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Settler Colonialism and First Nations e-Communities in Northwestern Ontario

Brian Beaton
University of New Brunswick

Peter Campbell
Keewaytinook Okimakanak

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 and social media, to 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, Tenasco, O'Donnell, Whiteduck & Lockhart, 2012; Whiteduck, J., 2010; Whiteduck, Beaton, Burton & O'Donnell 2012). We will argue that local ownership of the digital infrastructure as well as the online tools, social media and e-services that use it, is an important element 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", 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; p. 2). 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 worked well for the settlers who then believed they were in a position of power over the land. Critical First Nations theorists consider themselves to be still in a colonial state, led by the settler population, which now outnumbers the original peoples of this land. These critical theorists use the term "settler colonialism" instead of post-colonialism to describe problems that still have to be resolved, and several authors have documented the history of settler colonialism and the ongoing struggles that 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 [RCAP], 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 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 newcomers, 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 in 2013, Peter Campbell read from a story he had previously published (2001, p. 168), and shared the teachings he received while growing up on the traditional lands of North Spirit Lake First Nation in Northwestern Ontario:

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.

The land-based lifestyle and culture of First Nations has brought them into conflict with the Canadian state and its industry partners with their 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, which were protected by treaty for First Nations 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, and how "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, due in part to the most racist piece of legislation ever introduced in Canada. Introduced 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 have covered by 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 face. 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 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 for First Nations, to have a sustainable economic base. The most remote communities, those without any road access, face particular challenges due to the high cost of transporting supplies.

When population-based funding models are used to determine who gets the dollars, populous urban areas have an advantage over communities with small populations, which rarely receive

enough funding for infrastructure. Broadband infrastructure development in rural areas continues to lag behind the rest of Canada due to a lack of a federal government broadband policy, combined 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. They are collaborating to build sustainable local environments and opportunities that support employment and equitable access to services - including housing, health, education, safety, and security - along with the physical infrastructure to support these services.

Resilience, a concept well known to aboriginal people, is demonstrated by the residential school survivors, their communities, their families, and everyone affected both by the institutions themselves and the federal government policies that created and supported them. First Nations continued existence after the efforts of assimilation on the part of the state and the Indian Act policies is reason enough to celebrate the resiliency of these communities (Kenny, 2003; Kirmayer, Sehdev, Whitely, Dandeneau & Isaac, 2009).

Community resiliency involves the different relationships that interconnect and work together in First Nations, between individuals, family units, the community and the larger environment. Sharing narratives is critical to support resiliency and assist community members, particularly the youth, both in learning about and understanding the colonial experience, and in creating a positive future for themselves (Kirmayer, et al., 2009). Molyneaux, et al. (2014) argue that social media and community resilience are connected, because people employ these online environments to share their stories and experiences, as well as preserve their traditions and culture.

Kirmayer and colleagues have identified a core dimension of community resilience as the physical infrastructure that exists to provide the support and services that the community members demand. In their model, community resilience can be measured in part by the availability of built capital infrastructure, including 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 such as social media.

Unreliable communications infrastructure undermines community resilience. Using social media tools effectively in these remote and rural environments requires the same type of sustainable and reliable broadband infrastructure that is taken for granted in urban centres. Because commercial telecommunications companies require a profitable business case to build and deliver 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. However, there are examples across Canada where companies have had contracts to build the infrastructure, but

once there were no more dollars to support ongoing operations, they simply walked away from the project leaving the communities and region without online services.

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 First Mile access to and possession of the capacity to maintain and protect their infrastructure (McMahon et al., 2011). The principles of Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) were originally applied to data management by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (Schnarch, 2004) and the Assembly of First Nations (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2007). More recently, the First Nations Information Governance Centre has employed and 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. They are creating First Mile opportunities and sustaining local jobs, building the capacity to protect their communities and to deliver services, such as access to social media, which the people require in 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, one of which is the 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 that are 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, which is reinforced by their faith and the 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, Gibson, Kakekaspan, O'Donnell & Beaton, 2012). Each of these five KO First Nations operates its own school, health centre, administration complex, water and wastewater plants, roads, heavy equipment, airport, and social service programs. Three communities operate their own electrical networks. All community services require infrastructure and they increasingly rely on online processes, which in turn, require 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, O'Donnell, Fiser & Walmart, 2009; Beaton, Kakekaspan & O'Donnell, 2012).

The five member KO First Nations are Fort Severn, Deer Lake, Keewaywin, Poplar Hill and North Spirit Lake (Walmark, et al., 2012). When author Beaton first visited in 1995, North Spirit Lake First Nation had no airport, minimal and inferior infrastructure and no electricity. A single payphone on the outside of the police station served the entire community. Now, less than 20 years later, the community has a new school and health centre, it operates its own electrical, roads, water and wastewater systems as well as its own cellular, fiber, coaxial cable for television and internet, and a wireless network. Members of the North Spirit Lake community built what they could, used their infrastructure funding to contract the required development, and has retained ownership over this infrastructure. When possible, they worked with small local companies to help build local and regional capacity.

In contrast, in the 1970s the Canadian Federal government dictated the electrical and telecommunication infrastructure development process in Deer Lake and Fort Severn First Nations. 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 the 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 operate their own mobile and internet services. The lesson here is that while North Spirit Lake First Nation used government funds to build the networks, by owning the process the First Nation owns and manages its own electrical, mobile and digital network infrastructure. The additional benefit is that related jobs and capacity remain in the community.

When First Nations communities own and manage their own infrastructure and online services, it is more likely that new opportunities for local investment, enterprise and employment will address local needs and priorities. The delivery of these community services is being achieved under challenging conditions, particularly since operating costs are much higher than in urban centres. In addition, the infrastructure and smooth delivery of education, health, housing, policing, administrative, governance, transportation, water, power and communications services depends on the availability, skill and dedication of people within the community.

E-Community in First Nations

Keewaytinook Okimakanak and its member First Nations are currently combining nearly 20 years of experience developing ICT initiatives into an e-Community strategy with a social media component as a central communication tool for sharing e-Community information. This strategy celebrates the resilience of the First Nations and the work done thus far, and is designed to address future challenges faced by both the KO organization and the individual member communities. New infrastructure demands, upgrades, changing priorities and needs require flexibility and changing management skills from everyone working in these communities.

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 development, such as 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 and over the years, it expanded to offer a full selection of high school courses to thirteen different First Nations. Today KIHS hosts annual graduation ceremonies of students who have chosen to take all their high school courses through KIHS so they can stay in their home communities. 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 to 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 that students gain through the KIHS experience are proving to be beneficial when they decide to continue their post-secondary education, whether they continue their studies online or move away to a more urban setting. KIHS is an important user of the locally owned First Nation network, and contributes financially to the ongoing operation and maintenance of the network infrastructure and the e-Community framework.

Other local services supporting the First Nations' e-Community developments and using online processes include the KO Telemedicine (KOTM) service, videoconferencing, cellular phone, justice, local government administration, water and wastewater plant remote monitoring along with personal and business connections to the internet (O'Donnell, et al., 2011). The e-Community concept and local enterprise development strategy describe online initiatives as e-learning, e-health, e-utilities, e-research, e-governance and others. KO-KNET is also creating, adapting and making available other new ICT applications, resources and services to address local First Nation needs and priorities. These include an online cable plant management system that allows community network coordinators to manage internet and television connections as well as a bandwidth management system to ensure quality of service for community telehealth sessions. A new video booking system allows community members to easily book videoconference resources, and there is now a 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 also create new learning and economic initiatives and challenges, which has resulted in new employment and skills development opportunities (Beaton, et al., 2009; Fiser & Clement, 2009; O'Donnell, et al., 2011; Walmark, O'Donnell & Beaton, 2005).

Working collaboratively with other First Nations makes it possible to leverage best practices when negotiating agreements with strategic government and commercial partners to purchase the broadband infrastructure and telecommunication services. 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 outcome of this collaborative approach was the acceptance by the Chiefs of First Nations across the country of the AFN e-Community Framework resolution in July 2008. The AFN resolution provided a strong endorsement of 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 to work together using a team approach, and 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 initiative had a strong presence at the AFN Annual General Assembly in July 2012, and in June 2013, 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.

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., 2014). 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 in a way that respects community ownership, awareness and engagement, to facilitate information, resource and opportunity sharing among the online users. The next step in the KO e-community strategy involves working with the KO First Nations to expand the local membership of the these social media groups, as well as encouraging and supporting KO-KNET staff to be share 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, as well as their traditional and contemporary First Nation territories, values and cultures. The e-Community strategy and framework is designed to facilitate the delivery of and access to community services and teachings, and to enable First Nations to share 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. First Nations are actively increasing their autonomy in all areas of their lives, including taking control and ownership of broadband infrastructure. First Nations are using online tools and social media for a wide range of purposes, from the delivery and use of culturally appropriate services, to organizing on local, national and international levels, as evidenced most recently by the Idle No More movement (Philpot, O'Donnell & Kenny, 2013).

Owning and managing their local infrastructure contributes significantly to the community's resilience. The struggle with settler colonialism involves opposing ideologies, but also requires overcoming a model in which the corporate and private sector competes with the public community sector for limited public funds. This struggle is a political issue, and requires fundamental changes to the colonial model, where the central government decides which private sector group should benefit from public dollars. In contrast, a new funding model would place control over public funds at the community level, so communities are able to make the decisions that will improve their access to infrastructure and services. This funding model would also allow First Nations to decide who they want to work with, and how use the public funds in ways that will create opportunities to develop their own e-community strategies further.

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

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