



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

DATA COLONIALISM AND DATA SOVEREIGNTY IN INDIGENOUS SPACES

Copp lie Cocq
Humlab, Ume  University

This paper discusses a topic of prioritized importance in contemporary Indigenous research: data sovereignty. Contemporary modes of collection and use of data have re-actualized debates about colonialism. Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe data use in term of “data colonialism”, i.e. ”a form of fundamental appropriation (Greene & Joseph, 2015; Thatcher et al., 2016), or extraction (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017) of resources” (p. 338). Indigenous data sovereignty - “the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data about Indigenous communities, peoples, lands, and resources” (Rainie et al., 2019, p. 301) - is to be understood in relation to efforts towards self-determination. It is also intended to be a means for preventing misuse of data and for ensuring trustful and respectful relationships between research institutions and Indigenous communities.

In the light of the historical and cultural contexts in which we conduct our research, we need to revise data collection practices that risk contributing to a reiteration or an amplification of colonial practices and perspectives. For instance, collection of data is often initiated by authorities, institutions, or research groups, while the participation and influence of Indigenous community members are too often limited. Efforts toward ethically valid and cultural-sensitive modes of data use are taking shape in Indigenous research, calling for an increased awareness about the topic among scholars within the interdisciplinary field of digital research (e.g. Cocq 2022).

The role of cultural and social contexts in the design, use, and adaptation of technologies has been emphasized in previous research (Douglas, 1987; Nissenbaum, 2001; Noble 2018; Powell & Aitken, 2011), and scholars within the field of Indigenous research have also pointed at the importance of the historical context, for instance considering the legacy of colonialism (Axelsson & Storm Mienna 2020; Rainie et al. 2019), and the impact of colonization on research (Kuokkanen, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 2008). This paper suggests critical perspectives for sustainable digital research in relation to Indigenous research, more particularly regarding collection and management of data.

Suggested Citation (APA): Cocq, C. (2022, November). *Data Colonialism and Data Sovereignty in Indigenous Spaces*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

This presentation takes its point of departure in Sápmi, the traditional area of settlement of the Indigenous Sámi people, and in ongoing research and initiatives in the area (more specifically, Norway, Sweden and Finland). These include strengthening modes of co-production of knowledge, developing ethical guidelines for research with Sámi communities, and advancing Indigenous data sovereignty. The international research context, not least Indigenous research in Canada, New Zealand and Australia constitutes the framework for contextualizing topical debates and issues in Sápmi.

First, I will approach and examine practices and principles of data collection, data management and data curation through the lens of Indigenous research. What are the implications of surveillance culture (Lyon 2017) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) in Indigenous contexts? How is ownership of data discussed and applied in our contemporary research contexts? What examples of best practices can be found in Sápmi?

Second, I will discuss examples of digital initiatives in curatorship of Indigenous traditional knowledge, for instance the labelling of cultural heritage, use of metadata and access to library and archive collections. Current debates and ongoing works about ethical guidelines and about the application of FAIR principles (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse of digital assets) and CARE principles¹ (Collective benefits, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics) will be central in this discussion.

Finally, I will argue for how bringing together principles from Indigenous research and digital research/digital humanities can help us to develop sustainable research practices and to recognize the plurality of the cultural values, perspectives, and ethics that characterize our research fields, i.e. Indigenous research and digital research.

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¹ <https://www.gida-global.org/care>

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