Pervasive Technology: Aboriginal Communities and Oppression

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Abstract

Australian Aboriginal sovereignty is no longer just about Aboriginal communities retaining rights to their own land. The most brutal forms of dispossession are the latest forms of data retention, decreased privacy and unwarranted use of this personal data as a result of activities being collected, analyzed, and intelligently manipulated by geographically remote entities, all thanks to the Internet.

Energy

Essentially, humans exist in a vast orbit of energy. We are composed of a high percentage of aqueous matter and “hold charge” much like a battery holds energy, which is transferred and expended in connection. Humans are charged with energy that we can see manifest from time to time in our contact with other things or people.
That energy charge is an electrical state, both physical and emotional, as we interact, connect, and experience new things with others and as we move through a physical landscape.

“...Everything in our universe is essentially energy and information.” [1].

In essence, as humans in charge of our own destiny, we have the choice to connect with others in person, and when we do so we transfer energy. We pass a “charge” to others, in our communications, where others either hear of our ideas audibly, or engage with us in physical proximity to each other, feet to the ground, hand to hand, eye to eye.

A virtual reality is exactly that – virtual.

Routinely the virtual experience fails to realize the same depth of connection that we have with others in real life. Social media on the other hand is another manifestation of this virtual existence that on one hand can be considered to be revolutionary in the manner in which it connects people. Conversely, social media can be insidious in the myriad ways it acts as a social surveillance, manipulating the way we engage with others.

Technologists take this further with the notion that as sentient beings, humans are now “nodes” in a network largely facilitated by the Internet. The experiential transfer and connection that we feel in a physical environment is radically different to a science fiction writer's dream that an engineer is attempting to make real.

“...Networks are the key to learning and life - now and into the future... the most important component of the network is the node... the best networks have the best nodes... the best nodes are empowered individuals." –Tim Klapdor [2]

We must therefore seriously bring into question technologies that render our physical forms immobile, our voices mute, and our spirits locked into heads...
up displays, body worn video recorders, bracelets, embedded RFID chips, and countless other emergent technologies.

**Spiritual Dispossession**

In October 2015, a leading Australian Aboriginal Elder, Patrick Dodson, a Yawuru man and Senator of the Australian Parliament [3] from Broome, Western Australia, made reference in his address at a Higher Degree research retreat hosted by the National Centre for Indigenous Studies (NCIS), Australian National University to the lack of contemporaneous debate on emergent technology as a force of oppression within Australia [4].

Dodson was bringing forward a topic which is rarely critically debated, and that is instead largely drowned out by a rising tide of political and social injustices affecting the Australian Aboriginal community. The most important issues facing Australian Aboriginal communities are the dispossession of their lands as a direct result of government policies and intervention, the lack of power of veto on mining activity from international consortia, the incarceration and detainment of individuals as young as 12 for 90 days on spurious charges of terrorism, and the tragedy of ongoing deaths in custody [5]. These are just a few of the many, many despicable forms of marginalization and continued colonization occurring at this very minute, in this country, in the grip of a technologically facilitated apartheid.

Our need as individuals and as a community to expose for debate the savage techno-cide occurring on a second by second basis in all our communities across Australia and the world is now apparent. In many rural and remote communities in Australia, the connection between policing and public space, using surveillance cameras in petrol stations, shopping centers, automatic teller machines, banks, post offices, and medical centers, is directly attributed to targeted control of Aboriginal people.

Australian government agencies namely Juvenile Justice, the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Community Services all contribute to the multitude of ways in which technology is used to control welfare, education,
and community services in the country. These departments identify, reward, or punish those who are unaware of the hybrid nature of these visual, auditory, and data driven interconnected systems. In other instances citizens may be only too aware of being monitored if they are wearing mandatory GPS bracelets for punitive social detention reasons.

We are in the grip of an oppression that is so pervasive, and so insidiously gradual, designed, purposeful, and expedient, that most of the world’s population now accepts this monitoring activity as an everyday and acceptable way of being. Since the onset of the Internet, an abuse of our civil rights has occurred with the implementation of one key force, the globally connected and systematic process of colonization of private space [6].

**Surveillance**

Surveillance is an act of oppression, a genocide that seeks to erode our rights as humans to remain unseen, to be secluded by choice, to express ourselves selectively, without the oversight of others, first and foremost. The experience of privacy differs from culture to culture but inherently the manner in which we grow as a matter of personal freedom is as fundamental to human dignity as are the very spiritual domains in which our cultures hold secret, remain diverse, and in many cases the very reason they survive.

Surveillance on the other hand is an extension of the totalitarian state, a means to influence and control the human population and provides a means to divide us all in an activity known as social sorting [7]. This is often referred to as a state of ‘transparency’, a technology enhanced dossier of epic proportions which means in some cases corporation have a greater knowledge of our daily routines, transactions, web searches and secrets than we do ourselves. In religion, a fast failing agent of social control we see the manifestations of a human mind, we feel the inculcations of the charge of cultural mass, and yet in the present day due to digital technologies we are moving fast to an existential and nihilist dystopia of a quantified self.
Ray Kurzweil [8], author, computer scientist, inventor and futurist, Director of Engineering at Google, would have us believe that we are in an exponential phase of an “accelerating intelligence” of the human race as a result of these new and emergent technologies. However, a transmogrification of humans transcending their current biological milieu to that of an artificial intelligence enhanced Singularity is more likely to end humanity entirely, an unnecessary evil.

In a Singularity, where we become the carriers both external and internal of the very technology we found most useful, we also lose our sense of charge, our connection with each other, and ultimately our own will to live. Having failed to reach that utopia, we reach instead an empty transcended state. Our sense of intuition, awareness of country, and of “life force of place” [9] then is lost if we put these technologies first.

Therefore, when we engineer a devil incarnate in ourselves as cyborgs, we take away that spiritual connection if we fail to put country, place first. By taking away that spiritual connection we remove a domain of engagement that is only felt in a physical manner. We are in that case engineering in the likeness of non-humanity, which is the demise of humanity.

Veillance

Surveillance across these institutions, across the community and across all nations is not simply static video cameras in public space. The domain of veillances occurs in a number of forms [10]. Firstly, it appears in the form of surveillance and the hive of globally network cameras and recorders [11]. Secondly it occurs in the form of dataveillance and dataveillance “reward” schemes. Thirdly, it appears in the form of sousveillance [12] and the recalcitrance of shooting back on the system. Lastly it will appear as Uerveillance [13], which is the totality of all of these becoming an embedded electrophorus, a transdermal condition for all of humanity from the moment we are born, chipped, identifiable.
In every public place, and in many private spaces, businesses, homes, and workplaces, we have consistently been told through massive “awareness” campaigns that surveillance in all its forms is present for our own safety, for our well-being and for the good of the community. These surveillance systems extend to body worn cameras by police, emergency, or community services [14].

In all aspects of our daily lives we are now as never before subject to the gaze of authorities, whose presence and moniker in many cases is that of one single fixed physical object – the surveillance camera. Repeatedly we are told that surveillance is a panopticon that we need, a necessary evil that without its presence we descend as a human race into outright anarchy [15].

As if we have accepted the Orwellian dystopia without question [16], we now go about our daily lives under hundreds of cameras connected to systems that track our location, our facial and gait identity, many of which are monitored and the data used by corporations and law enforcement agencies far from the Australian shores.

The consequences of gaining a discount at a petrol bowser to use as reward points to gain “free” airline flights as anything more than convenience is an example of dataveillance that permeates many households, often indifferent to the activity of those collecting this information. Consumers seem willing to give away every detail of their shopping activity to organizations who use it to target further consumption.

This “giving away” of our private data means that we have become the product itself, that the data we provide is more valuable to the retailer en masse than their entire marketing campaigns and in some cases it is their sole marketing campaign. This manner of dataveillance has become an ingrained, networked, and socially acceptable way of being. The Internet therefore, has become not only a tool that greatly enhances our access to knowledge in real time but it has also become the most successful tool of human oppression in a modern society.
The networked effect of global information systems connected via a myriad of things now hardwired into the very architecture we inhabit has been instrumental in shaping how we now interact with each other, and more importantly how we have become enslaved to the very organizations who set this all up in the first place. We have a paradoxical habitation where on the one hand we celebrate the speed and efficiency of news and activity that is delivered by the system, yet on the other hand we recoil at the lack of privacy and autonomy we once had before that system took it all away.
The ambivalence and apathy we have adopted as to the permeance of this oversight from so many interconnected sources is probably the most dangerous of all human behaviors of the greater public.

In an Australian Aboriginal context, across rural and remote communities, and likewise across every single community in Australia, there is in some way a dependence on this network of networks, this nature of gaze through the very technologies we once thought were simply connections of convenience. The fact is that we all travel between centers of human habitation, fill our cars up with fuel under surveillance, shop under surveillance, interact in public spaces under surveillance, connect with and date others under surveillance and therein lies the paradox of it all.

Surveillance is not just the cameras that inhabit these physical spaces, it is in fact the hybrid of networked, electronic systems and connected devices that all combine to form a meshed triangulation of our activity no matter where we are located. Surveillance cameras are simply the visible form of this oppression, a physical moniker for what we are losing on a daily basis as we agree to give up our rights to privacy in a trade-off for convenience. Body Worn Cameras (BWC) now touted to be a fully back-to-base, artificial intelligence enhanced extension of this surveillance network and with a collapse of competition for engineers and data management into one United States provider our Australian municipal, community, state and national “whereabouts” risks becoming an extension of this already totalitarian regime.

Networked Gaze - No More Borders

Of greatest concern is the fact that the Internet has provided a use case for the network of networks to grow opportunities that can gaze into other communities, to gather intelligence, and by proximity to create a deep distrust in each other's motivations.
This allows for global forces such as the United States of America, China, and Russia to be inserted into the very communities we seek to keep open and free of this technologically facilitated and reinforced distrust.

It also allows for gross breaches of our civil liberties as Australian citizens as the Australian Government continues its oppression of Aboriginal and of all Australian communities, under the two-year minimum mandatory retention of data laws that have recently been passed in the Australian Senate [17].

Smart Technologies

The reality is that we, in many of the world’s communities, from our beds, as humans approaching a cyborg state of being, now answer social media requests, login to email systems, play games, and jostle through sometimes hundreds of mobile applications on smartphones, all of which require an acceptance of privacy conditions. These privacy conditions or ‘pop-ups’ are often never read, understood or consider seriously and users instead simply click ‘yes’ and proceed to use that application. In most cases users are unaware of that the application continues to track location, logs patterns of interactions between applications, and even who we are in contact with and why.

We do all of this without any sense of what the broader implications are for our privacy or personal security. It is obvious that the proliferation of wearable technologies such as mobile phones, GPS bracelets, and exercise trackers all contribute to the omniscience of unseen service providers trawling through massive amounts of our private data to make meaning from what we have become blinded to.

“...The emphasis on punitive law and order processes hasn't been shown to work in addressing youth crime and there's no evidence to suggest it's going to work here.” [18].

According to the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) The Northern Territory has the highest rate of youth incarceration in Australia. In
this region, three-quarters of incarcerated youths are detained on remand, meaning they are awaiting court hearings or sentencing. Of those about 95 percent of those detained are of Indigenous background.

The frightening reality is that GPS tracking and alcohol monitoring bracelets are currently being worn by 108 offenders across the NT serving out their sentence or on parole or as a result of other community based orders. The bracelet continually sends an electronic signal to a manned control room service to detect when a person is in breach of a curfew or in a restricted area.

On the consumer level, wearable technologies have taken this monitoring of our everyday activities to a more dangerous level by providing us with the convenience of knowing our own heartbeats, our position or “whereabouts” using geographic information systems (GIS), and our network connections. In many cases this monitoring directly affects essential services such as medical insurance, credit rating, social ranking or access to related services. This extends even further for Aboriginal people via a well meaning, misinformed and largely invasive breach of civil and human rights as they are tracked and restricted from using their pension funds in Australia by means of an electronic card, the ‘Basics Card’.

It is evident from literature in human computing, wearable technologies, engineering and ethics domains that the trajectory of technological innovation and embedded technologies as subdermal injections of Internet-connected things is the next step for humanity. Some researchers, engineers and social activists posit that it is time for humans to be microchipped as a matter of national security, of community safety and for personal well-being.

**Greatest Threat**

The onset of automated, networked systems facilitated by the Internet, along with the rapid shift towards wearable technologies as an everyday convenience, and the pervasive manner in which every known space that humans occupy is a target for a data logger or surveillance camera. It is a
situation that is potentially as great a threat to Aboriginal people of Australia and to everyone globally as anything else that has emerged as a threat to our humanity.

This threat is evidenced by the fixations of a few on inventing a certain cyborg future, and by those who would celebrate the demise of humanity in preference for a transhumanist existence. In all this there is one clear and consistent message resonating [12]:

“...to wake up non-Aboriginal people to a relationship with the land; to foster trust, friendship and empathy between the indigenous community and the wider Australian and International communities.”

Goolarabooloo, Paddy Roe [20]

We must recognize that these hybrid, ubiquitous and seemingly convenient technologies are part of a greater array of forces that take us away from ourselves. We lose ourselves if we surrender our autonomy, our life spirit, our life led by intuition. That intuition, our sum total sensory experience of self is known by the Nyikina people of the Kimberley Region of Western Australia as our liyan.

“...Liyan embodies the core of Nyikina consciousness which determines the status of individual, emotional, psychological and physical well being. Liyan, the capacity to stay true to one’s self, is connected to body, land and spirit and provides a sense of balance.” - Dr. Anne Poelina, Nyikina Senior Custodian [21]

In the 1992 BBC Series, ‘Millennium’ Frans Hoogland [22] in discussion with Nyikina Elder, Paddy Roe from the Kimberley region of Western Australia articulates what ‘liyan’ means for many Aboriginal people of the Kimberley.

“...This whole country is mapped out. Now, each area is like a human being, got feeling, got the liyan, that is the liyan of place. The liyan is like the life force, it’s like your spirit, like your essence. Now the only
way to make contact to those locations, to those sites, is through our liyan.” - Frans Hoogland

As Hoogland elucidates, the very reason for our everyday existence, our life force is grounded in achieved by listening to country, place first lest we lose ourselves and our connection with each other. We run the risk otherwise of being subservient to this technology, answering to superintelligence on the streets, only to realise that in its artificiality we are listening to ghostly whisperings of recordings from the time when we once knew ourselves as humans. With reason dismissed, reason in itself is subsumed and becomes subsumed under this technical or instrumental regime [22].

In Australia, in listening to country we recognize that peppering our existence with these pervasive technologies is perhaps the worst possible route we have taken since the mid-1980s as a nation. We must wake up and recognize that surveillance in all its forms is an act of cultural genocide, an epitaph inscribed on our tombstone of self-preservation.

We must wake up.
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**Figure Captions**
