

Social Media Counterpublics and the Chief Big Foot Memorial Ride

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Background

The Wounded Knee Massacre is considered significant for many reasons by historians, Lakota communities, and American Indian communities, broadly. Heralded by many as the end of the Indian Wars and the official "closing" of the frontier and the last military conflict against American Indian communities (Greene & Powers, 2014), Wounded Knee was also the place of the first and only recorded photographs of any conflict between the United States government during this period. An infamous 11 photographs, captured by George Trager, depict lodgepole skeletons of tipis erected in the camp, the frozen bodies of many Massacre victims including Chief Big Foot himself, and the mass burial of victims by teams of civilians (Mitchell, 1989).

However, these are not the only depictions of Wounded Knee and its remembrance that have been captured photographically. Since 1986, Lakota individuals and their allies have participated in the Chief Big Foot Memorial Ride, a nearly 200-mile long horse ride that commemorates the journey of Chief Big Foot's band and their eventual deaths at Wounded Knee. In recent years, the publicity of the ride has expanded. Through the use of social media platforms, riders publicize the rise by posting photos throughout the fifteen-day journey.

Theoretical Framework & Objective

Questions related to social media's relationship to activism have been of significant focus for social scientists (Allsop, 2016; McCabe & Harris, 2020; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). This focus has established the importance of social media platforms as sites of discourse within communities, including those engaged in social justice activism.

Publics: Developed by Jürgen Habermas in 1962 (1989); Habermas argues that a type of discursive space must exist where members of the public can discuss their common affairs, called the "public sphere."

Counterpublics: Nancy Fraser suggests that this conception of the public is filled with assumptions about who is included, whose affairs are considered common, and whether or not these publics represent a true move toward democracy (1992); instead she argues for a multiplicity of publics that can more effectively contend with inequalities, particularly those experienced by subaltern groups, called "counterpublics."

The potential for this concepts application to understand communities on social media are far-reaching and have been used in this context (e.g. Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). Social media platforms easily constitute clear examples of both publics and counterpublics. Made up of disparate users who can organize themselves based on common interests and pursuits, in many ways social media platforms are inseparable from these concepts.

Research Objective: Using social media posts from the 2018 Chief Big Foot Memorial Ride, this project sought to understand how engagement with these posts allowed for the construction of a Lakota and allied counterpublic where this movement could be made more visible to the general public while creating a space to amplify contemporary concerns in Indigenous communities. With these findings, I suggest strategies for Lakota communities to garner support for and publicize Lakota-led social movements more broadly.

Methods

Posts associated with the ride and dated between 12/15-12/29/2018 were collected using a multiplatform approach that included Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Posts on popular groups and pages associated with the ride were targeted as were additional public posts found through keyword and hashtag searches.

Sample: 52 total posts, 304 individual images

Data collected on posts: Date posted, number of engagements (aggregated sum of reactions, comments, and shares), poster name and type, number of photos posted, social media platform, post location (23 total), and post description.

Quantitative coding: Any of 21 codes including types of people and objects, types of activities, locations, and photographic qualities were assigned to each image. Photo codes were aggregated for each individual post.

Analysis: To understand possible relationships between a posts content and number of engagements, and by extension its reach to unique social media users, content codes by post were compared with their number of engagements for statistical significance using Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests. Posts were also mapped using ArcGIS to understand distribution of posts and engagements along the ride.

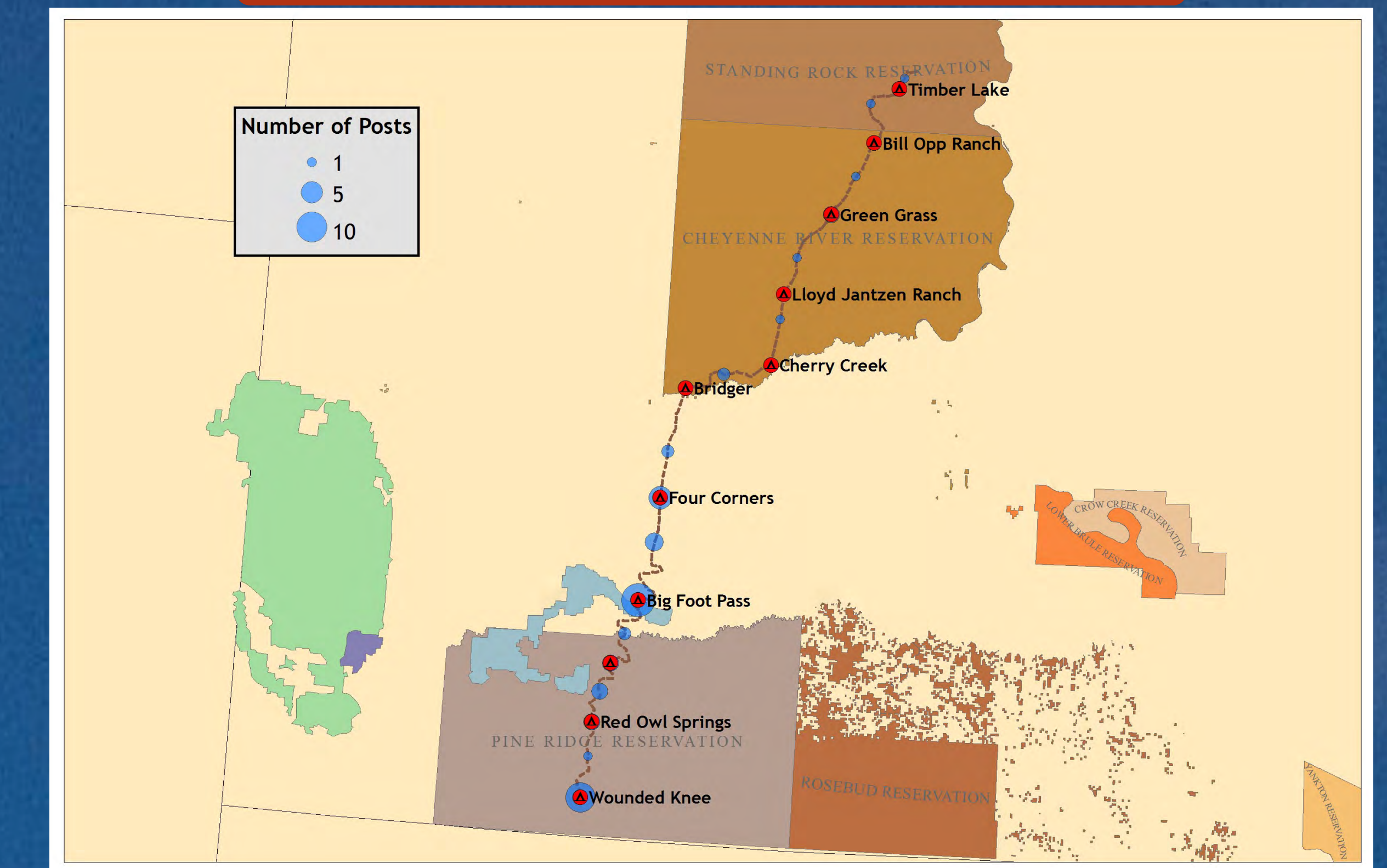
Qualitative coding: Any of 5 codes were used to organize qualitative data associated with posts (descriptions and comments). Thematic statements that reached saturation were developed by the author.

Results

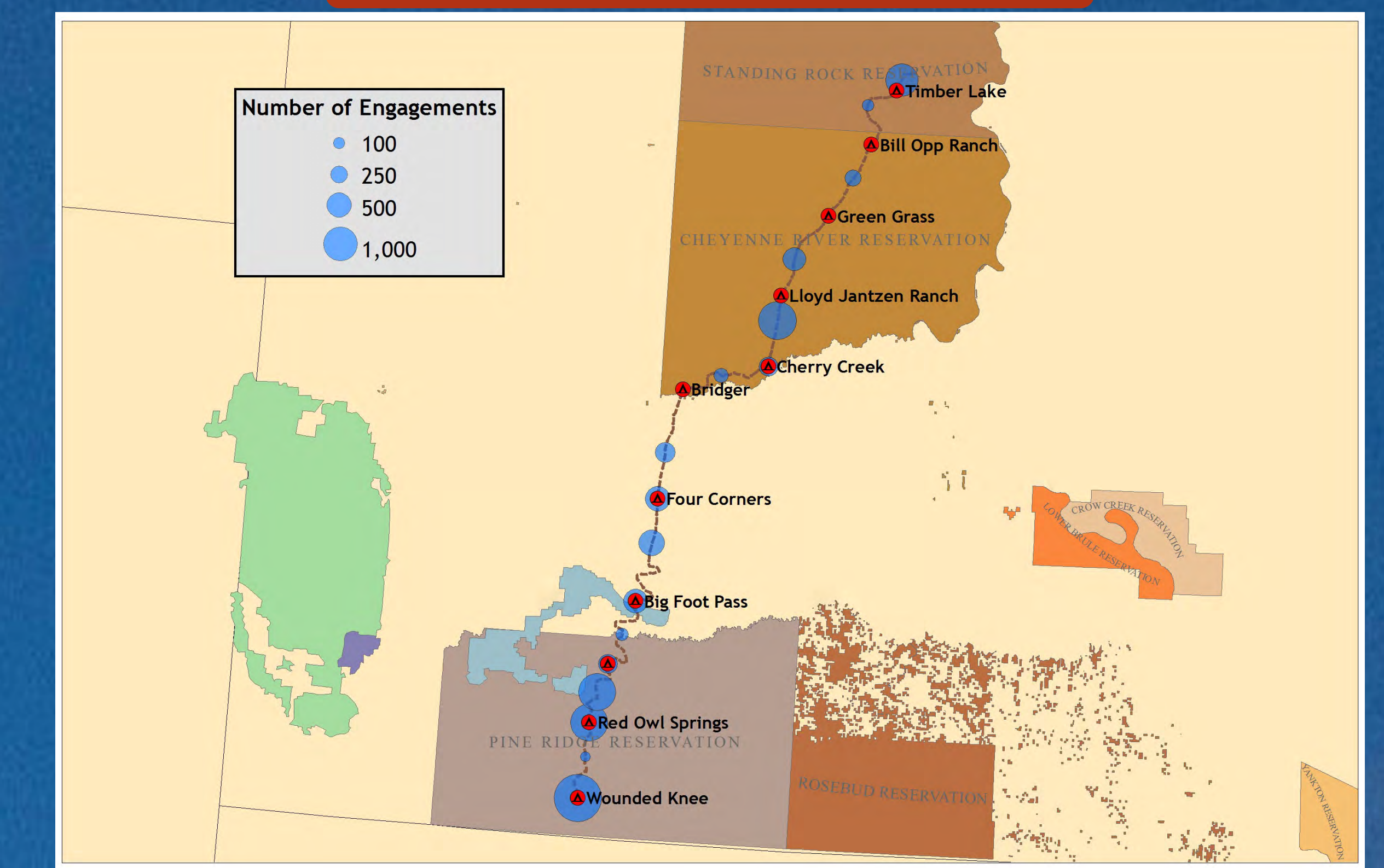
Chief Big Foot Memorial Ride and Environs



Social Media Posts by Location



Engagements by Location



Theme 1: *Engagement with posts allowed community members to express pride in Ride participants.*

- These comments most often targeted close family members and friends of commenters
- Also expressed pride in all riders, generally, especially youth participants

"Took my breath away and filled my heart with joy. Big Foot riders carry on, ancestors are proud!"

"Nice to know the young ones are taking a stand! Much love and blessings to you all."

Theme 2: *Some supporters used social media posts as an opportunity to provide support in the form of prayers and direct invocations of Lakota wakhán beings.*

- This support was directed at all riders, generally
- Frequently included Lakota spiritual and philosophical concepts

"Thank you and Tunkasila bless these riders."

"Love these pictures! ❤️ Sending prayers for the riders and their horses. Mitakuye Oyasin. ❤️"

Theme 3: *Comments also served as a way for non-Native allies to engage with and support riders.*

- These messages of support often included statements of where in the world they were located
- These commenters frequently used this kind of engagement to acknowledge the history inspiring the ride

"Let us never forget this travesty against the people."

"Beautiful. Solidarity from the Arctic of Norway. Happy Solstice."

Table 1. Statistically significant variables

Code	Frequency	% of N=52	Significance (p<.05)
Page	40		<.00001
Youth	42		.01
Elders	26		.02
Women	42		.03
Eagle staff	56		.02
Riders	77		.01
Horses	79		.01

Discussion

- One way Indigenous social movements can create increased awareness is by creating movement pages that increase traffic and circumvent individual privacy settings.
- Coupled qualitative and quantitative analysis suggest the importance of Lakota cultural and spiritual practices and ideas to the amount of engagement, such as posts portraying eagle staffs.
- Reflecting other contemporary Lakota social justice movements, the involvement of youth is central to the ride itself while serving as a driver of engagement on social media and pride within Lakota communities.
- Reflecting other research (Johnson, 2017), social media appears to assist in overcoming relative isolation of Indigenous communities in the United States and ignorance of their contemporary issues.

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