Water protectors 'behind the screen'. Digital activism practices within the #nodapl movement

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Abstract ITA

Oggetto di questo articolo sono i processi di partecipazione globale e di ascolto politico innescati dal movimento #NoDAPL in contrasto alla realizzazione della Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). L'attenzione è segnatamente rivolta verso istanze di *hashtag activism*, un fenomeno che ha esercitato un ruolo determinante nella mediatizzazione delle rivendicazioni territoriali indigene nel corso delle proteste. Adottando l'hashtag #NoDAPL come specifica chiave di lettura, l'obiettivo è quello di esaminare le modalità attraverso cui gli attivisti di Standing Rock (*Water Protectors*) hanno riformulato, nel vasto e composito panorama della rete, il dibattito sulla persistenza locale di politiche coloniali percepite come potenzialmente catastrofiche per la sostenibilità sociale e ambientale globale. Hashtag come #NoDAPL e #WaterIsLife hanno catalizzato l'attenzione dei *mass media*, della politica e del più ampio pubblico su tali tematiche, da un lato, assicurando la presenza di un commentario polifonico e transmediale sull'andamento delle manifestazioni a Standing Rock e, dall'altro, invitando singoli individui e gruppi di tutto il mondo all'organizzazione di *flash mob*, marce, incontri informativi e occasioni di scambio di qualsiasi natura a supporto delle rivendicazioni indigene. L'attivismo digitale si offre come un fenomeno ricco ed efficace per l'esplorazione netnografica dei nessi tra marginalizzazione, partecipazione e ascolto politico. Applicando le teorie della mediatizzazione e della virtualità ai metodi dell'etnografia digitale si analizza il contesto sopraindicato con l'obiettivo di produrre un breve riepilogo degli impatti che il movimento #NoDAPL ha avuto nei confronti dei contemporanei processi di *indigenous voicing* e *policy-making* negli USA e nel mondo.

Parole chiave: Attivismo digitale; NoDAPL; Attivismo hashtag; Mediatizzazione; Indigenous media

Abstract ENG

The article discusses the processes of global participation and political listening towards the indigenous claims on land rights activated by the

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#NoDAPL movement against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The focus is stressed on *hashtag activism*, which had a crucial role in the mediatization of the struggles. Using the #NoDAPL hashtag as a specific case of study, I aim to examine how Standing Rock activists reframed the debate around settler policies to adjust and broaden public perceptions of indigenous rights and environmental issues to the global present. Hashtags such as #NoDAPL and #WaterIsLife captured the international attention of media, politicians, and the public, thus providing a transmedia commentary of the ongoing demonstrations at Standing Rock, as well as inviting individuals and groups around the world to flash mobs, marches, informative seminars, and any sort of gathering in support of the indigenous struggles. On-site and online activism provide rich phenomena for exploring the relationships between marginalization, participation, and political listening. Through mediatization and virtualization theory applied to digital ethnography, the aim is to analyse the aforementioned context and recompile a brief summary of the impacts that the #NoDAPL movement has had within the contemporary processes of indigenous voicing and policymaking in the US and across the globe.

Keywords: Digital activism; NoDAPL; Hashtag activism; Mediatization; Indigenous media

Introduction

Today more than ever, in indigenous contexts around the world, the rapid and wide-ranging development of social media is paving the way to an increasing number of possibilities that are challenging the existing political communication systems, which for centuries operated in opposition to a democratic, inclusive media participation (Fuentes 2013, Brandt 2017). It is within these dynamic emancipatory processes that *hashtag activism* particularly opened silenced and marginalized groups to unprecedented prospects for political listening, outreach, and participation.[1]

1 A discussion on the origins and nature of the concept of 'hashtag activism' is offered in Davis (2013). Hill (2013) and Wang *et al.* (2016) contextualise the role of the hashtags and social media in the description of the most peculiar and pervasive aspects of today's activism, while Tufekci (2017) and Dobrin (2020) provide rich literature and sources on the support and criticism arouse around hashtag activism both in the scientific and public discussions. Yang (2016), Moscato (2016), Olson (2016), Habegger (2017), Mendes *et al.* (2018) and Fuentes (2019), eventually, apply the concept of hashtag activism to specific case studies highlighting the role of hashtags in global networking, in the formation of decentralized social movements, in the advancing and organization of counter-narratives, as well as cultural change driving forces or pitfalls.

In the framework of the demonstrations against the Dakota Access Pipeline, hashtag mobilization first established a national network of Native American peoples and non-Indigenous allies, then it expanded and reached out to international forums of heterogeneous audiences. Because of the extensive use of the #NoDAPL hashtag on social media, the movement commonly refers to itself using the same hashtag, which stands for both onsite and online involvement. Hashtags such as #NoDAPL, #WaterIsLife and #StandWithStandingRock captured the international attention of mass media, politicians, and the public, providing a commentary of the ongoing demonstrations at Standing Rock, as well as inviting individuals and groups around the world to flash mobs, marches, informative seminars, and other gatherings in support of the indigenous struggles. Hashtag and physical activism provide together rich phenomena for exploring the relationships between participation, political listening, mediatization and marginalization (cfr. Fuentes 2013, 2019; Ofori-Parku, Moscato 2018). Moreover, by combining these two social actions with another variety of media products like audio-visual documentaries, dance, music and oral narration, indigenous activists engendered a transmedia storytelling and communication network around the hashtags which allowed a wide-ranging circulation of ideas across different media platforms leading to the creation of a shared social movement identity (Jenkins 2003, Giovagnoli 2013) which seems to mirror the insightful and re-creative Turnerian concept of *communitas* (Turner 1986). Hashtags, as media tools, play a crucial role in reaching out to and mobilizing people, but also in building and deepening community-level and transnational ties, as well as in reducing the existing distance between those physically involved in the struggles and those behind a screen (Fuentes 2013, p. 32).

The article draws from a transdisciplinary methodological framework recently adopted by anthropology research to study human behaviours, values, and meanings in online spaces. It builds on a retrospective social media inquiry aimed at recompiling a relatively vast number of digital sources and stumbling data from an as much large number of authors and users. This infrequent, yet increasingly practiced framework necessarily demands for a preliminary redefinition of *fieldsite*, as "stage on which the social processes under study take place" (Burrell 2017, p. 51), which seeks its domains and methods beyond the classic ethnography background of the term.[2] Primarily because, as retrospective exploration of the subject, evidently

2 For a review of the emerging methodological frameworks of digital anthropology and netnography see Burrell 2017; Garcia *et al.* 2009; Kozinets 2010; Horst, Miller 2012; Underberg, Zorn 2013; Miller *et al.* 2016; Pink *et al.* 2016; Fielding *et al.* 2017; Sloan, Quan-Haase 2017; Hjorth *et al.* 2017. For a discussion on the application of digital ethnography to indigenous frameworks see Landzelius 2006; Wilson, Stewart 2008; Cocq 2013; Hilder *et al.* 2017.

the time of the investigated social process and of the investigation do not coincide (although in 2021 the #NoDAPL hashtag still insinuated in social media trend charts in more than one occasion). In the second place, because of a patent dislocation of sources, perspectives, and voices, which inevitably necessitated a 'spatial' extension of the *fieldsite* towards the wide and at times dispersive virtual landscape of the *net*. Therefore, the *fieldsite* and the corresponding interpretative tools have been progressively re-defined (and refined) depending on the media platform the source was from (Kozinets 2010, p. 43). Getting the most out of the *search engines* of the selected platforms has been crucial to firstly piece together the *local-to-global* path of the #NoDAPL hashtag. These dynamic tools proved to be efficient 'time-machines' for the early collection of quantitative data and the said primary sources (first-hand videos, photos, and live streaming shared online by activists from Standing Rock, but also captions, comments, memes from online users) which, in a second stage, have been interrelated to the published literature on the #NoDAPL social movement, to mediatization and virtualization theory, and to other secondary sources (documentary films, newspaper articles, edited interviews)[3] in order to study the collected data from a qualitative perspective and produce new comments on the case study and on the broader instance of hashtag activism.[4]

The aforementioned methodological framework is driven by the following research questions, which the article aims to answer: How hashtag activism provided a set of new opportunities for Native American peoples to voice their claims on land and indigenous rights? What are the perks and drawbacks of the digital global commitment engendered by #NoDAPL movement around indigenous and environmental issues in relation to the corresponding physical involvement? How did this digital mobilization condition contemporary indigenous political and media participation and where can the legacy of #NoDAPL activism be found in nowadays mediatized contexts?

Protectors, not protesters: spiritual ceremonies as political action against the DAPL construction

In June 2014, the Texan company *Energy Transfer Partners* (ETP) announced a 3.8 billion dollars project for the construction of a 1886 km long under-

3 Most of the examined primary and secondary sources were retrieved from the NoDAPL online archive (nodaplarchive.com), a collaborative and community archive which stores links to an extensive number and variety of multimedia sources related to No- and Pro-DAPL online multimedia commentaries.

4 For an introduction to the ethics and methods of internet data qualitative analysis see Mann, Stewart 2000 and the more recent Fielding *et al.* 2017, pp. 17-54.

ground pipeline designed to move crude oil from North Dakota to refineries in Illinois. Once approved, the construction was entrusted to the *Dakota Access, LLC* company, hence its name: Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The initial plan expected the pipeline to cross the Missouri River near to the city of Bismarck, but it was rejected by the 'United States Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) because of the risks of spoiling Bismarck's water supply. Therefore, the USACE presented alternative routes in conformity with the 'National Environmental Policy Act' of 1970 and, eventually, the DAPL project was re-directed through the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, thus in turn threatening the lake Oahe, primary source of drinking water for the local native groups (Dakota Access, LLC and USACE 2015). Yet, when the Lakota peoples of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe addressed ETP about the same risks which prevented the pipeline construction near Bismarck, the indigenous claims have been completely ignored by US authorities. Not only the DAPL would have posed risks to the quality of water, but it was also seen as a threat to the cultural heritage and memoires of the Lakota peoples living in the reservation,[5] as well as a case of environmental racism and a settler offense against native land rights. In fact, a segment of the pipeline was planned to cross lands and waters consensually acknowledged by the US to the Sioux tribes since the Treaty of Fort Laramie, in 1851 (Brandt 2017, p. 5). Crossing the Sioux territories, the construction would have desecrated the Lakota cultural landscape by destroying ancestral burial grounds and would have endangered the Tribes' powers relations with the State, as well as their safety and wellness.

With these premises, the violation of Fort Laramie's Treaty was interpreted by the Lakota communities as a US governmental action reinforcing settler policies on indigenous rights, impacting not only the local-national level, but also leading the way to similar colonial schemes which would have menaced other indigenous communities around the world. For these reasons, in defence of their own rights and land, but also as a common gesture in support of world's indigenous and environmental rights, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe organized a prompt non-violent resistance against yet another case of colonial exploitation and sovereignty.

It is noteworthy, at this point of the discussion, that the DAPL project was approved at the end of Obama's term, whose administration eased and reinforced the grab swingingly and ambiguously. The September 9, 2016, USACE 'Joint Statement' states that

5 The construction of the pipeline would have altered the natural and cultural landscape to the extent it menaced the integrity of the sacred sites and natural resources, but also of non-material shared inheritances likewise the indigenous sense of place and traditional ecological knowledge, as well as a broader set of values, beliefs and memories orally transmitted over time through a variety of cultural performances closely related to the ancestral land (cfr. Feld, Basso 1996, pp. 4, 11; Brandt 2017, pp. 8-9; Whyte 2017, p. 165).

> [t]he Army will not authorize constructing the Dakota Access pipeline on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers land bordering or under Lake Oahe until it can determine whether it will need to reconsider any of its previous decisions regarding the Lake Oahe site under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or other federal laws (US, Department of Justice 2016).

However, less than a couple of months later, in apparent contrast with the statements of the very same administration, heavily armed law enforcement officials were ready to surround the demonstrators at Backwater Bridge to dismantle a roadblock:

> The brutality of weaponizing water against peaceful water protectors at #standingrock is beyond appalling. @BarackObama where r you? #NoDAPL[6]

Later on, the takeover of 2017 Trump's administration implemented the governmental support to the construction. Despite the Lakota claims and the environmental warnings, on February 7, 2017, the former President Donald Trump instructed the USACE and the Department of the Army to grant the pipeline construction to cross the disputed Native lands, Lake Oahe included.

In April 2016, in an effort to stop the construction of the DAPL, as well as to gather an increasing number of activists for physical resistance, the Sacred Stones Camp was founded at the junction of the Cannonball River and the Missouri River by Standing Rock's Historic Preservation Officer LaDonna Brave Bull Allard. Yet, more than protesters, the individuals who joined the camp considered themselves as *Water Protectors*, and the bodily participation at Standing Rock took place as part of a large non-violent ceremony, more than a protest.[7] The blockade and human chain demonstrations, as symbolic barriers and borders defining and defending ancestor's lands from colonial settlement, were theatres and arenas often framed by ritual acts, such as prayer, group chanting and drumming, and spiritual cleansing. Once again, likewise during the historical *Ghost Dances* of the 1890s, against the Dawes Act, and in 1973, at Wounded Knee, Lakota communities and other Tribes joined their forces, their common cosmological and performative knowledge to demonstrate unity against the settler menace and to claim equal human and land rights (Kifner 1973; Comba 2012). The political opposing nature of the movement was defined in relation to the 'Black Snake' end-of-time prophecy (Brandt 2017, p. vi):

6 Tweeted by *AWAKE, A dream from Standing Rock*'s director Josh Fox (@joshfoxfilms) on November 21, 2016.

7 As part of the 'Direct Action Principles', these behaviours and guidelines are listed and articulated in the Fox *et al.* documentary (2017) as well as in Brandt 2017, pp. 35-36.

From the north
a black snake will come.
It will cross our lands,
slowly killing all it touches,
and in its passing
the water will become poison.

Writing from the Sacred Stones Camp, Sičháŋğu/Oglála Lakota youth activist Iyuskin American Horse makes both the ancestor knowledge and the political consciousness of the movement conspicuous: "Our elders have told us that if the zuzeca sape, the black snake, comes across our land, our world will end. Zuzeca has come – in the form of the Dakota Access Pipeline – and so I must fight" (American Horse 2016).[8] Native youth activists stressed the aforementioned relevancy of portraying the movement as a demonstration of defense instead of a protest, aiming at removing the *violence* of settler colonialism from the framing of the #NoDAPL movement (Ferguson 2018, p. 81).[9]

8 A description of the Lakota end-of-time prophecy is provided in the filing of the motion for preliminary injunction advanced by the Cheyenne River Sioux against the USACE on February 9, 2017 (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2017: case 1:16-cv-01534-JEB, doc. 98). According to Brandt, Native prophecies are "a strategy of creative interactions with an adaptive religious world […] a product of experiences that shape attitudes towards the world" (Brandt 2017, p. 14; see also Irwin 2008, p. 8). The spiritual and land-connected dimension of the movement might contextually be understood as an effective strategy activated by the Native activists to motivate and legitimize their joint action in a political framework which has a long history of indigenous political movements and organizations repression. In relation to the Ghost Dance performance, Smoak states that it "provided flexible doctrine that held the power to explain native peoples' current situation and prophesy their survival. It could be used to rally resistance to the cultural oppression of the assimilation program as well as draw together socially and politically diverse individuals in a reservation community. And it held the power to unite ethnically plural peoples as Indians" (Smoak 2006, p. 196). For a detailed analysis of the complex and reciprocal relationship between the spiritual and the political motivations of the #NoDAPL movement see Brandt 2017 and Johnson, Craft 2017.

9 It is relevant, at this point, to mention, although prematurely, the later conflicting tendencies in framing the peaceful, non-violent nature of the movement on Twitter, where the stance-taking nature of the posts at times determined a more 'aggressive' and ambiguous way to package and present the non-violent motivations of the struggle (see Smith, van Ierland 2018, p. 239). Between March and November 2016, a considerable number of *tweets* featuring the keyword 'Black snake' and the #NoDAPL hashtag included (in the captions, or in pictures, videos or GIFs) also words like 'fight', 'defeat', or 'kill' in direct relation to it. For instance, for the 2016 Indigenous Peoples Day, Ojibwe attorney Tara Huoska (Ṡ>∇·ዓ, @zhaabowekwe on Twitter) tweeted a black and white drawing of an exhausted black snake lifted away by a condor and an eagle, both traditionally decorated, captioning it as follows: "Mon. 10/10, Sacred Stone Camp: eagle & condor unite to kill the black snake. #NoDAPL #IndigenousPeoplesDay #NoBorder" (see figure 1). Rather than discrediting the peaceful resolutions of the movement, the use of this stance-taking language is a symptom of the

In a first moment, the *Water Protectors* gathered at Sacred Stones only little groups of indigenous activists from various Native American tribes, including the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the Crow Creek Tribe, who joined to defend indigenous sovereignty on the land, as well as environmental activists from other regions of North America (Fox *et al*. 2017). But soon, a group of young *Water Protectors* organized a social media campaign with the aim of making native voices and experiences heard around the world, and to inform the global audience about the suffered colonial threats and the political, environmental, and spiritual importance of their struggle:

> The first days on the blockade we asked for people to come, to stand with us. It was a shot in the dark: if anybody would hear us. If anybody would care. The camp grew along the banks of the Missouri river. We called it *Očhéthi Šakówiŋ*, the 'Seven Council Fires'. Dozens from all over the continent and the world came to pray with us. To face the fear with love. We called ourselves Water Protectors. We are here to protect the water (Whitebull in Fox *et al*. 2017).

The social media campaign was set off by native teenagers directly involved in the main Standing Rock struggles. In particular, 14 years old Tokata Iron Eyes efficiently employed, for the first time on social media, the #NoDAPL hashtag to share online with the rest of the world her onsite experiences. This campaign, built on the 'engaging' and interactive power of #NoDAPL, #WaterIsLife, and related hashtags launched within the broad context of social media, resulted to be an effective 'call to action' for people from all over the world who gathered to pray to the water and to stand with Standing Rock protecting the land from the Black Snake's advancing (Brandt 2017, pp. 42-43).

As "hyperlinked labels […] advanced by users to organize posts around shared interests", the hashtags were heavily employed across social media and helped the acknowledgment, the networking and the creation of virtual communities of people living farther away from the setting where actions took place (Fuentes 2019, p. 180). The hashtags themselves first became rallying cries for the *Water Protectors*, and factors of political and environmental engagement for social media users, which could still be digitally participating beside the main on-site struggles. Even when the camp was permanently closed, on February 23, 2017, the movement managed to con-

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acknowledged active role of the *Water Protectors* standing against the Black Snake. To "unite" and "kill the black snake", means to stop the prophecy from coming true and to challenge power relations through various acts of refusal and demonstrations of defense while, at the same time, corroborating the opposing nature of the movement name (see Brandt 2017, p. 7; Fox *et al*. 2017).

tinue the struggle on social media, organizing direct actions in various public spaces around the country and the world, and inspiring the construction of new *Protectors'* camps across the US (Brandt 2017, pp. 1-2). In addition to the help given in the growth of Standing Rock's camp from hundreds to thousands of people, the hashtag involved more than one million individuals around the globe, drawing crucial attention on the environmental issues raised by the DAPL and reshaping the national conversation on the Country and corporate's interests on Native American lands.

Global 'listening' and indigenous demarginalization through #NoDAPL digital activism

> *Within hours of the crucial events […], the Net became a global backchannel for all kinds of information that never made it into the mass media. People with cellular telephones report via satellite to people with computers and modems, and within minutes, witnesses on the spot can report what they see and hear to millions of others. Imagine how this might work ten years from now, when digital, battery-operated minicams are as ubiquitous as telephones, and people can feed digitized images as well as words to the Net.*
> Rheingold 1993, pp. 282-283

Stronger than ever, Marshall McLuhan's concept of 'global village' comes in help when trying to understand and describe the new-born instances of non-physical interhuman relationship. The most recent communication technologies encouraged the birth of a multitude of transnational communities which do not necessarily negate the chance for individual actions (Appadurai 1996, p. 5; see also Baym 1995). People use technologies to get involved into decentralized 'online communities' not as being physically part of them, but in a way that still allows anyone to express themselves in relation to other users (Tardini, Cantoni 2005, González-Bailon *et al.* 2011, p. 5; Fuentes 2013, pp. 26-27). During the so-called Information Age, forms of political engagement underwent the same processes of virtualization. In the last few years, activism has shifted from an only physical participation to new virtual ways of political involvement which do not involve physical presence at all (Habegger 2017, p. 16).

Within the context of digital activism, hashtags have gained a more and more prominent role in our daily information reception and communication. Hashtag-based social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok are deeply embedded into our routine and frequently people feel the urge to express political orientations and opinions on their profile. As active members of the 'global village,' we perceive ourselves so close and committed to the sources we share to the extent that they give

us the impression of a real participation; of being "true activists behind the keyboard" (*ibidem*) of our laptop:

> Contributing a performative modality of online intervention, virtual sit-ins demonstrate the role of the Internet as both a tool and a key aspect in reconfiguring activism in late or liquid modernity. Through such digitally mediated practices, activists have also redefined what constitutes activism, community, collective identity, democratic space, and political strategy (Fuentes 2013, p. 31).

The first hashtag ever used dates back to 1988, when the symbol '#' was employed as a searching tool in the categorization of digital items which shared common traits. The launch of hashtags on social media, in 2007, paved the way to the *participation* of 'digital citizens' in trending topics, in monitoring events, and "providing contexts for discussions" (Briones *et al*. 2016, p. 159), as well as to the creation of digital (like-minded) communities which shows unity, support and common action towards specific issues (cfr. Fuentes 2013, p. 47). Through hashtags, as argued by Briones, social media started engendering "interactive, dynamic systems of organizational action and public reaction" (Briones *et al*. 2016, p. 162). Therefore, the birth of hashtag activism is strongly related to its most common functions of virally proliferating topics and issues across social media, of building dialogues and networks around specific and salient concerns, and of using hashtags as steady cues for activists which keep on renewing the attention to the original message.

Indigenous and environmental actions against the Dakota Access Pipeline construction were also strongly reshaped by hashtag networking and the related "usage of a wide variety of digital technologies in activist campaigns, whereas the broader scope and reach of an activist network [was] realized by the simplicity, the haste and the affordability of digital tools" (Habegger 2017, p. 16). Therefore, the social media campaign launched by the native youth from Standing Rock offers a paradigmatic case of 'community-level' digital activism reaching out to national significance (Dreher *et al*. 2015, p. 32) and whose effectiveness brought it to transnational outreach, thus to both local and global political listening.

Fuentes argues that "hashtags transform 'posting about' an issue into 'participating in' a discussion or campaign when users' individual posts are interlinked as part of a broader conversation" (Fuentes 2019, p. 180). In relation to the Swiss case of #SchweizerAufschrei hashtag, Habegger adds that "from expressing to taking action, followed by directed advocacy, the hashtag used as a tool for activism can lead to a social movement but it is after the directed advocacy where some consequential actions needs to happen,

in order to be a serious social movement" (Habegger 2017, p. 24).[10] Yet, by transposing this theoretical statement to the #NoDAPL discussion, it is noteworthy that the hashtag was created at Standing Rock, where a series of social 'actions' happened already.

#NoDAPL hashtag activism is born from a grassroot indigenous social movement which stood up in front of the colonial menace and answered to it through non-violent means of demonstration. It began as a social media campaign beside the existing *vis-à-vis* and ceremonial actions performed at Standing Rock in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline construction. But on social media the #NoDAPL gradually morphed into a larger, trans-territorial movement and found global listening and support. Within this context, beside the 'call to action' for the growth of Sacred Stones camp, the former role of the hashtag was that of propelling the birth of informed networks and decisively let indigenous voices being heard within national policy-making discourses.

Thinking of hashtag activism in these terms may help to understand the role that the mediatization of #NoDAPL movement had within decolonized practices towards the globally pervasive marginalization of indigenous voices in media. In fact, in the wake of the significant results achieved by the 'Idle No More' digital campaign,[11] #NoDAPL consolidated a shift in media power relations "whereby marginalized voices can mobilize political action through social media, [as well as] mobilize Indigenous and non-Indigenous resistance to policy proposals that demanded the nation's attention" (Dreher *et al*. 2015, p. 35).

Hashtags such as #IdleNoMore, #NoDAPL and #WaterIsLife have pioneeringly provided tools for decolonization and democratization of the debate by widening the indigenous participation in the policy-making discourses on media, as well as by giving to historically silenced groups and individuals a way to directly participate in activism beside physical demon-

10 The #SchweizerAufschrei hashtag was first launched by women whose voice was felt as not enough heard and conveyed by the mass media in the public sphere. It served as a subaltern counter public tool to amplify silenced narratives of suffered violence experiences and, as soon as "hundreds of women and men joined in the conversation by tweeting their experiences of everyday sexism, sexual harassment and sexist behavior in the workplace, in public spaces, on public transport, or within the family", the hashtag became a rallying cry and developed (both online and in the streets) the traits of a established social movement (Habegger 2017, p. 33).

11 Idle No More is an ongoing protest movement started in November 2012 by the Treaty People in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta who joined in protest of the dismantling of environmental protection laws by the Canadian government, which endangered First Nations living on the land. Within days by its first sharing, the hashtag #IdleNoMore became a coast-to-coast event in terms of on-site demonstrations and media coverage, managing to connect "the most remote reserves to each other, to urbanized Indigenous people, and to the non-Indigenous population" (idlenomore.ca; see also Moscato 2016, p. 6).

strations (Habegger 2017, p. 31). #NoDAPL hashtag was launched by activists who were speaking to the public audience from a position they felt as subaltern towards the established mass media, and thus not enough listened to by policy-makers. In this sense, as stressed out by Fuentes, "cyberactivists use the Internet to fill the 'communicative gap' created by hegemonic mainstream media, producing information that diverges from administrative or market interests" and to advance counter-narratives (Fuentes 2013, p. 31).

Being underrepresented by national press and broadcasts, Standing Rock indigenous activists found in microblogging platforms effective virtual spaces for a free and globally-accessible real time information delivery service, which often has been employed as a source for breaking news, a *scenario* which seems to reflect Rheingold's prophecy in chapter's epigraph, which dates back to 1993.

Due to the unexpected immediate and widespread outcome of the hashtag, several media channels and key influencers and celebrities started covering the information provided by native activists (Schilling 2016). Therefore, nowadays, the obstacles of Indigenous participation in policy-making processes depends not on the lack of opportunities to speak, but rather on the lack of mainstream media attention and coverage, as well as the related uncertainty of being listened by policy-makers. As effectively summarized by Dreher:

> The rapidly transforming Indigenous participatory media sector presents possibilities to challenge and reconfigure the political communication system, which has for so long worked against the democratic involvement of Indigenous people around the world. Digital and social media have opened unprecedented opportunities for voice, and, in theory, participation in decision-making (Dreher *et al*. 2015, p. 24).

Johnson adds that "[s]ocial media allows minority groups an avenue through which they can rebuke, alter, or control the dominant media narrative" which convey "events using dominant frames that can minimize the message American Indians are trying to communicate through their protests" (Johnson 2017, p. 163). In relation to mediatization theory, *to frame* refers to the way users package the information and deliver it to global audiences, thus marking a process of interpretation and narrative mediation of the information.[12] Whereas through different frames and sentiments, #NoDAPL hashtag provided a common *leitmotiv* to the Lakota cause, leading to an unprecedented networking of heterogeneous audiences. The digital distance between social media users and the activists at Standing Rock was reduced by the sharing of multimedia real time updates which allowed

12 For a more detailed definition and discussion of the #NoDAPL framing see Smith, van Ierland 2018, pp. 232-237; Hopke *et al.* 2018, pp. 18-19; Tufekci 2017, p. 111.

vast audiences to understand what was happening 'on the field'. From moments of peaceful commonality:

> The Comanche came. The Kiowa too. This is historic and unprecedented. #NoDAPL[13]

to live stream reports of the harshest moments of the struggles, which worked as sources for global breaking news from the camp:

> Live by the blockade on hwy 1806 just north of Oceti Sakowin camp
> Check 1hr 11mins to see projectile fired into water protectors from police and national Guard. It catches ground on fire and while the water cannon is being used to soak peaceful water protectors another group of water protectors stamp out the fire to prevent it spreading.
> This shows the story of water cannons to put out fires to be untrue.

This last quote captions a video recorded and streamed live on Facebook by Water Protector Kevin Gilbert the night of November 20, 2016, during the Backwater Bridge blockade standoff. On this very occasion, as heavily armed law enforcement authorities surrounded the Water Protectors and deployed water cannons and tear gas onto them below freezing temperatures to dismantle the Highway 1806 roadblock, the social media attention around the movement and the #NoDAPL use on Twitter spiked at the highest peak (source: *Google Trends*; see also the graphs reported in Smith, van Ierland 2018 and Hopke *et al.* 2018).[14]

As argued by Tufekci,

> sometimes it is unclear whether online or offline protest is riskier. Tweeting a protest hashtag connects a person to the protest in a way that is more easily traceable by the authorities; while offline protest risks tear gas, online protests risks surveillance. For most protest movements, a large group that identifies with the protest helps empower the cause of the protesters, and hashtags can certainly contribute to building and spreading that collective identity (Tufekci 2017, p. 111).

Once gathered around a strong hashtag, these forms of indigenous transmedia storytelling engendered among the users a condition of *communitas* which, using Victor Turner's terms, may be understood as a moment that

13 Tweeted on August 21, 2016, by Great Sioux Nation writer and Chief Judge Ruth H. Hopkins (Red Road Woman, @Ruth_HHopkins) to caption a photo of a camper arriving at Sacred Stones and a group of Protectors with the flags of the mentioned Native tribes.

14 The video can be accessed at: https://www.facebook.com/kevin.happychappy/videos/1806777989594705/.

follows a social crisis and brings the whole community to reflect on the common suffering experience and find a solution to overcome the crisis (Turner 1986, pp. 39-44). As suggested by Fuentes, hashtags enclose transformative power, promote users' agency and are "performative" to the extent they "do things in the world rather than merely describe what exists" (Fuentes 2019, p. 180). Yet, "to what extent the change happens is always uncertain, it can lead to a social movement, higher awareness and education of a salient problem, slacktivism, or to people growing a sceptical opinion towards the social campaign" (Habegger 2017, p. 23).

Beside the perks that #NoDAPL movement had in the widening of the anti-colonial debate beyond the regional level and the related listening and demarginalization of Native American's voices, some scholars contemplated the risks that such practices of digital activism have in the reinforcement of passive forms of engagement where the initial messages are misled or part of audience is induced into 'slacktivist' attitudes (Dobrin 2020, p. 2). In this regard, Briones expresses her scepticism about the efficacy and value of hashtag activism when used as a tool for educating people that are unaware of the original intentions of the campaign (Briones *et al.* 2016, p. 162). The risks that hashtag activism poses to society when employed as an educational tool can be found in the loss of crucial information and nodes of the debate, as well as in forms of "misconception, misunderstanding and mistrust" towards the original course of the protests (Habegger 2017, p. 26). Beside a solid number of conscious and aware 'listening' users or virtual participants in the #NoDAPL struggles, the hashtag campaign accidentally caused also the rise of dichotomous practices of slacktivism (or 'clicktivism'), which may be defined as a mere user-side 'gratification' characterized by the lack of commitment and active participation that unable the creation of tangible beneficial effects for the promotion of the original struggle (Whyte 2010; Briones *et al.* 2016, p. 171; Habegger 2017, p. 27), as well as breakouts of *hashtag jumping*, a term that refers to the practice of using a trending hashtag for unrelated, often irrelevant or advertising, posts to make them more noticeable and influent (Hopke *et al.* 2018, p. 19).

In an era of digital globalization, where the new generations are more and more involved in social media and 'feed' their daily knowledge with information collected within those platforms, hitting a like button or retweeting has not rarely become practice of ego-boosting and interpersonal gratification. While clicktivism engages the ideology of marketing and the tactics of advertising, the #NoDAPL movement was built on the principle of directed advocacy and inter-relational commitment. Understood as such, hashtag activism is able to bridge the physical and virtual distance created between the *Water Protectors* at Standing Rock and those people that behind a screen are consciously engaged in the same processes of policymaking, political listening and native land and water protection.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed the #NoDAPL movement trying at first to define the historical and cultural coordinates of the Native American demonstrations at Standing Rock, and eventually deepening the mediatization of those struggles and the impact that #NoDAPL hashtag had on the global outreach of the social media campaign. I described the perception that activists at Standing Rock had of their role as *Water Protectors*, a perception that shifted the understanding of the political contestation to a more ceremonial participation. Beside the onsite actions, I found that #NoDAPL hashtag represented instead a process of politicisation of the native struggles online, not only in the way it aimed at the diffusion of awareness and at the seek for physical and virtual support, but above all to the extent that, through mediatization, it activated forms of activism able to reframe the debate around settler policies into a space that enhanced the possibilities of indigenous voice demarginalization, counter-narrative and political listening.

The #NoDAPL movement also provided a noteworthy case of pan-indigenous solidarity. The globalization and diffusion of social media allowed indigenous people from all over the world to bring their life-narrations and experiences into the public sphere, thus demarginalizing their voices and finding international support from other indigenous communities which faced and still face similar experiences of colonization. The hashtag became a tool for the Lakota communities, other indigenous people, and in general for every silenced group, to share fears, opinions, and actions in a virtual space that, compared to mainstream media, proves to be more open to interpretations (Hilder *et al.* 2017). Utilizing their own technological devices and getting the most from the networking features of social media, Native activists and other *Water Protectors* from Standing Rock managed to create their own unprecedented communication frame which is independent from mainstream media and, as accessible and unedited first-hand documentation, is subject to the direct reading and interpretation of global audiences.

Ultimately, this article focused only on the #NoDAPL movement and, therefore, it certainly cannot produce generalizable knowledge on the broader subject of hashtag activism. However, through specific examples of virtual actions and framing practices coordinated to the existing literature on this case study, it does provide clear evidence that Twitter or Facebook are progressively changing the ways and means through which activists and users participate in political struggles and social change, as these social media platforms succeed in empowering an increasingly wider and heterogenous number of social actors and in giving them creative access to unprecedented frames for debate. Yet, it is questionable whether at the said opening towards broader audiences corresponds an opening in communications between the *parts* involved. In other words, whether Twitter can be perceived

and employed as a constructive platform which helps users from different backgrounds and principles to find a dialogic virtual space where conflicting opinions can produce new knowledge. Smith and van Ierland concluded that "rather than opening up debates about the Dakota Access pipeline and proliferating a variety of perspectives on its positive and negative effects", both #NoDAPL and pro-DAPL commentaries selected or created conflictual and non-communicative frames which reinforced a dynamic, yet stalling "echo chamber effect" around each side's posts (Smith, van Ierland 2018, p. 239).

Witnessing the peak of the *visual turn*, it is possible to find the legacy of #NoDAPL and other cases of indigenous hashtag activism in digital flash mobs and 'challenges' launched on video-focused social media platforms like Instagram or TikTok. One of the latest cases is represented by the #PassTheBrush challenge, which represented a way to share the alive presence of indigenous voices on social media during the months of forced social distancing imposed by earlier COVID-19 restrictions. Born on TikTok, this viral challenge consists in individuals filming themself all-natural, in daily appearances, then covering the lens of the recording device with a makeup brush and eventually re-appearing into traditional clothes and makeup (Paul 2020). The challenge was welcomed by the global indigenous community who reshaped the former message in terms of indigenous pride. Thus, the #PassTheBrush became an inter-indigenous (virtual) social action which helped, for example, Wet'suwet'en and Sami people to keep alive their resistances against colonial threats during the lockdown: namely the Coastline Gaslink Pipeline in Canada, and the Nussir copper mine in Norway.

Thanks to the very propellant and networking nature of these media-tools, hashtag activism gave to global audiences an insider perspective that is not offered by most of mass media. The case of #NoDAPL, with the steady amount of live streaming, updates, and informative posts it provided, enabled an unprecedently wide-spread transmedia storytelling narrated by an insider perspective, and not mediated by the marginalizing communication frames of traditional media:

> We need people to not only see our side of things and to have our story told, but for us to be the ones to tell it (Tokata Iron Eyes 2016).[15]

In the Information Age, it appears we rather stare into an electronical device and participate to a virtual world than take action in the real one, nevertheless since the #NoDAPL demonstrations things seem to be changing fast. On the wake of the environmental issues of global interest arouse by the

15 Re-tweeted by Naomi Klein (@NaomiAKlein) on December 8, 2016.

Water Protectors in 2016, the #FridaysForFuture and #SkolstrejkFörKlimatet youth movements managed to create awareness on social media and are launching coordinated digital and physical actions on the global level. Yet, social media prove to be the preferred setting for the debate on indigenous rights and environmental justice, thus revealing their promising qualities for the study of the human behaviours, values, and means of knowledge transmission within online spaces. These digital tools help in the encouragement of users' awareness and curiosity, but above all, as demonstrated by #NoDAPL case, hashtags and social media offer to anyone the opportunity to participate in the online debate and occasionally in organized physical actions. It is within these processes of demarginalization and emancipation of the information that hashtag activism and social media campaign opened the Lakota peoples and other indigenous groups around the world to unprecedented arenas for 'political listening', as an ensemble of practices that are necessary for a democratic, decolonized communication.

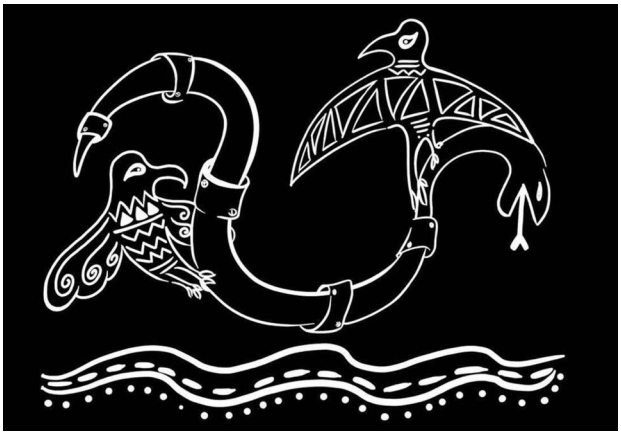

Figure 1: «Mon. 10/10, Sacred Stone Camp: eagle & condor unite to kill the black snake. #NoDAPL #IndigenousPeoplesDay #NoBorder» (Tara Huoska, October 9, 2016, Twitter).

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