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# **Disrupting Hostile Speech on Social Media: Indigenous Fishers and Allies Push Back for Ecojustice**

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**Abstract:** This project considers challenges and opportunities for educators to disrupt hostile exchanges on social media concerning environmental sustainability and cultural practice. Postcolonial theory and discourse analysis are used to analyze fishing-related conversations.

**Keywords:** ecojustice, sustainability, Indigenous studies, digital literacies

The Salish Sea is bounded by Vancouver Island, northwest Washington State, and lower British Columbia. These are our borderlands. They're complex and endlessly contested. Modern maps show the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel dividing the United States and Canada. Look closer, and you'll see a patchwork of reservations in the south and preserves in the north. These lines were established by treaty, backed by military power to delineate who controls the land and resources. Talk to Coast Salish elders. They will tell you about dozens of Nations and Bands whose ancient affiliations have nothing to do with boundaries set by the American or Canadian governments. Imagine yourself going back in time before statehood. You are at a frontier outpost, rubbing shoulders with gold miners, fur traders, and loggers. This is the Old West, a liminal space that remains a powerful (and problematic) symbol in our collective psyche (Hayashi, 2007). Now, overlay all of these interests and jurisdictions onto a policy debate about how to save endangered salmon runs. These are the challenges of promoting healthy biological and social environments around the Salish Sea.

Environmental educators understand that promoting environmental sustainability cannot be separated from issues of social justice. They recognize that problems of environmental degradation often co-occur with human conflict and unequal access to resources (see Bowers, 2017). This is certainly true on the Pacific Coast, where a century of overfishing and habitat destruction has decimated once-mighty runs of salmon. Educators might bring together disparate stakeholders who must work together to save the shared resource. Social media is an important tool to facilitate conversations about environmental sustainability. However, this platform presents considerable challenges (Johns & McCosker, 2015).

This case study compares two examples of contentious exchange on social media between predominantly White sport fishers and First Nation fishers of British Columbia. These tensions are set within a history of contentious relations between fishing groups, who assert conflicting claims to dwindling salmon runs along the Pacific Coast. While this analysis illustrates a particular set of regional issues, it has broader implications for educators who use social media to discuss the environment and social justice. This inquiry builds on a growing body of scholarship combining postcolonial theory with sustainability studies (see Griswold, 2017). I draw on theories of digital discourse (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011) to consider how electronic media present new challenges and opportunities for educators to address hostile conversations.

## **Fishing and Inter-Group Conflict on the Pacific Coast**

For millennia, Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Coast have relied on the harvest of salmon to sustain their communities. Their range was greatly reduced by treaties of the mid-

1800s, which moved Coast Salish populations onto reservations. As token compensation, Coast Salish peoples were guaranteed the right to harvest salmon in their traditional fishing grounds Washington (Gates, 1955). Indigenous fishing rights went largely uncontested until the early twentieth century when improved packing and shipping methods opened new markets for salmon. Predominantly White commercial fishermen rapidly built an industrial fishing industry on the Pacific Coast (Taylor, 1999), while Indigenous fishers were largely shut out of the commercial prosperity. Indigenous workers were employed by canneries in low-level positions, but they were not allowed to fish independently as guaranteed by treaty (Boxberger, 1989). Coast Salish fishers began protesting this violation of treaty rights. Their non-violent resistance became part of the broader Indian Rights Movement of the 1970s (Heffernan, 2013).

Historically, relations between fishing groups in British Columbia have been less volatile, but many of the same contentious issues exist across the international border. Unlike the US, the Canadian government did not specify through treaty that First Nations have the right to fish. Instead, First Nations of lower British Columbia have achieved incremental gains in fishing rights through multiple court decisions in relatively recent times (Harris, 2001).

Predominantly White sport fishers in lower British Columbia watched these events with great concern. As Canadian courts affirmed the fishing rights of First Nations in the Fraser River Basin, sport fishers feared that their access to the fishery would be unfairly curtailed. These fears coincided with precipitous declines of salmon runs. In response, sport fishers in the Fraser River area formed the Sportfishing Defense Alliance, a group dedicated to protecting the rights of sport fishers (Goto, 2018). One of their initiatives involved what they called “Observe, Record, and Report.” SDA members were encouraged to carry video cameras with them on fishing trips so they could record First Nations fishers who allegedly violate fishing regulations. These video recordings would be turned over to law enforcement in order to prosecute violators.

### **Research Design**

I conducted this pilot study in the tradition of participatory action research (PAR), which positions the investigator as an active participant and stakeholder in the area of study (McIntyre, 2008). My stake in the subject matter is deeply personal: I am an adult educator and a lifelong sport angler. Additionally, I am a non-Indigenous person of color who has experienced hostility on the river. In the spirit of PAR, I conducted the research in consultation with the Fraser River Peacemakers, a coalition of leaders from First Nations and sport angling groups.

Two discussion sites were included in the analysis. One is a discussion accompanying a YouTube video showing Indigenous fishing. The discussion is subject to YouTube’s policies concerning hate speech but, otherwise, it is unmoderated. This video drew almost 400 comments over a four-year period. The second case analysis comes from a website devoted to sport angling in the Fraser River basin. This is a closely moderated site subject to strict guidelines for participation. I analyzed 243 discussions, averaging four pages per thread with some threads exceeding 90 pages.

For each of discussion, I identified references to First Nations fishing. Next, I coded each reference as positive, neutral, or negative. For those identified as negative, I analyzed discursive turns, noting how other participants responded to hostile comments directed at First Nation fishers. This approach follows principles of digital discourse analysis (see Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011).

**YouTube Video: Hostility Approaching Hate Speech.** In some ways, this recording is reminiscent of the surveillance videos advocated by the Sportfishing Defense Alliance. It shows Indigenous fishers harvesting and dispatching salmon at a weir on a tributary of the Fraser River.

Presumably the video is “proof” of unethical or improper behavior. However, unlike SDA members, this vigilante bypassed law enforcement and to appeal directly to the court of public opinion. The person who posted the video used the term “massacre” to describe Indigenous fishing practices, leaving no doubt about author’s editorial stance.

Not surprisingly, responses to this video were overwhelmingly negative toward Indigenous fishing. Several participants posted violent threats, which prompted leaders of one First Nation to report the discussion to law enforcement. YouTube administration agreed that hate speech policies were violated, so the discussion was temporarily taken down. Later, the original author reposted the video with a disclaimer that no illegal activities are portrayed in the video. Hostile comments continued to roll in.

In general, complaints aligned with one of the following themes (in order of frequency): (1) Indigenous fishers are not being good stewards of the land; (2) their fishing methods are not traditional; (3) they are not eating the fish; (4) they are killing for profit; (5) they are trying to catch all of the fish; and (6) fishing laws and standards are not equitable. This excerpt shows a tag-team rant about how Indigenous fishers are allegedly not true to their traditional ways:

TB: This an embarrassment to Canada and a shame necklace hung around the neck of our Government....

CG: embarrassing to your culture..

TR: One of the most pathetic things i have ever seen. You think a group of people who utilize something so much would show a little respect. It is actually funny just how pathetic it has gotten....

DS: ... You should be ashamed as your ancestors would be turning in their graves on the lazy methods you do in life....

AP: Fuck all u white guys our people the natives were here first and that’s the way we did it even before the honkys were around so fuck u

FS: I have been fishing this river for over twenty years and this method has been used since I can remember. A weir is a traditional method (minus shopping carts) and is not easy to build. Most of the fishstock escapes slaughter in high water when the water surges the weir....

It is important to note the presence of oppositional voices in the vitriolic storm. Natives mounted a vigorous defense even though they were vastly outnumbered. Facing a barrage of racial insults from multiple fronts, AP fired back with his own epithets. FS responded with a more reasoned argument, rebutting an earlier claim (preceding the excerpted section) that weirs trap all salmon in the river.

Unfortunately, oppositional voices tended to be drowned out in the sheer volume of negative allegations. The asynchronous nature of threaded discussions made it difficult for Native respondents or allies to respond to a specific comment. By the time a Native respondent composed a well-reasoned rebuttal (as illustrated above), a dozen other posts might go up, taking the discussion different directions. Several days may pass between posts. A Native respondent might post a cogent rebuttal to false claim, but the author of the original claim was long gone. There was no real opportunity to influence that person’s beliefs.

**Moderated Discussion Site: Hope for Changing Hearts and Minds.** Discourse on the recreational angling website differed substantially from the YouTube discussion, even though the subject matter was similar. The website houses a discussion forum where members can discuss any topic related to fishing in lower British Columbia. In order to post comments, people must first register. They may use an anonymous screen name when posting, but the webmaster has access to the member's identifying information. Forum participants must agree to a set of netiquette rules in order to post. These include not "posting of offensive or illegal information, files and pictures." The rules specify that "personal attacks will be removed by moderators." Additionally, the webmaster enforces various unwritten expectations. He conveys in his moderating comments that opinions should be supported by factual evidence. This informal policy has created a culture of citation on this forum. While participants may have strong feelings about Indigenous fishing, they understand that their posting privileges are at risk if their claims stray too far from documented facts.

In coding negative comments about Indigenous fishing, I found many of the same themes that were expressed on the YouTube video. However, the frequency was different. The most frequent complaints had to do with (1) allegedly illegal fishing practices or (2) inequity of fishing regulations. Other complaints alleged that (3) First Nations sell salmon for profit or that (4) they catch too many fish. Sometimes, forum participants would bring up a topic by posting an op-ed article or other published source that criticizes Indigenous fishing. The published text served as a surrogate voice, allowing the individual to express his or her disapproval while staying within netiquette rules.

In the following example, a sport angler posted a wire service article stating that the sockeye salmon fishery would be closed on the Fraser River due to low returns. Two other sport anglers lamented the closure and suggested that the fishery should be closed for several years in order to restore the run. The conversation continued:

**RT:** Shut it down completely for a few years at least- to let the runs rebuild cuz it's only going to get worse if they don't. Especially with the native fishery on the Fraser, they don't really care about us sports fishermen, that's obvious, they just want the fish No matter what....

**Webmaster:** ... You have two choices: 1) Continue to point fingers at each group that utilize the resource and make the life of those who manage it difficult so we get our "fair" share of catch. 2) Forget what took place in the last couple of years, focus on rebuilding the stock and fishery by working cooperatively with FOC and other groups that share a common interest. Pick one....

**CM (to Webmaster):** you are right but memories are hard to forget that's why there memories continuing to point is fruitless but we do it in hopes that our voices maybe heard

**FA:** What happens if one user group decides not to participate and continues fishing 24/7?

**KM:** Yeah shut down the sockeye fishery... Now with the river closed who will be there to monitor the illegal native netting

**TF:** It's pretty silly isn't it...if you want springs (Chinook salmon), put aside the flossing gear and use bar rods! Almost 0 chance of hooking sockeye that way, catch springs and

the river remains open. ∴) (The Webmaster) is very right. If we all want to have a resource that is renewable and available for all, we all need to work together....

As in the YouTube discussion, participants on this thread launched a litany of unsubstantiated complaints about Indigenous fishing practices being unfair or illegal. The only evidentiary source was a newspaper article that has nothing to do with Indigenous fishing. In this case, the webmaster did not challenge the lack of evidence but, rather, he tried to redirect the conversation by asking participants to focus on ways of restoring the fishery. It was TF who challenged his peers directly by pointing out that recreational anglers sometimes use unsporting methods (e.g., flossing, which is a form of snagging) to catch salmon. The implication was that sport fishers are hypocritical in criticizing Indigenous fishing methods. TF's final statement was exceptional. He proposed cooperation with First Nations to protect the resource.

This conversation differs from the YouTube discussion in important ways. First, it is actually a discussion with people addressing each other as conversational partners. In contrast, the YouTube exchange is more analogous to strangers writing insulting messages on a bathroom wall. The YouTube participants had no vested interest in being together, whereas those on the fishing forum wanted to remain members of the virtual community. Consequently, they were more willing to abide by a common set of rules and they returned to the discussion thread multiple times. The webmaster's role was key on this site. He was an active participant in many discussions, and he frequently interjected comments encouraging participants to steer clear of personal attacks. Perhaps most encouraging were instances of other sport anglers, such as TF, stepping in to encourage civil and reasoned discourse. Conversations were not guided solely by the regulatory actions of the webmaster. It appears that the community was starting to develop a culture of civility. It is important to note that Indigenous voices were largely absent from this discussion site. I suspect the conversation would be different in the presence of Indigenous fishers.

### **Implications**

TF was absolutely correct in observing that Non-Indigenous sport anglers and Indigenous fishers must work together to preserve the fisheries on which the both depend. However, cooperation is impossible without some basis for mutual understanding and respect. This is exceedingly difficult in the context of post-colonization. Many in the dominant society maintain distorted perceptions of Natives in relation to the environment. Marker (2006) describes a tenacious stereotype, illustrated most memorably in a 1970s advertisement known as the "Crying Indian." The public service announcement showed an actor in Native American attire paddling a canoe along a polluted landscape. He sheds a single tear as trash is thrown at his feet. Marker astutely points out that the ad fetishizes Indigenous peoples. While they are upheld as supreme guardians of the environment, they are simultaneously expected to remain in an imagined state of pre-contact purity, residing pastorally in an untouched natural world. If modern Natives do anything that violates these impossible expectations, they are condemned by the dominant society for allegedly betraying their culture. This would explain the vitriolic response to Indigenous fishers using aluminum dip nets or selling salmon. I would argue that Non-Native bystanders cannot comment responsibly on Indigenous fishing (much less engage in cooperative efforts) if they maintain such harmful and distorted beliefs.

This is an opportunity for transformative learning. Environmental educators might facilitate conversations about how multiple stakeholders can preserve and share resources. Before this can happen, however, educators must help participants to unpack how they perceive themselves and others in relation to the environment. This work requires a broadened definition

of environment to include, not only the physical and biological context, but also the socio-economic and political contexts.

Social media shows both peril and promise as a site for ecojustice education. In theory, social media platforms could reach large numbers of people in a cost-effective manner. However a completely open forum might be toxic for learning. Educators would need consider how to overcome these technological and procedural challenges:

- The anonymity of screen names undermines personal accountability.
- The time delay of asynchronous discussion often prevents direct communication between a hostile author and a challenger.
- The linear nature of discussion threads makes it difficult to attach a particular response to a given comment.
- The fluid and ephemeral nature of electronic communication makes it difficult to address complicated issues that require extended commentary.

The example of the dedicated fishing suggests that productive conversations can occur on social media. If educators were to use a social media platform for ecojustice education, they would be wise to articulate and actively enforce rules for participation. The role of the facilitator is critical, but facilitation methods are not sufficient to ensure success. Participants must have a vested interest in working together for extended periods. They must be willing to look critically at their own beliefs and to defer judgment of others.

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