Abstract
Ongoing racist continues to violently impact on the cultures, lands, and bodies of Indigenous Peoples. While many health researchers are meeting the ethical challenges in working with Indigenous communities, this commentary draws attention to the often-uncritical adaption or use of digital tools. Many digital technologies, deliberately or accidently, lend themselves to overt or covert surveillance of communities. Indigenous resistance to surveillance must be understood in the context of colonization, and reassurances must be provided if the benefits of new technologies are to be fully realized for better Indigenous health outcomes.

The Surveillance of Indigenous Peoples
State sanctioned surveillance has been a key tool by which Indigenous voices have been silenced in debate and Indigenous individuals and collectives removed from place (Crosby and Monaghan 2018). In a chilling strategy of intimidation, Indigenous scholar and advocate Dr. Cindy Blackstock (Gitxsan First Nation) was subjected to state spying by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and the Department of Justice (Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada 2013). But it is not just Indigenous academics being monitored by their own governments. In 2008, several Māori (and environmental) activists were arrested and charged under the NZ 2004 Terrorism Response Act. Evidence included surveillance footage gathered by motion-activated cameras that had been installed by police near camp sites and access roads in traditional tribal territory (Gallavin and Wall 2012). Although ultimately acquitted of terrorism, the case revealed—if such a revelation was necessary—that even comparatively benign states like New Zealand overreach their legislated powers in surveilling and threatening Indigenous citizens deemed to pose a risk to state security.

The surveillance of Indigenous Peoples goes fist-in-glove with colonization and is particularly stark in the health sector. What is different in the twenty-first century is the incredible reach of digital technologies (spatially, temporally, and psychologically) and the growing reliance on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by all societies. The sheer scale of digital connectivity is worth reiterating: the social media sites (Twitter, YouTube, BlogSpot, Google Alerts, and Facebook) trawled by the Canadian government in their operation against Dr. Blackstock have billions of users who are up/down-loading terabytes of data daily. These sites are known to many of us in academia as being increasingly important for disseminating our research, supporting our peers and colleagues, building community, keeping ourselves informed, and simply socializing as citizens of modern, democratic states. Such is the quantum of accumulated data, computational power, and connectivity that individual profiles can be accessed at will by state and corporate players.
The profiling of ICT users (labeled “prosumers” by Fuchs 2011 as they are both producers and consumers of content) by state and corporate forces sees private companies as both proactive actors who accumulate and monetize the personal data of subscribers and (they argue) passive platforms on which individuals and groups play out their lifestyles, fantasies, commerce, and politics. The global platform offered by these multi-billion, transnational mega-corporations emphasizes the power of the private sector in surveillance. Despite multiple breaches of privacy laws around the world and interference in democratic elections (Shao, Luca, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, and Menzer 2017), this “information economy” (now often accused of disinformation) continues to expand to ever more users, in more countries, with deeper insights into personal and collective behavior. Of course, multilateral organizations, NGOs, charities, and research institutions rely on digital technologies to operate; those that do not are seen to lack credibility. Yet the corporate entities that produce, license and profit from the digital ecosystem (queue logos of a bitten apple, an angled window, a small blue bird, and the alphabet) have more economic power and political influence than many states. Private interests therefore have the ability to manipulate public perceptions, knowledge, and understandings of a myriad of social and political issues.

We acknowledge that Canada and New Zealand are considered good “global citizens.” Yet Indigenous communities in both countries continue to voice anger at ongoing racism and marginalization experienced by their communities, which are concerns that have been noted by the United Nations (UN General Assembly 2019) and confirmed by such operations as the opaque implementation of facial recognition technology in New Zealand (Smith 2020). The current COVID-19 pandemic, like any disaster, offers both opportunities and risks for Indigenous communities. Recently, the dramatic increase in attention to Black Lives Matter protests brings another focus to the surveillance and control of minorities, with state surveillance co-existing alongside NGO activism that seeks to support social movements (Glazer and Haggin 2020).

**Indigenous Data Governance**

We agree with Professor Kim TallBear’s (2013: 11) call to “center the roles of the social and techno-sciences in expanding Indigenous governance.” This short opinion piece argues for ethical, effective, and efficient research with Indigenous Peoples that is transparent and responsive to the rapidly changing digital ecosystem. In other words, Indigenous Peoples should govern the digital ecosystems in which they live. We accept that these rapidly evolving digital technologies can enable Indigenous communities to better respond to, and recover from, yet another outsider-induced disaster. We also understand the sense of urgency researchers feel to contribute their skills and passion. However, there is an ethical obligation to avoid placing increased risks on research partners. There is also the valid expectation (not least by funders) that research is effective and not hampered by litigation over intellectual property or challenges to an institutions ethics processes, and that results are both important and the knowledge appropriately transferred. Good, robust, ethically grounded research is more than an efficient use of funding; it is also a respectful and efficient use of the time and resources committed by Indigenous communities.

ICTs can be alluring tools for dealing with any crisis, which COVID-19 certainly is. Who would not support the use of GIS to facilitate international supply chains of personal protective equipment (PPE)? How else can we connect except via ICTs and the internet? For some, the use of online grocery orders, Netflix, and Spotify help with household chores and family entertainment, and so on. The tens of thousands of scientists working towards a cure and vaccine for COVID-19 are undoubtedly using computing power, Big Data, and cloud storage for their international collaboration. And all these communication and delivery mechanisms can be seen as comprising the health of economies, regions, municipalities, communities, households, and individuals.

Yet many of us pause and question the proliferation of these technologies and the assumptions underpinning their essentially enforced deployment, including as tools and techniques for researchers. Past interventions using new technologies have had unforeseen and tragic impacts. Humanitarians working in the South Sudan unwittingly put vulnerable people at risk when an Amnesty International (USA) program using satellite
imagery to monitor villages under threat of attack in Sudan in 2007 was made public (Scarnecchia et al. 2017). A subsequent study showed that acts of violence against these villages increased once the program ended and the Sudanese government deliberately targeted the villages (Gordon 2016).

The tragedy of Darfur and other global events led to the drafting of a digital ethics framework for the humanitarian sector, “The Signal Code” (Greenwood et al. 2017), which lists five key principles by which individuals and families may be safe and organizations held to account. The principles are based on rights to information; protection from harm; data security, data privacy, and data agency; and redress and rectification. Indigenous voices are detailing interests in and concerns about information held by Indigenous communities, government agencies, and other manifestations of a public sector. Kukutai and Taylor (2016) edited a collection of Indigenous researchers in a powerful argument for data to be seen as a component of Indigenous sovereignty. There are the OCAP principles, standing for Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession of First Nations data in Canada (First Nations Information Governance Centre 2014). Tairuru (2020) draws on Treaty discourse to design an ethical framework that recognizes data as a treasure to be valued, protected, and honored. At the risk of their lives, Indigenous communities around the world oppose the ongoing unsustainable extraction of wealth from their territories (Stewart-Harawira 2005). Yet this ongoing industrial destruction takes place in parallel and in collaboration with the realization of data as the new resource, a resource that is both personal and collective. In a medium where some claim this resource “wants to be free” and others claim that it cannot be owned in the first place, Indigenous Peoples demand that progress is possible and necessary.

Conclusions

For researchers looking to undertake fieldwork with Indigenous communities, we remind you that any fieldwork takes place in a post-disaster landscape complete with stories of resistance and compliance, tragedy and success. Further, we are all complicit in leaving our digital fingerprints on most of what we touch, including the ideas, words, territories, resources, assets, location, movements, and aspirations of Indigenous Peoples. COVID-19 provides an opportunity for Indigenous-centric data governance in the health and other sectors that researchers can build into all their discussions and proposals, and at the outset of planning and conversations. As Canada and other states seek ways to reconcile colonial legacies and move forward into the hopefully better future, the surveillance of Indigenous Peoples is an issue that now informs strategies for self-determined Indigenous health sectors. If we agree to improved health resourcing, culturally safe medical interventions, and healthier communities, then we must accept that current health disparities will be exacerbated by ill-thought surveillance practices that lead to unethical, ineffective, and inefficient pandemic responses. Such a failure would delay economic recoveries, embed culturally unsafe interventions, disillusion communities and health workers, and ultimately leave Indigenous communities less healthy. Such a failure can and must be avoided.

References


