

Alexa, Please Babysit My Child

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Abstract

According to the 2019 Statistics Canada report, Canada beats out every other country in the world regarding the amount of time spent online. This has likely been amplified due to the stay-at-home order caused by the COVID-19 crisis, hence why the new Bill C-11 will strengthen the current policies defending Canadians from corporate digital overstep. *Alexa, Please Babysit My Child* will explore, analyze, and evaluate Amazon's neuro-capitalistic technologies, specifically pertaining to the technologies made for child use. Neuro-capitalism is dangerous as it speaks to a corporation's ability to control the mind through the current hyper-technological society. Jurisdictional complexity surrounding artificial intelligence and cybersecurity can be mitigated by government-funded education. Therefore, my research explores the question: From a digital-colonial standpoint, to what extent are Amazon's child-targeted technologies' (such as Kindle 4 Kids) consistent with the new, proposed Bill C-11? This policy analysis will consist of three sections—first, an analysis of Amazon's Kindle 4 Kids Terms and Conditions (Site 1). Second, an evaluation of Bill C-11's ability to protect children from the pernicious aspects of neuro-capitalism (Site 2). Lastly, a compare and contrast section of the two entities, ending with a discussion of the findings. Particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, we must be sure that the Government of Canada is doing everything in their power to aid the youth of the country that spends the most time online and thus the most time with their babysitter: Alexa.

Keywords

child, digital colonialism, neuro-capitalism, Alexa, Bill C-11

I watch my teenage children clutch their smartphones wherever they go lest they be forced to endure a moment of boredom, and I wonder how much more dependent their children will be on devices that not only connect them with friends, but actually are friends- irresistibly upbeat and knowledgeable, a little insipid perhaps, but always available, usually helpful, and unflaggingly loyal, except when they're selling our secrets. When you stop and think about it, artificial intelligences are not what you want your children hanging around with all day long. (Shulevitz, 2018)

Cybersecurity in Canada is simultaneously one of the most complex and crucial areas of the country's national defence. There are apparent reasons where identity theft, government system hacking, and nuclear weapon controls exist. However, there are also more overlooked aspects of cybersecurity, such as the effects of neuro-capitalism. Neuro-Capitalism, as explained by author Giorgio Griziotti in his book by the same name, is a political-technological area of study in which “we have moved from a time when the driving force of all activity was accumulation in the physical sense, to a society based on performance and the exploitation of life in a broader sense” (Griziotti in Di Biase, 2016, para. 12). Griziotti explores tech giant's roles in Silicon Valley, explaining that “capitalism in Silicon Valley, which is part of the financial machine, founded its own power on its mastery of algorithms and ability to manipulate our attention, and even space-time” (Griziotti in Di Biase, 2016, para. 11). Griziotti concludes by stating that “we should not underestimate the importance of the debate on the ethical, political and social purpose of the use of these technologies” (Griziotti in Di Biase, 2016, para. 29).

While Griziotti regards the broader political-technological intersection, my research is more narrow, as it analyzes Alexa and Canadian legislation, exploring the ways the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted both:

[the COVID-19 pandemic] has not only magnified the value of the internet, but also what's wrong with it. Newsfeeds that spread misinformation. Digital ads that track and target us. Algorithms that make opaque decisions about our credit ratings or our dating lives. Smart speakers that listen to — and store — our every word. In short: the internet is indispensable — and imperfect. At this fraught moment in our digital society, Canada has a major opportunity to address much of what's wrong online. Several weeks ago, Canadian legislators in the House of Commons introduced Bill C-11 to enact the Consumer Privacy Protection Act. (Bednar & Surman, 2021, para. 1-4)

The adverse neurological effects that time spent online has created can be explained in several ways, but perhaps the best way would be through the Cam-

bridge Analytica scandal. In latent terms, neuro-capitalism took the world stage through the Cambridge Analytica Scandal when the 2016 Presidential Election was allegedly heavily swayed by Facebook's algorithms, pushing voters toward the Republican candidate Donald Trump (Meredith, 2018). And while the mere act alone of subconsciously swaying votes by allegedly influencing the American people is bad enough, what is even more unsettling is the fact that the Trump administration concealed it. Because there is so much jurisdictional complexity around the term cybersecurity (as surmised by the 2017 Canadian Cyber Review Consultation Report), Christopher Wiley--the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower— did not need to flee to Russia like the NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden had to. The very same reason why the Trump administration and Mark Zuckerberg knew to keep Cambridge Analytica under wraps is the same reason it is so important to shed light on it: they are aware of the neurological impact data can have, and that is why I would like to shift my focus from Facebook and look at this impact with another tech giant: Jeff Bezos's Amazon's Alexa (Meredith, 2018).

Furthermore, according to Shulevitz (2018), Ovum projected that there would be almost as many voice-activated assistants on the planet as people by the end of this year, 2021. This, tied with Canadians spending the most time online, may be grounds for concern.

Background information

Alexa, Please Babysit My Child is a developing project that will assess the relationship between Canadian children and one of the most popular interfaces in the world: Amazon's Alexa through the prism of digital (or data) colonialism. It makes the argument that Alexa has the potential ability to shape a child's cognitive development due to its position as a virtual co-parent.

Alexa, Please Babysit My Child employs the conceptual framework of political economy and, more specifically, digital colonialism. Digital colonialism is a term coined and defined by Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) in their book *The Costs of Connection*. It is their “term for the extension of a global process of extraction that started under colonialism and continues through industrial capitalism (Marx), culminating in today's new form: instead of natural resources in labor, what is now being appropriated is human life through its conversion into data” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, Location No. 255).

Digital colonialism is the colonization not of our tangible human selves but our digital selves. According to Couldry and Mejias (2019), one danger of digital colonialism is that it “undermines the autonomy of human life in a fundamental way

that threatens the very basis of freedom" (Location No. 147). They argue that the same way colonialism has been studied through political lenses and has impacted society, digital colonialism should be subjected to the same critical analysis. I take this argument further and apply it to Alexa and Bill C-11: the Amended Consumer Privacy Protection Act.

Bill C-11 is structured into two sections, where:

Part 1 enacts the Consumer Privacy Protection Act to protect the personal information of individuals while recognizing the need of organizations to collect, use or disclose personal information in the course of commercial activities. Consequently, it repeals Part 1 of the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act and changes the short title of that Act to the Electronic Documents Act. It also makes consequential and related amendments to other Acts.

Part 2 enacts the Personal Information and Data Protection Tribunal Act, which establishes an administrative tribunal to hear appeals of certain decisions made by the Privacy Commissioner under the Consumer Privacy Protection Act and to impose penalties for the contravention of certain provisions of that Act. It also makes a related amendment to the Administrative Tribunals Support Service of Canada Act. (Amended Consumer Privacy Protection Act, 2020)

The threat for Canadian children

It must be reiterated that the Cambridge Analytica scandal allegedly aimed and succeeded in affecting the American vote by ultimately swaying voters that were 18+ years of age--the legal age to vote in the USA (Meredith, 2018). If their objective worked among adults, what does that say for those typically more susceptible, those who spend even **more** time online: children? Children who were practically raised online by virtue of *technological ubiquity* (or coined as "data natives" by Nick Couldry & Ulises Mejias). If the 18+ citizens could not escape the influence of Cambridge Analytica, then children sure cannot. That is the reason why I titled my research "*Alexa, Please Babysit my Child.*"

Indeed, there are terms and conditions set in place that offer a fair "warning" to each user (or the user's guardians, in this case), but just how "fair" is "fair?" How many people are reading the terms and conditions? Are Amazon's lawyers hoping that these are read? I tend to think not. Moreover, if they were read thoroughly, I wonder how this would change the number of people that press "agree." A 2013 documentary about this titled *Terms and Conditions May Apply* by Cullen Hoback explored the dangerous truth behind ignorance, unread, and barely-read terms and

conditions. Many reviews were published about the film, but I believe it was best conceptualized by Mark Weinstein (2013), the CEO of MeWe, a company that prides itself on user privacy protection, who compared the documentary to the box office horror genre hit: *The Conjuring*. Hoback made this comparison because he claimed that the film, too, is a "horror movie based on real events" (para. 1). Such a juxtaposition speaks for itself.

A work in progress: Objectives

For my major research paper, I am considering examining not one site but two. This is because I am conducting a comparative study; therefore, I need not only analyze the Canadian policy but Amazon's terms and conditions as well. First, I must select which of Amazon's many child-targeted technologies to research, which I shall refer to as Site 1. To name a few, there are Amazon Kids+, Prime Video for Kids, Kindle 4 Kids, 'Amazon Kids,' Echo Dot Kids Edition, etc. However, I am leaning toward Amazon's Kindle 4 Kids.

This is because--unlike Alexa's other kid-centric technologies--a Kindle (which is an electronic reading device meant to replace a book) is precisely something that was not part of a typical child's learning-to-read experience twenty years ago.

The visual of a child being read to by their mother or father using a bedside night lamp is not a difficult one to conjure for a 90s baby. However, the same visual conjured by a 2000s baby could be imagined very differently with all of the lights off, showcasing a child using Kindle for Kids instead because Alexa can read to them in place of their parents.

The significance of this is that it demonstrates how Amazon's child-targeted technologies take over the roles of legal guardians. This transition minimally speaks to J.R Whitson's theory called "the gamification of labour," which is the act of gaming spaces that were recently not associated with gaming (2013). One of those spaces would be parenting/reading, which is why I believe Kindle 4 Kids may be the best technology to choose.

Proposed methodology

I plan to incorporate both Critical Discourse Analysis and Policy Analysis in my methodology. The Critical Discourse method will be conducted upon Site 1, whereas the policy analysis method will be conducted on Site 2. I must apply a methodology based on legislation in order to comprehend the political-technological

intersection within communication and social justice. The provisional step-by-step process will be as followed:

Step One: Conduct a critical analysis on Amazon's terms, conditions, and relevant discourse

Step Two: Conduct a policy analysis on Bill C-11: the Amended Consumer Privacy Protection Act.

Step Three: Compare and contrast the two entities and subjectively calculate where Amazon's Alexa is in accordance with the law and where it is not.

Step Four: Discuss the findings.

The relationship between Political Economy and Critical Discourse Analysis has been validated by academics Jane Mulderrig, Nicolina Montessori and Michael Farrell in their work titled: "Introducing Critical Policy Discourse." Mulderrig, Montessori, and Farrel believe that these two methods working in tandem have a three-fold benefit to research methodology and, in particular, projects like mine (2019). They argue that with Critical Policy Discourse, they have:

developed a framework for conducting systematic, yet contextually sensitive, analysis of texts based on a critically grounded theory of discourse. Its abductive, multi-layered research methodology involves con-tinual movement between theory, method, and data, allowing the researcher to link macro social processes to micro discursive events such as texts or conver- sations. Second, it shares with CPS a number of important assumptions about the object of research, as well as epistemological, ontological, and normative principles, which in turn have implications for how research can and should be conducted ... As such, [they] hope [they] make a significant and highly practical contribution to the field of critical and interpretive policy studies (Mulderrig et al, 2019, p. 5)

Literature review: Schematics

My in-progress literature review consists of dozens of documents ranging from peer-reviewed articles to legal documents that survey Alexa and her relationship with children. I acknowledge that a more comprehensive literature review is required. However, the schematics thus far are as follows:

1. Digital Colonialism: *Digital Capitalism, Neuro-Capitalism & Cognitive Theory*

- a. The Digital Revolution & the Social Quantification Sector (Shulevitz, Couldry & Mejias)
- b. Weaponized Data
2. Data Protection Political Discourse:
 - a. Historical & Modern | USA, UK & CAN
3. Company-States
4. Situating the 'Child' in *Alexa, Please Babysit My' Child:' Personification, Anthropomorphism & Research Limitations*
5. Privacy Infringement...or the New Zeitgeist?
6. The Learning Dilemma

Why Alexa and why should we care?

I have composed a bulleted list detailing why *Alexa, Please Babysit My Child* is a relevant analysis:

- Cambridge Analytica allegedly shifted an election. The impacts of Algorithmic/Platform governance are severe and global.
- School boards in North America have moved to incorporate Alexa into their daily classrooms, ensuring that Alexa will step even further into her co-parenting role (Horn, 2018).
- Bill C-10 is being amended for a reason. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, now more than ever are Canadians reliant on Alexa as we shift to an online society (Bednar & Surman, 2021).
- Original, historical colonialism is a political endeavour that negatively impacted one part of the world and positively impacted the other.
 - My case study argues that digital colonialism is doing the same thing but to a lesser extent. Instead of the colonizer countries being the delegators over the so-called colonized countries, in my analysis, the colonizers refers to Big Tech monopolies (such as Amazon), and the colonized refer to the users of said technologies (such as children).

- The same way historical colonizers ensured that colonial infrastructure unfairly situated them on top of the food chain is how Amazon has been borderline desperate to make sure that their stronghold on the monopoly survives (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).
 - In 2018, Amazon actually lost money on each Alexa unit sold, meaning their objective was about more than just selling Alexa's, similar to the millions of dollars poured into oil was about more than solely being an economically profitable endeavour (Shulevitz, 2018). It was and still is about making everyone abide by one system: the colonizer's system.
 - If the Third World knew what they were getting themselves into when they signed those agreements that ultimately bounded them to a one-sided lose-lose system of extraction--then one can assume that they may not have signed it. Therefore, my tech law study's objective is to educate the citizens under this new type of colonialism because then the digital "Third World" may have a fighting chance. Since it is rare for people to read through the lengthy terms and conditions, what is crucial here is for *Alexa, Please Babysit my Child* to read it for them in the hopes of providing meticulous analysis when compared to Bill C-11.
 - The artificial intelligence interface and digital colonialism intersection regarding algorithmic systems, algorithmic literacy, algorithmic regulation and algorithmic governance were addressed by several speakers at the Communication & Cultural Policy Conference in May of 2021.
- Unappealing terms and conditions are a deliberate function of neuro-capitalism. Big Tech like Amazon uses mind tricks and soft mind control to persuade the user to skip the reading and press agree. There is a reason why "mind-reading" is listed on the website as one of Alexa's "special skills."
 - Mary Shulevitz (2018) states that "we may not always realize just how powerfully our voice assistants are playing on our psychology, but at least we have opted into the relationship." This is an interesting notion because it touches on the concept of neuro-capitalism in my major research paper. Then it directs the attention to opt-in relationships, evidently referring to Alexa's terms and conditions.

- Canadians are dealing with a new generation that sees Alexa as more than a machine.
 - Lovato & Piper (the authors of multiple children & voice input system studies) call this new generation a new, neuro-capitalistic ontological category distinct from the ones we already know (2015).
 - Shulevitz (2018) cautions parents by stating that this instantaneous friendship with Alexa is worrisome because emotional relationships open up for vulnerable situations; she feels as though this relationship will "come to wield quite a lot of power over us, and even more over our children."

There is a privacy component that I--unfortunately-- will not have nearly enough time to explore, and I wish I could research more about the dozens of brilliant studies encountered, such as The Common Sense Media Survey (2013), The Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report (2013 & 2014), and The Childwise Monitor Report (2014)--however, none of these studies looked at the new Bill-C-11, and Canada was rarely a case study (Littleton & Kucirkova, 2016).

Conclusion

By using digital colonialism as a conceptual framework, *Alexa, Please Babysit My Child* hopes to use Canada's new Bill C-11 (the Amended Consumer Privacy Protection Act) as a case study to explore the effects of digital colonialism on Canadian children. It will apply a two-fold strategy called Critical Policy Discourse to understand the political-technological intersection of digital colonialism discourse, Amazon's Kindle for Kids terms and conditions, and the Government of Canada's Bill C-11. The overarching research question is:

From a digital-colonial standpoint, to what extent are Amazon's child-targeted technologies' (such as Kindle 4 Kids) consistent with the new, proposed Bill C-11?

The main objective of my research is to aid children's cybersecurity always, but especially during this pivotal COVID-19 crisis. We, as citizens, must be sure that the Government of Canada is doing everything in their power to protect the youth of the country that spends the most time online (Statistics Canada, 2019). But also be sure that the government is doing all they can to protect the Canadian youth from health hazards that include--but are not limited to--the spread of respiratory illnesses. Amazon has a significant opening to do as they please considering the world

is currently looking at physical health threats instead of neurological ones that show no cough-like symptoms. We should care more about digital colonialism for reasons similar to why we care about historical colonialism. I argue that parents must be wary of their babysitter: Alexa, because if they are not, then I predict that it will only be a matter of time until we have a different pandemic--dare I say a *digital pandemic*...on our hands.

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