

Practices of Resistance in Social Media Discourse. The Case of Grassy Narrows First Nation

Abstract: Grassy Narrows is sadly known for one of the worst community health crises in Canada. It came to public attention in 1970 when it was revealed that an alarming number of the community members were displaying symptoms of the Minamata disease, a form of mercury poisoning, due to the huge amount of mercury dumped into the Wabigoon river from 1962 to 1970 by a chemical plant. Despite the fact that Grassy Narrows' leaders and activists have struggled, over the years, to bring the issue to the fore, the community has not received the help they needed to face the devastating consequences of the poisoning – which are still going on nowadays. This paper takes into account the narratives emerging from one of the main micro-blogging and social networking services, namely Twitter, to attract public attention and engage wider audience. Analysis of the tweets collected by extrapolating three hashtag streams – specifically #grassynarrows, #freegrassy, #FreeGrassyNarrows – is meant to reveal forms of counter-discourse which continue the struggle for justice. The texts included in the corpus are analysed in search for the most recurrent themes through which issues relating to Grassy Narrows are framed and awareness on vital questions is created in the online and offline world.

Keywords: Grassy Narrows First Nation, social media discourse, digital activism, hashtag campaigning, environmental racism

1. The Case of Grassy Narrows First Nation

In 2017, the Graphic History Collective launched a collaborative project called “Remember, Resist, Redraw. A Radical History Poster Project”, featuring works by artists and writers aiming at promoting art, activism, and history in Canada.¹ The posters included in the project were meant to offer alternative perspectives on well-known historical events, shedding light on the role of Indigenous peoples, women, oppressed workers, and marginalised people. All the posters advocated for social change, counting on activist art to remember, resist and redraw history. One of the posters in particular, ‘Justice for Grassy Narrows’ (by Iruwa Da Silva), celebrated the people of Grassy Narrows First Nation, who have led an intergenerational movement to assert their sovereignty, protecting their land and water.² This movement of resistance and resilience, which in some forms flows in social media discourse, is the specific focus of this paper.

Grassy Narrows (located on the English-Wabigoon river system, in north-western Ontario, Canada), came to public attention in 1970 when an alarming number of residents were found to display symptoms of the Minamata disease, a neurological syndrome caused by severe mercury poisoning.³ According to experts, the natural resources on which the community depended contained excessively high mercury levels. It then emerged that the source of the pollution was Reed Paper Ltd chemical

¹ <https://graphichistorycollective.com/projects/remember-resist-redraw>, accessed 7 November 2022. Unless otherwise specified, all websites were last accessed in June 2022.

² <https://graphichistorycollective.com/projects/remember-resist-redraw>, accessed 7 November 2022.

³ Symptoms included sensory disturbances, such as narrowing of the visual field, impaired hearing, abnormal eye movements, tremor, ataxia (impaired balance), dysarthria (poor articulation of speech). The history of mercury poisoning among First Nations in Canada is entangled with the 20th century incident in the fishing village of Minamata, Japan, which also gave the name to the disease (before this disaster, the scientific community was unaware of the effects of mercury on humans). At the time, doctors established a link between methylmercury contaminated fish and human neurologic symptoms. As investigations proceeded in Japan from the late 1950s, a similar story began to unfold a few years later in Northern Canada – where, however, problems persisted for more than 50 years.

plant operating upstream from the reserve as part of the Dryden Chemical Company's pulp and paper mill. Further inquiry revealed that from 1962 to 1970, between 4 and 9 kg of untreated mercury per day were dumped into the English and Wabigoon rivers, poisoning waters that had been vital for local people for centuries. As a result, food became contaminated, commercial activities were closed and people were cut off from their main sources of income.⁴ Although Reed Paper Ltd ceased using mercury in 1975 following provincial government orders, the economic and social impact of mercury pollution was devastating. Tourism declined, while the loss of traditional ways of life caused a number of social problems like alcohol addiction, drug abuse, family violence, suicides and depression. Residents had worryingly elevated levels of mercury in their bodies, and despite the fact that compensation was offered – more than a decade later, (falsely) assuming that the effects of contamination would soon go away – community members currently continue to suffer from disproportionate rates of serious health problems. Indeed, recent surveys provide clear evidence that the physical and mental health of people in Grassy Narrows is poorer than that of other First Nation communities in Canada.⁵

The case of Grassy Narrows is sadly known as one of the worst environmental disasters and community health crises in Canadian history. Any discussion of the issue cannot leave the relationship of Indigenous peoples to their lands and territories out of consideration. In fact, strong ties exist between a spiritual, emotional, and mental dimension and a physical, material one, drawing on the concept that land is not merely the biological environment, it is the ashes of ancestors and, as such, it must be preserved for future generations.⁶ Indigenous communities consider their own history and culture to be closely and integrally connected to a specific ethno-habitat, their oral histories, cultural and linguistic heritage being strictly connected to the territory. It is through this land-culture connection and the ties to natural resources that historical continuity with ancestors can be maintained. Such a view strongly contrasts with existing legal and political frameworks, which usually diverge and clash with Indigenous sovereignty and land rights, making the community's concerns increasingly weaker and neglected.

In this respect, the concept of environmental justice, which has attracted enormous attention in the last decades, can be said to play a central role. According to Bullard, environmental justice “embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations”.⁷ Based on the assumption that all individuals have the right to be protected from pollution and to live and enjoy a clean and healthful environment, environmental justice links a number of social movements (anti-racism, Aboriginal rights, the environmental movement). Most importantly, it brings together key dimensions relating not only to sustainable development but also to social inclusion. Within the American context, for example, a landmark study, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*,⁸ showed that some ethnic communities were at

⁴ In 1970, the Ontario government banned commercial fishing in the English-Wabigoon rivers – which had been a central source of income and employment for local people – posting ‘Fish for Fun’ signs throughout the region to discourage consumption. See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5289874/#b3-189e213>, accessed 7 November 2022.

⁵ See <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/health-in-grassy-narrows-significantly-worse-than-other-first-nations-report-1.3942967>, accessed 7 November 2022. It appears extremely significant that Grassy Narrows has fewer elders than other First Nations, which demonstrates both the extent of the individual harm experienced by residents over the last decades and the extent to which this crisis threatens the ability to pass on their culture and traditions to future generations (see also <https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-in-canada/grassy-narrows-its-time-to-act-on-one-of-the-worst-health-crises-in-canada/>, accessed 7 November 2022).

⁶ Lori A. Colomeda and Eberhard Wenzel, “Medicine Keepers. Issues of Indigenous Health”, *Critical Public Health*, 10.2 (2000), 243-256.

⁷ Robert Bullard, “Environmental Justice. More than Waste Facility Siting”, *Social Science Quarterly*, 77 (1996), 493.

⁸ Benjamin Chavis and Charles Lee, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (New York: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987) available at <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/archives/pdfs/toxwrace87.pdf>, accessed 7 November 2022.

disproportionate risk from commercial toxic waste, something which was confirmed by later research⁹ on environmental hazards and ecological inequalities, and then led to the term ‘environmental racism’.¹⁰

The concept of racism in relation to natural resources has been of pivotal importance in the development of environmental justice studies in the USA, which demonstrated that racism is embedded in multiple social structures, discourses, and dominant value systems operating within society.¹¹ Social scientists and environmental activists concerned about pollution began to use the term ‘environmental racism’ in the late 1980s, specifically referring to “the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and polluting industries in areas inhabited mainly by Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous peoples, Asians, migrant farm workers and low-income peoples”.¹² This was regarded as an extension of institutional racism, causing racist discrimination in environmental policymaking.¹³ Through a series of acts of resistance, mostly by poor people and ethnic communities in the USA, the movement aimed to expose covert forms of racism negatively impacting some communities or groups in particular. As such, environmental racism evolved from a community-based movement struggling to raise public awareness of unequal environmental policies affecting low-income, ethnic communities, to a scholarly paradigm focusing on racism as a structural process involving communities that lack the resources or social status to partake in decisions that affect their territories.

While most of the studies first appeared in the US, a growing body of scientific literature is shedding light on a series of cases of environmental injustice in Canada too.¹⁴ The country is sadly filled with examples of environmental racism, with toxic waste plants, chemical treatment plants, and dumpsites placed near Indigenous communities, with increasing negative effects on physical health, environmental health, and the socio-economic context. In particular, for instance, evidence-based research has proved that Canada has the world’s third largest per-capita freshwater reserve, but a lot of Indigenous communities depend on contaminated water and difficult access to reservoirs.¹⁵ So water

⁹ Robert Bullard, “Ecological Inequalities and the New South. Black Communities Under Siege”, *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 17 (1990), 105-115; Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant, “Environmental Injustice. Weighing Race and Class as Factors in the Distribution of Environmental Hazards”, *University of Colorado Law Review*, 63 (1992), 921-932; Francis Adeola, “Environmental Hazards, Health and Racial Inequity in Hazardous Waste Distribution”, *Environment and Behavior*, 26 (1994), 99-126.

¹⁰ Chavis and Lee, *Toxic Waste*. After opposing a proposed toxic-waste site slated for a poor, largely African-American, community in North Carolina, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice launched a study that revealed a disturbing pattern. Hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators and coal-fired plants were often placed in areas largely inhabited by African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and poor people in general. Such marginalized groups were perceived as weak, vulnerable citizens unable to rally against the poisoning of their neighbourhoods. According to the study, such targeting was often deliberate.

¹¹ Robert Bullard, *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1997).

¹² James Hamilton, “Testing for Environmental Racism. Prejudice, Profits, Political Power?”, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 14.1 (1995), 107.

¹³ Andil Gosine and Cheryl Teelucksingh, *Environmental Justice and Racism. An Introduction* (Toronto, ON: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited, 2008), 4.

¹⁴ See, among others, Michael Jerrett et al., “Environmental Equity in Canada. An Empirical Investigation into the Income Distribution of Pollution in Ontario”, *Environmental and Planning A* 29.10 (1997): 1777-1800; Randolph Haluza-Delay, “Environmental Justice in Canada”, *Local Environment*, 12.6 (2007), 557-564; Leith Deacon and Jamie Baxter, “Framing Environmental Inequity in Canada. A Content Analysis of Daily Print News Media”, in Julian Agyeman et al., eds., *Speaking for Ourselves. Environmental Justice in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 181-202; Leith Deacon and Jamie Baxter, “No Opportunity to Say No. A Case Study of Procedural Environmental Justice in Canada”, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 56.5 (2013), 607-623. These studies posit that socially vulnerable groups – be they ethnic minorities or low-income groups – are usually disproportionately exposed to pollution. Most importantly, they stress that environmental justice is tied to broader issues of social and political justice endorsing the marginalization of some specific groups.

¹⁵ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44961490>, accessed 7 November 2022. In Canada, it is the federal government’s responsibility to ensure that First Nations peoples living on reserve lands have safe and clean drinking water and proper wastewater systems. Under the Canadian Environment Protection Act, Environment Canada – the Department that

pollution broadly appears a very controversial issue for First Nations communities, who tend to be disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. While, over the years, the United Nations have declared water and sanitation to be human rights and Canada federal government has promised to secure clean drinking water to First Nations communities by 2021, significant progress on this issue has yet to happen.

Since the federal government was aware of the water quality and the severe health problems suffered by the community of Grassy Narrows, it can be argued that the institutional refusal – or delay – to take responsibility for ensuring clean drinking water and a safe environment for food sources (mostly deriving from fish) can be deemed as a case of environmental racism. The federal government's lack of action was a practice that, intentionally or unintentionally, affected community members, treating them as second-class citizens. The case of Grassy Narrows would have urged the government to apply the highest standards of protection to their rights. Instead, the community was left unheard for decades, seeking justice while paying the price of systemic racism in state legislation and sovereignty with their health.

Overall, the complex weave of people, nature, geography and politics (that is often viewed in terms of environmental justice) has been approached rather ambivalently, especially when some social groups or individuals are denied access to representation due to their geographical location and political status.¹⁶ Injustices can be (un)recognised as such in relation to the status of people, which is directly connected to politics as much as the media.¹⁷

2. Digital activism and hashtag campaigning

Digital media are increasingly advocated as a tool to engage with society's most pressing and tricky issues, reaching a more inclusive public discourse which can empower minority or stigmatised groups by granting them access to online communication and, potentially, to public, political, and institutional dynamics.¹⁸ By providing the unrepresented or underrepresented members of society with a voice, social media – in particular some well-known social networking platforms, among them Twitter – have democratized communication, granting all users some degree of visibility. Indeed, a growing part of social media usage comprises individuals and activists advocating for political debates, humanitarian causes, environmental issues, and so forth,¹⁹ thus challenging the traditional role of mainstream mass media. The main, and probably most significant, result of the rise of social networking platforms is that “they have transformed the ways in which people can interact. They do not simply offer an alternative way of engaging in the same forms of communicative interaction that were available prior to their emergence; they also provide a number of notably different communicative dynamics and

coordinates environmental policies and programmes – is responsible for ensuring the clean-up of hazardous waste, developing standards, guidelines and protocols for wastewater systems, while the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs is responsible for providing funding for the construction, operation and maintenance of wastewater treatment facilities (Gosine and Teelucksingh, *Environmental Justice and Racism*: 39).

¹⁶ Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice. Reimagining Political Space in Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2008), 114.

¹⁷ The importance of considering the intricate connections between news media and Indigenous people – in cases of environmental justice – is often underscored. According to some scholars, environmental disasters receive increasing attention when they impact white, higher-income communities or neighbourhoods. News media tend to treat members of Indigenous communities as ‘un-people’, unimportant and, therefore, unworthy of coverage. See also Alia Valerie, “Un/Covering the North”, *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33-34 (2006), 179-198.

¹⁸ See Seo Hyunjin, Kim Ji Young, and Yang Sung-Un, “Global Activism and New Media”, *Public Relations Review*, 35.2 (2009); Derek Moscato, “Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism. A Framing Analysis of Canada's #Idlemore movement”, *Media and Communication*, 4.2 (2016); Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate. Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Napoli: Loffredo Editore, 2020).

¹⁹ Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, eds., *The Language of Social Media. Identity and Community on the Internet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

structures”.²⁰ Among such social networking platforms, Twitter has become an extremely popular object of study for social scientists in a variety of contexts due to its open nature: any user can interact with anyone else, the content created on the platform is public by default and can be easily downloaded.²¹ While not being representative of the general public, Twitter does provide a public arena for discussion, opinion sharing and persuasion.²²

With its 330 million monthly active users,²³ Twitter is one of the most widely used micro-blogging and social networking services. It is based on the concept of expressing ideas and opinions in less than 280 characters, which makes posts extremely condensed messages that are presented in reverse chronological order as a flux of content.²⁴ Such narratives are not necessarily interactive since, on Twitter, connections between users “are not bidirectional, but they reflect an individual’s attention to others, who may or may not reciprocate connection or attention”.²⁵ Tweets allow users to show their interest in specific topics, express their opinions, spread information and news, engage in discussions, and seek alliances. The other distinctive feature of the platform is that it allows users to create the so-called hashtags by using the # symbol followed by a word or phrase. Hashtags can be employed to follow any topic, in fact they can be seen as “an emergent convention for labelling the topic of a micro-post and a form of metadata incorporated into posts”.²⁶ Over time, the digital linguistic practice of hashtagging has gained not only public awareness but also an official status, and hashtags have become conversation markers and indexing tools to store, search for, and collect information on Twitter.²⁷ Since hashtags can be seen as “topical markers, an indication to the context of the tweet or as the core idea expressed in the tweet”,²⁸ they are regularly used to contribute to a topic by adding similar or related content. Trending topics are also added to the homepage to monitor the mechanisms of hashtag popularity in real time. Interestingly, hashtags have recently spread to other platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth, which signals the degree of popularity reached by such a practice.

Hashtags are also widely employed to create campaigns. Through hashtags, Twitter users are allowed to cluster their tweets around a single issue or focus, which is an extremely useful function for activists. In fact, the term ‘hashtag activism’ (that was first used by *New York Times* media columnist David Carr in 2012) – refers to the users’ ability to streamline their messages on the platform, thus launching campaigns. Hashtag campaigning can be viewed as the act of fighting for or supporting a cause that is advocated through social media, “to create awareness around vital issues in the offline world or the online world via social media. Therefore, it has changed the way people can have their

²⁰ Seargeant and Tagg, *The Language of Social Media*, 4.

²¹ Felix Gaisbauer et al., “Ideological Differences in Engagement in Public Debate on Twitter”, *PLoS ONE*, 16.3 (2021), e0249241, available at <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0249241>, accessed 7 November 2022.

²² Interestingly, public debate has been described as a series of “communication processes through which publics are constituted and within which opinions on public affairs are formed” (Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* (New York: Sage, 1992), largely invoking the analogy of a big town meeting. Modern communication technologies and the advent of social media have, indeed, enabled the enlargement of public consciousness and engagement, making the above-mentioned analogy become a digital reality.

²³ See <https://zephoria.com/twitter-statistics-top-ten/>, accessed 7 November 2022.

²⁴ Following Zappavigna’s definition, Twitter is “a form of length limited service (hence ‘micro’) communication using a social networking service”. Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media. How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 27.

²⁵ Stine Lomborg, *Social Media, Social Genres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 101.

²⁶ Michele Zappavigna, “Ambient Affiliation. A Linguistic Perspective on Twitter”, *Journal of New Media and Society*, 13.5 (2011), 790.

²⁷ Amira Hanafi El Zohiery, “Hashtag Campaigning as an Act of Resistance”, *Hermes Journals*, 10.1 (2021), 9-46.

²⁸ Oren Tsur and Ari Rappoport, “What’s in a Hashtag? Content-based Prediction of the Spread of Ideas in Microblogging Communities”, *Conference Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Web Search and Web Data Mining* (Seattle, 2012), 644.

voice expressed”.²⁹ Users employ hashtags to achieve and propagate two concepts that seem central in digital communication: empowerment and freedom.³⁰ Although several researchers have termed hashtag campaigning as ‘armchair activism done by the residents of the keyboards’ or ‘slacktivism’,³¹ as a sort of void online effort, a growing body of scientific literature notes that hashtag campaigning is increasingly used and regarded as complementary to offline efforts.³² In fact, according to some views, in order to affect society, social movements need to bridge the gap between online and offline contexts, while further facilitating (both online and offline) forms of citizen participation.³³ In other words, social media can be said to support and empower individuals and activists (rather than centralised organisations), making online communication pivotal for contemporary movements.³⁴ Most importantly, “[t]hrough online social media, social movement actors have a new means to disseminate self-representations that are not subjected to mass media filters. Activists are able to break through preconceived notions or agendas that might provide greater resistance in traditional media spaces”.³⁵ Therefore, social media allow activists to reach out wider audience who appears more engaged in political activity thus creating a shared social movement identity which is defined by collaboration and co-creation.³⁶

A number of studies concentrating on web-genres³⁷ have specifically discussed hashtag activism on Twitter,³⁸ shedding light on how Twitter has become a public space for protest rather than a mere channel to circulate news and data. In this context, for example, hashtags can be seen as a powerful tool for fighting gender inequalities and gender-based violence,³⁹ or even responding to rape culture.⁴⁰ Communication on Twitter allows users to cluster, rebroadcast, modify or reply to messages, fostering ongoing dialogue and conversation, which makes it perfectly appropriate for digital activism.

In the Canadian context, a case of hashtag activism that gained great public relevance was the #IdleNoMore movement, launched in 2012 by an Indigenous activist and law student who wanted to make known how a bill passed by the Canadian government would negatively affect First Nations

²⁹ Hanafi El Zohiery, “Hashtag Campaigning”, 12.

³⁰ Massimiliano Demata, Dermot Heaney, and Susan C. Herring, eds., *Language and Discourse in Social Media. New Challenges, New Approaches (Altre Modernità 2018)*.

³¹ Marco Bastos, Dan Mercea, and Andrea Baronchelli, “The Geographic Embedding of Online Echo Chambers”, *PLoS ONE*, 13.11 (2018), available at <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0206841>, accessed 7 November 2022.

³² Sylvester Ofori-parku and Derek Moscato, “Hashtag Activism as a Form of Political Action. A Qualitative Analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign in Nigerian, UK, and U.S. Press”, *International Journal of Communication*, 12 (2018), 2480-2502.

³³ This convergence of online and offline activism is regarded as a key aspect determining the success of the 2010 Tunisian uprisings (see Merlyna Lim, “Framing Bouazizi. ‘White lies’, hybrid network, and collective/connective action in the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising”, *Journalism*, 14.7 (2013), 921-941).

³⁴ Sarah Kessler, “Amplifying Individual Impact. Social Media’s Emerging Role in Activism”, in Tristan Anne Borer, ed., *Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights. Mediating Suffering* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 205-215.

³⁵ Moscato, “Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism”, 4.

³⁶ Sasha Costanza-Chock, “Transmedia Mobilization in the Popular Association of the Oaxacan Peoples, Los Angeles”, in Bart Cammaerts, Mattoni Alice and Patrick McCurdy, eds., *Mediation and Protest Movements* (Chicago IL: Intellect Books, 2013), 95-113.

³⁷ Andrew Dillon and Barbara Gushrowski, “Genres and the Web. Is the Home Page the First Digital Genre?”, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 51.2 (2000), 202-205. Saeed Mehrpour and Mohaddeseh Mehrzad, “A Comparative Genre Analysis of English Business E-mails Written by Iranians and Native English Speakers”, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 3.12 (2013): 2250-2261.

³⁸ Among them Tracey J. Hayes, “#MyNYPD. Transforming Twitter into a Public Place for Protest”, *Computers and Composition*, 43 (2017), 118-134.

³⁹ Sherri Williams, “Digital Defense. Black Feminists Resist Violence with Hashtag Activism”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 15.2 (2015), 341-344. Rosemary Clark, “Hope in a Hashtag. The Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed”, *Feminist Media Studies* (2016), 1471-5902.

⁴⁰ Carrie Rentschler, “#Safetytipsforladies. Feminist Twitter Takedowns of Victim Blaming”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 15.2 (2015), 353-356.

peoples. Through hashtags, Twitter users linked media stories about the same topic, fostered commentary, invited people to flash mobs, seminars, and protest events, while supporting activists and community leaders. Twitter has, since then, increasingly become a prominent venue for online activism, which makes it a privileged focus of interest for scientific investigation.

3. Methodology and corpus design

In order to analyse the online communication concerning Grassy Narrows as emerging from Twitter, a hybrid methodology integrating tools pertaining to quantitative analysis with frameworks for qualitative analysis was adopted. Both approaches are meant to uncover relationships between language and social context, paying attention to the discursive strategies employed, as they are “systematic ways of using language [...] at different levels of linguistic organization and complexity to achieve a certain social, political, psychological or linguistic aim”.⁴¹ All texts and discourses bear the mark of power, defining and maximising or minimising issues.⁴² In fact, in any society, “there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse”.⁴³ While discourse practices constitute society and culture (which are, of course, constituted by them in return),⁴⁴ every instance of language use makes its contribution to reproducing and/or transforming society and culture. If then discourse does ideological work, providing specific representations of events, realities, identities, especially collective identities of groups and communities, as in the case of Grassy Narrows, quantitative and qualitative analysis of social media discourse – in the form of tweets – can shed light on how collective opinions are shaped and wider support for social causes is gained.

With their ability to represent experience, express and amplify ideas and opinions, while negotiating interpersonal relationships and alignments, tweets and hashtags can be viewed as a form of social practice, attracting increasingly more activists or ordinary people who wish to engage in public debate through social media.⁴⁵ The platform provides, indeed, an opportunity for a new wave of social and environmental activism, to boost visible action on critical issues.

In this context, framing – as a broad communication theory – appears crucial. Apart from how cases are approached, construed or silenced, the amount of attention given to them, the perspective included in mainstream media discourse, social media and hashtag campaigns can set the boundaries for public debate, by determining salience and directing attention to some specific issues. In other words, events are framed, selecting some aspects and making them more salient.⁴⁶ Indeed, public debate has been traditionally framed by mainstream media: the way news is framed “represents an

⁴¹ Michael Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination. Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 386. See also Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁴ Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis”, in T. A. van Dijk, ed., *Discourse Studies. A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (London: Sage, 1997), 258-284.

⁴⁵ Indeed, micro-blogging, in itself, can be thought of as a form of social practice, adopting the lens offered by Systemic Functional Linguistics (M.A.K. Halliday and Christian Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold, 2004). In terms of meta-functions, hashtags can be said to always fulfil the textual function by organizing a tweet as a communicative unit of meaning or discourse; the ideational function indicates the topic or ‘aboutness’ of the tag; the interpersonal function is realised through the # symbol construing and enacting relationships, affiliations and alignments, while allowing the user to adopt a stance. Far from being mere discourse markers, hashtags allow Twitter users to engage in a more vigorous debate, serving as ideological tools to facilitate group inclusion or exclusion and to emphasize a polarization of point of views, thus contributing to public debate and policy.

⁴⁶ Robert M. Entman, “Framing. Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm”, *Journal of Communication*, 43 (1993), 51-58.

imprint of power, calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others”.⁴⁷ According to many views,⁴⁸ frames have the tremendous power to shape the way in which we interpret certain issues and events, thus ‘priming’ values differentially: “[t]o 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”.⁴⁹

This paper examines how Twitter users may be framing issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows First Nation, possibly changing the portrayal conveyed by mainstream media,⁵⁰ investigating what aspects are made most salient through hashtag campaigning, to get insight into how they influence broader debates about Indigenous rights and living conditions in Canada. Drawing on the assumption that Indigenous communities may suffer from un/under-representation – the media acting as a filter, sometimes silencing environmental disputes and inequities – microblogging is meant to be an online response, a means of self-determination and self-management, which allows users to autonomously frame events related to the community.

Frames can be described as powerful rhetorical tools that induce us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways.⁵¹ They appear as a rhetorical process whereby communicators construct a point of view that encourages specific interpretations of a given fact or event by other actors involved in communication.⁵² Due to its very nature, framing analysis has been often used to investigate mediated communication and social movements,⁵³ which tend to construe meanings and beliefs aligning them with the frames of the expected/desired participants. In fact, by highlighting some aspects of reality and/or events, frames define problems, ‘diagnose’ causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies.⁵⁴ Some steps, in particular, determine participants’ involvement and mobilization through frames:

- diagnostic framing for the identification of a problem and assignment of blame;
- prognostic framing to suggest strategies and solutions to a problem;
- motivational framing that serves as a call for action.

When such steps are covered, proper frames are created and, potentially, changes in society can be achieved.⁵⁵

The corpus analysed for this study was created extrapolating three hashtag streams – specifically #grassynarrows, #freegrassy, #FreeGrassyNarrows – from Twitter micro-blogging site. Overall, 608 tweets were downloaded, totalling 137,492 tokens, through the Premium Search Tweets: Full-Archive

⁴⁷ Moscato, “Media Portrayals of Hashtag Activism”, 6.

⁴⁸ Jim A. Kuypers, “Framing Analysis. How to Conduct a Rhetorical Framing Study of the News”, in J.A. Kuypers, ed., *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009). Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice. Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge, England: CUP, 1991).

⁴⁹ Entman, “Framing”, 51.

⁵⁰ For an investigation of the different portrayals of the case of Grassy Narrows as emerging from national newspapers vis-à-vis local newspapers in Canada, see Maria Cristina Nisco, “Environmental Racism in Canadian News Discourse. The Case of Grassy Narrows”, *Anglistica AION*, 22.1 (2018), 25-43.

⁵¹ Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism*.

⁵² See Jim A. Kuypers, *Bush’s War. Media Bias and Justification for War in a Terrorist Age* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

⁵³ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization”, in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, Sidney G. Tarrow, eds., *From Structure to Action: Social Movement Participation Across Culture* (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1988), 197-217.

⁵⁴ Kuypers, “Framing Analysis”, 182.

⁵⁵ David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Framing Processes and Social Movements. An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26 (2000), 611-639.

API.⁵⁶ The reason for selecting the specific tags was that, at the time of writing, they were the ‘trending’ hashtags connected to the seed terms ‘Grassy Narrows’.

4. Analysing the corpus

For this study, the following research questions were formulated in order to discover frames:

1. How do Twitter users create and negotiate discourses about Grassy Narrows and the main events connected to the community?
2. What themes and frames do users mostly resort to in order to enact practices of resistance through online communication?
3. To what extent does communication via Twitter adhere to the three core framing steps that determine participant mobilization?

In an attempt to respond to these research questions, some framing devices that may have been used – key words, metaphors, labels, that shed light on how some themes are framed – will be specifically looked at, and some illustrative examples from the corpus will be provided with the aim of highlighting the way events related to Grassy Narrows are discursively and linguistically expressed.

The first step of analysis was carried out adopting a quantitative approach. The corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine,⁵⁷ which allowed the extraction of single words or multi-words typical of the corpus under investigation, sorted by frequency. Searching for frequency within a corpus can be an indicator of markedness, and frequency counts can be used (with supporting contextual information) to unveil overt/covert discursive features.⁵⁸ Once retrieved, the terms showing the highest saliency (with regard to frequency) were grouped into thematic categories according to their semantic similarity, based on the assumption that they could provide a snapshot of the main discursive features in the *FreeGrassy* corpus and uncover its discursive specificity. This initial phase of corpus examination was followed by a comprehensive analysis of the context of occurrence of salient lexical items present in the word list through concordance analysis. Viewing the stretch of text where some specific terms appear can be extremely helpful in revealing common patterns and themes within the corpus, consequently, defining its overall focus or topic. Extrapolation of concordance lines may, in fact, have the benefit of indicating the direction to pursue in terms of analysis as guided by the corpus.

Concordances were the starting point of a qualitative analysis based on a meticulous, close reading of the great majority of the tweets comprised in the *FreeGrassy* corpus, paying attention to the most recurrent themes persisting in the tweets collected, which allowed an inductive examination of how they were framed in discourse.⁵⁹ Collectively the frames emerging from the tweets represented perspectives and agendas that somehow ‘competed’ with mainstream portrayals of Grassy Narrows and the Canadian Government. Three macro-discourses or frames could be identified, as listed below:

- Mercury poisoning and health crisis;
- Healing;
- Justice and resistance.

⁵⁶ The Twitter API is a pre-defined interface with which developers can communicate with the Twitter platform. A number of different parameters can be queried – the object tweet, language, geolocation (but some information is not available for all tweets). The Premium Search Tweets: Full-Archive API provides you with tweets since the first one posted in 2006. Tweets are matched and sent back to you based on the query you specify in your request.

⁵⁷ Adam Kilgariff et al., “The Sketch Engine”, in Williams Geoffrey and Sandra Vessier, eds., *Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX International Congress. EURALEX 2004* (Université de Bretagne-Sud: Lorient, 2004), 105-116.

⁵⁸ Paul Baker, *Sociolinguistics and Corpus Linguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2010). See also Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: A&C Black, 2006).

⁵⁹ Please note that any inaccurate spelling/grammar forms or generally unconventional language features contained in the quoted tweets are all authentic. The author has not modified the excerpts in any way.

Mercury poisoning is certainly the most frequent topic in the tweets. Although almost six decades have gone by since the disaster of Grassy Narrows gained public attention and was then acknowledged as such, numerous tweets still frame the debate recalling the unprecedented health crisis that was caused by the river system mercury poisoning.

[1] Even though 90% of the members of the Grassy Narrows community experience mercury poisoning symptoms, no one will take responsibility for it or acknowledge that impact on these individuals #FreeGrassyNarrows

[2] How has this been allowed to go on for so long? It's a national disaster and human rights travesty. Why has the government not brought clean water to all our First Nations and why do families still need to send away their children to attend school #grassynarrows

[3] The ppl of #GrassyNarrows deserve compensation. Mercury poisoning in the #water and the fish impact ppl in every generation, from elders to newborns. All happening under your watch! #freegrassy

The tweets included in this sub-group are linguistically construed through a relevant number of lexical items bearing a very negative semantic prosody – this is the case of ‘disaster’, ‘travesty’, ‘toxic’, ‘poisoning’, ‘death(s)’, ‘destruction’, ‘social catastrophe’, ‘illnesses’, ‘genocide’, ‘neglect’, and so forth. Twitter users tend to frame their posts about Grassy Narrows highlighting the environmental disaster that destroyed both the eco-system and the life of the community who is still paying the highest price in terms of medical conditions and impairments resulting from contamination. Despite the fact that most of the collected tweets mention mercury pollution and the cleaning-up of the river system, some additional references are also made to industrial logging and mining permits, namely further potential cases of abuse by the Canadian government and corporations in general. Indeed, great emphasis is given to the government’s responsibilities for its lack of action over the years, despite its promises and plans to clean up the river system.

What surfaces very clearly, within the tweets relating to this topic, is the overt relation between mercury poisoning and environmental racism:

[4] I better start seeing some #nopipelines and #grassynarrows with these #NoCoalAB hashtags. Says a lot about Canadians that they only speak up about the environment when the government is about to fuck with the parts they use.

[5] The #1 Canadian example of environmental racism is: #GrassyNarrows

[6] Diabetes is a disease of #colonialism. I'm sure there are experts who will disagree w me, but when your lands have been stolen & healthy traditional foods are no longer accessible or poisoned & not safe to eat how can it not be? #GrassyNarrows

[7] Bodies on the ground, bodies on the line, bodies in solidarity, bodies in opposition, to the indifference of the Canadian state. Bodies demanding to be counted, heard, seen. Justice for Grassy Narrows. No one is illegal on stolen land #freegrassy #GrassyNarrowsRiverRun

[8] Denying people clean water and turning your backs on the illnesses your industries have wrought IS genocide. Justice for Grassy! #freegrassy

[9] People from @FreeGrassy crawling to the Department of Indigenous Affairs. This is what that make us do, this is how we feel – that we have to crawl and beg for our rights. #FreeGrassy

Racism remains the major lens through which a great number of tweets frame Grassy Narrows, which is depicted as the first instance of Canadian racism, white colonial violence, and one of the worst cases of neglect in Canadian history.

Moving to the second recurrent topic, healing appears as one of the major frames through which users interested in or advocating for the case of Grassy Narrows discursively construe their tweets. Community members tirelessly campaign to acknowledge the fact that federal and provincial governments as well as corporations are to be considered guilty of recklessly disregarding Indigenous lives and environment. Above all, they urge the construction of a facility or treatment centre to allow residents of Grassy Narrows to stay close to home while receiving treatment, healthcare and assistance.

[10] We are on a healing path for our people and the forest is our treatment centre

[11] Mercury poisoning has had a dreadful impact on everyone, from young people to elders. We call upon both the Federal and Provincial government to make this centre a reality. #FreeGrassy

[12] Community members urge Ottawa to honour pledge to build mercury treatment facility for Grassy Narrows - #GrassyNarrows

[13] BREAKING: #GrassyNarrows First Nation has secured a contract from Canada to provide full funding to build a Mercury Care Home in the community! A big victory but there is still lots of work to do. Let's keep supporting!

This sub-group of tweets often features the use of metaphors to make the issue more relatable to other Twitter users, while enhancing tweets with powerful and figurative imagery. As instance [10] clearly shows, the forest is equated to Grassy Narrows people's treatment centre; nature and the land are the symbol of the people's healing process. As a matter of fact, in 2020, the federal government signed an agreement to build an on-reserve care home to serve the people who were still suffering from mercury poisoning and provide them with necessary support, but it could hardly be viewed as a form of compensation for the devastation that the community has faced over the years. Indeed, after mercury contamination, the community became plagued with intractable problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicides. Therefore, aspects relating to the healing process are addressed with urgency, tweets pressuring public debate and policy to fund the facility and provide it with specialised equipment.

Tightly connected with the previous topics, is the third most frequent frame emerging from the corpus, namely justice and the urge for the government to compensate for what Grassy Narrows people have experienced over the last decades.

[14] The ppl of #GrassyNarrows deserve justice, not more broken promises
They have my solidarity

[15] Why must this still be a struggle? Time to compensate all in #GrassyNarrows and figure out a sustainable future, one that does not include more destruction of the land

[16] #GrassyNarrows community members have fought for 50 years for mercury justice and four generations of Grassy Narrows people have become leaders in the growing grassroots movement for Indigenous self-determination and environmental justice.

[17] Grassy Narrows has turned a decades-long injustice into a national issue that can't be ignored. It's time to ramp up the campaign for mercury justice compensation and protect land and water from industrial logging and mining. #FreeGrassy

[18] When we stand together, anything is possible – and #GrassyNarrows is the perfect example of people power in action. Let's help support the cause and spread the word! #FreeGrassy

[19] The youth of Grassy Narrows, Canada want the river cleaned up. Help amplify their demands to #FreeGrassy from mercury poisoning.

[20] EVERYBODY EVERYBODY EVERYBODY

SIGN / SHARE / SHARE / SHARE / SHARE / SIGN THIS

#GrassyNarrows

Interestingly, tweets concerning this topic seem to uncover a completely different perspective, framing events related to Grassy Narrows in more positive and powerful terms. In fact, analysis reveals that a significant number of lexical items present in the tweets included in this sub-group feature a positive semantic prosody – as shown by ‘justice’, ‘sustainable future’, ‘Indigenous self-determination’, ‘people power in action’. The imperative mood can be often found to prompt other users to do something (for instance, ‘support the cause’, ‘spread the word’, ‘sign’, ‘share’), persuading them to act. Twitter users seem to be more aware of the path followed, of the growing grassroots movement for Indigenous rights that was founded and its ability and potentiality to influence public policy. Special emphasis is also given to youth, who appear to be addressing the community crisis while being at the forefront in the struggle for Grassy Narrows.

Aligning or dis-aligning with the positions of other online interlocutors,⁶⁰ endorsing or dis-endorsing views on issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows, Twitter users influence broader debates about Indigenous rights and living conditions in Canada. They actively contribute to such debates by autonomously framing – and giving resonance to – events related to the community. Indeed, if tweets have a direct and mediated effect on the perceptions of public opinions (as seems to be the case),⁶¹ this form of activism has the benefit of making some positions extremely visible. Due to the platform’s open design which provides users with a public arena for sharing information and opinions, interactions on Twitter can be said to come closest to what is commonly referred to as ‘public debate’. Moreover, they have the additional benefit of re-balancing some existing communication dynamics, allowing certain groups to become more expressive while embracing two pivotal concepts in social media communication, namely freedom and empowerment.

5. Concluding remarks

By taking into account the case of Grassy Narrows, this study seeks to contribute to current research on online practices of resistance in environmental conflicts pertaining to the Canadian context. Social media discourse can be said to hold a central role in how legal disputes are re-contextualised and framed to encourage citizens’ involvement on public policy issues.⁶² More specifically, the way events concerning Grassy Narrows are discursively construed can certainly offer a lens to investigate how they are framed and the potential, underlying power dynamics embedded in questions of visibility and invisibility as forms of violence and institutional racism. Indeed, digital media constitute a means to engage with society’s most pressing and tricky issues to reach a more inclusive public discourse which can grant access to online communication to minority and/or stigmatised groups.

Linguistic and discursive analysis has allowed the identification of how events concerning Grassy Narrows were framed, what topics were recurrently tackled in relation to the specific case, and what frames were generated, namely how Twitter users (and the public in general) prime and are, in turn, primed to evaluate issues relating to Grassy Narrows, providing and receiving contextual cues for potential/alternative interpretations.

In the attempt to respond to the research questions that were formulated for this study, a series of points can be highlighted. In the first place, Twitter users seem to create and negotiate discourses concerning Grassy Narrows resorting to some key topics and themes: mercury poisoning and health crisis, healing, justice and resistance. Grassy Narrows is still mostly framed as Canada’s shame, and moral outrage seems extremely common in users’ posts, protesting over past and present injustices,

⁶⁰ See Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter* and also Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁶¹ Gaisbauer et al., “Ideological Differences”.

⁶² Girolamo Tessuto, Vijay K. Bhatia, Jan Engberg, eds., *Frameworks for Discursive Actions and Practices of the Law* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

infringement of Indigenous rights, lack of healthcare resources, and assistance for vulnerable people. Due to the very nature of tweets, users' geographical and cultural specificities could not be detected,⁶³ therefore analysis does not shed light on who actually generated the emerging frames (the user being a member of Grassy Narrows community or a member of the general public). Individual and collective moral outrage seems to surge from people's anger and frustration for the violation of ethical values, and explode in a sort of written protest on Twitter. Such feelings, however, become the glue that builds a group with a sense of solidarity, against all threats of personal and collective identities, values, and beliefs. It is, therefore, used reactively as a strategy for change and resistance.

Twitter users enact practices of resistance through digital activism which takes the shape of a series of initiatives, dissemination of news, calls for action. In fact, communication via Twitter seems to adhere to the three core framing steps that determine participants' involvement and mobilization through some specific frames. Indeed, the identification of a problem and assignment of blame (diagnostic framing) – which characterises the first sub-group of tweets focused on mercury poisoning, health crisis, and environmental racism – is followed by suggestions of strategies and solutions to the problem (prognostic framing) – with tweets regarding the healing process and the urge to build a treatment centre. As for the last step, motivational framing, a large group of tweets serve the function of calling for action, exhorting users to engage with issues pertaining to Grassy Narrows.

If Indigenous populations have experienced the violence of environmental racism through varying forms of invisibility and collective amnesia, Twitter users seem to undo and resist the power dynamics that allowed the Canadian society to selectively leave First Nations through silent abuse and social neglect. By participating to the production of discourses in the public online sphere, they provide events concerning Grassy Narrows with new meanings, creating competing narratives that affect people's perceptions and value orientations, thus altering the parameters for public debates.

In an expansion of Habermas' concept of public sphere (as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in an identifiable space),⁶⁴ Twitter contributes to the shaping of public opinions and allows differing stances to reach a wide audience characterised by few formal constraints. It can thus be regarded as a sort of counter-public space or sphere, a "parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs".⁶⁵

⁶³ As a matter of fact, Twitter data feature two classes of geographical metadata: 1) tweet location (available when users share their location when posting), 2) account location (based on the 'home' location provided by users in their public profile). Retweets, however, cannot have a place attached to them. Such information was not taken into account because it was not shared systematically by all users.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* trans. by Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

⁶⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), 67.