

## **Book review of Jennifer Wemigwans (2018). *A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online*. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press.**

Shezadi Khushal, University of Toronto, Canada

*Abstract: This paper is a review of author Jennifer Wemigwans' book, A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online. It investigates a critical issue in education and highlights the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the internet, the flow of communication, protection, and access to Indigenous Knowledge online, and the safeguarding of freedom of expression of Indigenous Knowledge online. It makes a correlation between the protection of digital technology to that of Indigenous self-determination, resurgence, and revitalization. By embracing Indigenous theories and methodologies, this book heightens Indigenous voices, providing tools for empowerment.*

*Keywords: Indigenous knowledges, internet, resurgence, revitalization, transformation*

### **Indigenous Epistemology in a Digital Age**

**A** *Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online* opens very timely discussions about: (1) the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the internet; (2) the flow of communication, protection, and access to Indigenous Knowledges online; and (3) the safeguarding of freedom of expression of Indigenous Knowledges online. Through a series of interviews, *A Digital Bundle* connects online Indigenous Knowledges to Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty. This revitalization of knowledge systems and practices is key to transformation and sustainability of Indigenous communities. It also “speaks back to dominant colonial systems of knowledge in Canada by representing an active presence” rooted in the teachings of Elders and Knowledge Keepers (p. 2). A central foundation of the book is [FourDirectionsTeachings.com](http://FourDirectionsTeachings.com), an online project created and produced by author Jennifer Wemigwans through Indigenous protocols to investigate the role of knowledge production of five distinct Indigenous Nations (per Wemigwans: Blackfoot, Cree, Ojibwe, Mohawk, and M’ikmaq). Knowledge production in this context is defined “not in the sense of creating new knowledge, but rather, to the reproduction of aspects of long-existing Knowledge in new formats, and in relation to new contexts” (p. 3).

Chapter 1 identifies Indigenous Knowledges in two distinct forms: as sacred teachings (traditional knowledge passed through ceremonial protocols by only Elders and Traditional Teachers), and personal knowledge (acquired through individual educational pursuits, empirical processes, or derived through spiritual knowledge not bounded by cultural protocols). Wemigwans also examines how the internet leads, directly and indirectly, to Indigenous resurgence and revitalization. Here, the author explains descriptors attached to the terms “Elders” and “Traditional Teachers,” noting that an Elder or Traditional Knowledge Keeper can acquire knowledge through empirical observation, as well as the gifts they are born with or have received through revealed knowledge, and that only Elders and Traditional Teachers who have been gifted the Indigenous Knowledge and teachings can share those teachings publicly and transfer them. Indigenous Knowledge is held in trust as there is an expectation to abide by the cultural protocols entrusted to that knowledge.

In Chapter 2, Wemigwans uses four theoretical principles, referred to as Indigenous Tenets, to describe how Indigenous Knowledges online produce and contribute to resurgence. Drawing from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) 25 Indigenous Projects, Wemigwans embeds the four Tenets within Smith’s framework. The 25 projects are rooted in theorizing Indigenous issues at the level of ideas, policy analysis, critical debate, as well as social science research, and constitute a very complex research programme. The chapter also highlights long-standing delegitimization of Indigenous Knowledges by excluding Indigenous cultural norms. Building on George Sefa Dei’s work, Wemigwans affirms that “decolonization is about producing our own knowledge projects and not continually challenging and subverting epistemological imperialism” (p. 58). Wemigwans continues, “having Indigenous Knowledge projects online validated by the community creates rich learning environments that are intercultural, deeply respectful of local knowledge, and ultimately transformative” (p. 57). Such projects ground “knowledges and practices into their appropriate soils, cultural contexts, histories and heritages” (Dei, 2012, p. 104). Chapter 2 also delves into the important subject of cultural appropriation by non-Indigenous people as being “the root cause of centuries of degradation of Indigenous Knowledge” (p. 44). This is a very important aspect of Indigenous research, as cultural and linguistic integrity come into play.

Chapter 3 identifies Indigenous approaches to research and the importance of applying Indigenous methodologies and theories. The chapter begins with outlining how the research participants were selected and organized into three groups, consisting of educators, arts workers, and system workers, and goes into great detail on the process of the interviews. Rooted in reciprocity, this chapter also speaks to how Indigenous research serves Indigenous communities. The author connects the need to having Indigenous resources online that reaches the mainstream, to that of promoting Indigenous well-being, understanding and respect. The chapter ends with a thought-provoking question for reflection: “how are Indigenous voices, in turn, electronically reaching new audiences and creating horizons for speakers as well as listeners?” (p. 104).

Chapters 4-7 provide an in-depth examination of the four Tenets of Indigenous Knowledges to articulate how Indigenous Peoples use the internet currently and how these Tenets support a system that can ignite Indigenous Knowledges. The four Tenets include the following: *Biskaabiiyang* (look back), which refers to “looking back in order to re-create the cultural and political flourishing of the past to reclaim the fluidity of Indigenous traditions” (p. 47). *Naakgonige* (to plan) emphasizes that careful deliberation and decision must be at the forefront when facing change. *Naakgonige* encourages one to deliberate and consider the impacts of decisions on all aspects of life and relationships, and requires communities to carefully deliberate, using their emotional, physical and spiritual senses. The third Tenet, *Aanjigone* (non-interference), “ensures that the interrogation of decisions are focused on the decision, rather than the individual” (p. 49). This tenet is critical in that it requires one to set fears aside and think beyond oneself, and toward thinking of future generations. Finally, vital to mobilization, faith, and trust is *Debwewin* (truth), which is integral to how Indigenous Peoples write, read, envision, discover, and share. As Wemigwans suggests, learning, deliberation, and contemplation can only be integrated with one another by moving through each of these principles.

These chapters also explore critical concepts in Indigeneity, such as celebrating survival, what Indigenization requires, what democratizing looks like, and the importance of storytelling. Here, the author thinks strategically about cultural privacy as a way to protect not only against cultural appropriation, but also against cultural exploitation. Well-respected Elders and Traditional Teachers have credibility in their own communities, and “cultural appropriation is a huge concern for many people” (p. 171). Therefore, protecting languages, customs, beliefs, ideas, and natural resources is key. Wemigwans states “knowledge has to be respected” (p. 175) and offers the perspective of how research participants engage with Indigenous Knowledge online is in fact a “way of recovering or returning to cultural knowledge, in the form of teachings historically forbidden from being shared” (p. 162).

Chapter 8 centers on the argument that the promises of Indigenous education in curriculum expressed in the reports of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), People for Education (2015), and Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), are not being realized. “Although 96% of secondary schools have Aboriginal students enrolled, only 11% offer Native language programs. Only 29% of elementary schools offer training on Indigenous issues to teachers” (p. 210). The question then becomes, “how do we protect and transmit our ceremonies and knowledge in ways that maintain Indigenous integrity?” (p. 221). The author suggests this can only be attained through a cultural shift. Finally, the author maintains that history, treaties, colonial practices, assimilation, and the ongoing quest for dignity can each be conveyed to the broader public through using the internet.

*A Digital Bundle* is comprehensive and extremely well written. Importantly, “Digital Bundle” is used interchangeably with “Indigenous Knowledge online.” Because of the various contexts in which they are used, the definition can vary. One characterization, however, includes the notion of digital bundles as being sacred and holding a great deal of power. As Wemigwans describes, “digital bundles are on the precipice of new cultural and political openings. These openings can perpetuate Indigenous resurgence and counteract the impact of colonization” (p. 209).

The book has many strengths. “Indigenous Knowledge is a complex epistemological paradigm” (p. 3), and the author does an excellent job of illustrating the complexities associated with producing, promoting, and protecting Indigenous Knowledges. I particularly like that the author situates herself within the research. This is important because “the understanding of one’s own attitudes, values, and biases is useful not only in gaining deeper insight into the research, but also in ensuring that the focus remains on the research and its participants” (Patnaik, 2013, p. 100). The author provides clear and concrete recommendations for what she envisions for Indigenous communities in terms of ownership. Drawing from L’Hirondelle, Wemigwans asserts that “what I would like to see is our people actually create our own networks so that we can be part of that economy and have greater control” (p. 67). These points are also strengthened by the author’s inclusion of five distinct and diverse Indigenous Nations in the research, underscoring that Indigenous communities are not a monolith. Indeed, “every First Nations culture is unique and has

their differences in terms of teachings, practices, protocols, and even worldviews. There are approximately 630 First Nations communities, with every single one being unique” (p. 148).

While the author does argue it is possible to apply cultural protocols to the internet, further details, either in the book or the website resource, would have been helpful for readers attempting to honour those protocols appropriately, particularly with regard to ethical relationality and the aforementioned issues of appropriation/commercialization.

The author employs social theory, cultural analysis, political critique as well as Indigenous methodologies in her research. Qualitative methodology is used in the form of interviews and discussions. Significant consultations were also conducted with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Traditional Teachers, Chiefs, artists, and activists, which speaks to depth and scope of Indigenous ontology embedded into the findings. Indigenous resurgence, survival, cultural revitalization, and transformation are among the themes prevalent from the findings from the interviews.

*A Digital Bundle* is an imperative read. It makes a direct connection between the protection of digital technology and Indigenous self-determination, resurgence, and revitalization. Wemigwans drives home the message that a new online social movement is taking root because of access to internet and that this internet activism is propelled and shaped by Indigenous perspectives and values. It urges Indigenous Peoples to “move beyond a focus of decolonization (which puts the colonizer at the center of discussions), to one in which Indigenous theorizing is both recognized and achieved” (McGregor, 2005, p. 75). It also stresses that Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and cultural producers should take control and be recognized as the “architects and engineers of Indigenous technological processes” (p. 57). By embracing Indigenous theories and methodologies, this book heightens Indigenous voices and provides tools for empowerment. Thus, this book is beneficial for educators, leaders, and scholars (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in the social sciences, humanities, anthropology, and Indigenous studies.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Shezadi Khushal** is a PhD Student in the Educational, Leadership and Policy program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. She has spent the past two decades advocating for human rights. Through her commitment to the principles of equity, inclusivity, diversity, and justice, and in bridging the gap between education and human rights, Shezadi is working towards transforming educational policies, which have historically excluded marginalized members of society. Shezadi is passionate about issues relating to Indigenous rights, education, mental health and policy