COMMENTARY

Knowledge and power:
the tale of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data

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The phrase 'knowledge is power' is understood to mean that if individuals and groups in a society attain knowledge through transmission of knowledge (education), they attain wisdom. This wisdom is then used to assert power (Bacon and Montagu 1857). However, as Foucault (1990) argues, knowledge power recreates itself in a circular process. Therefore, who determines what knowledge is — and who has the right to speak to that knowledge — is important.

In this commentary we critique the power and knowledge structures of the economic, political, social and cultural resources that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data. We then challenge the current holders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data and the colonial worldview from which such data are converted into knowledges.

To map a new path, we offer solutions that are embedded in the concept of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDSov) and Indigenous Data Governance (IDGov).

Settler-colonial power and control over data

In Australia the ongoing process of settler-colonialism positions Western epistemes as superior, marginalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews (Rigney 2001; Wolfe 1999). The result has been the disempowering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

to speak our own knowledges and, by extension, to tell our stories. Indigenous data have been gleaned and assembled into knowledges through the frame of settler-colonialism to produce generalisations about us, which are then expressed as 'wisdom' about our historical and contemporary lives. Rarely acknowledged in the process of knowledge production is the settler-colonial cultural lens that is imbued with concepts such as racial hierarchy, racism and sexism. This practice has been particularly prevalent in the context of our demography, health and wellbeing.

Settler-colonial power and control over our data and knowledges have not gone unchallenged by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In challenging this knowledge control we are frequently rebuffed with counter claims that we are seeking something no other group in our society has — that we are seeking special privileges. In addition to being incorrect due to express rights,[1] this logic fails to acknowledge that settler-colonial power structures are entrenched across all societal systems. These same systems were historically designed to exclude and disempower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples unless we were assessed as worthy. Settler-colonial systems continue to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from power and control, despite, or perhaps in response to, our historical and contemporary intelligentsia. These same settler-colonial forces remain at play today.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we have little choice but to rely on Australian settler demographic and wellbeing data infrastructures to tell our stories. But current data infrastructures seem incapable of creating knowledge about our multiple demographics and of developing, collecting and reporting on basic demographic and wellbeing concepts that are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[2] We are not asking for rights that differ to settler-colonial society — rather, we are demanding the same rights to create knowledges about us and to use these knowledges to plan for our futures.

Despite our needs, concepts such as 'First Nations' are not entertained in the current data landscape. Yet, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we need to know the extent and spread of our Nations/language groups. Similarly,

data and information on concepts of wellbeing fundamental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemes, such as Country, cultural knowledge transmission and practice, cannot be fully conceptualised by the settler-colonial state. Cultural knowledge has a long history of piracy by settler-colonial societies, and modern forms include theft of intellectual property.

Data ecosystems (data development, collections, storage, access and use, analysis, reporting and destruction (deletion), generated or held by institutions such as governments, the public sector, research and commercial entities) do not include tribal affiliation or mob as standard items and therefore we lack information about our 'nations'. In settler-colonial states such as Australia, data ecosystems continuously demonstrate an inability to accommodate the data needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Lovett et al. 2019).

Instead, the settler-colonial system turns the gaze to the problem of data quality (i.e. completeness). The fundamental requirement of 'fit for purpose data' representing notions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing is often not discussed (Salmon et al. 2019; Yap and Yu 2016).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data expertise has been involved in every aspect of settler-colonial data ecosystems — mostly in advisory capacities to government structures with already embedded settler-colonial values (AIHW 2011). Internationally, from about 2000, following the development of OCAP® (which is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC n.d.), a shift began with First Nations peoples demanding data rights. Subsequently, Indigenous data rights were enhanced with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 (United Nations 2008). In more recent years we have seen seminal texts and the emergence of Indigenous data rights, specifically with the development of IDSov at the international and domestic level (Taylor and Kukutai 2015).

The most recent settler-colonial state response to IDSov is to argue that the definitions and concepts of IDSov and IDGov are emergent issues and that a common and shared definition is required. For those who continue to promulgate

this myth, Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2019) provide a rebuttal:

> Indigenous Data Sovereignty is the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership and application of data about Indigenous communities, peoples, lands, and resources. Its enactment mechanism, Indigenous data governance is built around two central premises: the rights of Indigenous nations over data about them, regardless of where it is held and by whom; and the right to the data Indigenous peoples require to support nation building and rebuilding.

We cannot wait for the settler-colonial state to catch up, and so many Nations/language groups and communities have taken it upon themselves to progress their data (and knowledges) agenda.

A new path: opportunities for data empowerment

Recent policy and legislative developments in Australia provide key developments for IDSov. First, policy imperatives provide opportunity. Concepts important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural and data issues have become the centre of the national Indigenous health policy agenda (Closing the Gap in Partnership 2020; Department of Health 2015). Cultural factors are now incorporated into these policies including access and use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, access to country and cultural participation. Access to data is also included in the new Closing the Gap in Partnership policy to ensure data held by the Commonwealth can be used at more regional or community levels for development. Second, the digital economy has prompted changes to our publicly funded data ecosystems, to open these up further as part of making economic opportunity from data that the Australian settler-colonial state has amassed. The government has introduced draft data release and data sharing reforms (Data Availability and Transparency Bill 2020), and is proposing to enact this in early 2021 to give greater access to Commonwealth data (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019).

The opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data empowerment are clear. First, it provides an opportunity for us to define the elements of our cultures that should be included and measured, and how this is done. Indeed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have already taken the first steps, as evidenced through two studies, the Yawuru Wellbeing Survey and Mayi Kuwayu Study (Jones et al. 2018; Yap and Yu 2016). Developed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, one study relates to culture and wellbeing locally for Yawuru, while the latter is relevant to national measurement (see the Lovett et al. paper in this volume).

Second, data empowerment provides the opportunity to mobilise Indigenous data principles and governance (Maiam nayri Wingara 2017), as has occurred in other CANZUS[3] states. In Australia this can take various forms.

- Incorporation of Indigenous data principles into settler-colonial data ecosystems: this is conceptualised as a set of Indigenous data standards for existing data ecosystems. Similar to privacy and other standards, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples design Indigenous data standards and provide the assessment and accreditation framework.
- Indigenous data governance processes for settler-colonial data ecosystems: this would include the systematic identification and prioritisation of settler-colonial controlled data of importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, who would then have to embed IDGov processes.
- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data infrastructure and authority: this would be conceptualised as repatriating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data; developing new data items; collecting, managing and analysing data by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs; and developing and realising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data capability.

The proposal of new legislation, such as data sharing reforms (Data Availability and Transparency Bill 2020), provides an opportunity to develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data infrastructure that is governed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It provides the potential to unshackle Indigenous

data from systems imbued with settler-colonial values, and to progress IDSov through the development of a data ecosystem that responds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and that can power self-determination.

The disappointment of historical exclusion from data ecosystems can be reimagined with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership of data and knowledge that meet our needs, along with the infrastructure to address these needs. While there is guidance on how existing data ecosystems can play their part, the time has come for us to take on this challenge and use our data to speak our stories for the future.

NOTES

1 See the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations 2008). This declaration contains no additional human rights or special privileges; rather, it explains how human rights apply for indigenous peoples. This is because indigenous human rights are so often violated by contemporary settler-colonial societies and nation states.

2 See Article 31 and Article 43 of the UNDRIP (United Nations 2008).

3 CANZUS (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States) refers to a collective of so-called First World settler states colonised by the British.

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