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## **Settler Colonialism and First Nations e-Communities in Northwestern Ontario**

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**Abstract:** Across Canada First Nation community leaders are adopting the e-Community approach for their local broadband development. E-Community is fueled by the desire of First Nations to own, control, and manage their local infrastructure and online services. The paper develops the concept of the importance of locally owned and managed telecommunication infrastructure supporting First Nation e-Community and local resilience. The First Nations e-Community framework provides choices for local people to remain in their communities and contribute to the growth and positive development in these challenging environments. The First Nations' struggle against settler colonialism to access their lands and resources by the colonial governments and their corporate partners continues today. Strong, resilient First Nations are now in a position to influence and support outcomes that benefit themselves, the lands and others in a positive manner.

### **Introduction**

Remote and rural First Nation (Indigenous) communities are in a constant struggle to maintain their autonomy in a settler colonial political and economic structure attempting to force community members' migration off their traditional lands to urban centres. This paper describes how First Nations in Northwestern Ontario are using social media along with locally owned and managed information and communication technologies (ICT) to support the creation of e-Communities. The e-Community refers to community members actively using digital networks and online tools and applications - everything from the internet, social media, videoconferencing, telehealth, distance education, cell phones and many other digital processes - to sustain and support the local economy, social services and the many communication processes required in every community (Whiteduck, G., et al. 2013, Whiteduck, J. 2010, Whiteduck, T., et al. 2012). We will argue that local ownership of the digital infrastructure and the online tools, social media and e-services that use it are important elements of First Nations' resilience.

We will reference critical theorists who write about colonization or, more appropriately, "settler colonialism" - a theory that describes the ongoing struggle in Canada between First Nations and the Canadian state characterized by racist efforts to remove the original people from their traditional territories. Before the organization was

eliminated this year by the Canadian government, the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) published a series of articles in 2009 entitled “Communities in Crisis” providing a detailed examination of the challenges First Nations people experience in Canada. In the introduction to the articles, Health Canada officials wrote: “There is an overwhelmingly consistent finding in the research that confirms colonization contributed significantly to the imbalance of social determinants of health in First Nation communities evident today” (Garman & Doull, 2009; p2). These government officials go on to recognize that some First Nations are building and sustaining healthy environments with their community members - efforts that need to be recognized and learned about.

Social media is one of the tools that First Nations people in northwestern Ontario are using effectively to organize and share their decolonization efforts. Presenting their own stories and experiences using social media, without mainstream media censorship, is liberating for the people and their communities (Budka, Bell & Fiser; 2009). Other rural communities can benefit from these First Nations’ experiences and stories, as they too struggle with their own out-migration of youth and families.

### **Settler Colonialism and its Effects on First Nations in Canada**

Some critical theorists use the term “post-colonial” to refer to the period after Canada became a country, free from ties with the colonial British power (Doughty, 2005). A more accurate portrayal is that the settler population rid themselves of their British colonial rulers, a position that works well for the settlers who now believe they are in a position of power over the land. Critical First Nations theorists consider themselves still in a colonial state led by the settler population who now outnumber the original peoples of this land. These critical theorists use the term “settler colonialism” instead of post-colonialism to describe an ongoing struggle that still has to be resolved. Several authors have documented the history of settler colonialism and the struggle First Nations are engaged in today (Coulthard, 2007; Palmater, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2013; Wolfe, 2006).

The contemporary and historical effects of settler colonialism need to be understood to appreciate the ongoing struggle. The original people and their different nations across the land that is now called Canada were thriving long before the arrival of Europeans over 500 years ago. The First Nations had and still have rich, vibrant cultures with their own languages, customs, traditions, and teachings that provided them with a long and successful relationship among the different nations and to the land that supported their survival. Their oral culture is still a strong part of their development today. Their creation stories provide the people with the knowledge and understanding of how they came to be on this land and relate to everything that supported their survival for thousands of years (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples<sup>1</sup>, 1996).

First Nations’ complex governance structures, laws, and political structures guided their internal operations and their co-existence with other nations. They prospered from their vast territories and careful management of the natural resources. The strategic use of inter-tribal trading networks supported a population that by some estimates numbered

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<sup>1</sup> Further references to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples document will use the abbreviation RCAP

close to 50 million people before the arrival of the Europeans. For the first 200 to 300 years of European contact that included the fur trade, First Nations people outnumbered the settlers. But diseases brought by the new comers, starvation from the over-exploitation of the furbearing animals, wars between the European nations over the land and battles to protect their own land from encroachment decimated the Indigenous population (RCAP, 1996).

In his presentation at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association conference (NAISA 2013), Peter Campbell shared the teachings he received while growing up on the traditional lands of North Spirit Lake First Nation in Northwestern Ontario by reading from a story he had previously published. "In the past our people were nomadic, moving from place to place and living off the land as they endeavoured to provide for themselves and their families. These activities summarized part of the culture and traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation. The environment they lived in trained them to be both self-sufficient and hardy ... as soon as a child became of age to be able to walk and follow, the training would begin." (Campbell, 2001)

The land-based lifestyle and culture of First Nations has brought them into conflict with the Canadian state and its industry partners with a Western worldview that sees land as property to be exploited for wealth. Much of Canada's economy today remains based on extraction of natural resources from First Nations' traditional lands that were protected in their treaties for their use. Very few of the dollars generated from the resource extraction industry ever reaches the First Nations. Palmater (2011) refers to the rich, vibrant cultures that existed before European contact as "First Nations have gone from being the richest peoples in the world to the most impoverished, as their lands, resources, and ways of being were stolen from them" (p.112).

The relations between the Canadian government and First Nations are complex and often adversarial, in part due to the most racist piece of legislation ever introduced in Canada, in the late 1800s. The *Indian Act* details how First Nations will be accommodated by the federal government. It dictates how First Nations are completely at the mercy of the people in power regarding how the First Nations people and their communities will be funded. The continuing assimilationist tactics perpetuated by the Canadian government are carefully protected in this legislation. Recent movements to create policies that support First Nations' self-governance are presented in the media, and yet the *Indian Act* and its related policies have not been amended to reflect these proposed changes (Palmater, 2011).

The widespread poverty, inadequate housing, undrinkable water and high suicide rates in many of the First Nations across Canada continue to be clear indicators of the struggles against settler colonialism that these communities are addressing. Aboriginal people make up 5% of Canada's population, yet 40% of the female prison population is Aboriginal. Whole communities are still trying to recover from the devastating impacts of the 100-year legacy of the residential schools on individuals, families, communities and the country as a whole (RCAP, 1996).

## Community Infrastructure and Its Relationship to Community Resilience

Canada is the second largest country in the world but has the lowest density and the most urbanized population. Given that approximately 80% of Canadians live in urban areas and 20% in the rural, most of the land base is sparsely populated. Most First Nations are located in the rural and remote regions of the country. It is very challenging for all rural communities in Canada, and particularly so for First Nations, to have a sustainable economic base. The remotest communities, those without any road access, face particular challenges due to the high costs of transporting supplies.

With small populations there is rarely enough funding available for infrastructure, compared to populous urban areas where often population-based funding determines who gets the dollars. Broadband infrastructure development in rural areas continues to lag behind the rest of Canada due to a lack of a federal government broadband policy along with a strong focus on developing the private sector instead of developing the communities located in these regions. This situation creates challenging environments that are the everyday reality for the people living in these remote communities.

First Nation community members are working together to create resilient communities to resist the ongoing government efforts to remove them from their territories and, instead, are collaborating to build sustainable local environments and opportunities that support employment and equitable access to services - including housing, health, education, safety, security – along with the physical infrastructure to support these services. As Iris Heavy Runner aptly observes, *“resilience is not a new concept to aboriginal peoples. It’s an ancient principle in our philosophy of life. To persevere, to stand strong, to never give up hope. A culture’s world view is the lens through which they learn how to nurture, protect, and dream for future generations”* (Kenny, 2003, p.3).

Researchers recognize that resilience is more than an individual attribute - it is clustered, occurring in groups of people in a web of meaningful relationships. The individual, family unit, community and larger environment are interconnected and work together to form a resilient community. Three important components of resiliency in First Nations are social capital, sharing stories, and networking. Sharing stories facilitates bonding between storytellers and listeners. Stories are important because they help community members, particularly the youth, to understand their negative experiences and to anticipate a more positive future (Kirmayer, et al. 2009). Molyneaux, et al. (2012) argue that social media and community resilience are connected because people are able to share their stories, experiences and preserve their traditions and culture employing these online environments.

Kirmayer and colleagues have identified the physical infrastructure as a core dimension of community resilience. They believe that community resilience can be measured in part by the availability of built capital infrastructure that provides the support facilities required to provide the services community members’ demand. In their model, infrastructure includes housing, transportation, water, power, and communications (Kirmayer et al., 2009). For the e-community work, we understand

communications to encompass all elements of telecommunications, including broadband infrastructure, networks, and applications including social media.

To use social media tools effectively in these remote and rural environments requires the same type of sustainable broadband infrastructure that is taken for granted in urban centres. Because the commercial telecommunications companies require a functional business case to build and deliver their broadband services, public dollars are required to put telecom infrastructure in place in remote communities. When the government pays a corporation to build the required infrastructure, there is often the expectation that these communities will be able to pay the corporation to deliver the broadband connections on an ongoing basis. There are examples across Canada where companies get the contracts to build the infrastructure, but once there are no more dollars to support its ongoing operation, they simply walk away from the project, leaving the communities and region without the required online services. Having unreliable infrastructure weakens the communities' resilience.

### **OCAP and Community-Owned Infrastructure in Northwestern Ontario.**

Community ownership and control over their infrastructure is an important requirement for First Nations. In uncertain times and during crisis, especially for remote communities far from other supporting organizations, communities require access to and possession of the capacity to maintain and protect their infrastructure (McMahon et al., 2011). The principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) have been applied to data management originally by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (Schnarch, 2004) and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN, 2007) and, more recently, by the First Nations Information Governance Centre that trademarked the concept. We argue that OCAP is also an important requirement related to community resilience and First Nation owned and managed infrastructure. Working with the principles of OCAP means that First Nations are doing it for themselves, creating and sustaining local jobs and capacity that protect their community and deliver the services, such as access to social media that the people require to support their efforts to counter settler colonialism.

Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) is a tribal council in Northwestern Ontario providing second level support to its member First Nations. KO is a First Nation owned and managed organization delivering a variety of services that includes its telecommunications broadband network, Kuhkenah Network (KO-KNET) (O'Donnell, et al., 2011). KO's Board of Directors are the Chiefs of six small remote First Nations in Northwestern Ontario. Working with these communities for nearly 20 years since 1994 as the KO-KNET Coordinator, author Beaton was involved in developing and supporting the broadband infrastructure in these communities, as well as several e-community initiatives still operating today.

Five of these small KO First Nation communities are very remote, meaning they are fly-in only communities. Four have about 400 people and the fifth has about 1,000 people living there year round. The communities are diverse in language (Cree, Oji-Cree and Ojibway), culture, history and geography. The cost of living is exorbitant, given the high costs of power generation and transporting goods. The people have a strong

connection to the land, reinforced by their faith and cultural beliefs they continue to practice and celebrate today. Their elected government consists of a Chief and Council members who work with local service program managers and community members to use the community infrastructure to deliver the services required in every community (Walmart, et al., 2012). Each of these five KO First Nations operates its own school, health centre, administration complex, water and wastewater plants, electrical network (three of the communities), roads, heavy equipment, airport, and social service programs that every community is expected to provide for its residents. All these community services require infrastructure and, increasingly, they rely on online processes requiring adequate broadband infrastructure to operate successfully. Social media and online activities are important to the people in these First Nations for sharing their stories and experiences, especially as they relate to the land (Beaton et al., 2009; Beaton et al., 2012).

The five member KO First Nations are Fort Severn, Deer Lake, Keewaywin, Poplar Hill and North Spirit Lake (Walmart, et al., 2012). In 1995, Beaton visited North Spirit Lake First Nation for the first time. The community had no airport, a single payphone on the outside of the police station, minimal and inferior infrastructure and no electricity. Now, less than 20 years later, the community has a new school and health centre, operates its own electrical, roads, water and wastewater systems, as well as its own cellular, fiber, coaxial cable for television and internet, and wireless network serving community members. North Spirit Lake members built the infrastructure themselves, using their infrastructure funding to contract the required development and retain ownership of the infrastructure. When possible, they worked with small local companies to support local and regional capacity-building.

In contrast, in the 1970s in Deer Lake and Fort Severn First Nations, the Canadian Federal government dictated the electrical and telecommunication infrastructure development process. The government kept the local communities out of the development process and, instead, contracted large urban corporations to build, own and operate the electrical and telephone infrastructure. These corporate-owned systems were always slow to be upgraded, with the corporations unwilling to invest in their infrastructure unless the government provided public funding to cover all the costs. Today these communities are unable to build much-needed housing because there is an inadequate supply of electricity to serve their communities. This negative experience with corporate owned and managed infrastructure led Deer Lake and Fort Severn to build their own digital network infrastructure, and now both communities are operating their own mobile and internet services. The lesson here is that even though North Spirit Lake First Nation used government funds to build their locally owned and managed networks, its ownership of the process means the First Nation owns its electrical, mobile and digital network infrastructure. The jobs and the capacity remain in the community.

The First Nations' community owned and managed infrastructure and online services using that infrastructure creates new opportunities for local investments, enterprises and employment addressing local needs and priorities. The delivery of these community services is being achieved under challenging conditions where operating costs are much higher than in urban centres. Education, health, housing, policing, administrative,

governance, transportation, water, power and communications infrastructure and services require skilled and dedicated people to ensure the smooth delivery of these products.

## **E-Community in First Nations**

With nearly 20 years of experience in developing ICT initiatives, Keewaytinook Okimakanak and its member First Nations are currently combining these initiatives into an e-Community strategy that has a social media component as a central communication tool for sharing e-Community information. This strategy celebrates the resilience of the First Nations, the work thus far, and the challenges for the KO organization and the communities. Flexibility and change management skills are required by everyone working in these communities due to new infrastructure demands, upgrades, priorities and needs.

The history of the e-Community in the KO First Nations can be traced back to the development of local community radio systems in the 1970s and then community cable television in the late 1980s. In 1994, the Chiefs of KO supported the development of a computer communication network by the KO education department to assist their elementary school staff and students in sharing messages and information between the schools in the other KO First Nations. Beaton was then hired to set up the Kuhkenah Network (KO-KNET) and Bulletin Board System (BBS). These early communication challenges helped pave the way for future telecommunication infrastructure and local ICT developments.

An example of one resulting ICT development was the Keewaytinook Internet High School (KIHS). KIHS began in 2000 with three KO First Nations delivering Grade 9 and 10 courses in their local high school classroom created with support from the KIHS program. Over the years, KIHS expanded to include 13 First Nations and a full selection of high school courses. Today KIHS is hosting annual graduation ceremonies, with some of the students choosing to take all their high school courses in their home community. KIHS has emerged as an important local service for many reasons. There is at least one additional full-time high school teacher who is now living and working in each of the participating First Nations. In some of the larger classrooms, local Education Assistants are hired to work with the students and support the KIHS teacher. Each First Nation now has its own local high school that parents and students can access to obtain their high school diploma. The communication and learning skills students gain are proving to be beneficial when they decide to continue their post-secondary education either online or in an urban setting. KIHS is an important user of the locally owned First Nation network, financially contributing to the ongoing operation and maintenance of the network infrastructure and e-Community framework.

Other local services supporting the First Nations' e-Community developments include the KO Telemedicine (KOTM) service, videoconferencing, cellular phone, justice, local government administration, water and wastewater plant remote monitoring - all of which use online processes - along with personal and business connections to the internet (O'Donnell et al., 2011). The e-Community concept and local enterprise development strategy describe these online initiatives as e-learning, e-health, e-utilities, e-research,

e-governance and others. KO-KNET is also creating, adapting and making available many other new ICT applications, resources and services to address local First Nation needs and priorities, including: the online cable plant management system that allows community network coordinators to manage internet and television connections; the bandwidth management system to ensure quality of service for community telehealth sessions; the video booking system that allows community members to easily book videoconference resources; and the community mobile phone pay-as-go billing system. First Nations created these systems and processes to support healthy and sustainable environments and services that are locally owned and controlled. These projects create new learning and economic initiatives and challenges, resulting in new employment and skills development opportunities (Beaton et al., 2009; Fiser & Clement, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2011; Walmark et al. 2005).

Working collaboratively with other First Nations makes it possible to leverage best prices and purchase the broadband infrastructure and telecommunication services required by negotiating agreements with strategic government and commercial partners to benefit the First Nations partners. Sharing best practices so all communities and partners are included and supported in the e-community development work supports meaningful and respectful partnership and engagement. An important result of this work was the acceptance by the Chiefs of First Nations across the country of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) e-Community Framework resolution in July 2008. The AFN resolution provided a strong endorsement for the work begun so many years before in these small remote First Nations in Northwestern Ontario. More recently, the AFN Chiefs again supported this work with the adoption of the e-Community Strategy resolution at their assembly in December 2011.

The KO organization is sharing their e-community story widely. This involves getting everyone within the organization working together using a team approach to share how their particular KO service is using the e-community tools and framework to support KO community members and their services. The KO e-community display and information session was a significant contribution to the AFN Annual General Assembly in July 2012. KO service managers and staff made eight presentations about their e-community activities at the international North American Indigenous Studies Association annual gathering in Saskatoon in June 2013 and displayed their work there as well.

Social media is now a central element in the KO e-community strategy. From the KO-KNET research completed over the years, the use of social media was recognized as almost universal in each of the First Nations for selling products locally and sharing information (Budka, et al., 2009; Budka, 2012; Molyneaux et al., 2012). Building on their myKNET.org social media experience, the KO-KNET staff recently developed a web-based interface for the different KO e-community programs and services that shares information with local Facebook e-community groups owned by each KO First Nation. These social media environments are designed and managed, respecting community ownership, awareness and engagement, as information, resources and opportunities are shared among the online users. The next step in the KO e-community strategy will involve working with the KO First Nations to expand the local membership of the these

social media groups, along with encouraging and supporting KO-KNET staff to be sharing updates and information using these online tools.

## **Conclusion**

The First Nations in Northwestern Ontario are using social media and other online tools to protect and maintain their autonomy and their traditional and contemporary First Nation territories, values and cultures. Their e-Community work is delivering and accessing community services and teaching and sharing their ways and their relationship to the land with others. The almost 500 years of colonization experienced by First Nations has generated many acts of resistance and increased autonomy in all areas of their lives, including taking control and ownership of broadband infrastructure. First Nations are using online tools for a wide range of purposes - from delivering and using culturally appropriate services to using social media to organize locally, nationally and internationally, as evidenced most recently by the Idle No More movement (Philpot et al., 2013).

Owning and managing their local infrastructure contributes significantly to the community's resilience. The struggle with settler colonialism involves opposing ideologies where the corporate and private sector is competing with the public community sector for limited public funds. This struggle is a political issue requiring that the control over public funding be placed at the community level so communities are able to make the decisions that affect their access to infrastructure and services. This funding model is in contrast to the colonial model employed today where the central government is deciding which private sector group should benefit from public dollars. Who and how the First Nations decide to work with and use the public funds then becomes an opportunity to develop further their own e-community strategy.

The innovative ICT work demonstrated by KO-KNET and its First Nation partners is resulting in research and policies that can only be created and supported through working together. Small, remote First Nations are creating strategies based on their traditional values and teachings to engage, empower, and support their citizens and especially the youth to continue living and building strong and healthy communities for future generations. Creating and providing the opportunities for youth to do the work they are interested in developing and sustaining is now being achieved. An elder and community leader who grew up during the residential school era informed a group of researchers that his definition of success would be to hear children and young people playing. E-community efforts are making that possible today.

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Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey ([www.firstnationhelp.com](http://www.firstnationhelp.com)) and the University of New Brunswick ([www.unb.ca](http://www.unb.ca)). The FNI project works closely with the First Mile project (<http://firstmile.ca>). We welcome feedback on this paper.

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