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When knowledge goes underground: Cultural information poverty, and Canada's *Indian Act*

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Abstract

This paper will examine information poverty, and how the Indian Act imposed a situation of cultural information poverty. Passed in 1876, the Indian Act imposed cultural information poverty within Indigenous communities. Through this piece of Canadian legislation, Indigenous communities were forced to send their children to Residential Schools, and all cultural practices such as the potlatch and Sun Dance were banned. These policies disrupted education practices, and the passing down of information, creating a disconnect between younger generations and their communities. However, the Indian Act's goal of assimilation failed with some of these traditions going underground, being practiced in secret. Through strength and resilience communities today are experiencing a cultural revitalization, and what one Indigenous author calls a renaissance. The paper concludes by sharing ideas on how academic libraries can better engage with their local Indigenous communities.

Keywords: information poverty, decolonization, Indigenous peoples, colonization, cultural genocide, Indigenous librarianship, academic libraries

Information poverty typically refers to countries or communities that are unable to access information (Britz, 2004; Childers, 1975). Today that understanding has expanded to include being unable to use or interpret that information (Britz, 2004; Marcella & Chowdhury, 2018). In this paper, I am going to examine the ways in which the Indian Act, a piece of Canadian legislation enacted in 1876, imposed information poverty on Indigenous communities through practices such as the residential school system and social services (i.e. 60's Scoop). Specifically, I am going to focus on the

disconnect between communities and their cultural information. The Indian Act was supposed to result in the assimilation of Indigenous peoples, and in this regard, it has failed. Due to the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples, their cultural practices and traditional knowledge is being revitalized.

Academic libraries have a role in this process of revitalization and reclamation of Indigenous culture as the places that house information. As institutions, and as the people who work in these institutions, we must be aware of how academia has contributed to this information poverty and attempted erasure of Indigenous cultures.

This paper uses a framework inspired by Smylie, Kaplan-Myrth, and McShane (2009) who studied how some Indigenous community members seek out and engage with health information. They looked specifically at urban Inuit and Métis communities in Ottawa and a semi-rural Algonquin community- the Pikwakanagan First Nation- outside of Ottawa. The framework used for their study was informed by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and included several assumptions that I have adapted from the health context to the information context:

- before colonization, Indigenous communities had complex systems of education and knowledge transfer;
- reflective of the diverse groups of Indigenous peoples across this country we now call Canada, these systems were, themselves, diverse;
- due to colonization, these systems have been "actively suppressed and outlawed" (Smylie et al., 2009, p. 437) and;
- these actions continue to impact Indigenous peoples today.

Based on these assumptions, this paper will discuss cultural information poverty within Indigenous communities as a symptom of colonial tactics. Following this, I will suggest some recommendations for the future of academic libraries and Indigenous knowledge.

Author's Positionality

Following the guidance in Sean Wilson's book (Opaskwayak Cree; 2008) regarding Indigenous Research Methods, before I continue with this paper, I want to take this moment to situate myself within my research and writing. I am a Métis-Western European woman with family roots grounded in the Red River area of Manitoba, Scotland, England, and the Netherlands. Growing up outside of my community, in Stó:lō

territory located in present-day British Columbia, I was disconnected from my Indigenous culture for a large portion of my life. I was not raised Indigenous, nor was I raised with knowledge of my heritage. My Oma faced so much racism growing up in the late 1930s and 1940s that she renounced her heritage. Despite this, I grew up proud to be "Indian" as my father said - even though I did not understand exactly what that meant. I hold a level of privilege because I am a "hidden" Indigenous person even though I have similar experiences as some Indigenous people such as being from a broken home and helping raise younger siblings. Sometimes I feel as if I am occupying a grey area, neither one nor the other, but a semblance of both.

This paper, and my studies more broadly, are influenced not only by my interest but also by my career trajectory. After graduating with my library technician diploma in 2009, I worked as the Assistant Librarian for the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre for three years. It was during this time that I began learning about Canada's Indigenous history and specifically of the history and culture of the place I grew up. In my work at Simon Fraser University, I assist students daily on our Research Help Desk and AskAway (BC's virtual chat). Through my interactions with students, both domestic and international, I have an appreciation for the complex nature of Indigenous topics. Since the summer of 2018, I have served on the Decolonizing the Library Task Group, working to actively -though slowly- alter the library in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action released in 2015, and the SFU Aboriginal Reconciliation Committee's report Walk This Path With Us (2017).

Before continuing, I want to make a note about the terminology I am using. Following the government definition and current practice (Joseph (Gwawaenuk), 2018; Justice (Cherokee Nation), 2018; Vowel (Métis), 2016), the term Indigenous will be used when discussing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Older and outdated terms may be used in context when discussing practices or as used by an author. Additionally, where possible, I have included the name of an author's community or Nation. I am responsible for any omissions or mistakes and apologize in advance for them. These practices are a part of my own journey out of information poverty regarding Indigenous history, culture, and traditions.

What is Information Poverty?

Information poverty has been discussed as a concept in academic literature for approximately the past fifty years (Britz, 2004; Marcella & Chowdhury, 2018). While information poverty can be discussed as an issue faced by an entire country, it can also be more localized and experienced by a group within a country/province/municipality (Britz, 2004). Additionally, people can be information poor in specific areas but information rich in others (Lingel & Boyd, 2013), and living in poverty is not an indication of information poverty (Chatman, 1996; Marcella & Chowdhury, 2018). Experiences of information poverty will vary; however, there are some common reasons behind being information poor: technological barriers, educational barriers, cultural barriers, language barriers, and political barriers (Marcella & Chowdhury, 2018). Regardless of why someone or a community is information poor, Britz (2004) claims that it is the largest problem in the world affecting "economic, cultural, and socio-political development" (p. 192).

Similar to having many reasons or contexts behind why/how information poverty is experienced, there are many definitions. Childers (1975) states that the information poor have closed information systems which leads to "an inordinate amount of unawareness and misinformation" (p. 32). Marcella & Chowdhury (2018) identify information poverty as someone being "denied access to the information necessary for survival, self-sufficiency, sustainability or development" (p. 2). Britz (2004) expands the definition past access to include not having the skills to find and evaluate information, or the necessary infrastructure as part of being information poor. Lingel and Boyd (2013) uniquely refer to how "people locate, use, share, and evaluate information" (p. 981) as information practices. As such, they understand Chatman's work on information poverty to mean that the information poor are those who do not have a lot of "information resources that speak to their world view" (p. 983). It is using Chatman's (1996) explanation of the information poor that I will be looking at information poverty, the Indian Act, and Indigenous communities, examining the ability to locate, use and share information (Lingel & Boyd, 2013).

The Indian Act was written in an effort to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into a "Canadian" worldview or society (Joseph, 2018). Settlers did not understand or

recognize Indigenous informational practices (Burton & Point, 2006; Justice, 2018) and therefore decided they were inferior. Chatman (2001) discusses how experiences are a result of information that we use to create our realities. She questions whether someone can truly understand another's experiences because their worlds are different (1996). These differences, or worlds, creates insiders and outsiders where one is dominant and the other marginalized. Unlike dominant people, marginalized people, such as those living in information poverty, have two worlds "which are very different from each other" (Chatman, 2001, p. 3).

Information poverty is often researched within communities who are "marginalized" in some way. In the 1970s Childers defined marginalized or disadvantaged people as "having a low reading level, eyesight or hearing problems, and having English as a second language" (1975, p. 32). Today that definition should be modified to include occurrences of stigma, such as in Lingel and Boyd's 2013 study on information poverty and individuals who practice extreme body modifications. Location can also affect an individual's information poverty level if the infrastructure is not available (Britz, 2004; Lingel & Boyd, 2013, Marcella & Chowdhury, 2018). By looking at how the Indian Act, a Canadian legal document, impacted the traditional cultures of Indigenous communities, I am adding those who experienced cultural genocide to this definition.

Information Poverty in Canada

When searching for "information poverty AND Canada" in both the database Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text (LISTA), and Google Scholar, the majority of articles focused on immigrants and/or refugees coming into Canada. Other results were about information poverty and the digital divide, or information poverty, and information literacy. These results had me wondering about communities within Canada who may be, now or historically, in a state of information poverty. Britz (2004) writes that information poverty does not have to encompass an entire country, that it can be found within communities of a larger group. My response to his statement was to wonder about ways information poverty has been imposed on Indigenous communities through legislation and other governmental policies. Additionally, I wondered about in today's awareness of the cultural genocide, has this

state of information poverty persisted? This question is inspired by both my work on Decolonizing library practices and learning about my Métis heritage.

Colonization Tactics

The *Indian Act*

The Canadian government has a long history of trying to control the Indigenous communities that occupied this land for thousands of years before it was 'discovered'. The piece of legislation that has done the most harm is the Indian Act, a racist document that continues to be in effect today. The Indian Act was enacted in 1876, with the Bagot Report of 1844 providing the framework (Joseph, 2018). The Act made Indigenous Peoples wards of the Canadian government (Burton & Point (Stó:lō), 2006), and though originally it stated "that every effort should be made to aid the Red man in lifting himself out of his condition to tutelage and dependence" (as cited in Joseph, 2018) what it did was create a situation where Indigenous were demeaned, and treated as if they were unable to care for themselves.

It is important for all Canadians to understand the depth and reach of this document, and the impact it has had on Indigenous Peoples - and continues to have. As Joseph (2018) writes in his book, *21 Things You May Know About the Indian Act*, the Act controlled all aspects of First Nation's people's lives: where they lived, where they worked, went to school, if they could leave their reserve (there was a Pass System enacted and people needed permission slips), who was considered First Nations, and imposed a system of government. First Nations people were not considered people, as a person was "an individual other than an Indian" according to the Indian Act (Joseph, 2018, p. 27), a definition that was not changed until 1951.

The Indian Act also banned all cultural and spiritual ceremonies, a provision that is commonly referred to as the Potlatch Law (Burton & Point, 2006; Joseph, 2018). The potlatch is an integral ceremony to West Coast communities, where families gather to witness events such as passing on ancestral names, celebrating marriages and births, and honouring those who had passed away (Joseph, 2018). Judge Alfred Scow remarked that this ban "prevented the passing down of our oral history. It prevented the passing down of our values" (as quoted in Joseph, 2018, p. 47). This provision was

supposed to be specific to religious ceremonies, but often authorities punished those communities who hosted a powwow or Sun Dance (Henderson, 2018). By 1925 all dancing, on or off reserve, was banned (Henderson, 2018).

People could decide to move off reserve, attend university, and gain the right to vote — if they gave up their Indian status, and disconnected from their heritage. This process was referred to as enfranchisement, and the Act had both voluntary (such as those I have listed above) and involuntary (such an Indigenous woman marrying a non-Indigenous man) processes for enfranchisement (Joseph, 2018). Enfranchisement was included in the Act until 1985 when Bill C-31 was introduced (Joseph, 2018) which not only ended enfranchisement but added complexity to who was considered status Indian (Vowel, 2016). Being enfranchised meant an Indigenous person was viewed as civilized and as a British subject (Joseph, 2018), but it also meant they were disenfranchised from their family, culture, and home (Vowel, 2016).

Those changes in 1985 were not the first time the Indian Act was amended. In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott added mandatory education for all Indigenous children to the Act, in an effort to "get rid of the Indian problem" (Joseph, 2018, p. 120). Residential schools were the institutions preferred by the government, since they took the children away from their homes, and therefore cultures (Joseph, 2018). Some parts of the Act were repealed or altered in 1951, but it fundamentally stayed the same until 1985 (Joseph, 2018). The changes in 1951 occurred as a response to the horrific actions in Europe during World War II; People in Canada began to examine how Indigenous people were being treated (Joseph, 2018).

In all its forms, the Indian Act has focused on the lives of status Indians - those who qualify for a status card from the federal government (Vowel, 2016). It is not the same as band membership and does not apply to Métis or Inuit communities, even though they may be impacted by it (Vowel, 2018).

Residential Schools and the 60's Scoop

While not the focus of this paper, it would be remiss if I failed to mention two major devastating outcomes of the Indian Act: Residential Schools and the 60's Scoop, which refers to the practice of social services removing Indigenous children from their homes and placing them in foster care or up for adoption. The term "60's Scoop" is

misleading because the practice did not stop at the end of that decade, but continues today (Vowel, 2016). There is an enormous amount of published works on these two government-endorsed systems, and I will not go into detail on either here.

The Indian Act does not include a social service or child welfare provision so, at a glance, the connection between it and the 60's Scoop may not be apparent. Children were removed under the assumption that parents were not fit and that homes were not suitable (Justice, 2018; Vowel, 2016). This belief is evident in Residential Schools, where children suffered physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (TRC, 2015a). How could they grow up and not be traumatized? What skills or affection were they taught and shown? Some survivors developed addictions and inflicted similar abuse on their families (Hanson, n.d.; TRC, 2015a; Vowel, 2016). For decades there was a cycle of intergenerational trauma, and this trauma has its roots in the colonizers' belief that their Western ways were more civilized than those of the Indigenous Peoples. This cycle continues to impact communities today.

What I want to highlight here is the outcome of Residential Schools and the Scoop: loss of language, sense of identity, culture, and family connections. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report summary (2015a) goes into detail on the conditions of Residential Schools and the abuse inflicted on children therein. Stolen from families, these children were sent kilometers away to places where they couldn't speak their languages and were told repeatedly that they were less than non-Indigenous society, that they were savages and heathens (Hanson, n.d.; Joseph, 2018; Vowel, 2016). They were beaten for trying to keep their Indigenity through language, stories, and practices (TRC, 2015a). There is a reason those who went through Residential Schools are referred to as survivors. Regarding the children taken by social services, Vowel (2016) refers to them as "cultural amputees" (p. 183).

Information Poverty and the *Indian Act*

Based on my understanding of information poverty and the Indian Act, I would suggest that two instances of information poverty were created. The first instance is by not adequately educating children to succeed in the dominant (i.e. Western) society of Canada. The second instance is one of cultural information poverty, or cultural genocide (Joseph, 2018; Vowel, 2016). This instance of information poverty is a direct result of

the Indian Act and Residential Schools prohibiting Indigenous languages and cultural practices (Joseph, 2018; Vowel, 2016). As Childers (1975) wrote, Indigenous peoples have "unique information needs" (p. 80) regarding culture.

Inadequate Educational Practices

Residential Schools were supposed to assimilate Indigenous children into Western culture by providing them an education (Burton & Point, 2006; Joseph, 2018). This education was conducted in English, a language not all children understood at their arrival at the schools (Hanson, n.d.), and was on topics the church-run institutions deemed appropriate. Children were taught up to maybe a grade five level by age eighteen, and their education focused on manual labour or domestic work (Hanson, n.d.). Due to inadequate government funding, students often spent half their days working around the school or in the fields to help the schools stay open (Hanson, n.d.; Joseph, 2018).

In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples stated that "public education had failed Aboriginal peoples" (Burton & Point, 2006, p. 46). As mentioned above many graduates had a grade five education, and so were not encouraged to further their education (Hanson, n.d.). Even if or when someone wanted to, any Indigenous person who pursued higher education was automatically enfranchised until 1951 (Joseph, 2018). Meaning they would have a Western education, at the cost of their status as First Nations, cutting them off from their culture - their world view, or information.

Prior to contact, Indigenous communities had a system of education, just not one recognized by Western standards (Burton & Point, 2006). Education was community and land based, with children learning from their parents, grandparents, and community members through observation, participation, and storytelling (Mccue, 2018). It was unnecessary to remove children from their homes since communities were open to having their children educated at local schools (Burton & Point, 2006). The real reason behind making residential schools mandatory was to remove children from their community, so they could not participate in cultural practices (Burton & Point, 2006; Hanson, n.d.; Joseph, 2018). It was through this removal of children that the Indian Act,

through Residential Schools, severed their ties to culture and worldview, therefore imposing cultural information poverty.

Cultural Genocide

As defined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission summary (2015a), cultural genocide is "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow a group to continue as a group" (p. 1). The report then names practices of banning languages, restricting movement, confiscating spiritual items and outlawing spiritual practices, and disrupting family units "to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next" (p. 1) as indicators of cultural genocide. As discussed above, Canada did all of these (and more) to Indigenous communities, specifically First Nations.

The government sent children outside of their community in the hopes of assimilation into Western culture. It was believed that education would "kill the Indian in the child" (from the TRC, as cited in Joseph, 2018, p. 53) and "get rid of the Indian problem" (Duncan Campbell Scott, as cited in Joseph, 2018, p. 120). By no longer living in their communities and surrounded by their families, children lost touch with their culture. Children were placed in religious run schools that did not understand or respect their traditions. In fact, children were punished by those who worked in the schools if heard speaking their language or seen interacting with family members of the opposite gender (Joseph, 2018; TRC, 2015a). School officials even denied children their traditional names and gave them a Christian one (TRC, 2015a).

All of these actions were deliberate steps to strip Indigenous peoples of their culture, their knowledge/information, and therefore their identity. The Indian Act forced a state of cultural information poverty on Indigenous communities.

"A living legacy"[1]: Indigenous Cultural Survival

Despite decades of abuse and government policies designed to eradicate Indigenous cultural practices, languages, and knowledges, they have survived. In the years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, there has been a significant increase in social awareness for the need to Decolonize and Indigenize.

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[1] Justice, 2018, p.53

Why? Because the Indian Act and Residential Schools failed in their mission to destroy Indigenous culture by assimilation. As stated in the TRC (2015a): "[a]lthough Aboriginal peoples and cultures have been badly damaged, they continue to exist. Aboriginal people have refused to surrender their identity" (p. 6).

From the beginning, Indigenous communities resisted the Indian Act's declarations of what people could and could not do. Some activities such as the potlatch went underground, with ceremonies being conducted in secret even with the threat of imprisonment (Joseph, 2018; Vowel, 2016). It is through the bravery and strength of people who continued to practice their culture, and speak their language, that Indigenous culture is poised to thrive today. While "old traditions and old ways have endured" (Justice, 2018, p. 65), they are being reworked with modern technology creating new "opportunities for cultural expression" (p. 65).

One way that cultural information has been protected by communities, and spearheading cultural reclamation, is through stories. As Justice (2018) discusses, stories are medicine which show that Indigenous peoples "are the descendants of those who survived the colonizing apocalypse" (p. 5). There has been a rise in the presence of Indigenous authors, and music artists, in the years since the TRC, as Alicia Elliot (Tuscarora) writes in an article for CBC entitled "The Indigenous renaissance was truly here in 2018 - and it's not going anywhere" (December 27, 2018). She writes that while Indigenous art, music, and storytelling have never gone away, there is more awareness and support for these endeavours, partially as a result of the TRC Calls to Action (TRC, 2015b). In her article (2018), she states that it is difficult to create and share art in any form when you are experiencing cultural genocide.

Stories and songs are only part of cultural reclamation though. As reported by Kaitlyn Swan in CBC (2019), there is a movement in Nova Scotia of Indigenous people seeking their family's traditions. Younger generations want to formally change their names to those that were taken away during the Residential School era (Swan, 2019). An episode on CBC's Unreserved podcast from February of this year looks at ways both communities and the government is working to protect and restore languages (CBC Radio, 2019). These are just a few ways that Indigenous communities and people are reclaiming and sharing their culture. Others include video games, such as *Never Alone*

which is set in Alaska and written with Iñupiat Elders (Upper One Games, n.d.), movies such as *Indian Horse* based on the novel by Richard Wagamese, and TV shows such as the upcoming *Marrow Thieves* series based off the novel by Cherie Dimaline.

Implications for Academic Libraries

While there are a multitude of ways for libraries to better engage with their Indigenous communities, I want to look at two areas where academic libraries can: first, access and second, programs and services.

Access

Access to information written by and about Indigenous Peoples has been a contentious issue for years. When ethnographers and anthropologists entered communities to conduct research, they wrote down stories, songs, traditions, and customs. What happened then was that information became 'owned' by those authors under copyright. Further, the resulting book, article, or other work was likely never shared with the community. Today that means some information is inaccessible to the communities it came from.

During the Q&A session of the Collection and Community Panel at the Sorting Libraries Out symposium (2019), Bruce Muir and Marvin Williams (Lake Babine Nation) talked about how difficult it can be to locate and access materials. Williams shared a story about conducting research for treaty negotiations and needing to bring twelve people to a special collections library so that each could copy ten pages of a book to bring home. This seems like an extraordinary amount of work and money for the nation to have gone through to have information about themselves.

An easy answer might be to digitize documents and ensure that they are open access. However, while good in principle, not all Indigenous information should be freely open and accessible (Callison, Nayyer, & Ludbrook, 2019; Justice, 2018). Some information should only be available to certain communities or select people within that community based on role or gender. Some should only be accessed during certain seasons (Callison, Nayyer, & Ludbrook, 2019).

With this in mind my recommendations for academic libraries based around access issues are these:

- Provide any Indigenous person living in Canada a library card, similar to how the University of British Columbia Library (n.d.) does.

- Collaborate on initiatives such as the Community Scholars Program (Simon Fraser University Library, 2019), which provides collections access to charitable and non-profit organizations.

- If there is an archive or special collection within the library, work on identifying Indigenous materials belonging to which community and share or repatriate the information.

Programs and Services

With Indigenous enrolment in trades, colleges, and universities on the rise (Statistics Canada, 2018), academic libraries should examine what programming and services are being offered. With the addition of initiatives such as maker spaces, digital initiatives (e.g. GIS and data visualization), and digital publishing tools to traditional library services, libraries have a lot to offer their academic community.

My recommendations and suggestions include:

- Dedicated time, space, and workshops in a maker space. Workshops could be on traditional practices beading, weaving, regalia making facilitated by an Elder or Indigenous artist. Alternatively, workshops could be on how to use the equipment to continue oral traditions (through the creation of podcasts or videos).

- Engage in participatory research with digital initiatives, such as mapping communities and including place name stories.

- Provide a dedicated study space within the library.

- Collaborate with Indigenous Student Centres on scholarly publishing opportunities. The Public Knowledge Project offers well-paced, autonomous courses on topics.

- Establish an Indigenous Storytelling in Residence, similar to the program at the Vancouver Public Library (n.d.).

Conclusion

I am by no means an expert in Indigenous history, cultures, or literature. Often I have more questions about how to Decolonize and Indigenize my personal and

professional lives than I have answers. What I do know is that I am surrounded by Indigenous voices, in my work and personal life. Yes, I am seeking them out, but what is important is that they are there for me to find. This would not have been the case if the Indian Act had been successful in destroying Indigenous cultural knowledge and traditions. While there may have been a period of cultural information poverty, this is changing.

In July 2019 I attended a powwow where an Elder from the community opened the Grand Entry with a prayer. She shared with us (I apologize; I did not have anything to take notes with so do not have her name) her story about growing up without these cultural practices, being afraid to sing and dance. There were hundreds of people at the powwow, of all ages, yet I bet her story is not the only one like that. As the cultural information poverty declines, Indigenous cultures and teachings are being started with all Canadians and offering everyone a richer world view.

For decades Western culture in Canada has privileged one knowledge system and/or culture while punishing anyone who practiced another. The Indian Act, and subsequent practices such as the residential school system, were put in place to destroy centuries of Indigenous information practices. These failed. Today's Indigenous communities are leaving behind a state of cultural information poverty to enter an "Indigenous renaissance" (Elliot, 2018).

Conflict of Interest Statement

None declared.

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