

## Freedom Train: Mobilizing Alternative Media

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In 2012, as efforts grew to move more Canadian oil into international markets, members of a group of First Nations communities undertook a cross-country protest to protect their lands from pipeline encroachment. This analysis of documents produced and shared by organizers of Freedom Train 2012 maps modes of mobilizing participation across media spaces. Drawing upon alternative media literature, this article proposes a turn from analyzing how protest movements use media tools to how protest movements can be understood as forms of alternative media. The article concludes by advocating further study of alternative media practices to attend to how traditionally marginalized voices and cross-community communication networks contest industrial, governmental, and mainstream media power.

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In the spring of 2012, members of a group of northern British Columbia First Nations communities, self-identifying as the Yinka Dene Alliance, traveled across Canada to protest the Enbridge Northern Gateway, a pipeline that—if realized—would carry Alberta bitumen to Pacific Coast tankers. Arguably less well known internationally than the Keystone XL pipeline, which is proposed to bring Canadian oil to the U.S. Gulf Coast, the Northern Gateway project is nonetheless similarly representative of a domestic drive to move bituminous oil out of landlocked Alberta, a province immediately north of the U.S. state of Montana. Though not all First Nations and Métis people oppose the Enbridge Northern Gateway line, perhaps its most vociferous opponents have been Indigenous communities from British Columbia's remote northwest. No oil pipeline has crossed this region before (Leggett, Bateman, & Matthews, 2013). In 2012, members of some of these First Nations communities organized Freedom Train, a 3,800-kilometer rail journey from a first rally in Jasper, Alberta, to a last in Toronto, Ontario, Canada's financial and population center. On arrival, they demonstrated at the Enbridge pipeline company's annual shareholders' meeting. Throughout their journey, Freedom Train participants offered

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online written, photographic, and video accounts of their movement. As well, they made stops in cities across the country to rally and to meet with local Indigenous groups and supporters. They described this exercise as, “taking our message across the country, but . . . also about meeting and listening to the messages of our friends from other communities” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012a, para. 2). Freedom Train thus interrupted nation-building narratives that render new oil pipelines necessary to Canada’s economic development and sustainability. By journeying to Canada’s largest urban center, Freedom Train participants called upon people across the country to engage with their protest.

In this process, I argue an alternative media site was also realized. To contribute to how we might broaden the study of alternative media, this article surveys the movement’s dissemination of messages of protest, its creation of spectacles of opposition, its facilitation of information exchange, and its mobilization of allies across the nation. By analyzing protest as alternative media—rather than analyzing how social movements and protesters use media tools—the media practices of social movement organizers can be studied as we might study the practices of other media makers: as learned, coordinated, and refined with experience. Such an analysis would position social movement organizers not as responding to perceived “lay theories of news media” (McCurdy, 2013, p. 59), or intuitively using new and social media, but as empowered media makers operating within the field of alternative media.<sup>2</sup> Treating the organization and performance of protests as an analytical whole opens possibilities; for example, to adapt questions Chris Atton (2008) has put forward, we might ask more of how narratives are decided and shaped.

The challenge of examining how a social movement can be read as alternative media is inspired by Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts, and Nico Carpentier (2007), who argue that political actions, insofar as they “define a collective identity” and communicate to a public, “become a communication medium, which extends our understanding of alternative communication beyond a media-centric perspective” (p. 109). In examining the case of the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers’ Movement, Bailey et al. analytically break out the movement’s “repertoire of action, communication, and alternative media” (p. 108), to some extent instrumentalizing the alternative media that is produced even as they highlight its contributions. Treating media as among the tools taken up by social movements is a common thread through recent social movement media case studies.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I shift the object of analysis from how Freedom Train organizers used media practices to how the Freedom Train movement, as it traveled across the country, can be understood as alternative media. To do this, I primarily focus on documents produced

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<sup>2</sup> See Benson and Neveau (2005) for a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s journalistic field and Atton (2008) on alternative media as its own field.

<sup>3</sup> Consider as examples Bart Cammaerts’s (2007) discussion of how a Belgian activist group used online and off-line communication strategies to meet different organizational, media, and policy-changing goals as well as his (2012) discussion of a “mediation opportunity structure”; Alice Mattoni’s (2013) elaboration of how “social movement actors develop *repertoires of communication*” (p. 46, emphasis in original) and what this demands of future study; Dorothy Kidd’s (2015) analysis of Occupy participants’ use and creation of media; and Thomas Poell and José van Dijck’s (2015) argument that social media use by activists allows them to make broader public appeals. This list is not exhaustive, though it is representative of analyses that hold media practices inside an activist’s toolbox.

by Freedom Train participants immediately before and during the April–May 2012 event. These include movement descriptions, schedules, and blog entries posted to the Freedom Train website and press releases issued on behalf of the Yinka Dene Alliance. Government press releases and transcripts of speeches posted online, as well as news reports published by Canadian newspapers and searchable via Google or the online databases EBSCOhost and ProQuest, are treated primarily as supporting material to illustrate Canada’s pipeline discourse between 2006 and 2016. News reports about Freedom Train published in May 2012 are also discussed to contrast mainstream and other news coverage of the event.

Ultimately, my analysis of Freedom Train documents aims to unpack the workings of the alternative media site by highlighting how its producers related to broader narratives and other media. Future studies in this vein would be served by a further mix of interviews with media makers and field research. However, by centering documentary evidence, I demonstrate how online and off-line efforts communicated a reframing of national issues and introduced ways for communities to relate to one another. This article thus attends to three elements of the Freedom Train movement that contribute to framing it as an alternative media site, and it offers a starting point for further consideration of this shift in analysis. These three elements include the expressed messages of Freedom Train organizers, the train itself as a symbolic meeting point, and continued mobilization of participation and memory outside the time line of the cross-country protest.

The following sections map the conjuncture from which Freedom Train emerged; review literature that brings together alternative media, communications, and social movement theories; and illustrate how a protest can work as a site of alternative media and how a movement’s (alternative) mediation work carries empowering consequences. In closing, I briefly describe how a new Canadian government, elected in the fall of 2015, has approached oil sands pipeline debates before elaborating upon links between this case study and broader alternative media research.

### **Mapping the Pipeline**

If realized, the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline would start in Canada’s Prairies in northern Alberta and cross the Rocky Mountains, passing through forests, rivers, creeks, and rural communities in northern British Columbia. Altogether, the \$6.5 billion pipeline would stretch nearly 1,180 kilometers and each day carry as many as 525,000 barrels of bituminous oil to tankers and 193,000 barrels of condensate to thin the oil in the other direction (Enbridge, n.d.). From its Kitimat, British Columbia, terminus, the Asia-bound tankers would navigate small islands and narrow channels, along routes that cross “waters used by Aboriginal groups, commercial and recreational fisheries, sailors and kayakers, tourist vessels, ferries, and other shipping” vessels (Leggett et al., 2013, p. 6), before hitting open water.

The project has been touted as necessary for Canada’s economic future as a whole by industry and, until a 2015 change in government, by federal political leaders. It would allow Alberta’s bitumen to find a market outside North America that offers higher prices than those available via trade with the United States. Before the Canadian government, then under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, offered its conditional approval of the project in 2014 (Government of Canada, 2014), it appointed a joint Environmental Assessment Agency–National Energy Board panel to weigh the project’s benefits and

hazards. The three-member panel traveled all over British Columbia and Alberta in 2012 and 2013, holding hearings that included the oral testimonies and evidence of First Nations and Métis people, many of whom spoke of traditional land and water use that could be interrupted by pipeline construction or potential spills. By moving away from the sites of these hearings and creating new opportunities to share and amplify opposition to the Enbridge Northern Gateway project, Freedom Train mediated a reordering of the broader discussion of the proposed pipeline and a refusal of national narratives of economic growth and prosperity, working toward refocusing the scale of the debate.

### Freedom Train as Alternative Media

To make the link between the symbolic work of protest movements and the extent to which such movements can be perceived as a form of media, alternative media scholars have drawn upon Alberto Melucci's (1996) book, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*.<sup>4</sup> Melucci writes that movements work as media when they illuminate problems and conflicts that are not already being dealt with in public or political spheres. By highlighting otherwise ignored or marginalized issues, protests as media open the possibility for political action and response. This article pushes this argument further: If elements of protest actions that articulate social problems by "naming" issues (Melucci, 1996, pp. 36–37) can be viewed as media, can they also be viewed as forms of alternative media? To make this claim demands a flexible approach to alternative media, recognizing its purpose as contesting social and media power (Couldry, 2003) and challenging what media is and how it operates. Such an approach, following Kozolanka, Mazepa, and Skinner (2012), focuses on alternative media's "*structure, participation, and activism*," as different from but operating in relationship to the practices of mainstream media (pp. 15–16, emphasis in original). This definition emphasizes *processes* of contestation, opening up possibilities for more participatory or dialogue-driven communication, mobilizing support, and inviting multiple articulations of the issues and problems to which an organization or network is providing alternative responses or solutions. Unlike a protest, such solutions may not include appealing to recognized institutions of power for response or action. Instead, they may constitute alternative framings of issues, education, and community creation as well as mobilization.

In the case of Freedom Train 2012, organizers were clearly calling upon the Enbridge pipeline company and its stakeholders to cancel its plans for a pipeline through northern British Columbia. In this sense, they proceeded as a traditional protest, appealing to an institution to reconsider its agenda and take new or different action.<sup>5</sup> However, claims made by Freedom Train participants, and efforts to connect with a range of communities, also spoke to a longer-term advocacy for and insistence upon different ways of thinking about pipelines, the environment, and Indigenous rights than what fits within the scope of Enbridge's responsibilities. For example, Chief Jackie Thomas of the Saik'uz First Nation is quoted describing Freedom Train's intent as such:

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<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Atton (2004), Cammaerts (2012), Couldry (2001), and Szerszynski (2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Lipsky's (1968) definition of protests and discussion of appeals to, and dependence upon, broad public support. A number of scholars have since focused on the relationship between protests, public appeal, and media coverage as pivotal to protesters' success in meeting their goals (see della Porta & Diani, 2006; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

This is about our freedom to choose our future, our freedom to live according to our culture, our freedom to govern ourselves, and our freedom from the catastrophic risks of an Enbridge pipeline oil spill. We are fighting for our very survival. An oil spill into our lands and waters threatens our health, our culture and our very existence as separate peoples. (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2014a, para. 1)

While Enbridge is able to change course on the Northern Gateway pipeline project, the company has no real avenue for engaging with much broader questions of decolonization or self-government. Chief Thomas's description of what drove Freedom Train moves beyond an antipipeline position into a broader engagement with Indigenous politics of resistance and self-determination in Canada.

To read Freedom Train as alternative media, then, we must differentiate how the movement and its members staged some events to invite participation and identification while acknowledging that other events took up a more traditional protest logic of engaging and securing mainstream media attention. Both categories of activity challenge expectations of the extent to which First Peoples might have direct access to creating, negotiating, and managing how they are represented by media institutions in a settler-colonial setting.<sup>6</sup> Examples of how Freedom Train adapted to mainstream media's expectations of protest—"hav(ing) spokespersons, issu(ing) statements, conced(ing) interviews, grant(ing) access to journalists, etc." (Cammaerts, 2012, p. 124)—may test the boundaries of alternative media. These adaptations invite us to think less of alternative media as a parallel and separate pathway for communication and more as a mode that may at times cross or intersect with the mainstream. These moments of invitation also resonate with Lorna Roth's (2005) use of the term "cultural persistence" (p. 17) to examine how First Peoples in Canada use and produce media to define and pursue their own terms of engagement in addition to or in excess of resistance. For instance, rather than yielding to the schedule and locations for the government-appointed review of the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline, through Freedom Train, the Yinka Dene Alliance mounted a media effort that targeted small and large media centers across much of the country on a time line largely of their own determination. Fresh press releases were issued nationally ahead of each rallying stop, consistently incorporating new comments from members of the movement that drew clear connections between local issues and opposition to the

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<sup>6</sup> A range of Indigenous media scholarship takes up issues of mainstream media access and representations, much of which points to ways that First Peoples have been marginalized from such media production, and the effects of this marginalization (see Bredin & Hafsteinsson, 2010). Among examples, see comparative historical analyses of representations of indigenous peoples in Canadian newspaper coverage dating back to the late 19th century (Anderson & Robertson, 2011; Harding, 2006); Lorna Roth's (2005) discussion of "early visual representations of First Peoples in Canada" across media (pp. 52–60); Gail Valaskakis's (1994) analysis of the use of popular culture representations in news coverage of First Nations blockades in Quebec in the summer of 1990; and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (2014) pointed critique of mainstream news coverage of the Idle No More movement in late 2012 and early 2013. This article owes much to analyses and critiques of Indigenous people's interactions with mainstream media, a sample of which is listed here. Such work has opened space for imagining alternative avenues to cross-cultural communication, message amplification, and media access.

proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway project.<sup>7</sup> For example, on arrival in first Saskatoon and then Winnipeg, links were made between pipeline spills reported by Enbridge outside both Prairie cities five and two years earlier, respectively (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012b, 2012c). Drawing out such connections shed new light on spills that took place in isolated areas and worked as a direct counterpoint to media narratives that located opposition to the Enbridge Northern Gateway project in British Columbia's First Nations communities and environmental organizations alone. In a release issued ahead of the Winnipeg rally, Hereditary Chief Tso Dih of Nak'azdli is quoted as saying,

We are fighting to protect the public too, not just our communities. Enbridge's pipelines and oil supertankers aren't in Canada's interest, and we'll do Canadians a favor by putting a stop to them. (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012b, para. 7)

Winnipeg is about 2,700 kilometers east of Kitimat, British Columbia. By weaving an interprovincial narrative about pipelines, Freedom Train riders from northern British Columbia were not waiting for someone else to expound upon the national costs and benefits of the project—as would be provided the following year in the government-appointed joint review panel's final report on the Enbridge Northern Gateway. Nor did they wait for Canadians elsewhere to turn attention to a remote corner of the country. Rather, at four major cities (Edmonton, Alberta; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; Winnipeg, Manitoba; and, finally, Toronto, Ontario), they endeavored to commandeer media attention with public displays of protest and solidarity.

It is difficult, years later, to measure their success in capturing mainstream media attention. Newspaper stories, collected in library databases, are easiest to revisit, while radio and television broadcasts are harder to locate via website-based archives. Acknowledging this, but aiming to offer a snapshot of Freedom Train's news coverage, below I briefly assess broadsheet newspaper coverage of the movement in the *Edmonton Journal* (owned by the national Postmedia Network Inc. newspaper chain), *The Toronto Star* (owned by the TorStar Corporation, which also owns other newspapers in Ontario), and *The Globe and Mail* (which is part of an ownership structure that includes a private national broadcaster, CTV). The stories each of these publications wrote about Freedom Train are retrievable online; though archives of the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* and *Winnipeg Free Press* are available in the same databases, there are no archived stories with the terms "Freedom Train" or "Yinka Dene Alliance" from May 2012 in these newspapers.

Before the Freedom Train rallies in Edmonton and Toronto, local newspapers announced details of planned public events (see Hasham, 2012; Stolte, 2012). A story I wrote as a reporter following the Edmonton rally was published in the "A" section of the *Journal* the next day alongside two photographs (Audette, 2012). In Toronto, the *Star* published two stories related to Freedom Train the day after the rally at Enbridge's annual general meeting. The first, printed with photographs and at the front of the paper's "B" section, detailed the number of supporters to join the rally and included short quotes from a

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<sup>7</sup> These press releases, issued via the international distribution website marketwired.com, included contact information for a Vancouver-based communications firm and relayed comments from Freedom Train participants (Yinka Dene Alliance 2012b, 2012c, 2012d).

cross-section of parties, including First Nations members, Enbridge's CEO, shareholders, and then-natural resources minister Joe Oliver (Lu, 2012). In its "A" section, news of the Freedom Train was included in a larger piece about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police monitoring the Yinka Dene Alliance's meetings, social media and media presence, and generating monthly intelligence reports (Lukacs & Groves, 2012). Ultimately the alliance was positioned at the fore of a narrative of "legitimate opponents of resource developments like the Northern Gateway" being "demonized" by the government of the day and treated as "radicals" (Lukacs & Groves, 2012). Despite a handful of stories naming the Yinka Dene Alliance as opponents to the Enbridge Northern Gateway plan between 2010 and 2012, *The Globe and Mail* (Canada's oldest national newspaper) made no mention of the Freedom Train movement until its arrival in Toronto. The day Freedom Train activists and their allies were scheduled to rally outside the Enbridge meeting, the *Globe* published a story indicating Enbridge was seeing growing support among First Nations for the pipeline, with the notable exception of those "nearest" British Columbia's coast, including members of the Yinka Dene Alliance (Vanderklippe, 2012).

In Canada's national Indigenous media, detailed accounts of the movement can be found in the archives of the newspaper *Windspeaker* at the start of May, including news of when, why, and how the Freedom Train would roll out (*Windspeaker* news briefs, 2012). After the event, *Windspeaker* published an interview with one of the hereditary chiefs who was part of the movement (Narine, 2012). Searching for the term "Freedom Train," or for the terms "Yinka Dene" and "Toronto," in the online archives of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in 2016, just two stories can be found: a three-minute feature story reported in Edmonton that included interviews and images from the day's protest (Laboucan, 2012) and a story just under a minute long that touched on the movement's arrival in Winnipeg with an anchor's voice-over and a short clip of a British Columbia chief's address to an unseen audience ("Anti-pipeline Freedom Train," 2012).

These snapshots, though varied, offer insight as to why an alternative, or more complete, narrative of Freedom Train was necessary. To this end, I turn now to the messages shared through Freedom Train 2012. Going forward, it is important to highlight the now-archived status of the movement's website, originally <http://freedomtrain2012.com>, and now found online using the Internet archive *Wayback Machine*.<sup>8</sup> In researching and writing this article, the original website and its regularly updated blog, "Notes From the Freedom Train," served as primary sources of information about the protest's background, intent, and community networking. However, I do not suggest the website itself could stand alone as an example of alternative media. For example, it offered no avenue for online response or interaction, except for a petition (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012e). This absence challenges key

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, the Yinka Dene Alliance's website remains online (<http://yinkadene.ca/index.php/home>), as does its Facebook account, featuring pictures from Freedom Train. A short documentary featuring the Freedom Train riders and their stories, produced by the Yinka Dene Alliance, directed by Ryan Paterson, and filmed by Tiffany Hsiung, has an active home on the Alliance's website (<http://yinkadene.ca/freedomtrain>). The *Wayback Machine's* archive of the Freedom Train website can be found at <http://web.archive.org/web/20140107111902/http://freedomtrain2012.com/>.

criteria for alternative media—the integration of processes for participation—and invites deeper analysis of Freedom Train’s horizontal processes for producing “live,” or off-line, events.

### ***Shared Messages***

Freedom Train emerged from an alliance of members of Carrier and Sekani First Nations communities in northern British Columbia opposed to the construction of the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012f). The Yinka Dene Alliance presents the pipeline and associated tanker traffic as illegal should it cross their traditional territories, “threaten(ing) the very survival of First Nations peoples with devastating oil spills” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012f, para. 2). The groups describe as much as a quarter of the proposed pipeline and tanker route as crossing their territories (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012f), implicitly note the absence of negotiated treaties in much of British Columbia, and explicitly highlight the unique cultural aspect of their ongoing protest:

We have never given up our Title, Rights and legal authority over our lands. As self-governing Nations, we have a legal and moral responsibility to protect everyone from the harms that are sure to result if this pipeline is built. . . . Our entire culture, our language, our way of being in the world, are directly tied to the land and water and the creatures around us. Gathering our foods and medicines is one of the central parts of our culture, our families and our community life. Our very existence as separate peoples depends on this. (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012g, paras. 1, 5)

Through a series of events and press releases, as well as cooperation with other First Peoples (see “We will protect our rivers,” 2010), the Yinka Dene Alliance was already a prominent opponent of the pipeline before members organized Freedom Train, and through other public efforts it remains so at the time of writing. For the purpose of this article, however, I focus on Freedom Train for its ability to move the pipeline battle from isolated rural areas hardly mapped on mainstream Canadian imagination to downtown Toronto. Not only could this move broadcast messages to a wider audience, it also drew allies and participants from a broader geographic base.

As discussed above, alternative media involves contesting and reframing how issues are approached. This activist ethic includes challenging the very authority of media, government, and industry by naming, unpacking, and challenging the rhetoric that underlies common, or mainstream, understanding of issues of economic, community, and pipeline development. In the case of Freedom Train, we see the construction of counterhegemonic messages, including opposition to the pipeline despite industry and government discourses of nation building and economic growth; refusal to submit to industry-driven and media-reported discourses of consensus building; and recognition of Indigenous ways of life.

At its most explicit level, Freedom Train conveyed a clear message—to the federal government, Enbridge, provincial leaders in British Columbia and Alberta, and Canadians as a whole—that “The Yinka Dene Alliance and other opposed nations make a solid wall of opposition that no pipeline can break through” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012a, para. 3). In this way, Freedom Train participants refused federal government assurances that an independent panel weighing environmental and energy implications could



make a final determination on the pipeline that would be suitable for all Canadians. Additionally, the movement cast doubt upon whether the panel could fulfill the responsibility of the Canadian government to consult with First Nations.<sup>9</sup> By drawing attention to recent spills, Freedom Train also challenged Enbridge assurances that the environment could be safeguarded and argued, “any risk of an oil spill” is unacceptable, regardless “how much money they are willing to offer” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012g, para. 6).

Freedom Train’s counterrhetoric attempted to overwrite the economic promises on which the project had come to rely. Since his electoral victory in 2006, then-Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper had staked out Canada’s claim to become a world-class “energy superpower,” in part through the export of oil from northern Alberta’s tar sands (Harper, 2006; Taber, 2006). As more bitumen-carrying pipelines were proposed, debated, and publicly protested, Harper’s natural resources minister, Joe Oliver, emerged as a firm and public supporter of their construction. At the start of the public review of the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline, for example, Oliver issued an “open letter” urging the diversification of Canada’s oil exports and casting pipeline opponents as “threaten[ing] to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda” (Natural Resources Canada, 2012, para. 4). Oliver also drew a through-line from the 19th-century “western expansion” of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Natural Resources Canada, 2012, para. 6) to the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline, discursively tying the two projects together as examples of nation-building efforts.

Through messages and actions, Freedom Train participants demanded to be heard and challenged mainstream framings of their issues and concerns. If the promises of alternative media—or, as Downing (2001) calls it, “radical media”—include “trying to disrupt the silence, to counter the lies, to provide the truth” (pp. 15–16), the expressed messages of Freedom Train can also be seen as refusing preexisting narratives. For example, using their blog, Freedom Train members challenged Enbridge’s consensus-building rhetoric:

. . . to Enbridge: you know that we have said no and yet you still say to the newspaper that you intend to engage in further discussions with us “to better understand our concerns and discuss solutions, handling of risks and potential benefits to communities,” as the *Edmonton Journal* reported on May 2. This is what you say to the papers to make it seem like you are listening, but in fact it proves the opposite. Your statement makes it crystal clear that you have never been listening. We sat across from your executives and board for an hour last year and laid out, in detail, our concerns. Our answer to your dangerous proposal is no. There is nothing more than that for you to understand. We are travelling across the continent to Toronto to tell your shareholders—and all Canadians—just how much you have refused to listen. (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012a, para. 3)

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<sup>9</sup> For details regarding the duties of the Joint Environmental Assessment Agency-National Energy Board panel reviewing the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline, see National Energy Board (2009), O’Neil and Hoekstra (2011), and *Gitxaala Nation v. Canada* (2016).

Using media to contest how Enbridge had presented its engagement with First Peoples in news coverage aligns with what Downing and others have called the “counterinformation model,” though, as Downing writes, this model and its tools are typically put to work “under highly reactionary and repressive regimes” (2001, p. 16). Radical media practiced in “less tense” circumstances questions media presentations, “provide[s] facts to a public denied them,” and does so in “fresh ways” that emphasize the public’s potential to similarly participate in questioning media every day (p. 16). Movement across the country, as described above and unpacked throughout this article, provided avenues for a range of participants to involve themselves in ceremonies, protests, and other alliance-building activities.

The demand for recognition exemplified in the messages of Freedom Train also contested framing of First Peoples as consultants or informants to a government process of weighing the pipeline, or as participants in a movement influenced or led by others. Through social media and a mix of media and private events, Freedom Train constructed an image of Indigenous peoples as having the power to stop the pipeline project. This self-representation is in keeping with literature that places protests as “prime agents in contesting old ways of seeing and/or doing things as well as constructing collective identities” (Cammaerts, 2012, p. 119, drawing on Melucci, 1996). In terms of crafting a collective identity, the messages emphasized the agency of First Peoples, which is particularly important in a political and cultural landscape that has marginalized Indigenous issues in Canada for centuries.

### ***The Symbolism of a Cross-Country Train***

Arguing that Freedom Train can be understood as alternative media demands an interrogation of how the movement was constructed through shared histories and an acknowledgement of the cultural specificity of First Nations opposition to the Enbridge pipeline. Freedom Train 2012 belongs to a trajectory of Indigenous resistance and persistence that gained attention in the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. It is an example of ongoing work to recognize the rights of First Nations people in Canada.

Freedom Train shares its name with other historic and international iterations. However, the cross-Canada journey of 2012 borrows some of its spirit from the similarly donation-funded and cross-country Constitution Express (Hasham, 2012). In 1980–1981, the Constitution Express elaborated Indigenous protests against the federal government’s perceived failure to recognize First Nations rights as Canada negotiated its own constitution and pulled out from under the dominion of the United Kingdom (Hanson, 2009; Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, n.d.). During that protest, First Nations members traveled east from British Columbia by train, “stopped in each community to educate people about aboriginal rights” (Clayton Thomas-Muller, quoted in Yaghmaei, 2012).

To read Freedom Train as alternative media, and to understand some of the context of the Constitution Express, it is important to note that Canada’s cross-country railway persists as a symbol of nation building, carrying with it histories of colonialism, European immigration, Indigenous displacement, and east-west domestic trade. Decades after its completion, the Canadian Pacific Railway was “sometimes . . . referred to as ‘The Great Colonizer’ in recognition of its long-sustained efforts in the cause of western land development” (Hedges, 1939, p. 2). Rail lines also provided a skeleton for telecommunication

services (to start, telegraph lines) while linking key industrial areas (Babe, 1990, pp. 42–43), further bolstering east-west community ties. Robert E. Babe (1990) has dubbed these lingering narratives “technological nationalism,” or “nationhood through deployment of industrial devices” (p. 5), arguing they are mobilized to justify public support for massive infrastructure projects. Domestic pipelines reaching out from Alberta’s oil sands tend to be framed in similar fashion, as having the potential to safeguard and enhance national prosperity by moving bitumen to international markets—on Canada’s terms—the way goods were moved along the Canadian Pacific Railway, keeping the country’s regions economically and culturally connected and keeping the nation’s prosperity and domestic trade intact.

### ***Cross-Country Mobilization in the Spring of 2012 and Beyond***

Turning from symbolism to the affordances of the train, to this day, its main passenger stops include Canada’s largest cities. In turn, the cities where Freedom Train participants disembarked for events aligned with some of the country’s major media markets. This allowed members of the Yinka Dene Alliance to court mainstream media organizations, engage with and connect local communities, and ensure that easily understood framing mechanisms were in place to communicate opposition to the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline despite its nation-building and self-determining promise for Canada’s economy. This conforming to media “logics” of protest (see Cammaerts, 2012; della Porta & Diani, 2006) makes defining Freedom Train as a wholly alternative media site problematic. Rather than consistently contesting media power structures, at times the movement appeared to play strategically to the logistics of the mainstream media, maximizing the opportunity, at least, for cross-country, multiday coverage. Engaging with this boundary, however, it may be instructive to consider the drawback of alternative media processes that are wholly segregated from other public conversations. Therein lies the risk of reinforcing the values and positions of the “likeminded” rather than influencing or persuading others (Cammaerts, 2012, p. 130).<sup>10</sup>

Having considered how Freedom Train organizers invited mainstream news coverage (and saw a range of responses in print, at least), we must examine how the movement invited participation and fellowship. Building cross-country support is central to understanding Freedom Train not only as a social movement but as a form of alternative media. As touched on above, and in keeping with the work of Kirsten Kozolanka et al. (2012), key characteristics and roles of alternative media include empowering communities and facilitating horizontal production practices instead of top-down ones. Through community feasts and round dances, to which media were explicitly not invited “for protocol reasons” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012h, paras. 2, 5), alternative, if parallel, spaces for dialogue and powerful links between otherwise far-flung communities could be created. After such a feast in Edmonton (the stop closest to Alberta’s oil sands), the author of the Freedom Train blog wrote, “it’s a privilege to hear about what life is like in different communities and the challenges you face” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012a, para. 2). In Jasper, Alberta, a water ceremony brought together water from bodies in northern British Columbia and area water, connecting those who were present; participants described the ceremonial mixing of water as

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<sup>10</sup> In discussing the limitations of movement-driven media, Cammaerts cites the work of Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993).

a “reminder . . . [of] what we’re on this journey to protect” (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012i, para. 2). Inviting prayers over this gathered water also explicitly introduced terms of spirituality to a discussion of water’s importance and of the risks presented to water bodies by the pipeline project.

On arriving at the Winnipeg train station, the approximate midway point of the Freedom Train journey, participants reflected on the welcome they received from locals:

Then, down the long, dimly lit corridor leading into the rotunda at the entrance of the station came the sound of voices. We heard first a lone drum beating, and then many—the rise and fall of a song of welcome traveling towards us. Leaving luggage behind, we began to walk with quickened steps toward the rotunda—chiefs, community members, Elders, children, Yinka Dene and supporters, moving towards a song of welcome.

The arriving Freedom Train riders streamed into the hall, and looked into the welcoming faces of a broad semi-circle of people whose voices were rising to fill the massive rotunda. Our arrival completed the circle, and we stood, the people of this place and those arriving, with hearts full, united in our resolve to protect the land and the water from tar sands oil pipelines and tankers. (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2012j, paras. 4–5)

This moment can be read as signifying Freedom Train’s success in mobilizing action outside the group of British Columbia First Nations belonging to the Yinka Dene Alliance. Additionally, in the above excerpt, the writer brought to life the celebratory and empowering potential of this meeting and its shared energy. By sharing this moment online in such detail, it is kept alive spatially and temporally. The shared writing, which could easily be found online more than a year after the event, and which continues to be externally archived for a much longer period, offers the possibility of keeping the emotions of the movement in some sense tangible well after the journey’s end. As “protest artifacts,” these online long-living texts have the potential to cement the “collective memory of protest” (Cammaerts, 2012, p. 125) and perhaps foster movement motivation in the future. It is this continued liveness that allows the campaign to be remembered in a way that is different from an archived newspaper article or a six o’clock broadcast news item. This article does not delve deeply into social media use, though there are shared photo galleries on Flickr and hashtagged tweets that connect people’s personal experiences of Freedom Train, and which have their own, independent media lives separate from the movement’s website.

Following the Yinka Dene Alliance’s and Freedom Train’s trails today allows further connections to on- and off-line actions and movements, illustrating how the essence of the alternative media discussed here survives as a symbolic hub from which to continue networking. Their work continued with the Hold the Wall campaign and petition against the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline (<http://www.holdthewall.ca/>) and through continued collaboration with other First Peoples involved in opposing or speaking back to tar sands and pipeline development. In the summer of 2014, the Yinka Dene Alliance announced that its members would join other First Nations in British Columbia to mount court challenges to the government’s approval of the pipeline (West Coast Environmental Law, 2014; Yinka Dene Alliance, 2014b); in the summer of 2015, members of the alliance traveled to support efforts by First Nations communities in the provinces of New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba to resist a

different pipeline proposed to carry bitumen from Alberta to eastern Canada, the TransCanada company's Energy East project (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2015a).

The purpose of both the short-term Freedom Train and long-term Yinka Dene Alliance efforts, as organizers have expressed it, is tied to and driven by the politics of the day, upholding "a powerful and unbroken wall of opposition" (Yinka Dene Alliance n.d., para. 1) and resisting efforts to realize the Northern Gateway pipeline project. However, by stitching local community interests from across the country to the interests of British Columbia First Nations, the Yinka Dene Alliance shared its media spotlight and arguably now finds itself in an antipipeline position both for northern British Columbia and on behalf of communities as far-flung as those in rural Saskatchewan and the Atlantic province of New Brunswick. As industry and establishment interests in increasing bitumen mobility fan out to encompass eastbound pipelines through Quebec, southbound pipelines through the United States, and elsewhere, the Yinka Dene Alliance's resistance—facilitated through off-line movements such as Freedom Train 2012 or West Meets East 2015—effectively fans out as well, as a support network for opposition. In June 2015, a Yinka Dene Alliance press release outlined the challenge members have taken up:

"Tar Sands pipelines like Energy East and the inherent risks of a toxic pipeline spill or tanker accident are newer issues for First Nations out East, but we are all too familiar with them out West. We wanted to share our years of experience dealing with such issues as the First Nations in the East seek to understand and take position on such matters," said Geraldine Thomas-Flurer of the Yinka Dene Alliance.

The Yinka Dene Alliance believes that the best way to have Indigenous Rights and Laws respected in regard to such enormous projects is to work in collaboration with other First Nations. (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2015b, paras. 2–3)

In Yinka Dene Alliance and Freedom Train discourse, there are concerted efforts to make resistance known, and to name the issues often overlooked when economic development is discussed in connection to the extraction and mobility of nonrenewable resources. There is an activist ethic, firmly rooted in identified Indigenous cultural practices, that challenges the very authority of business and government institutions by unpacking and contesting the rhetoric that is dominant in mainstream media. Essentially, through Freedom Train, a series of live and online meeting points—alternative media productions—moved outside the limits of institutional issue defining, to mobilize broader participation.

### **Oil Sands Pipelines in a Time of "Sunny Ways"**

Late in 2015, a new government was elected in Canada, changing the prospects for the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline and more generally changing the tenor of government rhetoric regarding the necessity of pipelines to get Alberta bitumen to wider markets (see Hoekstra, 2015; Zilio, 2015). Before his election, Justin Trudeau was vociferously opposed to the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline (Liberal Party of Canada, 2014), and he made renewing and strengthening environmental assessments of proposed pipeline projects part of his 2015 campaign platform.

The night of his victory, Prime Minister Trudeau told assembled supporters and media, "Sunny ways my friends, sunny ways. . . . This is what positive politics can do" (quoted in O'Connor, 2015, para. 2). Borrowed from a previous prime minister of the same political party, and often repeated in the early days of the new government, "sunny ways" have so far become synonymous with Trudeau's approach to governing (Liberal Party of Canada, 2016). An example of this approach may be found in a departure from the previous government's focus on realizing (and exerting the pressure of) its energy superpower ambitions. For years, Canada had focused lobbying efforts on the cross-border Keystone XL project. When U.S. President Barack Obama ultimately rejected the pipeline in 2015, Trudeau indicated he was disappointed (Whittington, 2015). However, in an issued statement, the prime minister pointed out the two countries' "relationship is much bigger than any one project," and said he "look[ed] forward to a fresh start with President Obama to strengthen our remarkable ties in a spirit of friendship and cooperation" (quoted in Whittington, 2015, para. 4).

At the time of writing, the previous government's conditional approval of the Northern Gateway project was overturned by a Federal Court of Appeal (*Gitxaala Nation v. Canada*, 2016). Trudeau had also ordered an oil tanker ban along British Columbia's northern coast that would seem to make the pipeline project unnecessary (Prystupa, 2015). Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, described the government's decision as "an opportunity to demonstrate that it is listening to First Nations" (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2015c, para. 5), and the Yinka Dene Alliance announced its support for the tanker moratorium (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2015c). In a press release issued by the alliance, Chief Fred Sam of the Nak'azdli Nation is quoted as saying:

"The dispute between First Nations and the federal government over Northern Gateway has been prolonged and highly-charged, diverting resources away from the many other important issues in the region that require constructive, forward-looking dialogue. . . . I'm heartened that the federal government seems ready to move from promise to reality on an oil tanker moratorium on BC's north coast, which would put this toxic issue behind us and mark an important step in improving relations with First Nations." (Yinka Dene Alliance, 2015c, para. 6)

### Conclusion

Based on an analysis of media produced by Freedom Train organizers, this article concludes that the movement worked as a form of alternative media insofar as it pushed the limits of mainstream media coverage while appealing to a broad cross-country audience, resisting and attempting to overwrite powerful discourses of nation building, and creating opportunities for on- and off-line networks to be mobilized. Downing (2008) argues that definitions of media must be "stretched . . . to embrace graffiti, murals, street theater, popular music, dance, dress, and other media of communication" (p. 44). In support of this "stretching," this examination advocates alternative media study that exceeds attention to alternative technologies, new media platforms, or even the public performance of a spectacle. Renewed study would turn, rather, to understanding the field of practices that produce a protest as an alternative media site. Such study would continue to borrow from alternative media's rich history while engaging further with social movement literature to shift focus to media practices that contest institutional and

mainstream media power and bring otherwise marginalized voices to the fore, inviting cross-cultural participation and mobilizing people across multiple media spaces.

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