**Demarginalizing Interdisciplinarity in IS Research: Interdisciplinary Research in Marginalization**

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<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Communications of the Association for Information Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>PR-19-107.R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Editorial Board Reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date Submitted by the Author:</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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| Keywords: | Interdisciplinarity, Indigenous peoples, Demarginalization, Decolonization |
Demarginalizing Interdisciplinarity in IS Research: Interdisciplinary Research in Marginalization

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Abstract:
This article reports on the 2nd Workshop of a World University Network (WUN) Research Development Funded project on “The trans-nationalisation of Indigenous movements: The role of digital technologies” at the University of Southampton, UK. The workshop explored interdisciplinarity and how interdisciplinary collaboration can help us to study complex social phenomenon, such as the ways in which marginalized Indigenous communities use and shape digital technologies (such as social media) to enhance their cause. The workshop brought together scholars from diverse disciplines to engage in a critical debate. In addition to scholars from information systems, scholars from history, political science, geography, literature, arts, and anthropology came together to discuss the use of digital media by marginalized Indigenous communities. The workshop highlighted the need for more interdisciplinary research in the field and called for more critical approaches to bring such marginalized topics to the forefront of research in information systems. Three broad areas of inquiry are considered in this article: demarginalizing methodology for interdisciplinary research, interdisciplinary perspectives for demarginalization, and interdisciplinary contexts for demarginalization.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, Indigenous peoples, Demarginalization, Decolonization
1 Introduction

In the field of information systems (IS), we study how people engage with various forms of information and communication technologies (ICT) in diverse contexts with rich, complex and diverse histories. However, this very diversity can at times present methodological and theoretical challenges. Davison and Martinsons (2011) suggest that IS research will make a more significant scholarly and organizational contribution "when it incorporates different methods from a diversity of epistemological perspectives" (Davison & Martinsons, 2011, p. 290). We agree. In fact, we go further and suggest that, not only should IS researchers encourage diversity within the field (Davison & Martinsons, 2016; Galliers, 2011; Tarafdar & Davison, 2018) we should also be more proactive in forging cross-disciplinary alliances with scholars in fields which intersect with our own. To this end, we believe that interdisciplinarity presents a powerful means of advancing the IS field (Klein, 2010).

At the moment, however, very few IS scholars engage in research projects that involve any degree of interdisciplinary collaboration (Palmer, 2010). In a recent review of the IS literature, Tarafdar and Davison (2018) found only five articles where some aspects of interdisciplinarity were present. Within this already limited sample, the authors further noted that most such research was conducted within the context of business use, which carries the risk of pushing aside consideration of critical social issues (p. 539).

Following our first workshop (Ortiz et al., 2019), this workshop highlighted the value of interdisciplinary research in IS, particularly as this relates to the use of digital technologies by marginalized Indigenous communities. Researchers from a broad range of disciplines (history, literature, arts, sociology, geography, anthropology, political science, management as well as IS) came together to explore the issues surrounding these marginalized Indigenous groups. By exploring the topic from a range of disciplinary perspectives, we hope to show how such research can add value to the IS research community.

The rest of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical background and the key terms that are relevant to the workshop. Section 3 provides the details of the workshop. Section 4 provides the viewpoints of the participants. Finally, section 5 offers brief conclusions and some suggested directions for future research.

2 Background

2.1 Demarginalization

Demarginalization and interdisciplinarity are two interrelated concepts that are deeply rooted in contemporary critical theory, and in particular, debates surrounding post-coloniality (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1999). As a branch of critical theory, postcolonial theory seeks to call attention to power asymmetries embedded within social contexts as a vestige of – or, more accurately, evidence of the ongoing nature of – colonial power relations (Myers & Klein, 2011). In light of their social, theoretical, and methodological predispositions, we find the work of post-colonial critical theorists Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha particularly relevant to any discussion of demarginalizing interdisciplinarity in IS research.

From this perspective, developing a truly diverse interdisciplinary terrain of IS research requires a critique of the field’s most fundamental underlying assumptions – that is, a methodological decolonization. Such a decolonization approach forces one to question many of the most taken-for-granted notions developed in contexts that are foreign to the contemporary social situation\(^1\). Interdisciplinary contributions have been called for (Tarafdar & Davison, 2018), but it remains to be seen how the field can develop such research if it continues to work with orthodoxies, theories, and methods tethered to a colonial past. This is particularly problematic in the context of studying information systems used by/for/against socially marginalized or vulnerable populations (for example, see Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015; Thomas & Narayan, 2016; Young, 2018).

\(^1\) A familiar related term is the post-colonial perspective, which aims to depart from the dependency on conventional theories and method to explore social situations (Bhabha, 1994). Another unfamiliar but important term is anti-colonialism, which strongly rejects any approach that is developed in the light of colonialism.
2.2 Interdisciplinary

Interdisciplinary research is defined as a specific form of inquiry that happens at the intersection of various disciplines (Tarafdar & Davison, 2018). From the perspective of those working in demarginalization, this emphasis on intersections is less about finding the meeting points of disciplines – that is, their points of agreement and convergence – and more about engaging with spaces that emerge in the border regions where the disciplines meet (Smith, 2012, p. 202). These spaces comprise the fields of resistance (Spivak, 1999) where researchers can examine the intersection of ideas viz. how the contemporary challenges the prevailing orthodoxy.

Researchers of demarginalization typically deal with issues surrounding a “social group (individual, society) in an unfavorable situation (e.g., spatial, economic, social) and to observe whether their situation improves (demarginalization) or worsens (marginalization)” (Pelc, 2018, p. 5). By way of example, IS researchers have used Bhabha’s (1994) work to explain power relations in an organizational context (e.g., Ravishankar, Pan, & Myers, 2013) and Spivak’s (1999) critiques to make sense of problematic legacy policies in the context of ICT4D projects (e.g., Lin, Kuo, & Myers, 2015). These examples highlight the potential for inclusion of demarginalization into the broader methodological and critical toolkit of IS researchers.

Table 1 provides brief definitions of the key terms related to the workshop.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinarity</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary research aims to produce useful “knowledge at the intersection of different disciplines” (Tarafdar &amp; Davison, 2018, p. 528). An interdisciplinary approach is different from <em>intra</em>disciplinarity, which refers to the creation of knowledge using various concepts from within the discipline. Two related but different terms are cross-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity. The former refers to contributing knowledge to more disciplines than one whereas the latter is about invoking concepts from different disciplines in order to create knowledge in a single discipline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demarginalization</td>
<td>A critical practice comprising conscious and astute actions towards engagement with the surrounding world, aimed at liberation from conditions of oppression and repression, attempting to improve the situation (O’Brien, 2013). In the context of digital media and information systems, demarginalization refers to “an individual’s sense of the legitimation of a dimension of identity formerly felt to be socially marginalized, as among some participants in supportive online communities of like-minded people” (Chandler &amp; Munday, 2011, p. 95).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decolonization</td>
<td>Based on works by critical theorists Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, decolonial thinking is a response to post-colonial issues, “a way out of colonialism” (Smith, 2012, p. 204), and a way to enact demarginalization in theory and practice (Sandoval, 2000). “Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices” (Smith, 2012, p. 21). “Decolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith, 2012, p. 41).</td>
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3 Description of the Workshop

This workshop was hosted at the University of Southampton Business School, UK, in November 2018, and was part of a larger project involving several member institutions of the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) as well as other research universities. Building upon an earlier workshop described in Ortiz et al. (2019), the main purpose of this workshop was to bring together scholars and doctoral students from the collaborating institutions to explore themes related to Indigenous peoples’ use of digital technologies in the context of ongoing social movements, particularly as it relates to their ability to mobilize, disseminate collective aims, and reconfigure actor networks through connective media.
The two-day workshop brought together scholars from a diverse range of perspectives. Participants came from a range of disciplines, but were linked by a common focus on social movements, digital activism, and issues surrounding contemporary Indigenous peoples. Eight faculty members across five universities, as well as five doctoral students from three universities participated in the workshop, and presented work based upon ongoing studies of Indigenous peoples in South Asia, North America, and Australasia (see Table 2).

<table>
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<th>Faculty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Amber G. Young</td>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>University of Arkansas</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Myers</td>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>University of Auckland</td>
<td>NZ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hameed Chughtai</td>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<td>Chris Prior</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<td>Valentina Cardo</td>
<td>Political Communication and Journalism</td>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<td>Stephen Morton</td>
<td>English Literature</td>
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<td>Suay M. Özkula</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>University of Sheffield</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alpa Shah</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>London School of Economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eugene Young</td>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tomas Borsa</td>
<td>Anthropology and Data Science</td>
<td>University of Oxford</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joanna Wilkin</td>
<td>Geography and Environmental Science</td>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cat Morgan</td>
<td>Web Sciences</td>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Öziem Demirkol</td>
<td>Media and Communication</td>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>UK</td>
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### 4 The Presentations

Below are the summaries of each presenter in their own voice. The summaries are classified into three sections: (1) Demarginalizing Methods for Interdisciplinary Research; (2) Interdisciplinary Perspectives for Demarginalization; and (3) Interdisciplinary Contexts of Demarginalization.

#### 4.1 Demarginalizing Methodology for Interdisciplinary Research

4.1.1 Interdisciplinarity and Demarginalization in Information Systems Research (Michael Myers)

This presentation provided an overview of the entire WUN research project which focuses on digital technologies and social media use by certain marginalized Indigenous groups, including how they use these technologies for global collaboration. Socially marginalized people are those who are excluded from economic, social, and political life (Walsh, 2006). Marginalized groups frequently face exclusion from decision making bodies (Sunstein, 2002).

However, new digital technologies are giving socially marginalized people around the world a means through which they can make their voices heard. Through digital technologies such as the Internet, many social movements have been made possible, giving previously excluded people an opportunity to express their voice and coordinate their campaigns to spur change. Increasingly, Indigenous peoples around the world no longer work in isolation; they are collaborating across social media, and attracting international attention.

To study the use of ICT in such a rich and complex context, we believe that IS researchers cannot do so by themselves. Rather, interdisciplinary collaboration is required. We need to hear the views of scholars from disciplines such as history, political science and sociology. Hence, the purpose of this workshop was to explore such interdisciplinary collaboration, which is in line with previous calls for such collaboration to take place (Kauffman, 2005; Tarafdar & Davison, 2018). Obtaining diverse views on such a complex and
sometimes fraught topic from various disciplines can be a challenge, but one which all the participants were willing to take.

4.1.2 Decolonizing Information Systems Methodologies (Hameed Chughtai)

Hameed’s presentation centered on the idea that the study of human practices in the information systems literature is primarily influenced by the western, white, or Eurocentric worldviews. The theoretical and methodological toolkits available to the researchers force them to put forward insights that further reinforce what hooks (1992) refers to as the ‘white gaze’. That is, by looking at the vulnerable researched population (such as Indigenous people) through the eyes of an oppressor one tends to use methodologies that favor western views. This position not only paints a partial picture of the world but also gives the impression that qualitative methodologies are neutral and void of any political agenda. This is a naïve view and can have negative consequences. For qualitative researchers involved with participants (like ethnographers and fieldworkers), this is, in effect, wielding power over the oppressed by methodically ignoring their views and further marginalizing them. As Butler (1993, p. 136) says “the ethnographic conceit of a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze, an unmarked white gaze, one which passes its own perspective off as the omniscient, one which presumes upon and enacts its own perspective as if it were no perspective at all.”

While researchers often borrow theories and concepts from sociology and anthropology, they tend to overlook the fact that there is an ongoing debate concerning decolonization of methodologies in those fields (Sandoval, 2000). For example, anthropology has been discussed as the “daughter” of the “era of violence” enacted by the “Western world” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 126) and “the handmaiden of colonialism” (Asad, 1973, p. 16). For Lévi-Strauss, the crucial problem of classical anthropology was that it treated its vulnerable subjects (Indigenous cultures) as mere things of intellectual curiosity and denied them the right to represent themselves as they are. This also created a lacuna in understanding the other where the researcher refused to use decolonized approaches (such as Indigenous methods and ways of knowing to make sense of Indigenous cultures). In sociology, interdisciplinary approaches have been suggested for a long time to address the needs and problems of oppressed and marginalized groups (Klein, 2010).

In information systems, a critical discussion of the predominance of the westernized theories is uncommon. Qualitative methodologies are used in ways that offers little or no engagement with the participants’ worldviews. A decolonial approach is therefore vital because “researchers often appear to assume that a given theory that they are adopting is universally applicable” (Davison & Martinsons, 2016, p. 242). In science and technology studies, researchers have started to argue that an application of methodology, which is not sensitive to the context of the researched, can further marginalize the vulnerable and their practices (Jasanoff, 2010, p. 196).

Many subtle but powerful traces of colonial past remain in the practices of the oppressed that need to be carefully disentangled. Similarly, methodologies that were born out of colonial violence continue to exert their power as new theoretical frameworks are built using the same methods. I suggest that decolonization of research methodologies is essential if information systems researchers are to meaningfully engage with real-world issues related to the oppressed and the marginalized.

4.1.3 The Importance of Maps for Indigenous Communities (Joanna Wilkin)

Joanna’s presentation focused on the role that maps can have in helping Indigenous communities record and share their own knowledge of their local area. The production of traditional maps has been inextricably linked to colonialism (Harley, 1988), where cadastral-type maps became essential to demarcate territory, record local natural resources and take note of point of interest. These Western-based cartographic representations of space have continued into today’s digital world, with existing mapping applications shown to exclude the land rights of many Indigenous communities. For example, despite launching in 2005, Google Maps only recently added spatial information on the Indigenous Lands in Canada (Rush, 2017) and Brazil (Seamester, 2017), after long campaigns by Indigenous communities and organizations, such as the Fundação Nacional do Índio in Brazil. This exclusion from the map is seen to reiterate and rework power asymmetries. As maps are used to help with the control and access of land as well as understand resource allocation, without spatially-explicit boundaries to ‘defend’, Indigenous communities are vulnerable to exploitation, from investment plans for infrastructure and mining to land appropriation in the guise of ‘conservation’. Furthermore, as maps help to record places of historic, cultural and religious significance including local or Indigenous names, in remote or data scarce regions.
where Indigenous territories are not clearly defined or demarcated, there is no spatially explicit information about the importance of areas to Indigenous communities (Ramirez-Gomez et al, 2016), which risk these areas being overwritten by ‘authoritative’ official maps.

Maps therefore are needed to “help with the increasing demands from under-represented social groups that want greater influence in the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods and also recognition that the use and integration of non-expert, place-based knowledge and experience can help address complex land use problems to become valued, legitimized and sanctioned” (Brown & Kyttä, 2018). Participatory mapping (PM) is highlighted here as a potential approach to create these maps. PM encourages individuals, groups and communities to create maps that record and document their own and their community’s value and concerns. Already several examples of PM within Indigenous Communities exist, including creating maps to: avoid eviction in Botogá’s eastern hills (Allen, Lambert, Apsan Frediani, & Ome, 2015); encourage land tenure security in eastern Panama (Vergara-Asenjo, Mateo-Vega, Alvarado, & Potvin, 2017); evaluate ecosystem services in Southern Suriname (Ramirez-Gomez, Brown, Verweij, & Boot, 2016); and help manage water and land resources within tribal groups in Northern Australia (Robinson, Maclean, Hill, Bock, & Rist, 2016). Whilst the maps can be created for a wide range of human-environment applications, the main aim is to facilitate the sharing of knowledge within a community as well as to engage and empower these marginalized groups within wider society.

Introducing PM to Indigenous communities is not without its challenges, including conceptually ‘folding’ Indigenous knowledge into geographical space, politically negotiating the line of rendering customary traditional land use with ‘Western’, ‘scientific’ or ‘state’ documents see (see Bryan, 2011), as well as the technical or administrative aspects of collecting, managing (updating) and sharing data appropriately (see Olson, Hackett, & DeRoy, 2016). Touched upon during the presentation was that the recent growth in digital mapping and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in conjunction with these participatory mapping techniques. The combination of the two may help with the addressing these challenges, such as the use of qualitative story maps as well as mapping initiatives such as the Missing Maps Project that encourage and facilitate the self-mapping of vulnerable and isolated communities. The ultimate output of PM is to enable communities to make maps of their lands and resource uses, and to bolster the legitimacy of their customary claims to resources by appropriating the state’s techniques and manner of presentation (Fox, Suryanata, Hershock, & Pramono, 2016).

4.2 Interdisciplinary Perspectives for Demarginalization

4.2.1 Social Media Blur Identity Boundaries and Complicate Identity Management for Native American Nations (Amber Young)

Amber’s presentation discusses the role of social media in shaping Native American identity. In the United States, there is much conflict regarding who is considered Native American, and who should be eligible for citizenship in Native American Nations, i.e., sovereign governments which operate as hybrid organizations with political, cultural and corporate interests. Federally-recognized tribes have a special relationship with the US and state governments. Sovereignty allows Nations to create and enforce laws, receive federal assistance, circumvent taxation, etc. Sovereignty is undermined when non-citizens claim they have a right to citizen resources. These claims may be illegitimate, fueled by jealousy. Or, these claims may have merit as is the case for Five Tribes Freedmen, descendants of African people enslaved by the Five Tribes.

Slavery was outlawed in the US in the 1860s. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Five Tribes entered treaties with the US to establish each Tribes’ national sovereignty. Some Nations enrolled Freedmen as citizens; others rejected the Freedmen and denied them the rights associated with citizenship, e.g., voting rights and access to medical care. In the 1980s, those Freedmen who had been enrolled as citizens, and their descendants, were disenrolled from their Tribes and told they were no longer Native American. In response to Freedmen’s claims of citizenship rights, the Five Tribes have asserted that pressure to enroll Freedmen is a challenge to tribal leaders’ sovereign authority to decide who is and is not a citizen. In 2017, one of the Five Tribes, the Cherokee Nation, opened citizenship to Freedmen descendants.

The Five Tribes are not the only Nations facing identity challenges. New technologies afford identity contests through which diverse stakeholders are challenging the boundaries of Native American identity. Open ancestry communities, DNA tests, and heightened visibility of information about how to enroll in Native American Nations have all led to surges in applications for citizenship. While new citizens are being enrolled, disenrollment of families who have been citizens for generations has also become common. For instance, the Nooksack Tribe disenrolled 15% of citizens in 2016.
Identity boundaries are cognitive limits which define and constrain who a group is and who the group is not. Identity boundary changes and challenges faced by Native American Nations have left many asking—what does it mean to be Native American? Some Native American leaders assert that anyone who is not a citizen cannot refer to themselves as Native American. There is no term to describe someone who has some Native American ancestors but is not a citizen of a federally-recognized tribe. By most popular definitions, someone whose ancestors are all Native American may not be Native American. Alternatively, someone could have no Native American ancestors and be Native American. Such cases are outliers, but these special cases make identity definition challenging. While identity contests have played out for many years in some circles, social media is intensifying these contests and bringing Native American identity to the fore of public discourse (Young, 2018).

Examining digital identity artifacts of members of the Five Tribes and Five Tribes Freedmen of Oklahoma reveals that social media constrain identity boundary definition, afford identity boundary expansion, and afford identity boundary permeability. Social media constrain identity boundary definition by giving voice to people with conflicting identity narratives. For instance, some Freedmen refer to themselves as Freedmen, others Indian. One woman explains, “I hate the term Freedmen. I say Cherokee citizen, ‘cause that’s who we are—Cherokee citizens” (Herrera, 2016). Social media afford identity expansion. For example, the Choctaw used social media to stand with Standing Rock and promote Indigenous Peoples Day, expanding their identity narrative to identify with Indigenous peoples across the world. Social media afford identity permeability also. When the Cherokee Nation reenrolled Freedmen in 2017, the Nation was able to change their website in real time to reflect their new, inclusive identity.

This research highlights identity boundaries as one aspect of identity that is particularly vulnerable to contestation through social media. The concept of boundaries can be applied to theoretically explain the role of social media in shaping the boundaries of Native American identity. This research outlines three social media affordances/constraints for identity boundary management. Without boundaries, identity will dissolve into a globalized identity, losing what is unique about local groups. Legitimate boundary challenges, when unaddressed, will weaken identity definitions and undermine sovereignty. But these challenges can be addressed thanks to social media affordances for identity expansion and permeability. Benefits of identity expansion and permeability should be weighed against risks of loss of definition. Careful management is needed. This research is an example of how research can address a context of marginalization for the benefit of a marginalized group. The implications of this research are tailored for a Native American and Freedmen audience rather than dominant society.

### 4.2.2 Not Only Do Simple Narratives Not Tell the Whole Story, they Reify Oppression (Eugene Young)

Eugene’s presentation was about efforts by the Native American Freedmen (i.e., descendants to Africans enslaved by Five “Civilized” Tribes) to have their citizenship rights recognized. In the US, when slavery ended, Freedmen in Indian Territory were left in limbo regarding tribal citizenship. In 1866, treaties between the US government and the “civilized” tribes allowed citizenship for some Freedmen and revoked citizenship for others. Disenrollment waves hit in the 1980s as tribies purged Black citizens from their rolls. Recent lawsuits have resulted in some Freedmen being reenrolled as citizens. Others continue to fight for their rights.

As lawsuits for Freedmen rights continue, the way the Chickasaw portray the history of slavery on their website changes (Young & Miranda, 2014). Recently, the Chickasaw Nation website suggested that people were not enslaved but willingly fled to the Chickasaw for refuge and a better life. To combat this frame, Eugene draws on two first-hand accounts from women who survived. These women recount terror, murders and mutilating beatings at the hands of those who bought and sold them and separated them from their families (Baker & Baker, 1996). Few firsthand accounts of slavery in Indian Territory exist because so many people did not survive or could not read and write. The few accounts that exist describe physical and sexual abuse (Krauthamer, 2013). Denial of rights continues as Freedmen, many still residing in Oklahoma, cannot vote in tribal elections or receive benefits such as college tuition waivers. Local schools cannot receive the federal funding they deserve because Freedmen are not counted as citizens.

Freedmen are ignored by traditional media. There is a myth that Black Indians do not exist. The Chickasaw Nation has a broad and impactful digital presence from which they can spread misinformation about Black Indians. Fighting for human rights is challenging in cases of nested marginalization. Researchers are hesitant to engage with the Freedmen’s cause, or even study their social movement, for
fear of being seen as “anti-Indian”. Freedmen are hesitant to engage in digital activism because their words can be hijacked by anti-Indian groups and used in ways that harm the tribes Freedmen want to join.

Recently, IS scholars have expressed interest in learning from marginalized peoples whose unique knowledge, perspectives and skills are under-represented in research (Davison & Diaz Andrade, 2018). Too often, scholars drop in and out of marginalized communities, pass off hasty judgements as fact, and gloss over any intra-group conflicts that challenge the neatly-packaged “insights” of the researcher. While researchers may be removed from the context and consequences of their research, marginalized individuals are not. Thus, it is of utmost importance that the voices of marginalized groups affected by research be heard in academic discourse. Further, it is important that multiple, diverse voices from any group be heard as no community exists in complete unity. By paternalistically simplifying research narratives to protect marginalized peoples, researchers create a taboo of critical engagement with marginalized peoples and reify the oppression of those experiencing nested marginalization.

4.2.3 Transnational Activism Among the Ruins of Empires: African Solidarity Movements, c.1955-65 (Chris Prior)

National elites of emergent post-colonial African states in the 1950s and 1960s were activists of a form. Not merely content with rallying their own citizens behind national emancipatory or reconstructive projects, such leaders articulated their own endeavors as part of broader ‘Pan African’ efforts to solidify horizontal connections across national borders. Transnational bonds of sentiment were underpinned by a common shared experience of imperial rule and of a continued sense that the West’s post-imperial relationship with Africa was principally a ‘neo-colonial’ effort to maintain control in a different form. Indeed, African eyes were fixed upon the unfinished business of liberation in southern Africa, in the fight against apartheid, the Portuguese empire, and white racist minority rule in Southern Rhodesia. Concern about this, and expressions of solidarity with those in the south, were the most common features of pan-African meetings into the 1960s. Suspicion of the capacity of larger multilateral bodies such as the United Nations to speak on behalf of the emergent nations facilitated a further focus on action at a continent-wide level.

However, there was much less consensus amongst African leaders over the order of magnitude of future pan-African connections. Some, particularly Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, were driven by a utopian vision, for which the endpoint was a United States of Africa. For others, such as many Nigerian leaders, the intention was to maintain a nebulous African solidarity, to encourage internal cooperation, particularly surrounding economic development and the pooling of technical expertise. Combined with this, many national leaders became increasingly anxious about their own positions of authority. Indeed, the possibility of secessionist action needing to be stamped down helps explain the attachment to established national borders. Hence, in 1963, the newly-formed Organisation of African Unity voted to respect national borders defined during the colonial era, despite member states’ common acknowledgement that such borders were wholly artificial and paid no heed to pre-colonial realities. Instead, as the 1960s progressed, talk turned more to African cultural underpinnings, and less about transnational political solidarity, as can be witnessed by the declining fortunes of the Organisation for African Unity's Liberation Committee, which was that body’s formal mechanism by which independence movements were aided.

Even if we bear in mind the pressures being brought to bear upon newly independent African nations, read one way, this lends itself readily to a narrative of failure. But this raises the obvious definitional question of how do we judge success? What is the benchmark for what constitutes successful activism? The difficulties in discerning this were discussed in other papers at the workshop. When it comes to the case of post-colonial Africa, to criticize for a failure is to criticize African political figures for not living up to the demands of the most prominent and insistent political activists (such as Nkrumah), rather than of some averaged-out set of expectations from across Africa as a whole. And these post-colonial conversations clearly bequeathed attitudes that continue to this day – discussions about the establishment of some form of East African federation, for example, recently resurfaced, as they have done intermittently since the 1960s. And a broader, cultural reinvocation of a pan-African identity continues to perform a symbolic and identity-forming function. Looking at activism in a historical context is to be attuned to processes that are fragile and contingent, ideas that rise and fall in intensity according to the demands of the moment, ideas to which people attach different levels of importance and different types of meaning at different moments in the modern age.
4.2.4 Zombies in the Tar Sands (Stephen Morton)

Opposition to the controversial extraction of fossil oil in the Tar Sands of Alberta, and the construction of the XL Keystone Pipeline linking Alberta and the Gulf of Mexico via Native American lands in North Dakota has been one of the defining aspects of the Idle No More movement for Indigenous recognition and struggle in Canada. Idle No More was ‘initiated in 2012 by a small group of Indigenous women ‘who connected specific concerns in their community to a broader critique of the then Harper government’s omnibus Bill C45, which weakened a slate of environmental regulations’. A crucial dimension of this social movement was a concern to rethink the relationship between Indigenous thought, land, and sovereignty. Against the fetishism of settler colonial law, which tries to frame First nations culture and sovereignty as primitive, artists such as Nadia Myre and Brian Jungen; writers such as George Blondin, Lee Maracle, Jeannette Armstrong, Tomson Highway, and Richard Van Camp; and legal and political thinkers such as Zoe Todd, John Borrows, and Greg Coulthard have developed powerful cultural narratives that challenge the colonial logic of capitalist modernity. Such anticolonial narratives have mobilized the resources of Indigenous thought to rethink the relationship between society and the land.

This paper considers one example of the transmission of such a form of knowledge in Richard Van Camp’s story, ‘On the Wings of This Prayer’ (Van Camp, 2013). In this story, the ecological devastation caused by fracking in the Tar Sands of Alberta’s Athabasca river basin is framed in terms of the dystopian codes of a zombie apocalypse. And yet the dystopian figure of the zombie—like the figure of the Weetigo in Cree cosmology—also implies its dialectical opposite: the possibility of an alternative to a capitalist economy fuelled by cheap fossil energy.

4.3 Interdisciplinary Contexts for Demarginalization

4.3.1 Totems and Tablets: Haida Hybridity in the Age of the Digital (Tomas Borsa)

Tomas’ presentation concerned his ongoing doctoral research into the social implications and collective imaginaries of the Internet on Haida Gwaii. His presentation began by highlighting the different ways of conceptualizing the ‘digital divide’ and argued that the Internet must be seen as a social-technical assemblage guided and constrained by relations of power (Parks & Starosielski, 2015). From here, he described the considerable gaps in Internet access and affordability which continue to plague Indigenous peoples in rural and remote regions of Canada, noting that while the roots of such ‘digital divides’ (Van Dijk, 2005) have their basis in far broader structures of dispossession and exclusion, the digital self-development of Indigenous peoples continues to accelerate. Such is the case in the village of Skidegate, Haida Gwaii, where the imminent completion of a comprehensive fibre-to-home network will soon bring to an end a decade of making-do with some of the most expensive, unreliable, and bandwidth-limited connectivity in the Northern hemisphere. Particularly among younger, more technically literate community members, this appears to be seen as a largely positive development— the ‘imagined affordances’ (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of which include greater opportunities for self-expression, personal development, and professional growth. But for others, particularly more elderly or less affluent community members, the sudden availability of high-speed Internet is seen to present something of a Faustian dilemma (Ginsburg, 1991), as the very tool provided in response to calls for equal opportunity is seen to carry within it an equal, if not greater, capacity for disempowerment. What will become of the social regulation of traditional knowledge, if made to abide by the all-encompassing paradigm that ‘information wants to be free’? What will become of those whose knowledge does not readily conform to the roles, rules, and relay-points of the networked tomorrow? In short, for all that it may positively impact upon the lives of some community members, how might the arrival of ubiquitous connectivity reinscribe, or even exacerbate, existing inequalities among others?

In setting out to examine such questions, Tomas’ research calls for a close reading of the variable scales at which the ‘digital divide’ may persist long after the establishment of basic network integration, and highlights that networked flows of information are germane to the broader project of self-determination only insofar as control remains in the hands of Indigenous peoples and communities. As the study continues to develop, it may be counted among a small but growing number of works (e.g., Duarte, 2017; Lewis, 2016; TallBear, 2016) which seek explicitly to foster cross-disciplinary dialogue between Indigenous Studies and Information Science, and which have already done much to carve out a space for Indigenous lived realities within the intellectual history of information technologies. By highlighting the agency of small-scale, locally-hewn network solutions, Tomas’ research will also contribute to a re-framing...
of ‘digital divides’ from one of needs to one of strengths, and can support the development of new policy indicators more attuned to local knowledge and lived experience.

4.3.2 Reproductive Politics Online: Political Women, Gender and Social Media at Election Time (Valentina Cardo)

Valentina’s paper investigated how women political leaders used digital technologies in their political campaigns to discuss gender specific issues and concerns. She focused on three leaders: Theresa May (who became UK Prime Minister in July 2016), Jacinda Ardern (who became NZ Prime Minister in September 2017) and Hillary Clinton (who ran against and lost to Donald Trump in the November 2016 USA election). The paper asked whether these leaders were able through their use of social media during their election campaigns to overcome the barriers for women in politics, sidestep gatekeepers, speak on behalf of other women and represent them.

Despite being treated as minorities, whose concerns are broadly underrepresented, women are in fact only a perceived, not an actual, minority. The consequence is that women’s issues (in other words, issues that have a direct effect on women’s lives, such as abortion and child-care) are often under-represented and under-catered for in national legislatures, whereas typically ‘masculine’ issues (such as the economy and foreign policy) are perceived as more important for the ‘majority’. This power imbalance between what is important (and masculine) and trivial (and feminine) is reflected in the way the media cover politics and the women within it (Ross, 2017). This is true globally.

This paper then asks whether women political leaders are able to redress this gap between what is valued as politically meaningful and what is treated as ‘feminine’ and trivial by changing the narrative through the aid of online media. It investigates whether social media provides a space for political women to become a critical mass, able to change masculine norms of political debate and redefine what counts as political concern. Ultimately it is concerned with finding out whether social media provided a platform for the leaders considered in this paper to feminize political debate (Lovenduski, 2005). If so, can we say that digital technologies give a voice to traditionally underrepresented groups and therefore have the power to make a difference in women’s lives?

The thought that internet technology, and especially social media, would revolutionize politics and empower previously marginalized groups has been popular amongst digital optimists (Rheingold, 2000; Shirky, 2008; Trippi, 2004), whom have hailed digital media as able to make a difference in the lives of those traditionally underrepresented. The reality has been somewhat different: online like offline politics is still the preserve of a narrow elite of mostly white, heterosexual, young men, whereas women are still less likely to discuss (and do) politics online (Davis, 2005; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). The literature on e-campaigning reflects this imbalance by telling us about (mainly American) men’s success: we know about McCain (Chadwick, 2006), Obama’s (Hendricks & Denton, 2010) and Trump’s (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018) online campaigns, but we know very little about Clinton (Enli, 2017) and Palin’s for instance. This paper aims at redressing this gap in the literature.

4.3.3 Feminist Twitter: A Sense of Solidarity (Cat Morgan)

This presentation explored the reasons why feminists use Twitter as a site of political action, grounded in the research of feminist politics afforded by the Web. The networks of Web 2.0 are inherently social and participatory (Fotopoulou, 2016), which makes it easier for users to connect with others. Twitter is a highly social network that provides a space to converse with others, creating connections and forming communities based on mutual interests (Murthy, 2012). For feminism, the Web has been transformative, allowing for the creation of alternative publics that function as spaces to speak out and be heard by others.

The relevance of the hashtag cannot be underplayed; it has been an essential tool utilized by feminists to drive an agenda. I discussed prominent examples of these campaigns, such as #BringBackOurGirls, #MeToo and #WhyIStayed. These campaigns all center on the marginalization of women and girls, and have an element of violence associated with them.

Online abuse, such as ‘negativity, hostility and trolling’ are frequently used to diminish and silence women (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019). Standing up to the users who target women is one of the key behavior’s that define feminist Twitter members. Rather than ‘feeding’ the troll by responding to their verbal attack or meme onslaught, feminists directly address the targeted individual, expressing sympathy and solidarity as a way to connect with and support them.
Performing this research from an interdisciplinary perspective has been essential, to consider the design and features of Twitter, and how these are interpreted by the feminist Twitter community to manage their use of the platform. Designing a qualitative study that uses digital ethnography allows the researcher to investigate the nuances of an online community and the practices that influence feminist collaboration and communication.

4.3.4 Wordplays, Screenshots and Analogies: Researching Dissent on Twitter When It Doesn’t Want to be Found (Özlem Demirkol)

Özlem’s presentation focused on the methodological shortcomings of the current trends in Twitter research when investigating the dissident political talk on Twitter in repressive settings. This presentation was based on the methodological challenges she faced during her on-going doctoral research into the ways dissidents communicate and mobilize on Turkish Twitter amidst pressures by the state and strict media censorship. She argued that in repressive settings where dissidents need to employ self-censorship in order to avoid prosecution, the research needs to look beyond the explicitly political content when analyzing the ways dissidents use Twitter and/or other social media.

Research into the citizens’ political communication and mobilization on Twitter have so far overwhelmingly focused on the political hashtags and the use of political keywords as markers of political talk (see Jungherr, 2016; Larsson & Moe, 2012; Ogan & Varol, 2017; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welpe, 2011; Vaccari et al., 2015; Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2015). Hashtags and keywords, by providing access to a considerable amount of political talk centered around specific issues, allows for detailed insights into the ways users mobilize and make meaning around political concerns. This overdependence to the convenience provided by such datasets, however, is criticized for its dismissal of the less explicit forms of political engagement that happen between ordinary citizens (Bruns, Moon, Paul, & Münch, 2016; Wright et al., 2015). This limitation becomes increasingly problematic when it comes to the countries where dissident tweets are leveraged as criminal offense. In these settings finding relevant keywords and hashtags that are used by a meaningful proportion of the Twitter users is a growing issue due to self-censorship (Tanash, Chen, Wallach, & Marschall, 2017).

Especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Turkey has become notorious for imprisoning thousands of social media users over alleged links to terrorist organizations (AP, 2016) and more recently for criticizing the government over military operations in Afrin, Syria (BBC, 2018). A recent research shows not only a major increase in the self-censorship of ordinary users but also a significant decrease in the use of hashtags after the failed coup attempt (Tanash et al., 2017). Consequently, social media users are leaning towards more indirect commentaries; instead of using identifiable keywords, dissent is communicated through and embedded in the subtext and political satire. As Papacharissi (2012) notes, “individuals confronted with a restricted stage for self-presentation seek to overcome expressive restrictions through imaginative strategies that include play” (p. 10). Similarly, Özlem’s analysis show that dissidents express grievances through more indirect and playful commentaries often in ways that are meaningful to those who are familiar with the vernacular Twitter culture. These expressions that can be classified as “tactical frivolity” (Kingsmith, 2016) include wordplays with politicians’ names and appropriating otherwise non-political events and viral phenomena to comment on politics. Rather than mobilizing through hashtags, they disseminate the tweets that challenge politicians’ statements and the tweets that contain calls for action through retweet networks. These less explicit forms of political engagement that exist within repressive contexts show the need for more nuanced studies that go beyond the “one size fits all” approach when researching Twitter. Future Twitter research needs to consider the linguistic, cultural and political differences of these communities and the effect of these differences on the ways citizens interact with the communication technologies (Cuevas, Gonzalez, Cuevas, & Guerrero, 2014).

4.3.5 Endogenous Bottom-up Social Change & Opening Participatory Structures in Civil Society Organizations (Suay Özkula)

This presentation discusses how the opening up of participatory structures in civil society organizations (CSO) creates new engagement opportunities for marginalized groups, and thus, helps towards demarginalization. In recent decades, digital space has changed the landscape of socio-political engagement by offering new political opportunity structures through new spaces and structures, new social movements that are comparatively more flexible, decentralized, and horizontally organized, and that include new combinations between horizontal and hierarchical structures, collective and connective...
actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Even so, there remain barriers in participation such as digital divides and an unequal distribution of technological capital, state interventions, regulations and censorship (region-dependent), as well as differing platforms affordances and restrictions. As a result, meaningful participation is hindered (see Jenkins, 2006; Selwyn, 2003, 2004, 2006; Selwyn & Facer, 2010) in that (1) access does not equal use, (2) use does not equal political use, (3) a larger range of voice means that certain voices get diluted, and (4) interaction does not necessarily mean participation. Thus, although digital technologies have opened up global access, that access is neither necessarily global, nor unconditional, nor by default politically significant.

Addressing these issues in participatory culture, this presentation offered findings and insights on an enquiry on how recent organizational changes at Amnesty International affected participatory potential in digitally enabled activism. It draws on digital ethnographic fieldwork in the organization’s Digital Communications Programme at the International Secretariat (London) from 2013 to 2014. The fieldwork showed an organization that was adapting to social media culture, and, through that, opening up its structures through endogenous bottom-up social change. In theory, this should allow for an increased involvement of demarginalized Indigenous communities, and, via a global organization integrating these initiatives, also to their transnationalization. Through the adaptation of a more flexible and decentralized model (mirroring structures more commonly found in digital space), the organization was therefore shedding some of the traditional barriers in participation.

The findings also suggested, however, that certain (if not new) barriers persist as the changes have largely been provoked by activist communications, but not necessarily by how individual users or communities have created initiatives. Digital space being socio-material, activists’ communications are very much shaped and confined by the spaces they occupy. As culture is embedded in technology, that technology reflects cultural norms, and digital space, while open to Indigenous communities, has been largely shaped by progressive Western activist movements. For users trying to engage with organizations, this creates a new problematic. Although a local issue may receive organizational support and potentially become viral, it will have to adapt to popular digital communications or specific platform culture or “vernaculars” (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015) - a digital or social media filter. Since these communications are, however, created by Western communities, it remains to be seen whether such filters do not also adapt and therefore westernize movements, or at least prioritize those that are more suited to Western audiences.

Going forward, this means that, on the one hand, there are changes in the civil society sector that open CSOs up to niche voices – individual users, demarginalized communities, and small local or Indigenous communities. On the other hand, it is difficult to assess whether such communities actually benefit from these developments. Thus, future research would need to question whether these organizational changes, though seemingly integrative, aren’t maybe also conveying a false utopian sense of transnationalizing local issues.

5 Conclusions, Suggested Directions, and a Call for Research

The discipline of information systems is more than the study of the design, adoption, implementation, and use of technology. As this workshop has highlighted, IS researchers must also consider the broader implications and imaginaries of the field, taking into account the people, places, cultures, and social histories that can mediate (and at times foreclose) the possibilities of our technological encounters. To take such an approach is to challenge the orthodoxies of IS research, where technology sits firmly at the center.

As the participants in this workshop have illustrated in their own unique ways, a refusal to move beyond such an “instrument-centered” (Marvin, 1990, p. 4) approach inadvertently downplays consideration of critical social issues, such that a wide array of user-communities and contexts can become marginalized and reduced to “silenced centers” (Spivak, 1999, p. 269).

What must be done to ensure that the social aspects of IS research are not muted in our inquiry? One suggestion is to broaden the point of inquiry. Indeed, there can be more focal points than one. In order to better capture diverse and at-times competing perspectives, the participants in this workshop, for one, are united in the belief that more interdisciplinary approaches are needed. To this end, the field of IS would also do well to take stock of the paradigms which inform our oft-neglected sister discipline of Science and Technology Studies (STS), whose principal concern is less with the evolution of technical efficiencies and more with the impacts of such developments, particularly as this relates to “who is inside and outside, who
may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed” (Marvin, 1990, p. 4). Likewise, we might find inspiration in the field of Cultural Anthropology – a field where interdisciplinarity is inescapable, and which prompts us to consider the ways in which interpersonal, cross-cultural, and historic factors can give rise to technologies “both rooted in and routed through particular places” (Clifford, 2013, p. 52).

For all the idiosyncrasies to their respective research emphases, regions, and case studies, the participants in this workshop were linked by a broad commitment to many of the notions found throughout contemporary critical social theory. One such notion is that existing methodologies are often left wanting – particularly if they are applied to the context of marginalized Indigenous peoples. Why is this so? For one, many extant theories were developed through omission of, or at the expense of, worldviews and epistemologies which fell outside of the myopic gaze of colonial sanctioning. This being the case, the insights which emerge from such theories cannot be so simply generalized and extrapolated as though they are capable of capturing the nuances of marginalized peoples’ experiences. In this perspective, Spivak (1999, pp. 358ff) has highlighted some examples such as the theories built on McLuhan’s ideas of a global village and Lyotard’s framework of legitimation. Although we agree with Spivak’s analysis of the contemporary social situations, like her we have neither the hubris nor desire to up-end decades of work by rejecting existing theory outright. Our aim, rather, is to highlight the impossibility of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. Simply put, new methodological and theoretical approaches are needed if we are to integrate decolonial perspectives into IS research, and thereby amplify the voices of the voiceless and the marginalized peoples and research collaborators.

To this end, it is vital that we develop more nuanced, critical, and polyvocal narratives. We might start with one of the more common issues in qualitative research, which involves identifying the audience, or asking “for whom do we write?” (Davison, 2019). For demarginalization to occur, we suggest that it is more important to identify and acknowledge for whom the text speaks. Following the lead of critical theorists such as Spivak and Bhabha, this will allow IS researchers – particularly those working within the paradigms of critical and interpretive methods – to recover and deconstruct everyday practices as “from the archives of a colonial system that subjugated its colonial subjects through a pedagogic enterprise” (Morton, 2011, p. 76). In short, an invitation to demarginalizing interdisciplinarity is one which promises to shine light on ways of knowing that have hitherto been all too often brushed aside.

The Association for Information Systems (AIS) has thus far taken an apolitical stance towards technology, both in terms of its functions and conditions of use. However, as the mission of AIS is to “serve society,” we agree with Fedorowicz et al (2019) that this needs to change. One insight from this workshop is that the politics of information technologies are only set to become more complex, as IS phenomena proliferate and become further integrated into the minutiae of everyday life. As we have seen, this includes the uptake, appropriation, and reinvention of digital technologies by Indigenous peoples across the globe, who have leveraged an array of technical affordances as a means of overcoming social exclusion in many different forms. Drawing upon our interdisciplinary backgrounds, we are unequivocal in our suggestion that the AIS revise its mission to more adequately include the politics of information technologies and systems. We do not mean to suggest that researchers should set out to blur the line between activism and academia. Instead, it is our hope that AIS will acknowledge the sensitivities – both internal and external – associated with our phenomena of choice, and that it may use its platform to encourage research which not only advances the field, but paves the way for real-world impact through knowledge creation that supports and improves the lived realities of marginalized peoples.

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