

Wonks and War Rooms

S02 E01 - Decolonizing Digital Spaces with Alexander Dirksen

Episode Transcript

Elizabeth: [00:00:03] Welcome to [Wonks and War Rooms](#), where pol[itical] comm[unication] theory meets on the ground strategy. I'm your host [Elizabeth Dubois](#) and I'm an associate professor at the [University of Ottawa](#). My pronouns are she/her, and I am recording from the traditional unceded territories of the Algonquin nation. And in today's episode, we're talking about decolonizing digital spaces.

Alexander: [00:00:20] Hello, everyone. My name is [Alexander Dirkson](#); [I use] he/him pronouns. I am calling in from the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. I myself am a proud member of [Métis Nation B.C.](#) and really see my life's work as the meaningful pursuit of [reconciliation](#) [and] of decolonizing systems and our ways of being with each other. And as it relates to the context of the conversation here today, I have spent some time giving some thought to what that means in a digital age. So, looking forward to the future (and obviously the here and now)... what does that mean? I've had the privilege of working with the [First Nations Technology Council](#) [on these issues]. I'm now still actively considering and contemplating these questions and recently had the opportunity to contribute a chapter to [Connected Canada](#) around some of these themes as well. And so looking forward to unpacking and exploring some of that during our time here together today.

Elizabeth: [00:01:19] Wonderful. Thank you.

Yeah, so we have this book that I helped co-edited called [Citizenship and a Connected Canada](#), and your chapter, [Decolonizing Digital Spaces](#), is a chapter we use really to lay out some of the early stage foundations of: How do we approach policy development and research agendas in new digital contexts? And: How do we make sure that that's responsive to citizens' needs?

So what I'd like to start out with is taking that idea of decolonizing digital spaces. I'm going to offer you, like, "this is my academic pol[itical] comm[unication] researcher view of it," and [then] I'm going to check in with you and see whether or not I've hit the mark.

[00:02:02] So if we go [old school](#) academia, the texts [say], well: Decolonizing is the removal of colonization. So it's when the colonizers leave and they take with them the exploitative relationships that were imposed by these colonizers to their benefit and at the expense of, you know, "the others", right? And so that view of decolonization is found in some of the earlier works.

But now, and as is, I think, reflected in [your chapter](#), we're really talking more about: How do we reimagine existing relationships to recognize that exploitative past, to recognize the inequitable past, and in many cases present, and then try and make this present and future more equitable, more inclusive? We'll talk later about all of the ways we might do that, but this, in digital spaces might mean things like ensuring that the [digital divide](#) is eliminated, [or ensuring] we've got equal access and availability and skill. Or supporting Indigenous-led tech companies and innovators so that it's not, you know, done by simply whoever is the dominant ruling class and actually [ends up being] something that is inclusive of all of the people who live in this area and are using these digital tools and existing in these digital spaces.

[00:03:16] So how'd I do? Does that fit with your understanding? What am I missing?

Alexander: [00:03:22] I think [decolonization](#) is such an important place to start this conversation, and actually unpacking what that means in terms of an approach, in terms of a way of being. And I think it really is much broader than simply removal. This is something that I really tried to speak to in the chapter, which is: decolonization is also about recentering. It's about recognition of innovation as something that is intrinsic to these territories, to the nations upon which colonial Canada has been forcibly placed and really moving to a place where we actually recognize and celebrate and respect and honour that as well.

[00:04:05] And so, yeah, for me, decolonization is much broader than simply a stripping away. It's also a rebuilding—as you said, a reimagining. And that, I think, is what is really exciting about looking to the future: How can we actually reimagine some of this? And I make a point in the book that, [whether in] digital or physical spaces, [this] really starts with us as individuals. And then from there, it translates into some of these tools that shape our day-to-day lives. And so, yeah, it's a very broad term.

[00:04:36] For myself, just in my own practice and approach, I have come to use that term far more regularly than reconciliation (which in many ways is being co-opted and politicized and has come to mean less for many folks than decolonization, which is actually really getting to [the more systemic issues and the systemic injustices](#)). And I think that is what is so important and is so important to this conversation as well: not just surface level changes, but actually deep transformative change. And I think that's what's captured when we talk about or use the framing of decolonization.

Elizabeth: [00:05:17] Absolutely. I think that makes sense, and I think the idea of decolonization feels like something that everyone can be a part of, right? Like, the conversations around reconciliation often feel like a government thing and a report thing, and somehow distinct from the everyday lives of people. And that is, I personally think, completely unfair. But as you said, it's been a word that's been reused, reframed, and means different things once it's been politicized. So, I also like the term decolonization for empowering people to be part of this process of recentering.

[00:06:01] And I think something [your chapter](#) does really interestingly is takes a look at the history of big tech and brings us back to the roots of how we see [Silicon Valley](#)—which is, like, a lot of white dudes—and their power to create this digital space that we have to exist in. And then you bring us from that original route through to, "Okay, and now? What do we do now?"

Alexander: [00:06:30] Yeah. In many ways decolonization is a call to action, and I think it is, as you shared, a[n] opportunity for all of us to become involved. And I think very much, as this chapter traces the history of Silicon Valley, in many ways it mirrors or replicates the history of the colonial construct known as Canada. You look at a picture of the "[founding fathers](#)" of the colonial enterprise known as Canada—[it's] very similar—if you look at that and compare that to the [demographics of Silicon Valley](#). And particularly if you look at some of those that have really founded or shaped or influenced some of what is now become [big tech](#). And so when we're talking about digital spaces, I think it's so important to start with that historical context and background because you can very clearly and quickly see how some of those same forces of colonization and colonial violence, of capitalism, just as they have shaped our physical spaces, actually shape our digital spaces as well.

[00:07:37] Something that I really try to emphasize in the chapter is understanding this history and better coming to realize the roots of Silicon Valley, which [is] largely white men. [And these men often come from a] military route, as well; [\[there has been\] a lot of military backing and government backing \[of Silicon Valley\]](#). It makes you very quickly realize that [the technology we use is not neutral](#). And as I said earlier, in terms of decolonization being a call to action, I think when you realize that technology is not neutral, that it is politicized and that using technology is a political act, then there's a greater drive to then be engaged in some of these conversations about, "Okay, if this is not neutral, then what does it mean to actually bring a set of values into the space? And how do we fight for and advocate for a digital space that is equitable and is just as opposed to just seeing this as a blank canvas upon which we can paint whatever we'd like to paint?" And so I think, yeah, the history piece is so, so important in that regard.

Elizabeth: [00:08:40] Yeah, I agree. And it's interesting because in the history of the internet, we often talk about how the early founders of the internet and related technologies thought of it as this [digital utopia](#): everything was going to be democratized, everyone was going to have equal say. But of course, the people who had any power to create those early versions of the internet and the early technologies were the people who were currently in positions of power in larger society. And their vision of what this democratized world looked like wasn't considering how it was maybe going to embed the existing inequalities in society. And as we've seen, turns out, people are still people when they're using technology and those kinds of social systems replicate and sometimes are exacerbated, and in really problematic ways.

Alexander: [00:09:35] Yeah. And the utopia framing, I think, is a good one. But it was largely a utopia of whiteness, just as the colonial construct of Canada was and continues to be. In the chapter, I referenced [the Apple ad or the Steve Jobs ad](#) of, "Those those that think they're crazy enough to change the world are the ones that do." And I make a note of referencing, "Yes... if you have access, if you have the resources, if you are a white male working within a system that is engineered to to support you and to elevate your ideas and your approach." We can't lose sight of that. I think that is such an important piece. When you think about a program on your computer—there are lines of code that have been entered in[to it] by a human. And that's why when we talk about decolonizing digital spaces, it really is beginning with the *individual* because it is about [what that individual \[is\] carrying into their daily work as they sit down to type those](#)

[things in on their keyboard](#). And so, yeah, it's a really, really important piece of that conversation as well.

Elizabeth: [00:10:43] I agree. I agree. It's so essential to be thinking about not just what sort of large scale policy structures play into this, but also what organizational structures and then what individual opportunities, structures, challenges. Those things all play into that system in really crucial ways.

[00:11:04] And that actually connects to my next question, [which] still [looks at the issue from a] framing level. One of the things that has become quite common to talk about among people who work in tech is, "How do we build in, or build for, inclusion and equity? How do we build so that everybody is going to be able to have access so that we're not unintentionally discriminating in the way that these tools are created or services are designed?" And that [equity and inclusion](#) conversation seems very similar to some of the issues that you've brought up about decolonizing digital space. And I just wonder what relationship you see, if any, between those conversations around [building for equity and inclusion](#) and [decolonizing digital spaces](#)?

Alexander: [00:11:56] Yeah. I think here it's really, again, drawing a parallel to the physical space of Canada—and there's even this idea of citizenship [involved]. For so long, [the conversation] was around—and you see this through the entrenched [enfranchisement policies](#) of the [Indian Act](#)—it [focused] around, "How can we ensure that Indigenous folks are part of the Canadian colonial state?" As opposed to what we're now pushing for and advocating, which is this [nation to nation relationship](#).

[00:12:29] And I see something very similar happening within the tech sector, which is: "How can we ensure that Indigenous folks, [and] other racialized folks, how can we get them into this existing structure?" [A structure] which was never designed to serve them; which was never considering their needs, their desires, their aspirations; which in many ways was actually fundamentally engineered to exclude, to marginalize, to oppress. As opposed to, "How do we actually create a digital space in which Indigenous folks, racialized folks, those that have not been part of these spaces and conversations in terms of the tech sector's development, how can they lead the way? And how do they have agency in terms of where we're going with this work?"

[00:13:14] And so for me, when we're looking at decolonizing digital spaces, that to me is at the core. This idea of Indigenous rights, and [sovereignty](#), and [agency](#) is actually to be able to set the terms and set the tone for that conversation. And so rather than having a large tech company that's saying, "Well, we'd really love it if we could bring our representation numbers up" (which are currently abysmal across the tech sector), instead, [decolonizing means asking], "How do we actually [resource Indigenous innovators](#) who are creating their own platforms and initiatives or doing work for their nations or for their communities?" [Work] that is truly progressive and really something that we could all be learning from and drawing from in terms of how to move this forward and adjust in an equitable way. And so, yeah, for me, when we talk about decolonizing digital spaces, it's not about: "How do we slightly make again those changes on the margins?" Rather, [it is]: "How do we actually recenter this entire conversation and this entire space?"

Elizabeth: [00:14:21] Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

[00:14:25] One of the things that, in some of my work looking at machine learning—which is only tangentially related to this present conversation—but one of the things we talk about is how there's this desire in the tech industry to be everything to everyone. And [that] the investment structure of Silicon Valley is such that you need exponential growth all of the time. And one of the problems is: If you apply a machine learning tool developed in one context to a completely new context, you're not going to get it right! You kind of need to be in that actual context to be able to do it well. And that applies across a lot of tech development. And I think what you've described makes sense, too, in terms of: "How do you create the best tool?" Even if we take this from that capitalist perspective of, "Why would I want to decolonize digital space?" [Well,] because you're going to make better things if you actually work with the people who are going to use the things and if you are actually among those communities yourself!

Alexander: [00:15:30] Totally. I think within a more academic space it might be [called] "[human-centred design](#)," [but] I think it's just actually human dignity and rights [that are] at the core of this. But you know, it really does—yeah—come down to this idea of, and I reference this in the chapter: the disconnect between market demand and citizen rights, and nation rights—Indigenous nations' rights. And to actually have that agency in that

conversation, and to be actually shaping those tools, as opposed to just being the end recipient and not actually having a voice in how that comes to be.

[00:16:10] Really, when we talk about decolonizing digital spaces, those market forces of—and you mentioned this desire to scale, to replicate, to maximize market share, all of these things—none of those serve anyone except for those corporate interests. And in that sense, this really is a conversation for everyone who's underserved, [and everyone] who is not the young white male programmer that is dominant in these spaces.

Elizabeth: [00:16:44] Mm hmm.

Alexander: [00:16:45] Everyone will benefit from this much more diversified power structure and agency in terms of shaping these tools that have become so foundational to our lives.

Elizabeth: [00:16:57] Absolutely. This seems like a really good point then to pivot over to, "Alright, so what do we do? How do we fix it? Where do we go from here?" Obviously, in the chapter, you list out a bunch of things, [but] I'm wondering what your top things are for next steps?

Alexander: [00:17:17] Yeah. So I think for me, first and foremost always is that individual work (as I mentioned at the start of our conversation). And that work is ongoing. Something I fear is that, for some folks, particularly with the release of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) in 2015, there was a big push for education and awareness, particularly in terms of the [colonial violence and genocide of the history of colonial Canada](#). What I fear is that that momentum is slowing, and that Canadians feel as though the [territorial acknowledgement](#) at the start of their events or their talks is sufficient. And so I really continue to push and advocate for folks to go deeper and to understand. And this is where that framing of decolonization as opposed to reconciliation comes in as well: to see the ways in which colonial forces and colonial violence ha[ve] shaped so much of our lives. Really, across any sector, across any aspect of our lives, there are ways in which colonization has shaped and influenced that

space. And obviously, the digital space being one of those spaces that really needs to be examined through this lens. And so to continue that work, to continue to go deeper in one's own understandings and reflections and *action*, ultimately. I think that's the other piece of this: not just merely building awareness—because that ultimately doesn't result in any tangible change out in the world—but to actually move to action.

[00:18:53] And so that brings me to the second piece, which in relation to these conversations, is beginning with advocacy work. To begin pushing to address the digital divide. We're talking in this conversation around digital tools and platforms, but, there are still far too many folks across [Turtle Island](#)—Indigenous nations, but also really rural remote communities as well—[who don't even have that basic access \[to the internet\]](#) or are paying exponentially more than those in urban environments for far, far less in terms of bandwidth. In terms of just that, yeah, that basic access. So [it] begins with with advocating for that, to make that a priority. It is clear that, because the tech sector is so driven by corporate forces, that corporate Canada is not going to be necessarily the ones to be fixing this. And it really is something where governments need to step in—particularly when we're talking about rights being there for everyone, and understanding [digital access as a fundamental human right in this age](#)—and to really address some of that digital divide. And I think everyone can be advocating for that and pushing for that.

[00:20:08] And then, in terms of this bigger picture that we're talking about... In terms of big tech and its relationship to particularly colonial governments. Obviously so-called Canada is very much at the whim of Silicon Valley in terms of, we really are depending on an American administration to actually address these tech companies (and we're starting to see murmurs of that, although it'll be interesting to see whether that ultimately leads anywhere). But that doesn't mean we can't do anything here. And I think really for particularly at the federal level, to be pushing for a much more comprehensive [digital bill of rights](#). I know there's conversations ongoing around that [already], but [Canadian government needs] to really [learn from the European Union](#) in particular around how that process went for them, to learn some of those lessons, [and] to enshrine that to ultimately make these corporations put some regulation in and make them actually work to access this "market base". I think that's something that is so, so key.

[00:21:16] And for too long we've—and this gets back to our earlier conversation around tech being seen as neutral... Part of why it's seen as neutral [is that it] was very intentional by tech companies so that they could avoid this regulation. They wanted self-regulation. And we've clearly seen that that's not working. And so it's up to governments to be putting some of those checks and balances in.

[00:21:42] And coupled with that, in addition to regulating these companies, is also having the tools in place to meaningfully respond to and address issues of negligence, [and] of behaviour that leads to harm. We're seeing, particularly after the [Capitol insurrection in Washington](#), a lot of [tech companies reeling from the realization of how much their platforms played a role in that](#)—all the way to the Oval Office at the time as well. But we really need to have ways to respond to this and to understand that, particularly for BIPOC communities, [and] 2SLGBTQ+ communities, [online spaces are not safe spaces](#). And there needs to be measures in place to really protect folks and to be responding when things take place online that cause harm. And so, there needs to be much more regulation, but also [many] more frameworks and platforms in place to address this.

Elizabeth: [00:22:49] Yeah, we've seen in the academic research that these content moderation policies (as one example of self-regulation) [disproportionately negatively affect marginalized communities, \[and\] racialized people](#). They are the tool that gets used by a lot of white people to try and silence non-white people. And that is not an okay thing, but there's no government framework to prevent that. There's very limited transparency or accountability for these platforms. And so, the kinds of things you're talking about of, "We need to have some sort of government oversight, government contribution, here," really rings true.

[00:23:30] Sure, the example of early January in the U.S. on the Capitol has really highlighted the extent to which platforms control the flow of political speech and information in our communities. But this has been going on for a long time, and so trying to find new ways to understand our information environments is essential. You know, [especially \[in\] COVID times](#): we're all necessarily spending a lot more time online. We don't have choices, right? It's not just like, "Oh, well, just don't participate in the digital space and you're good!" Like, that's not a thing that we do anymore. Everybody has to [participate online].

Alexander: [00:24:11] Totally. And I would argue that the reason why we haven't seen meaningful action on this is there's no incentive for tech companies. And as you said, that is why governments need to step in. There was the famous example of Facebook—in terms of content moderation, how it was defining white supremacy. [\[The](#)

[definition](#) was lifted from a [Wikipedia page](#). And [this] shows how little care is given to this because for many of those folks [creating the content moderation policy], [white supremacy] was not a day-to-day reality in terms of online hate speech, or abuse, or violence. And so there's not that incentive structure there for them. And this really is a place where governments need to step in and protect their citizens in terms of how they engage online. Like you said, particularly in a time when we are so dependent and reliant on digital spaces for connection, for communication, for our livelihoods. It's not, like you said, a means of just being able to opt out of this space, [or] of this conversation, and so we really need to make sure that everyone has that equitable access and also the protections online as well.

Elizabeth: [00:25:25] Absolutely.

[00:25:26] So we're coming up to time, but there was one more point on the "What we can or should be doing" front that I wanted to bring up because you mentioned it in your book chapter. It's this idea of sustained investments. And I thought that was really crucial: the idea of investing in creating digital skills training in remote communities, supporting Indigenous innovators and the companies and tools that they are creating. And I just thought that was so essential so I wanted to make sure we took a few seconds at least to acknowledge that.

Alexander: [00:25:58] Definitely. Definitely. And I think this is again where, in terms of moving from that awareness to action, [it] is [important] for individuals to be supporting some of this work—and that includes procurement policies. There's some incredible Indigenous-led [organizations](#) and [initiatives](#) out there that do everything from web design to [you-name-it](#) in the tech space. And so, supporting those types of organisations [is an important action]. There's a thriving number of Indigenous folks online that are [using digital platforms to sell](#) beadwork, to engage and connect around some of their writing, and to use it as a platform for advocacy. So supporting this work, identifying some of those [Indigenous innovators](#) that are doing incredible things, amplifying that work. Who are you following on social media? All of these little things are so, so important and really are tangible ways in which individuals can really put both their dollars and their mouths and their actions to work. Supporting Indigenous entrepreneurship online, supporting Indigenous innovators, supporting the rights of

Indigenous advocates and activists to freely express online—all of these things are things that we should all be actively doing in our day to day lives.

Elizabeth: [00:27:22] Yeah, and in the [show notes](#) I add additional reading and resources, so in addition to academic ones that I've got here already lined up, we'll add in some links for people to follow if they're interested in seeking out some of those kinds of resources and connecting with different organizations working in this space.

Alexander: [00:27:42] Perfect. Perfect.

Elizabeth: [00:27:43] Alright, so let's finish up. We finish up Wonks and War Rooms with a little pop quiz every time. Which [today] is basically: if you were asked to, in a short answer quiz, explain the basics of, "What is decolonizing digital space?" what would you say? [What would be] your two sentences?

Alexander: [00:28:04] Oh, pop quizzes.

[00:28:09] So for me, I would say: digital spaces are not neutral spaces. And, just as in the physical spaces [where] we have a responsibility to meaningfully pursue acts of decolonization and solidarity work, we have to do the very same things in digital spaces. And that will require us to think critically about the tools we use, to push and advocate for true equity and inclusion in online spaces, and to actually work together to craft a future for these platforms that allows everyone's voices to thrive.

Elizabeth: [00:28:46] That's fantastic. That's so perfect. Thank you.

Alexander: [00:28:51] Thank you. This has been such a pleasure. Thank you.

Elizabeth: [00:28:57] Alright, that was our episode on decolonizing digital spaces. If you're interested in learning more about this idea or any of the other theories or concepts we talked about today, head over to polcommtech.ca or check the [show notes](#).