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Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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CANADA

#OpThunderbird: Anonymous engagement to combat violence against Indigenous women in Canada



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Introduction

Violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada has reached a point of crisis. Faced with persistent insecurity, Indigenous women in Canada are three times more likely to experience spousal violence and seven times more likely to be murdered than non-Indigenous women.¹ Law enforcement around the country has consistently failed to address this issue, with reports of police misconduct, harassment and sexual assault.²

In December 2012, the case of a racially motivated abduction and rape of an Indigenous woman in Thunder Bay, Ontario,³ and subsequent failure by local police to adequately respond, prompted the development of Operation Thunderbird.⁴ Started by a group of local Indigenous women and allies using the Anonymous network,⁵ Operation Thunderbird is a community-based initiative to raise public awareness and pressure local authorities to take effective action. This initiative is part of a larger Indigenous-led movement in Canada called Idle No More, and reflects growing engagement by the Anonymous network in cases of violence against women and girls.

Background

Erosion of Indigenous rights in Canada

The insecurity faced by Indigenous women and girls in Canada is a national human rights tragedy. Despite receiving strong recommendations at the United Nations Human Rights Council,⁶ including the launching

of a national commission of enquiry,⁷ the government of Canada has continued to uphold the status quo.⁸

Despite systemic violence against Indigenous women in the country, individual cases are often given low priority by local authorities and media. In 2005, a Canadian media analysis⁹ suggested significant disparities in how local police and media respond to reports of missing Indigenous women when compared to non-Indigenous women. Reports from Amnesty International¹⁰ indicate widespread failure by local authorities to protect Indigenous women and girls from violence, while recent research conducted by Human Rights Watch¹¹ in the north of British Columbia documents cases of physical and sexual assault by officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

Violence against Indigenous women is part of the growing inequality and marginalisation of Indigenous people in Canada, including endemic child poverty,¹² structural discrimination and the erosion of treaty and land rights.¹³ Despite many issue-focused campaigns, public awareness has been historically low. In November 2012, in response to proposed federal legislation that would lower the threshold of community consent in the designation and surrender of Aboriginal Reserve lands,¹⁴ four women developed a grassroots campaign¹⁵ to raise awareness of the impact of Bill C-45 on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. This campaign developed into Idle No More,¹⁶ a

1 www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=5056509&File=18
2 www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2013/02/12/bc-human-rights-watch-abuse-report.html
3 www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/story/2012/12/31/tb-police-investigate-sexual-assault.html
4 www.wawataynews.ca/archive/all/2013/4/10/operation-thunderbird-rallies-Indigenous-women-thunder-bay_24354
5 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anonymous_%28group%29
6 www.upr-info.org/IMG/pdf/a_hrc_wg.6_16_l.9_canada.pdf

7 www.amnesty.ca/blog/un-committee-canada-needs-comprehensive-action-to-uphold-Indigenous-rights
8 www.vancouversun.com/life/report+finds+Canada+doing+enough+stop+violence+against+aboriginal+women/8315408/story.html#report+finds+Canada+doing+enough+stop+violence+against+aboriginal+women/8315408/story.html
9 Madison, L. M. (2006) *Immediacy, Where Is It For Aboriginal Women Who Are Reported Missing?*
10 www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/Indigenous-peoples/no-more-stolen-sisters
11 www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/13/canada-abusive-policing-neglect-along-highway-tears
12 www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/06/18/f-poverty-first-nations-Indigenous-report.html
13 www.amnesty.ca/blog/un-committee-canada-needs-comprehensive-action-to-uphold-Indigenous-rights
14 www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/10/19/pol-list-2nd-omnibus-bill.html
15 idlenomore.ca/about-us/item/1-history-of-idle-no-more-grassroots-movement
16 www.idlenomore.ca

protest movement that has gained significant support across Canada and internationally. Social media have been an essential part of the movement, to both raise awareness and provide a space for Indigenous people – particularly youth – to speak out and have their voices heard.¹⁷

Anonymous “hacktivism”

Often referred to as “hacktivists”,¹⁸ Anonymous is a loose network of hackers, technologists, activists, human rights advocates, geeks and pranksters, using the name as a banner for disparate collective action to protect and promote the free flow of information.¹⁹

Anonymous gained public attention in 2010 as a result of Operation Payback,²⁰ a series of distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks against websites of financial institutions refusing to transfer funds from donors to WikiLeaks following the US diplomatic cable leaks.²¹ Months later, in 2011, members of the Anonymous network participated in attacks on government websites in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya in support of the Arab uprisings.²²

The Canadian branch of the Anonymous network, CanAnon,²³ has taken a slightly different approach to anonymous activism, raising awareness and rallying support against policies that limit freedom of expression online, including the proposed online surveillance bill, C-30.²⁴ In 2012, members of Anonymous released details through social media about an alleged suspect in the blackmail and sexual assault of a 15-year-old girl who committed suicide after private photos were shared without her consent.²⁵ The allegations were ultimately found to be false, leading some to raise concerns over the negative impacts of online “vigilantism”.²⁶

Operation Thunderbird

On 27 December 2012, an Indigenous woman was abducted and raped by two white men in Thunder Bay, Ontario, in alleged response to ongoing pro-

tests connected to the Idle No More movement.²⁷ During the assault the woman was told by her attackers that she deserved to lose her Treaty rights, referencing recent protests. Reports indicate that local police devoted few resources to investigating the racially motivated crime, and the perpetrators were never found.

After years of similar cases and police response, a group of like-minded Indigenous and allied women and men identified the need for direct action. Using the Anonymous network, Operation Thunderbird was developed to raise awareness and demand that police allocate sufficient resources in order to conduct full investigations.²⁸ In January 2013, the Anonymous network released a video²⁹ from Operation Thunderbird, criticising police response to the assault and releasing descriptions of two suspects. Referencing Anonymous action in other cases,³⁰ the video contained a message to police stating that if no public progress was made, a second phase of Operation Thunderbird would be undertaken.

In February 2013, Operation Thunderbird began a second phase through the development of an online crowdsourced map to demonstrate the extent of violence against Indigenous women in Canada and the United States.³¹ Using Anonymous online networks, Operation Thunderbird receives and shares information on missing Indigenous women, and communicates directly with police and media to address the disparity in resources deployed to protect and bring justice to victims. In an interview, the principal researcher for Operation Thunderbird described the importance of the internet and social media in addressing violence against Indigenous women:

The internet community is the global digital community now connected, discussing and sharing resources like never before. We believe this is useful in terms of knowing what has and has not been done to combat disparity and systemic racism.³²

17 www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/01/11/social_media_helps_drive_idle_no_more_movement.html

18 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hacktivism

19 canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free

20 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Payback

21 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_diplomatic_cables_leak

22 www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/05/201151917634659824.html

23 www.cananon.info

24 www.brockpress.com/focus/a-new-breed-of-activism-unmasking-canada-s-anonymous-culture

25 www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/16/amanda-todd-bully-anonymous-suicide_n_1969792.html

26 www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/hacktivist-group-names-second-person-in-amanda-todd-case/article4619867

27 www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/story/2012/12/31/tb-police-investigate-sexual-assault.html

28 Interview with @org9, Operation Thunderbird, 2 June 2013.

29 www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/story/2013/01/24/tby-anonymous-hacker-thunder-bay-police-investigation.html

30 jezebel.com/5973165/anonymous-releases-more-intel-on-the-alleged-steubenville-rape-crew

31 www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/story/2013/02/06/tby-thunderbay-anonymous-map-tracks-missing-murdered-aboriginal-women.html

32 Interview with @org9, Operation Thunderbird, 2 June 2013.

Using its crowdsourced map and confidential tips from witnesses, Operation Thunderbird raises public awareness through Tumblr and Facebook,³³ using the Twitter handle @anony_mmis to tweet updates and connect to related movements. Although the group has experienced some opposition and online harassment, Operation Thunderbird has developed strong support through connections within the Idle No More movement and hacktivist communities. Members of the group have been involved in online crisis mapping, including with the Standby Task Force during the Libya conflict in 2011.³⁴ In the future Operation Thunderbird plans to investigate sources of funding to develop a website to house databases, documents, research catalogues and a specialised map to assist further research and advocacy.

While Operation Thunderbird has used online platforms to put pressure on local authorities, its members believe that this online advocacy must be tied to offline strategies:

Only by meeting people in person and physically being at the location of the crimes with the intent of demanding answers from authorities will any real longer term impact come from internet-based [...], crowdsourced or digital activism.³⁵

Offline organising has been a regular component of action by Operation Thunderbird, including holding rallies outside of local police headquarters. In April 2013, Operation Thunderbird staged a peaceful protest outside of the Thunder Bay Police Services office, with protestors coming in support from nearby cities and towns. While some of the protestors wore Anonymous Guy Fawkes masks,³⁶ others revealed their identity, including the communications officer of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and families of women who had been murdered or gone missing.³⁷

Surveillance and exclusion

While online platforms and networks have played an essential role in holding local authorities accountable for cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, there are also risks posed by new technology. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the RCMP were accused in 2012 of spying on environmentalists and Indigenous groups in order to provide information

to the energy corporations in the Arctic.³⁸ In May 2013, Canada's Privacy Commissioner confirmed reports that the government had unlawfully spied on Cindy Blackstock, the executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, after her organisation filed a human rights complaint over funding of child services on reserves.³⁹

These cases, as well as recent revelations of US National Security Agency spying, demonstrate the growing importance of privacy and anonymity online. The Association for Progressive Communication's (APC) EROTICS research⁴⁰ from India and South Africa found that while the internet is an increasingly important public space for democratic deliberation, anonymity is key to provide a safe space for the negotiation of rights, particularly for those denied access to other spaces based on sexuality or gender identity.

In addition to increased surveillance of individuals and civil society groups in Canada, experts suggest that because of significant digital divides, the use of social media may exclude individuals living in rural communities from participating in political activism.⁴¹

Conclusions

In March 2013, the outcome document of the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women made recommendations for governments, national human rights institutions, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders to "[s]upport the development and use of ICT and social media as a resource for the empowerment of women and girls, including access to information on the prevention of and response to violence against women and girls."⁴²

"Hacktivists" associated with the Anonymous network are a growing source of support for community-based development and use of technology to prevent and respond to violence against women in Canada. Moving away from DDoS attacks and towards legal protest, outreach and information sharing, groups collaborating under the Anonymous banner are working with local communities to tackle structural inequalities. While questions continue

33 ophthunderbird.tumblr.com/

34 standbytaskforce.wordpress.com/2011/09/01/libya-crisis-map-report

35 Interview with @org9, Operation Thunderbird, 2 June 2013.

36 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guy_Fawkes_mask

37 wawataynews.ca/node/24354

38 www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/4640

39 www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/05/29/conservative_government_found_spying_on_aboriginal_advocate_tim_harper.html

40 www.apc.org/en/node/12804

41 www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/01/11/social_media_helps_drive_idle_no_more_movement.html

42 www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/agreed-conclusions-csw-57th-include-violence-against-women-and-ict

to arise as to the evolving nature of this heterogeneous network, and how it can be held accountable, local Anonymous action to address women's rights issues is having a real impact and merits further study.

Moreover, in considering anonymity and accountability in the public sphere,⁴³ and in light of growing convergence between Anonymous activism and work to combat violence against women, it is essential to critically discuss risks posed by new technology, as well as the barriers to access and engagement.

Action steps

Operation Thunderbird provides important guidance for individuals and civil society groups working to address violence against Indigenous women in Canada. At the same time, further action is needed to strengthen this initiative, and others like it:

- Support community-based social media initiatives to gather and disseminate information, raise awareness, and demand justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women.

- Combine online mobilisation with offline engagement to hold local authorities accountable.
- Work together with community informatics groups to demand greater access to the internet in Indigenous communities.
- Develop strategies for secure online communications, such as those set by the Take Back The Tech (TBTT) campaign.⁴⁴
- Conduct research on the impact of Anonymous activism in advocating for the protection and promotion of women's rights. ■

43 www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/anonymity-accountability-and-public-sphere

44 www.takebackthetech.net/be-safe