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Meme and Protest



Figure 1: Orange shirt day.

The protest meme that I chose to write about is one depicting a group of people wearing orange shirts with “Every Child Matters” written on them. I chose this meme because the subject of Indigenous people is very important to me.

After watching the ‘America the Great’ show at Disney World, I was upset at how the native Americans were perceived as savages and how they painted the Americans for being heroes for killing off the natives in mass quantities to take over the land. I felt like if we were going to be teaching American history, we should tell it in a way that did not dishonor and dehumanize the people that were brutally murdered and mistreated but told the reality of how America became America and the truth about the treatment of the native people. I took my anger to social media in a post and explained my feelings. This with me met with a lot of angry comments back about I should feel grateful to live in such a great country and not to step on the flag. I was shocked, all I wanted was to shed light on the whole picture and not let the Indigenous people’s stories be tainted.

This fueled the idea for project between my husband and I of reaching out to groups of indigenous tribes and creating story maps and documenting their history so that their stories can be told. While starting to gather information for our project, we have discovered a lot of cases of mistreatment for these people and how a lot of it goes unreported simply for the fact they are indigenous. This research has led us to finding out about the “National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

Every year in Canada on September 30th, people are encouraged to wear orange shirts for the ‘National Day for Truth and Reconciliation’ holiday, meant to commemorate the legacy of the Canadian Indian school system. Many people will march the streets wearing these orange shirts or will change their social media backgrounds to the color orange in support of the holiday. The movement to shed light on what was once a network of boarding schools meant for indigenous people. The purpose of these schools was to isolate the Indigenous children and to assimilate them into the dominant Canadian culture. They wanted these children to adhere to the European culture and forget about their own culture. These schools were littered with abuse and of the around 150,000 children were placed into these schools, and the number of school related deaths are unknown because of ill kept records, but the estimates range from 3,200 to over 6,000 (“Canadian Indian Residential School Gravesites”, 2021). Many of the schools did not share news of these child deaths and would bury the children in unmarked graves. Largely, but not completely, the bodies of these children have been found in shallow, unmarked graves on the properties of residential schools owned by Catholic churches. Because of this the Canadian government and Catholic church has been blamed with the majority of the responsibility for these children’s deaths. According to the Indigenous Foundations website Indigenous Foundations “From the 1990s onward, the government and the churches involved—Anglican, Presbyterian, United, and Roman Catholic—began to acknowledge their responsibility for an education scheme that was specifically designed to “kill the Indian in the child.” On June 11, 2008, the Canadian government issued a formal apology in Parliament for the damage done by the residential school system. In spite of this and other apologies, however, the effects remain”

(Hanson, 2020). While apologies by some parties may have been issued, the structural violence that it started remains.

Because of the Catholic churches involvement, especially in British Columbia, many churches there have been burned, including St. Ann's Catholic Church and the Chopaka Catholic Church, after the discovery of 215 children buried on the site (Chavez, 2021). Though it wasn't only the Catholic church that was involved in the kidnapping and mistreatment of indigenous children, Protestant and other denominations were involved as well. And churches of the Protestant denomination have been burned as well.

Not only in Canada, but throughout the world indigenous groups are largely overlooked. Memes like this one aim at adding more visibility to these far too often overlooked groups. The #everychildmatters movement, in addition to the memes produced to visually display their message, is intended to put a spotlight on them. Even if that involves advocating for extreme measures (see figure 2). The atrocities done to these people for centuries is answered by extreme measures. And memes serve as a useful vessel for sending these answers out into the online world for all to see. Memes, like any form of communication, are just another tool we use as humans. Communication is incredibly important to us. Whether that be in the form of writing a letter, painting a picture, or making a phone call. We learn about the world outside of ourselves via communication. And memes, while still a new form of communication, are turning out to be a very useful one. It's difficult to reach a large group of people by making a phone call or sending a text message. It's difficult to tell a story to an entire country through any form of communication. Paintings can spread a message further than most methods. But memes allow us to share a message, through humor or empathy most often, with a wide audience, potentially everyone who uses the internet, simultaneously. And of course, they can also be used to spread false information or to hurt others. But that's the case with any method of communication. Memes are just another tool that we can use to say what we want to say. But unlike a letter to a friend, they have far more potential to reach a large audience. And in a case like the one discussed in this paper, that means a better chance for a typically overlooked group to be heard.

"Catholic church lights up in orange in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples"



Figure 2: Catholic Church on Fire

Works Cited

“Canadian Indian Residential School Gravesites.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 8 Nov. 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Indian_residential_school_gravesites.

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