Research in Brief

Pushing the Academy: The Need for Decolonizing Research

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ABSTRACT With renewed interest for research involving Indigenous peoples, nations, and communities following the height of the Idle No More movement and, more recently, the release of the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report, this research in brief argues that there is a need for researchers to recognize the history of the Western academy’s relationship with Indigenous peoples and its legacy of contributing to colonization. As a result, communication scholarship should seek to embrace and even privilege Indigenous knowledges in research, when appropriate, and accept research goals of Indigenous social justice based on decolonizing methodologies. The collaborative nature of research means that there is ample opportunity to speak up when research fails to include Indigenous ways of knowing.

KEYWORDS Activism; Academia; Decolonization; Indigenous knowledges; Research

RÉSUMÉ À la suite du mouvement Idle No More et, plus récemment, de la publication du rapport final de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada sur les écoles résidentielles autochtones, on remarque un intérêt renouvelé pour la recherche sur les peuples, nations et communautés autochtones. Dans ce contexte, ce Coup d’œil sur la recherche soutient que les chercheurs ont besoin de mieux reconnaître l’histoire de la relation entre les peuples autochtones et l’université occidentale et la participation de celle-ci à leur colonisation. Dans les circonstances, la recherche en communication devrait chercher à inclure et même privilégier les savoirs autochtones quand il est pertinent de le faire, et accepter les objectifs visés par la justice sociale autochtone fondée sur des méthodologies décolonisatrices. La nature collaborative de la recherche est telle qu’il y a maintes occasions où l’on pourrait intervenir aux moments où celle-ci oublie les modes d’apprentissage autochtones.

MOTS CLÉS Activisme; Monde universitaire; Décolonisation; Savoirs autochtones; Recherche

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Canadian Journal of Communication Vol 42 (2017) 113-119
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Introduction

There is renewed focus on research about and involving Indigenous movements in Canada. The ongoing Idle No More movement that grew to prominence in 2012/2013 continues to attract a wide spectrum of communication scholars to the subject, focusing on a range of research interests. To be sure, the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the movement lends itself to countless research opportunities. The scope and composition remain unprecedented as Indigenous peoples from coast to coast to coast take collective action in defense of land, water, and treaty rights in ways that have never before been seen within Canada’s geographical borders. Pan-national Indigenous movements, such as the American Indian Movement and the Red Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s, have been more common in the United States than in Canada (Ramos, 2006; Wilkes, 2006). More recently, the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) directed Canada’s attention to the legacy of the residential school program, gathering testimony from survivors and proposing actions in support of reconciliation. The TRC’s (2015) final report includes specific calls to action that offer new research opportunities focused on Indigenous issues such as education, media and news reporting, and increases to social science research funding, to name a few.

As I read some of the emerging research by communication scholars, and as I grapple with my own positioning as a non-Indigenous communication scholar located in a Western institution, I am reminded of Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) argument that “research” is one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous vocabulary given its historic and continued link to colonization. Indeed, Indigenous peoples are some of the most researched peoples in the world, and yet Indigenous knowledges continue to be undervalued in the academy where Western ways of knowing trump all others to explain Indigenous contexts. The effects, as Smith (1999), Margaret Kovach (2009), and others argue, have been devastating for many Indigenous communities, as significant amounts of research marginalize or ignore their knowledges, customs, and perspectives. Oral histories and storytelling, for example, are at times viewed as inadmissible academic data while the meaning and value of ceremony are generalized across Indigenous cultures (Kovach, 2009). The goals of Indigenous movements are narrowly explained by relying on existing academic literature. Questions of social justice as a centrepiece of research are also, at times, shunned in favour of a commitment to a perceived observational neutrality that many scholars believe pillar the foundations of the Western academy.

In this research in brief, I echo the argument that there is a need to push back against some of the pillars of the Western academy in ways that will help it rebuild trust with Indigenous peoples, nations, and communities in Canada (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). Following the work of the TRC, calls to “indigenize the academy” have resurfaced (Macdonald, 2016) as scholars grapple with what this concept means and whether it is even possible (Albert, 2015; Findlay, 2000; Hill, 2012; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Ottmann, 2013). Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred (2012) suggests that while it may be impossible to completely Indigenize the academy, the ongoing process of decolonization continues to be worthwhile. Within the academy this is to argue that it
remains necessary for scholars to push back when institutions or their actors conduct themselves in colonizing ways, to encourage meaningful relationship building with the communities in question, and to include Indigenous knowledges in data analysis and interpretation. The study cites few sources on Indigenous identity and points narrowly to social media scholarship. What is more, there is no mention of place or land as defining factors of Indigenous identity, something that could be addressed with a research approach that included consultation and relationship building with traditional knowledge keepers and organizers or supporters of the movement. In my view, recognizing and pushing back against colonizing research is an important form of activism that communication scholars need to be aware of, both in their role as actors within the institution and as researchers.

Here, I argue three things. First, I call for broader acceptance for social justice research goals for communication scholarship when it comes to work related to Indigenous peoples. We must recognize that Indigenous movements such as Idle No More are the result of hundreds of years of survival strategies against many forms of colonization, including those from the academy (Smith, 1999). Second, I argue that these same communication scholars need to incorporate Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledges into their research, therefore ensuring that such worldviews are not marginalized or rejected altogether. Without doing so, any research will likely contribute to the ongoing project of colonization. Third, I argue that when these first two tenets are not met, there is a responsibility for scholars to be vigilant and push back when research threatens to promote rather than reject colonization.

**Research: An agenda for action**

> It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (Smith, 1999, p. 1)

The idea that research is a “dirty word” is unsettling and foreign to many. It is jarring to know, once confronted with Smith’s powerful quote, that the pursuit of knowledge using the academy’s traditional toolbox is galling and appalling to particular communities. When I raise this point to those whose academic traditions fall outside of the Native or Indigenous studies disciplines, I hear two responses. On one hand, there are those curious to know what can be done to address this issue. Their response stems from a discomfort of learning about the devastating and real legacy of research on Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, there are those who reject the notion that the academy needs to change, claiming instead that the institution’s value comes first and foremost from its observational neutrality. The tension here is between research that supports or fails to support the goals of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Without a commitment to the former, research can contribute to the legacy of distrust between Indigenous communities and the academy.
But as Margaret Kovach (2009) reminds us, knowledge production and academic inquiry are political. Researchers rely on epistemologies and ideologies that legitimize particular ways of understanding the world and what counts as knowledge. What is perceived to be legitimate knowledge is determined largely by a small and relatively homogenous group of people who form the academy. Indigenous experience and knowledge, however, emerge from centuries of survival strategies and cultural systems that have sustained Indigenous communities, whether in pre-contact societies negotiating survival with each other, with the land, and with ancestors, or after the arrival of European settlers (Augustine, 2016; Smith, 1999).

The continued and often violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands is a fundamental feature of understanding the Indigenous context in Canada and globally, especially in its relationship to identity and self-determination. By paying attention to the survival strategies born out of this struggle, we are able to recognize the land not only as a place of struggle but also as a form of knowledge. Indeed as Glen Coulthard (2014) argues, the land is not simply to be understood in terms of property, but rather as something Indigenous peoples use to think and act. The Mi'kmaw people, for instance, use ceremony to negotiate their continued existence with the land and with the elements of the earth that need to be harvested (Augustine, 2016). Research into the Mi'kmaw peoples' contribution to the Idle No More movement, whether through social media or actions on the land, need to reflect this fundamental tenet of Mi'kmaw culture. Social media research about the Idle No More movement, for instance, lends itself to inquiry about the meaning of place and space for both online and offline political discourse, and the deep connections between the two. It reflects the teachings of the Mi'kmaw creation story, which explains an entire way of being beginning with the first ancestors. Rob McMahon's (2011, 2014) work on digital self-determination and Indigenous community infrastructures is an important example that should guide researchers on the type of relationship building needed to make appropriate links to Indigenous cultures.

The colonizing history of research has prompted Indigenous communities to counter the legacy by demanding an approach driven by decolonization. Research then becomes a distinct agenda for action that is rooted in Indigenous knowledges and experiences of colonization while also seeking rights-based social justice that furthers the goals of self-determination for Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Research cannot, for example, be limited to mining Twitter content and online mobilization without contextualizing the data within hundreds of years of Indigenous struggle. In other words, research cannot simply be an extractive exercise. Decolonizing research is instead transformative and serves the purposes of healing and mobilizing peoples (Smith, 1999). I argue that research claiming to be neutral is also transformative, but in colonizing ways as it marginalizes those peoples it seeks to study.

Adopting a decolonizing approach can be viewed as a form of quasi-academic activism by privileging Indigenous voices, pursuing agendas of self-determination for Indigenous peoples on their terms and eschewing colonizing agendas that further marginalizes Indigenous peoples. For Kovach (2009), a decolonizing methodology is a
“unifier” (p. 81) that gives voice to the distinctive experiences of Indigenous peoples. I therefore argue that there needs to be wider acceptance of an approach where Indigenous social justice sits at the centre.

Privileging Indigenous knowledges

For a long time society has asked us to learn their way. Now the time has come for you to learn our way. (Kelly, 2016)

Indigenous academic and activist Vine Deloria Jr. (1970) noted that American cinema has embodied a “cameo” approach to history, arguing that “it takes a basic ‘manifest destiny’ white interpretation of history and lovingly plugs in a few feathers, wooly heads, and sombreros into the famous events of American history” (p. 731). In many ways, there is evidence that this is what the Western academy is doing to the study of Indigenous issues. In the name of reconciliation or even decolonization, researchers tokenize Indigenous knowledges rather than weaving them into the fabric of their work. In so doing, they fail to consult the communities in question and utilize only Western knowledges to interpret phenomena.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) reflect on this disturbing trend, referring to the ways decolonization has been turned into a metaphor by non-Indigenous researchers who grapple with “excuses, distractions, and diversions from decolonization,” (p. 35) focusing instead on their settler-colonial guilt and experience. Tuck and Yang's (2012) caution is important because it highlights the ways the language of decolonization can be superficially adopted into research, only to be supplanted by non-Indigenous approaches to social justice and critical methodologies, and centred on settler perspectives. As they argue, “when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it re-centers whiteness, it resettles history, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (p. 3).


I raise these points because they speak to the tokenism that, either intentionally or unintentionally, finds its way into research—where concepts are defined apart from, and without consideration of, Indigenous knowledges. Settler researchers, then, grapple with their own guilt and biased research projects centred on the settler. The Mi'kmaw people refer to the concept of “two eyed seeing” that can serve as a useful way of theorizing a better approach (Augustine, 2016; Howe, 2015). Through one eye we are able to see the world on Indigenous terms and rely on Indigenous knowledge of the land. Through the other eye comes a Western understanding of the world. Using both eyes to see the world in both ways allows “a range of hopeful possibilities as hybrid manners of comprehension are born” (Howe, 2015, p. 17). What should be taken
from this concept is the idea that Indigenous peoples now expect us to learn their cultures, histories, and ways of knowing the world, and include those into our work. We can use Western concepts and ideas but must do so, as Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (2014) argue, alongside Indigenous ones.

**Pushing the academy: Putting an Indigenous agenda on the table**

The complex, dynamic, and multifaceted aspects of research mean there are many opportunities to raise one’s hand when research strays too far from including Indigenous voices and knowledges. This research in brief thus calls for an activism beyond a simple nudging to encourage our colleagues to put an Indigenous agenda front and centre when it comes to researching Indigenous peoples, nations, and communities. The TRC’s call to reconciliation requires us to be more outspoken and to push this issue to the forefront. More concretely, this means encouraging researchers to be highly reflexive in their work and in their understanding of their relationship to Indigenous peoples. This is about advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing the world within the academy and, as a result, broadening what is considered to be academic data. It entails encouraging researchers to be even more collaborative with Indigenous communities and researchers when it is appropriate. Moreover, it means accepting the notion that research can serve decolonizing purposes rather than contributing to or helping to legitimize further acts of colonization.

The majority of my experiences having these conversations are positive. Most communication scholars are open to this kind of feedback, particularly if they feel it will make their research better. The reality is that many are not aware of the academy’s legacy when it comes to Indigenous peoples and welcome the opportunity to learn more. When I began my own research, these concepts were also new to me and, with time, I learned from my mentors and colleagues ways to speak up. There will not, however, always be a positive reaction. Those instances present opportunities for lively discussions and a chance to continue to reflexively interrogate one’s position within and beyond the institution. At the end of the day, this kind of activism is worthwhile and will go a long way toward healing the relationship between the academy and Indigenous peoples.

**Note**

1. I use the term “Indigenous peoples” to refer to the many peoples, cultures, and histories within the diverse and divergent First Nation, Metis, and Inuit communities. The plural “peoples” is an attempt to reflect that diversity while referring to the quality that links them together, which is their indigeneity to North America (see Francis, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999).

**References**


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