



Lakota elder Rita Long Visitor Holy Dance, 93, and her son Nathaniel Blindman traveled 12 hours from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota to the Oceti Sakowin camp. Rita offered her support and encouragement to the camp's organizers and elders on behalf of all Lakota people.



THE REVOLUTION
WAS

#LIVE

THE #NODAPL MOVEMENT MAY NOT
HAVE SUCCESSFULLY STOPPED A
PIPELINE, BUT IT BROUGHT NATIVE
AMERICAN VOICES AND ISSUES TO THE
TOP OF SOCIAL MEDIA FEEDS

BY SARAH STEIMER

PHOTOS BY LAURA FONG

THE CAMERA IS FOCUSED

ON 13-YEAR-OLD TOKATA IRON EYES. THE SUN IS BOUNCING OFF HER CHEEK AS HER EYES BEAM AND SHE TELLS THE AUDIENCE, “I FEEL LIKE I GOT MY FUTURE BACK.” AS IF ON CUE, SHE BEGINS TO CRY.

There were, of course, no cues from a director—no producer who plucked this young Native American from a pile of headshots. It’s unscripted and it aired in real time, with almost 2 million views on the Facebook Live video to date. The clip is of Iron Eyes celebrating a since-overturned decision by the Army Corps of Engineers not to grant an easement to allow construction of the 1,172-mile-long Dakota Access Pipeline, designed to carry crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois. The video captures the youth of the anti-pipeline movement, a group that helped propel its messaging across the U.S. and beyond using some of the simplest (and cheapest) of marketing tools: social media.

The movement—known via hashtags that include #NoDAPL, #WaterIsLife and #StandWithStandingRock—did something still relatively new in storytelling. Not only did it tell its story in real time, but it opened that voice up to anyone who would listen. Brands with some of the greatest

expertise, manpower and editing skills still haven’t quite mastered the art of live storytelling, and they certainly wouldn’t give that power to just any average web user, free to attach the movement’s name to whatever is produced.

The NoDAPL movement chose to open this story to gain traction and awareness, placing a spotlight on an issue that wasn’t getting much mainstream media traction. It used promotional tools familiar to many marketers, but the voices that rose weren’t from polished brands—they were from people and organizations rarely projected through a corporate megaphone.

The pipeline has yet to be halted as of this article’s publication, which may suggest the movement wasn’t a complete success. But is it a complete loss if it led to Native Americans gaining a larger audience within the national conversation? In this case, a battle may have been lost, but a considerable following was won—an outcome marketers would consider a win in the long game.

INTRODUCING A MOVEMENT AND REINTRODUCING A PEOPLE

The general consensus was that the movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline began with young indigenous people. Specifically, many point to the Oceti Sakowin Youth, or the Standing Rock Youth, and a number of relays they ran to garner awareness and support for their stance against the pipeline.

Bobbi Jean Three Legs, a young Lakota woman from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, organized the runs, which grew in size and distance from March 2016. The second run was a 500-mile relay from the Sacred Stone Camp, ground zero for the movement, to Omaha to deliver a letter to the Army Corps of Engineers. The Indigenous Environmental Network set up a social media campaign around the run, and the Standing Rock Youth designed a Change.org petition for their efforts. The run then expanded to include Washington, D.C., and New York. Juliana Britto Schwartz, a campaigner at Change.org who supported the Standing Rock Youth petition, says the group’s storytelling ability, particularly on social media, and use of Change.org’s update tools were huge contributors to gaining more than 500,000 supporting signatures.

The real-time documentation that so many young people do naturally throughout the day only deepened the story for those following. Schwartz recalls an instance on the relay to Washington, D.C., when the runners learned one of the final permits for the pipeline had been granted by the Army Corps. The group turned to Facebook Live to record their reaction.





The Kalpulli Yaocenoxtli Aztec Nation arrived at the Oceti Sakowin camp in early October 2016. More than 200 indigenous tribes offered their support and solidarity with the water protectors.

“It was so powerful,” Schwartz says. “I was tearing up just watching them feel like they had run all this way and no one was listening. And then they made the decision as a group to keep going.”

Schwartz says there were two unique parts of the Standing Rock Youth’s campaign: This was not just a youth effort, but an organized youth effort that also had the backing of elders. She says this campaign was also particularly compelling because it brought the Native American voice to the forefront of a massive, mainstream campaign, something she says there isn’t a lot of at Change.org or elsewhere. They amplified their message through authenticity.

“They didn’t manufacture a story to pull people in. The campaign just escalated in a way that you couldn’t put your phone down,” Schwartz says. “You wanted to see what was happening next.”

Some of those who took note included celebrities. Actress Shailene Woodley was among those who picked up on the story, particularly via the relays, and boosted the messages through her own social media channels. This was no small victory in getting the opposition’s word out, as Woodley has more than 1.9 million followers on Instagram and 1.22 million followers on Twitter.

While Woodley and other celebrities, including actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Mark Ruffalo, showed

their support on social media and in interviews, the indigenous people being directly affected saw their own voices rise to the top. Simon Moya-Smith, a journalist and activist, emphasizes that Native Americans want to tell their own story, and social media provided the platform to do so.

“This is the first time in history that the Native American voice, the authentic, bona fide Native American voice has been ubiquitous,” Moya-Smith says. “You have people utilizing their phones, their Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, whatever they can to get the narrative out.”

According to Moya-Smith, a large part of getting the narrative out is reminding people that Native Americans do, in fact, still exist. In speaking with an online audience, indigenous people aren’t only trying to battle the pipeline, but they’re also tasked with educating their readers or viewers of their existence. It’s a basic marketing conundrum: How do you convince people to convert or transact if they don’t even know you exist?

This reeducation is happening online, and Moya-Smith says the narrative of evicting Native Americans hasn’t changed much, but the way this story is being told has. It’s being told in real time, and sometimes it’s a brutal story to watch.



Donations piled next to the common eating area and main prayer circle at the Oceti Sakowin camp. In early October, night temperatures were as low as 30 degrees.

“When you see these images and videos coming through of unarmed water protectors being assaulted, it starts to wake people up and it bridges the space,” Moya-Smith says. “The idea of reservations was to remove Native Americans out of sight, out of mind, to geographically isolate us. Through social media, that geographic isolation isn’t there anymore.”

When it comes to the Dakota Access Pipeline in particular, he says, social media pushed Native American voices to the front. Both young Native Americans and the elders have embraced social media for responding in real time to the national conversation, which can often include correcting misunderstood or mis-told stories that have circulated for centuries.

“This isn’t revisionist history, it’s history,” Moya-Smith says. “We’re telling you what’s been canceled out of the conversation, and what has been canceled out has been our voice. But not with social media. With social media, we get to speak loudly and people are listening.”

MESSAGING AND UNIFICATION

Messaging has remained relatively consistent among the various stakeholders, be they individuals or organizations. Anything that includes #NoDAPL or similar hashtags could be considered branded content for the movement, and this pseudo trademark has spread like wildfire over the internet.

A “Twitter Listening Report” provided by marketing and communications agency Media Cause, whose clients include nonprofits and educators, shows #NoDAPL was used on Twitter an average of 48,517 times per day between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, 2016, for a total volume of 4.41 million. Joining the conversation became as simple as searching for and using the hashtag over any social media platform. Amplifying the message was as easy as a retweet.

Taylor Johnston, account director at Media Cause, was involved in creating social media content about the Dakota Access pipeline on behalf of her agency’s client, the National Resources Defense Council. She says the



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NRDC’s conversation about the pipeline, to which they are opposed, would most often include the #NoDAPL and #WaterIsLife hashtags. They also frequently retweeted or reposted other accounts’ posts about the pipeline.

The NRDC and other organizations made sure to tag and check in to Standing Rock as part of their social media messaging as well. Johnston says this only strengthened the unification against the pipeline, suggesting the protest was far larger than just those on the ground and included a massive online community. She credits the Indigenous Environmental Network for helping to unify the messaging used by so many opposed to the pipeline. IEN acts as an umbrella organization that builds alliances among indigenous communities, environmental organizations and other groups in an effort to organize campaigns, direct actions and create public awareness.

“They (IEN) were the ones that were really creating these coalition groups, these coalition messaging points, and distributing it out,” Johnston says. IEN figured out who was involved, who was protesting and unified the audience, she says. They pushed out different pieces of information, and other organizations put IEN at the forefront, letting them push out messaging and direct the dialog. “Having a coalition with cohesive messaging helped to strengthen that messaging, get out the truth and fight through all the cloudiness ... of all the other dialog,” Johnston says.

The way this unification works on social media is relatively simple. Johnston says the NRDC would amplify the messages posted by others—for example, reposting items from the Standing Rock Sioux social media accounts. There was a day of action (#NoDAPLDayOfAction) on Nov. 15, 2016, that many organizations opposed to the pipeline took part in, with their varied social media accounts working to get petitions signed and create buzz.

Jade Begay, a producer and communications coordinator for IEN, calls social media use crucial for grassroots movements. Begay says one example of its success was in bringing U.S. military veterans to defend Standing Rock water protectors.

“I conducted interviews with veterans who were there [at Standing Rock], asking them how they heard this call and what it felt like to get this call of duty, so to speak,” Begay says. “A lot of the response was, ‘Well, I first heard of Standing Rock on social media,’ or, ‘I first heard of the movement from social media and then I continued to follow, I continued to stay engaged via Facebook and when the call was made for veterans to come, that’s when I knew it was the right time for me to join.’ Everybody I interviewed

or who our team interviewed said that they heard of the movement or learned about it via social media.”

Begay says a large part of IEN’s work prior to rallies or marches is focused on unifying messaging and visuals: What will the banners say? What artwork will be present? If IEN is holding its own action, it will bring its delegates together from across the nation and huddle on the messaging.

“We’re learning more and more that we need to be very clear in our messaging,” Begay says. “We can’t just say, for instance, ‘protect indigenous rights.’ To indigenous people, we know what that means. We know what our goal is. But when non-native people see that message ... we don’t know if people understand what indigenous rights are really because of hundreds of years of erasure and not respecting treaties.”

She says the use of phrasing related to treaties, such as “honor the treaties,” is often debated because the audience may not know that any treaties even existed between the U.S. government and Native Americans. Another key point of phrasing, she says, relates to how those opposed to the pipeline are referenced. She says her organization has worked to get journalists to use the phrase “water protectors,” rather than protestors. Not because these people aren’t protesting, but because of the negative connotation that can be attached to the word “protesters.”

With the messaging defined and the audience growing, the calls to action came rolling in. Chief among them has been the call to defund the pipeline, often referenced via the #DefundDAPL hashtag. The dedicated website for defunding explains how to do so, with individual, organizational and governmental steps. The site describes how to remove money from banks involved in a key loan for the pipeline, but also urges those who took specific action to post about it on their social media accounts. The site’s tracker claims \$74.91 million has been divested from the Dakota Access Pipeline in personal funds and \$4.07 billion divested in city funds. The #DefundDAPL hashtag is seen on almost 6,000 public posts on Instagram, with users showing their divestment letters and envelopes or standing in front of their former banks.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Native Organizers Alliance and Indigenous Environmental Network also called for the organization of a camp and march on Washington, D.C. Much like the Women’s March before it, the call went out via social media: Invitations came through Facebook, and the hashtag #NativeNationsRise grew in use as attendees posted from the event. The number of RSVPs on Facebook came to about 2,000.

ANCIENT CULTURE, MODERN TECHNOLOGY

The impact and necessity of social media was clear from the start of the movement. While the land at Standing Rock is considered sacred, some modern updates were needed. Specifically, the movement required an internet connection to broadcast the stories in an area where cell service was notoriously spotty. There was even a ridge nearby that was nicknamed Facebook Hill, where people would try to get cell service.

Begay says IEN and some other groups were able to get Wi-Fi connectivity in some of the tents in the Standing Rock camp, but there still weren’t ideal internet conditions. Live video from some of the final days of the camp in February was fairly poor, but vital, still, in telling the story.

“Having this ability to go live gives us a really useful tool to bring attention to what is happening in the moment,” Begay says. “Those live feeds were such a powerful way to show what was happening, and not necessarily from a biased place because you’re not editing. You’re showing exactly what is happening in the moment.”

Marketers speak constantly about the use of live video and social media to tell stories, and young people in particular have taken to these formats for their everyday lives. It can, however, feel like a clash of cultures to digitally document such an old, indigenous population.

Moya-Smith says there are some situations and ceremonies where people are not allowed to use a cell phone or take photos. But where Native American elders request sacred ceremonies remain undocumented, they also understand the importance of social media to connect the community.

“Native Americans are the smallest racial minority in their own ancestral land, only 5.2 million people,” Moya-Smith says. “That’s a very small community of people, but social media brings our people together and our elders want us to come together. They want to make sure that somebody who wasn’t born on the reservation can go back to the reservation and learn the language, learn ceremony, etc. That’s where social media helps you become that community, but it can’t be in certain situations like [a] ceremony. Turn it off.”

There have been some instances where modern, digital light has illuminated certain Native American practices for the rest of the world. For example, a member of Standing Rock Rising posted a photo on Facebook of a Sacred Fire, by request of the water protectors, prior to the final prayer walk and exit from the campgrounds on Feb. 22. The post read, “For those of you not aware, the Sacred Fire has always been off limits for media, as it contains the spirits. I was





A holy woman of the Kalpulli Yaocenoxtli Nation offers prayers for the water protectors at the Oceti Sakowin camp in October 2016. Each nation performed a welcome dance in their full regalia from the camp's entrance to the main prayer circle.