposes, not only providing on-the-ground perspectives or directives, but also delivering key information to a broader public, garnering newfound publicity by reaching other media, or attracting attention from local governmental authorities (Penney & Dadas, 2014) in positive or negative ways. Twitter’s ability to foster ongoing dialogue and conversation positions it perfectly for digital activism:

“The promise for these huge processes of networked action directed towards mutual understanding cannot be dismissed lightly. This particular platform, as one instance among many, is built on a set of computer protocols that foreground interaction, enabling a greatly expanded reach for critique and organization among interlocutors.” (Hands, 2011, p. 18)

One of Twitter’s more distinct advantages is its ability to leverage audience interest to amplify messaging. Retweeting, for example, allows a movement’s members not present at an event or rally to still participate in the distribution of information and thus the shaping of public opinion (Penny & Dadas, 2014). Twitter offers no guarantee of successful message distribution in terms of amplification or even accuracy, however. Accounts of hashtags being hijacked by interests outside the original purpose—whether for consumer products or social movements—have been fairly common. Even the supporters of a hashtag can undermine its goals. Poell and Borra’s (2012) examination of social media ac-

counts of the 2010 G20 Summit protests in Toronto showed that the hashtag #G20report became overwhelmed with accounts of police activity—at the expense of communicative demonstrations for issues such as “Native Land Rights,” “Queer Liberation,” and the “Environment.” At the same time, while social media use has emerged as a significant and important tool for certain types of activism, its impact varies from one form of protest (such as street protests, traditional media outreach, or e-petitions) to another (Valenzuela, 2013).

### 4. Hashtags as an Approach to Informing and Educating Publics

More organizations have discovered social media—and Twitter specifically—to be a powerful device for public education approaches. Hashtags as a tool play a prominent role in the stages of reaching out to people, building and deepening emergent ties, and mobilizing supporters (Guo & Saxton, 2014). In politics, informing is the primary function of a hashtag (Small, 2011) as contributors scour the Internet for pertinent and timely information and disseminate their findings with an appropriate tag. More so than a tweet by itself, the existence of a hashtagged message via Twitter actively invites audience attention by setting parameters for the embedded discourse (Brock, 2012). The messages adjoined to such hashtags may invoke context, histories, emotions, or calls to action. Furthermore, and perhaps at odds with the reputation of social media “slacktivism” sometimes promoted in traditional media venues, some researchers report that hashtagged tweets strengthen bonds between networked users on Twitter, regardless of cultural affiliation (Brock, 2012).

The reporting of protest and dissent is another area where a divergence between traditional media and hashtagged Twitter communication has been identified. A content analysis of social media activity during the Egyptian Revolution, marked by the hashtags of #egypt and #jan25, shows that while established media stuck to official sources and emphasized the spectacle of the event, Twitter feeds and blogs provided more legitimacy to the protesters and more opportunities to their readers for interactivity and understanding (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). This raises the question of whether traditional media are susceptible to influence by online social networks and the movements they help spawn. Previous research has shown that evidence of a movement’s legitimacy and the active support it has received is enough to sway public opinion and awareness over time (Kowalchuk, 2009), which can alter both the quantity and quality of mainstream press coverage (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001).

Retweets, hashtagged or not, can empower the diffusion of information and help it spread well beyond the reach of the original tweet’s followership, which raises the question of whether Twitter is itself a social

network or a form of news media (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). This also invokes the issue of how traditional media report on protest movements borne of, or fueled by, Twitter's mix of social network diffusion and potential mass audience reach.

## 5. Framing and the Shifting Grounds of Media Coverage

The framing of public policy debates by traditional media has enjoyed significant attention over the past two decades. Entman (2007) suggests that media interventions in the everyday contests to control government strategy within mainstream politics help to set the boundaries for public debate. In a news text, the frame represents an imprint of power, calling to attention some aspects of reality while obscuring others (Entman, 1993). The media's role becomes one of selection and salience, directing attention to how communicated text exerts its power:

"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." (Entman, p. 51)

For example, U.S. President George Bush's description of his government's post September 11, 2001 policy as a "war on terror"—while highly contested at the time—was an effective framing choice that influenced most media coverage and debate in spite of some outliers in the press (Entman, 2003). More recently, media framing has been shown to shape environments favorable or hostile to certain forms of public policy. An examination of the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts by the Bush White House Administration reveals that the media's framing of such cuts in relation to economic growth—as opposed to individual economic interests—diminished citizens' ability to understand the new policy (Bell & Entman, 2011).

In summation, the ability of hashtags within Twitter to diffuse and amplify information and ideas across social media has afforded activists and advocates of various movements new media outreach opportunities. The growing legitimacy of such movements invites more scrutiny of portrayals of these online causes by traditional media, and in particular the media framing of such movements. Using the case study of #IdleNoMore, this study establishes how media framed an activist campaign borne of social media, as well as the differences of such frames between media outlets, by asking three research questions:

RQ 1. How did the national media frame the #IdleNoMore movement?

RQ 2. How did hashtag activism factor into the framing, if at all?

RQ 3. What aspects of the movement did the media make more salient, and what were the political consequences?

## 6. Method

### 6.1. Framing Analysis

To answer the research questions, this study uses a qualitative framing analysis to examine traditional media articles about #IdleNoMore that appeared in the first two months of the movement. Analyzing media texts can highlight information that is more or less salient by placement or repetition—illuminating how influence of human consciousness is exerted by the transfer of information (Entman, 1993). Devices such as word choice, metaphors, exemplars, descriptions, arguments, and visual images (Gamson & Lasch, 1983) help establish media frames. Entman (1993) notes that "even a single unillustrated appearance of a notion in an obscure part of the text can be highly salient, if it comports with the existing schemata in a receiver's belief systems." To this end, a technique such as counting, while helpful, is not a primary driver of the qualitative framing analysis (Altheide, 1996). The collapsing of media texts and discourses into containers based on size or frequency might obscure embedded meanings, while a qualitative approach allows for analysis of ambiguity, historical contingency, and an emphasis on meaning making (Reese, 2001, p. 8). Such an approach, then, is well-suited to fulfilling a key objective of framing as posited by Entman (1993): the yielding of data that effectively represent the media messages being picked up by most audience members.

### 7. Media Selection

Because #IdleNoMore started in Canada and within days became a coast-to-coast event in terms of on-the-ground activity and media coverage, I examined articles about the movement from two Canadian national media outlets—The *Globe and Mail* newspaper and *Maclean's* magazine. The Toronto, Ontario-based *Globe and Mail* is Canada's top circulated national newspaper, with a weekly (six day) readership of 2.5 million. *Maclean's* is Canada's weekly current affairs magazine, with a readership of 2.4 million. Like the *Globe and Mail*, it is based in Toronto.

### 8. Sampling and Data Collection

To collect the media coverage for analysis, I used the LexisNexis database and the *Maclean's* magazine website archive employing the search terms "#IdleNoMo-

re” as well as “Idle No More” to account for different spelling variations of the movement. I examined the months of December 2012 and January 2013—the period marking the critical first six weeks of #IdleNoMore. From December 19 to January 31, the *Globe and Mail* published 33 articles about the movement in its newspaper and on its website. During the same timeframe, *Maclean’s Magazine* published 54 articles about the movement in print and online. The articles analyzed from the *Globe and Mail* and *Maclean’s* were published between the start of the movement and during a number of key events during December 2012 through the end of January 2013. These included marches, blockades, a hunger-strike, and high-level meetings involving the federal government.

In the case of both publications, I removed articles where #IdleNoMore was mentioned in passing or was not central to the article or report (for example, if included as part of a broader story about government economic or environmental policies). In order to gauge framing by the media institutions themselves, I also removed articles provided by wire services (such as the Associated Press or Canadian Press). Using these criteria, I was left with a total of 51 news articles. From this number, I selected the most information- and text-rich articles—12 from the *Globe and Mail*, 13 from *Maclean’s*—for the analysis.

## 9. Coding and Analysis

To determine how the media framed the movement, I read over the articles several times to identify frames using Entman’s framing definition. I recorded notes for article focus, theme, language use, tone, sources, and differences or similarities in the coverage between the *Globe and Mail* and *Maclean’s*. Catchphrases, terms, and metaphors were recorded to identify whether their usage was suggestive of a particular frame. Finally, notes and findings were categorized to assess what frames were ultimately present.

## 10. Results

Collectively, the articles created frames of this movement representing competing but also coalescing perspectives and agendas. The frames that emerged for both publications will be briefly described. The results from each media outlet are presented separately to account for the differences in editorial approaches.

### 10.1. *Globe and Mail*

#### 10.1.1. Technology/Social Media as Benchmark of a Protest Movement

This frame suggested Twitter and social media were positive drivers of the offline movement activities,

ushering in a new era for social movements in Canada and a digital foundation for cross-country and global growth. Analysis of hashtag and other social media metrics were provided to help assess the progress of the movement. The newspaper’s “analysis of the hashtag” on January 1, for example, included tweets per day from the previous week, mentions by gender, percentage of tweets that were favorable, and a comparison of social media mentions between Twitter and Facebook. Digital communication specialists provided further context and commentary. For example, one analyst explained that a Twitter-wide slowdown on Christmas Day softened #IdleNoMore’s otherwise strong Internet foothold during this time period. Describing the week’s previous data that included 12,000 mentions on Facebook and 144,000 mentions on Twitter, the publication declared that “Idle No More had found a strong foothold on the Internet.” A later report compared the number of #IdleNoMore-tagged tweets with major offline events happening at the same time. The article showed the movement enjoyed 19,858 tweets on the same day it staged a peaceful demonstration at the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta; and 23,304 tweets on a day that saw protests both along the Trans-Canada Highway in Nova Scotia and along an oilsands highway near Fort McMurray, Alberta. As the movement neared the end of its second month, however, a social media analyst suggested the movement couldn’t keep growing at its current pace: “The rate of growth of the movement has stalled, there’s no fresh blood.”

#### 10.1.2. Changing Demographics: Gender and Youth

This frame suggested that educated women and young people are enjoying a newfound voice within Aboriginal communities and in Canadian politics as well. This was presented as revolutionary and sometimes at odds with the traditional leadership pattern within First Nations bands. “Young, university-educated women” were responsible for the majority of messaging for #IdleNoMore on Twitter and indeed founded the movement. A January 25 analysis described the fact that the majority of tweets were coming from women as “an extremely unusual finding” in light of online political discussions of being dominated by males. Women are described as being “part of a new political class that has emerged as an alternative to the traditional First Nations leadership—the chief and band council system—which is often described as male dominated.” Although Canada’s population is aging, demographics in Aboriginal communities skew younger. The median age of Aboriginal Canadian was pegged at 27, compared to 40 for non-Aboriginal Canadians. To this end, the elevation of demographics as a frame helped highlight the changing relationship dynamics between First Nations and the general population but also forecasted changes within First Nations communities. The “explo-

sion of native activism” was attributed to “a very young population, rising levels of income and education and a community that has suffered decades of injustice.” Not all analysts agreed with the notion that young people were the driving force of #IdleNoMore, however. At least one recognized “there is a perception that Idle No More is being driven by youth, but that is only because they are the ones most adept at using their computers to share their anger and organize these types of events. But it is supported by First Nations members of all ages.”

### 10.1.3. Canadian Geography and Constitution

This frame showed the #IdleNoMore movement within the lens of Canadian confederation and unity. The protests and debates were presented as a truly coast-to-coast phenomenon that involved communities, businesses, and other stakeholders across the country and that also had implications for, and indeed challenged, the nation’s constitution. “Aboriginal leaders want the federal government to lead provinces and territories toward changes that would provide a share of resource revenues to their communities to finance social and economic development” reported the *Globe* on January 17. Federal politicians countered that “Ottawa will work with the provinces and industry to ensure aboriginal Canadians benefit fully from the looming opportunities offered by Canada’s resource boom.” Meetings and discussions between Canada’s Prime Minister and First Nations leaders were highlighted and often encouraged. A January 29 article reported that “demonstrators affiliated with the grassroots movement...rallied on the snowy plaza outside Parliament’s Centre Block on Monday, the first day politicians returned to Ottawa following a Christmas break in which the outcry of first nations dominated the news.” While this pan-Canadian perspective often homed in on cross-country civil disobedience, it also noted involvement and support of everyday Canadians. Still, a January 25 editorial argued that “Canadians are not blind to the troubling conditions on some native reserves, and to the plight of native peoples in urban areas, but they do not believe it is entirely the fault of the federal government. They know that Ottawa funds first nations to the tune of billions of dollars annually and, to a degree, lets those communities manage the money.”

### 10.1.4. #IdleNoMore as a Long-Term Movement in Canada

The *Globe and Mail* presented numerous instances of demands unmet among First Nations peoples in Canada as a precursor and potential justification for further growth and spread of the #IdleNoMore movement—as opposed to a movement that would run out of energy or spirit in the short term. Such long-term implicati-

ons—“a revolution of rising expectations”—served as a warning to Canadian politicians and the general public that the protests and unrest needed to be taken seriously. “With the rise of the Idle No More movement, a different side of native Canada has marched into view—determined, not passive; insistent, not patient” argued a January 16 editorial. A commentary written by a conservative strategist and campaign manager, focused on the wider implications of the debate sparked by Idle No More, argued that the movement’s “indigenist ideology” represented “a direct challenge to the existence of Canada as a state. Canada is not going to last long if it really contains more than 600 sovereign Indian bands, now known as first nations, plus the Metis, plus whatever the courts eventually determine non-status Indians to be.” That #IdleNoMore was unique to Canadian politics was highlighted by another report, which noted that “IdleNoMore is only going to get bigger...It has seen sustained activity for weeks—it’s unusual for any topic in Canadian politics to maintain this momentum.”

## 10.2. Maclean’s

### 10.2.1. Fear of Escalation and Confrontation

This frame highlighted the polarization between the Canadian government, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and the country’s First Nations, leading to the latter’s “mobilizing across the country” and “anti-Harper vitriol.” Reaching peaceful resolutions seems far-fetched in the face of “radicalism, road blockades and hunger strikes.” Such hostility was adjoined by descriptions of political ineptitude and public confusion to create a picture of inevitable conflict. A January 15 article reported that Ontario’s police commissioner was forced to respond on YouTube to “criticism of what some perceive as a failure to end rail blockades and other protest disruptions,” this after court injunctions to end First Nations blockades. The head of Ontario’s police force trumpeted “public safety” and “the fact that there haven’t been any reports of injuries to protesters, police or members of the public at the protests in the (Ontario) jurisdiction.” Meanwhile, reports also described several hundred protesters blocking traffic to the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Windsor, Ontario to the U.S. city of Detroit; and 60 protesters taking over a parking lot in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

### 10.2.2. Jobs and the Economy

The framing of the movement as primarily an economic issue was highlighted by one pundit’s use of the term “casinos and pipelines” and regular allusions to the country’s energy industry in particular. Canada’s bountiful natural resources and prosperous economy were juxtaposed against demands for land or royalties, bloc-

kades of transportation infrastructure, and “an underutilized labor pool” in First Nations communities. Job growth for First Nations was contrasted by private sector leaders lamenting a loss of jobs for companies impacted by blockades. With the Canadian National Railway, the Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Sarnia, Ontario is described as having found “a big and easy target in their backyard...leading in and out of one of Canada’s largest industrial complexes, Sarnia’s Chemical Valley.” Companies associated with the complex, such as Nova Chemicals, slowed production, while the Canadian Propane Association warned of gas shortages. In addition to Sarnia, *Maclean’s* pointed out rail disruptions in Manitoba, eastern Quebec, and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Meanwhile, another report warned of “blockades and demonstrations against pipelines and mining developments in hot spots across the country.” While First Nations were seen as a disruption to the economy in the short term because of political action, they were positioned as a panacea to the country’s long term economic goals. A politics and policy commentator for the magazine argued that the way for the Prime Minister to “offer new hope to impoverished reserves is to link their fortunes to natural resource developments. Instead of seeing First Nations’ grievances in sweeping historical and constitutional terms...frame the problem as an underutilized labor pool that could be matched with an expanding economic sector.”

### 10.2.3. Colonial History

The notion of British monarchy intervening in negotiations between Canada’s government and First Nations as a frame invoked the classic symbolism from Canada’s colonial past: Buckingham Palace, The Queen’s representative in Canada (the Governor-General), and Queen Elizabeth II herself. This highlighted not only historic grievances between First Nations and the British Empire before the establishment of Canada, as well as the continued importance of centuries-old treaties, but also potential cracks within Canada’s current constitution, which potentially validate the involvement of another country such as the United Kingdom. Such history also reinforced longstanding First Nations grievances. The magazine described Aboriginal leaders at a hunger strike as having “lashed out at the media and a long Canadian history of disrespect towards First Nations people.” One *Maclean’s* commentator noted that First Nations’ “preferred solutions—a fundamental rethink of Canada’s treaty obligations, a royal commission, an intervention from the Queen—are not on offer.” This assertion was backed by another report that many First Nations leaders wanted to boycott talks with the Prime Minister since he would not agree to include Canada’s Governor-General (the Queen’s representative) in discussions. A reminder of Britain’s role in the saga came in mid-January, as the magazine described “100 peaceful pro-

testers gathered outside the British Consulate...to remind the government to honor the treaties signed between the Crown and Canada’s Indian nations.”

### 10.2.4. Cause Celebre

The cause celebre frame showed how the #IdleNoMore movement had extended beyond the traditional forums of public debate to venues where politics and public policy—particularly around Aboriginal affairs—are traditionally not paramount, and where there is interest by the general public at a more casual level. A humorist conveyed frustration with the inconvenience of blockades, while one pundit described how “shopping-mall drum circles” disrupted the Prime Minister’s agenda. Another noted friendly visits by a Hollywood celebrity to one of the protest sites. Meanwhile, commentators took umbrage with Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence’s well-publicized hunger strike, with one arguing that a diet of fish broth, tea, and vitamins was hardly a hunger strike at all. A humorist with the publication chimed in that “fish broth is food! Although, if we’re debating the calorie count of fish water, we have perhaps strayed some distance from the larger point.” While all of this had the effect of packaging the movement as tabloid fare, it importantly established accessible entry points to the issue for readers normally averse to coverage of weighty political, economic, or social matters.

## 11. Discussion

The *Globe and Mail*, as a newspaper of record in Canada, provided frames that contributed to a better understanding of the social and technological forces that gave rise to the movement. At the same time, the newspaper lived up to its coast-to-coast mandate with a treatment of the movement as a truly national phenomenon—including its implications and challenges to the country’s existing constitution. By providing updated social media metrics of the movement through the first several weeks of the movement, the *Globe* helped validate social media as legitimate grounds for advocacy and debate. The regular representations of the movement in locales across the country, as well as highlighting the importance of educated women and young people to the movement, helped position First Nations as an integral aspect of Canadian Confederation in the years to come. This is accentuated by the frame depicting this movement as a longer-term phenomenon, hardly the flash-in-the-pan movement that some protests or movements are labeled as by media pundits.

*Maclean’s*, as a current events magazine, provided news and commentary of the movement that was more provocative and showed greater polarity—at various levels between protesters, government, industry, and the general public. Part of this can be attributed to

*Maclean's* existence as a current affairs weekly magazine and its greater usage of opinion articles and even humor-driven commentary. By invoking the British monarchy and First Nations historic treaties with British settlers, it provided entertaining symbolism of Buckingham Palace and the Queen, while raising important issues about historic grievances dating back centuries that have yet to be rectified. More irreverent coverage of the movement—including humor, celebrity mentions, and references to protests in superficial contexts—is more polarizing but also increased accessibility to casual readers. A future study might examine whether this “cause celebre” frame actually helped increase total media coverage of the movement. It may have also helped balance a darker and more serious frame invoking fear—fear of blockades, violence, and further escalation of the movement. The economic frame, importantly, recognized the financial stakes of this movement but also the longer-term jobs and business implications—for the government, for the general public, and specifically for First Nations. Notably, references to natural resources extraction and Canada's unmet labor demands that Aboriginal peoples might eventually fill helped place First Nations in the context of the future economic prosperity of the country.

Both publications developed frames that played off their mandates and leveraged their respective media strengths. As a Canadian daily newspaper, the *Globe and Mail's* holistic framing was more sober in its approach, taking care to address #IdleNoMore in the context of federalist politics and the modern Canadian state. That it focused on social media communication, transformed Aboriginal demographics, and inevitable growth of the movement speaks to its role in mediating a daily discourse across the country's regions and populations. *Maclean's*, as a weekly magazine, considered the movement in a broader and sometimes more controversial approach, with editorial content that strived to be predictive, provocative, and even amusing. It did not provide the #IdleNoMore hashtag activism with the same legitimacy afforded by the *Globe and Mail*. Rather, the online origins of the movement were either treated by *Maclean's* as background noise or a kind of “slacktivism” that precluded the rise of the aforementioned “shopping mall drum circles” and celebrity supporters. While critics of such an approach would argue that it serves to distract audiences and sensationalize the bigger picture, some of *Maclean's* frames had the effect of moving peripheral but ultimately relevant issues—such as First Nations' relationships with monarchy or with mainstream Canada—to the political fore. Even *Maclean's* biting commentaries—which disparaged some of the tactics of the protesters—saved some of their harshest words for the Canadian government's treatment of First Nations and the “atrocious living conditions” on reserves. At the same time, neither the social media origins and metrics

of the movement, nor the transforming demographics, received the same kind of attention in *Maclean's* as they did in the *Globe and Mail*.

The emergent frames from both publications ensured that the #IdleNoMore movement would have immediate and longer-term political consequences in Canada. By invoking history, economy, and Canadian nationhood, the publications ensured that non-Aboriginal Canadians would be aware of the scale of this movement and the depth of its support. This was reinforced by the *Globe's* social media metrics, which regularly showed large numbers of tweets, retweets, and other forms of digital network support. *Maclean's* “cause celebre” frame went so far as to bring awareness of #IdleNoMore to those who are normally averse to political or business news in favor of lighter entertainment fare.

The media framing of the movement echoes Entman's assertion that media interventions help to set boundaries for public policy debates. In the case of #IdleNoMore, certain themes—such as demographics, economy, and the role of social media—were made more salient, underscoring the high stakes of the movement for the future of Canada and its First Nations communities. Other frames projected, while also a result of selection and salience, served to reinforce skepticisms of social media activism as mere “slacktivism,” or to even serve as comic fodder. Ironically, *Maclean's* stories connecting the movement to British monarchy provided one of the few mainstream venues for articulating a post-colonialism in Canada that is marked by social inequality and historic grievances. A frame featuring celebrity drop-ins and shopping mall activism may have brought perceptions of the movement closer to the “slacktivism” envisioned by critics, but it also provided a connection to the movement for otherwise disengaged or apolitical Canadians. To these ends, media frames emanating from hashtag activism not only set new boundaries for public policy debates, but also reconfigured the composition of media audiences of First Nations activism, and the histories through which Canada's Indigenous communities are understood.

This study ultimately focused on one case, #IdleNoMore, and therefore does not yield generalizable results. It does provide a specific example of how portrayals of social movements—particularly those with fast-moving events fueled by social media—are susceptible to different kinds of framing. While these frames often serve the purpose of a media outlet's mandate—to report, to mediate, to debate, to entertain, or to take a political or economic position—they can also leverage the efforts of activists by providing history and context while widening perspectives.

#### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.



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