

## 8 Rethinking the Digital Age\*

*Faye Ginsburg*

In March 2005, the United Nations inaugurated a long-awaited programme, a 'Digital Solidarity Fund', to underwrite initiatives that address 'the uneven distribution and use of new information and communication technologies' and 'enable excluded people and countries to enter the new era of the information society' ('From the Digital Divide ...', 2005).<sup>1</sup> What this might mean in practice – which digital technologies might make a significant difference and for whom and with what resources – is still an open and contentious question. Debates about plans for the Fund at the first meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in December 2003 are symptomatic of the complexity of 'digital divide' issues that have also been central to the second phase of the information summit, held in November 2005 in Tunisia.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I consider the relationship of indigenous people to new media technologies that people in these communities have started to take up with both ambivalence and enthusiasm over the last decade. To give a sense of that oscillation, let me start with three quotes that articulate the range of stakes. The first – a statement leaning toward the technophilic – is from Jolene Rickard, a Tuscarora artist, scholar, and community leader, introducing an online project, called CyberPowWow,<sup>3</sup> that began in 1996 in order to get more Native American art on the web:

Wasn't it the Hopi that warned of a time when the world would be circled by a spiders' web of power lines? That time has come.... There is no doubt that First Nation peoples are wired and ready to surf and chat. It seems like a distant memory when the tone of discussion about computers, interactivity, and aboriginal people was filled with Prophetic caution. Ironically, the image of Natives is still firmly planted in the past. The idea that Indians would be on the frontier of a technology is inconsistent with the dominant image of 'traditional' Indians.

(Rickard 1999)

The second, more sceptical, quote is from Alopi Latukefu, regional manager of the Outback Digital Network,<sup>4</sup> a digitally based broadband network that began in 1996, linking six Aboriginal communities in Australia:

So seductive is the power of the ICT medium that it might only appear to remove centralised control out of the hands of government and into the hands of the people, giving them the notion of ... empowerment. While ongoing struggles for self-determination play a complex role in the drive to bring the Information Age to indigenous communities in Australia and around the world, it can be argued that self-determination within one system may well be a further buy-in to another.

(Latukefu 2006: 4)

Latukefu continues:

The issue that needs to be raised before any question of indigenous usage of the Internet is addressed is: whose information infrastructure or 'info-structure' determines what is valued in an economy – whether in the local community or the greater global economy which they are linked to? ... Associated with this is the overarching issue of who determines knowledge within these remote communities and for the wider indigenous populations throughout Australia and beyond?

(Latukefu 2006: 4)

The third quote is from the 2003 indigenous position paper for the World Summit on the Information Society, which states, 'Our collective knowledge is not merely a commodity to be traded like any other in the market place. We strongly object to the notion that it constitutes a raw material or commercial resource for the knowledge-based economy of the Information Society.' Like some of their corporate counterparts, international indigenous representatives want to limit the circulation of particular ideas, knowledge and cultural materials. They 'strongly reject the application of the public domain concept to any aspect related to our cultures and identities' and further 'reject the application of IPR [intellectual property rights] regimes to assert patents, copyrights, or trademark monopolies for products, data or processes derived or originating from our traditional knowledge or our cultural expressions ...' (Indigenous Position Paper, 2003).

The issues raised in these quotes echo those I have heard in my own research with indigenous media makers, positions that are not necessarily in contradiction. Fundamentally, they ask who has the right to control knowledge and what are the consequences of the new circulatory regimes introduced by digital technologies. Rickard articulates a desire, as an indigenous artist, to work with digital technologies in order to link

indigenous communities to each other on their own terms, objecting to stereotypes that suggest traditional communities should not have access to forms associated with modernity. Latukefu cautions that one must take into account the power relations that decide whose knowledge is valued, while the statement of the Indigenous People's Working Group offers a strong warning against the commodification of their knowledge under Western systems of intellectual property.

Why are their concerns barely audible in discussions of new media? I would like to suggest that part of the problem has to do with the rise of the term 'the Digital Age' over the last decade and the assumptions that support it. While it initially had the shock of the new, it now has become as naturalised for many of us – Western cultural workers and intellectuals – as a temporal marking of the dominance of a certain kind of technological regime ('the Digital') as is 'the Palaeolithic's' association with certain kinds of stone tools for palaeontologists. This seems even more remarkable given certain realities: only 12 per cent of the world is wired (according to statistics from the January 2005 World Economic Forum in Davos), and only sixteen people in every hundred of the world's population are serviced with telephone land lines.<sup>5</sup> Digerati may see those numbers and salivate at the possibilities for entrepreneurship. But, for an anthropologist who has spent a good portion of her career looking at the uptake of media in remote indigenous communities, the unexamined ethnocentrism that undergirds assumptions about the Digital Age is discouraging; indeed, the seeming ubiquity of the internet appears a facade of First World illusions. I am not suggesting that the massive shifts in communication, sociality, knowledge production, and politics that the internet enables are simply irrelevant to remote communities; my concern is with how the language smuggles in a set of assumptions that paper over cultural differences in the way things digital may be taken up – if at all – in radically different contexts and thus serve to further insulate thinking against recognition of alterity that different kinds of media worlds present, particularly in key areas such as intellectual property.

In this chapter, I examine how concepts such as the Digital Age have taken on a sense of evolutionary inevitability, thus creating an increasing stratification and ethnocentrism in the distribution of certain kinds of media practices, despite prior and recent trends to de-Westernise media studies (see Curran and Park 2000). Work in new (and old) media that is being produced in indigenous communities might expand and complicate our ideas about 'the Digital Age' in ways that take into account other points of view in the so-called global village.

### A history of digital debates

Let me turn to my first task by briefly reviewing some of the recent debates around the rhetoric of the Digital Age – for certainly I am not

alone in my concern, though mine may be shaped in a particular way. Within the ranks of those who have been writing and worrying about 'Cultural Production in a Digital Age' and its global implications, there is some contestation as to 'whether it is appropriate, given unequal access to advanced technologies (let alone more basic goods)' in different parts of the world that the term 'the Digital Age' be used to define the current period (see Klineneberg and Benzecry 2005). This debate occurs in tandem with that attached to the Digital Divide, the phrase invented to describe the circumstances of inequality that characterise access (or lack of access) to resources, technological and otherwise, across much of the globe. Even as it wants to call well intentioned concern to such inequities, the term nonetheless invokes neo-developmental language that assumes that less privileged cultural enclaves with little or no access to digital resources – from the South Bronx to the global South – are simply waiting, endlessly, to catch up to the privileged West. Inevitably, the language suggests, they are simply falling farther behind the current epicentre, whether that be Silicon Valley or the MIT Media Lab.

Some exemplary cases that have made it to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* provide charming counterpoints of hopeful possibility, stories of far-flung villages 'catching up' to the West. For example, in a *New York Times* article, James Brooks (2004) describes the work of Bernard Krisher, representing both MIT's Media Lab and the American Assistance for Cambodia group in O Siengle, Cambodia, a village of less than 800 people on the edge of the forest that is emblematic of life for the millions of Asians who live on the unwired side of the Digital Divide. Through the Motoman project, the village connects its new elementary school to the internet. Since they have no electricity or phones, the system is powered by solar panels, and, as Brooks (2004) describes it:

An internet 'Motoman' rides a red motorcycle slowly past the school [once a day]. On the passenger seat is a gray metal box with a short fat antenna. The box holds a wireless Wi-Fi chip set that allows the exchange of e-mail between the box and computers. Briefly, this schoolyard of tree stumps and a hand-cranked water well becomes an Internet hot spot [a process duplicated in five other villages]. At dusk, the motorcycles [from five villages] converge on the provincial capital, Ban Lung, where an advanced school is equipped with a satellite dish, allowing a bulk e-mail exchange with the outside world.<sup>6</sup>

Tellingly, this story was in the Business Section of the *Times*, suggesting that part of its charm is the possibility of new markets, the engine that drives even such idealistic innovation in consumer technologies; computers and the internet are hardly exceptional.

This techno-imaginary universe of digital eras and divides has the effect, I argue, of reinscribing on to the world a kind of 'allochronic chronopolitics'

(to borrow a term from Johannes Fabian's 1983 *Time and the Other*), in which the 'other' exists in a time not contemporary with our own. This has the effect of re-stratifying the world along lines of a late modernity, despite the utopian promises by the digerati of the possibilities of a twenty-first-century McLuhanesque global village. For the last two decades, scholars have argued about (and mostly for) the transformative power of digital systems and their capacity to alter daily life, democratic politics, and personhood. That sense of a paradigm shift is perhaps most evident in Castells's 1996 classic *The Rise of the Network Society*. The premise of his work, of course, is that the internet has more or less created a new era by providing the technological basis for the organisational form of the Information Age: *the network*. In *The Internet Galaxy* (2003) Castells's scale seems to have expanded from society to the cosmos. While he celebrates the internet's capacity to liberate, he also cautions us about its ability to marginalise and exclude those who do not have access to it and suggests that we need to take responsibility for the future of this new Information Age.

Taking the critique a bit farther, no less a luminary than Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft and once the personification of new media evangelism, has become an outspoken critic of that attitude. Initially, he was part of the group of American executives who, at the 1998 World Economic Forum in Davos, dedicated themselves to closing the gap on digital equity. By 2000, however, in a speech at a conference entitled 'Creating Digital Dividends', Gates demonstrated a remarkable change of heart, offering blistering criticism of the idea of the Digital Divide and its capacity to blind people to the reality of the condition of the globe's poorest people. As he put it at the time:

OK, you want to send computers to Africa, what about food and electricity – those computers aren't going to be that valuable. The mothers are going to walk right up to that computer and say, 'My children are dying, what can you do?' They're not going to sit there and, like, browse eBay or something. What they want is for their children to live. They don't want their children's growth to be stunted. Do you really have to put in computers to figure that out?

(Quoted in Verhovic 2000: A1)<sup>7</sup>

His apparent disdain for the notion that the world's poorest people constitute a significant market for high-tech products has had an impact. The priorities of the \$21 billion Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are with health care, in particular the development and distribution of vaccines. At the January 2005 World Economic Forum meeting, while technology guru Nicholas Negroponte was marketing a mock-up of a \$100 laptop computer, hoping to capture China's 220 million students as possible consumers of digital technology, Gates was reported to be 'in the thick of

plenary discussions ... considering ways of eliminating poverty and disease that do not encompass information technology' (Markoff 2005).<sup>8</sup> 'I think it's fascinating,' Gates commented, 'that there was no plenary session at Davos this year on how information technology is changing the world' (Markoff 2005).<sup>9</sup>

The internet, of course, has been met with some optimism by those sharing concerns of broader access for freedom of expression and social movements. Manuel Castells in *The Power of Identity* (1997) noted the range of dissident social actors, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico. Today, we would add to that list an array of groups, from the grass-roots leftist political sentiments organised by moveon.org to right-wing Christians and militant Islamists to the Falun Gong in China. These and scores of other groups have used the internet to shape what some call 'the network logic' of anti-[corporate] globalisation movements and smart mobs, as well as its uptake by loosely linked Islamic terrorists. Additionally, a number of researchers have noted how the internet has in many cases reduced the 'price of entry' into a cultural field, creating openings for actors and organisations who were previously unable to get their work into the public, as the inclusion and impact of bloggers during the 2004 US presidential campaigns (Massing 2005). Clearly, then, digital networks can enable the global dispersion of creative and political activity.

In its 12–18 March 2005 cover story, no less an advocate for the spread of free enterprise than *The Economist* features a rethinking of the term (and terms of) 'The Real Digital Divide', along with a compelling photo of a young African boy holding an ersatz cellphone made of mud to his ear. Its lead opinion piece states that:

the debate over the digital divide is founded on a myth – that plugging poor countries into the internet will help them to become rich rapidly.... So even if it were possible to wave a magic wand and cause a computer to appear in every household on earth, it would not achieve very much: a computer is not useful if you have no food or electricity and cannot read.

(‘Technology and development’ 2005)

Ideas about what the Digital Age might offer look different from the perspective of people struggling to manage to make ends meet on a daily basis. As *The Economist* notes, research suggests that radio and cellphones may be the forms of digital technology that make the difference, once basic needs are addressed (Norris *et al.* 2001). My concern here, however, is to ask whether terms like the Digital Divide too easily foreclose discussion about what the stakes are for those who are out of power. Rather than imagining that we know the answers, clearly, we need to keep listening to the large percentage of the earth's population that is on the unwired side of the so-called digital divide.

### Going digital: indigenous internet ‘on the ground’

So what does the ‘Digital Age’ feel and look like in indigenous communities in remote regions of the world where access to telephone land lines can still be difficult? As Kyra Landzelius asks in her 2006 collection, *Native on the Net*, ‘Can the info-superhighway be a fast track to greater empowerment for the historically disenfranchised? Or do they risk becoming “roadkill”: casualties of hyper-media and the drive to electronically map everything?’ (2006: 1). Recent developments give some insight into what it might actually mean for indigenous subjects. As Harald Prins (2001) has argued regarding the place of indigenous people in ‘cyberia’:

Although indigenous peoples are proportionally underrepresented in cyberspace – for obvious reasons such as economic poverty, technological inexperience, linguistic isolation, political repression, and/or cultural resistance – the Internet has vastly extended traditional networks of information and communication. Greatly enhancing the visibility of otherwise marginal communities and individuals, the information superhighway enables even very small and isolated communities to expand their sphere of influence and mobilize political support in their struggles for cultural survival. In addition to maintaining contact with their own communities, indigenous peoples also use the Internet to connect with other such widely dispersed groups in the world. Today, it is not unusual for a Mi'kmaq in Newfoundland to go on the Internet and communicate with individuals belonging to other remote groups such as the Maori in New Zealand, Saami in Norway, Kuna in Panama, or Navajo in Arizona. Together with the rest of us, they have pioneered across the new cultural frontier and are now surfing daily through Cyberia.

Clearly, Prins points to the circumstances in which use of the internet – and more broadly the cross-platformed use of digital technologies – is being taken up in indigenous communities on their own terms, furthering the development of political networks and the capacity to extend their traditional cultural worlds into new domains (Anderson, no date). It is that latter enterprise that I address in the following examples.

Recent initiatives demonstrate what some of these possibilities look like in three very different parts of the world: Inuit regions of Nunavut through the work of Igloodik Isuma; the work of Arrernte living in town camps in Alice Springs, central Australia, creating an innovative interactive project called ‘Us Mob’; and a digital animation project by Canadian-based north-west coast Aboriginal artists and storytellers who have created an animated version of *The Raven's Tale*. All are exemplary of community-based groups collaborating with a number of agencies to indigenise the use of digital technologies in the interests of storytelling as a way to generate broader

understandings of their histories and cultures, for wider audiences but, most important, for their own cultural futures.<sup>10</sup>

### Igloolik Isuma and Sila.nu

During the 1970s, as satellite-based television made its way into the Canadian Arctic, Inuit people began exploring the possibilities that these combinations of media forms offered for local productions that could be distributed over the vast expanses of Canada's north. Zacharias Kunuk, a young Inuit man at that time, had the vision to turn these technologies into vehicles for cultural expression of Inuit lives and histories, forming a media production group called Igloolik Isuma.<sup>11</sup> Kunuk worked with friends and family members, creating a remarkable team of non-professional actors who recreated the stories of the transformations of their own lives over the last century, starting with works such as *Qaggig* in 1988 and quickly moving on to create the remarkable television series entitled *Nunavut*, which is also the name of the recently formed Inuit-controlled territory where Kunuk's home settlement is located. The series *Nunavut* was a staple not only of TV Northern Canada (the pan-Arctic satellite station that preceded the current first national indigenous cable television station, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network), but it also screened at MoMA in New York and the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Fast-forward to 2001 and the premiere at the Cannes Film Festival of Kunuk's first feature, the epic recreation of a well known Inuit legend, *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*,<sup>12</sup> at the Cannes Film Festival. There, this first film ever made by an Inuit director in the Inuktitut language received the coveted Camera d'or award for best first feature and went on to stunning critical and theatrical success, picking up many more awards along the way. In 2005, Kunuk and his crew shot their second feature, a Danish co-production entitled *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, based on the writings of the famous Inuit-Danish explorer who travelled throughout the Arctic in the 1920s exploring the transformations of Inuit life that were occurring in the early twentieth century, when Inuit shamans first encountered Christian missionaries. The journals provide the storyline for a film that provides an Inuit perspective on that fateful historical encounter.

But, never content to think conventionally, Kunuk and company established an incredible web site from the film's production location (<http://www.sila.nu/live>) that allowed us to follow what was happening on the film set on a daily basis while also sending us back to Rasmussen's journals and the key characters he met in his journeys through the Arctic.<sup>13</sup> Daily blogs by an 'embedded' journalist and (of course) their own anthropologist provided different perspectives, while QuickTime movies showed us how multiple languages (English, French, Inuktitut, Danish) were negotiated, as well as how props and food were managed in this

remote Arctic locale. Pop-ups offered a linked glossary for foreign or more arcane words. Background bios on key personnel – on and off screen – illuminated the community-based approach to film making that Kunuk and his partner Norman Cohn have perfected. (My personal favourite was the interview with the lead sled dog, Tooguyuk, who 'described' the trials of learning commands in both 'Greenlandic' and 'Igloolik' and talked about looking forward to his 'girlfriend having puppies, so I'm excited to be a daddy'.) Inuit web site producer Katarina Soukup explained the project and its origins:

Isuma has wanted for a long, long time to use the Internet to connect the remote Arctic with people around the world, a way to bring people to Igloolik without the extreme expense and inconvenience of traveling here, as well as to allow Inuit to remain in their communities and out on the land without losing touch with the twenty-first century. One dream is a nomadic media lab/television station out on the land connected to the Internet. It just has not been technically possible until now, thanks to a high-speed data satellite phone and wireless broadband in Nunavut, making remote, nomadic computing much less expensive. The goals with the educational website are to connect people to Inuit culture through the Internet and our films. We have been creating materials for the educational market for about two or three years (e.g. the Isuma Inuit Culture Kit), and the site is another step in this direction. The project employs an innovative technical infrastructure to deliver to the world priceless Inuit cultural content, such as interactive e-learning activities, video-on-demand, customisable teacher resources, and Inuktitut language lessons. It is a platform for North-South communication and collaboration. In addition to educating the public about Inuit culture, another goal of the site is to develop a youth and educational market for our films.

(Quoted in Ginsburg 2005b)

The site was beautifully designed in every sense. The project had two teams, one in the Arctic at Igloolik and another in Montreal. In Igloolik the team was made up of about nine members: three videographers, an audio reporter, a photographer, and three writers who did the daily blogs, as well as eight youth trainees from the community who were learning about media production. The Sila web site presented a remarkable demonstration of how this technology might be successfully 'indigenised' to help Inuit school kids, college students in New York, Maori colleagues in New Zealand, and many others, learn about their film making, the Arctic, indigenous lives, missionisation, and new ways of 'understanding media' (McLuhan 1964/1994) and their possibilities in the twenty-first century.

### Us Mob, central Australia

A digitally based project has been developed by the activist lawyer and documentary maker David Vadiveloo in collaboration with Arrernte Aboriginal youth living in Hidden Valley, a town camp outside of Alice Springs in central Australia. *Us Mob* is Australia's first Aboriginal children's television series and interactive web site. On the site, users interact with the challenges and daily lives of kids from the camp – Harry, Della, Charlie, and Jacquita – following multi-path storylines, activating video and text diaries, forums, movies, and games that offer a virtual experience of the camp and surrounding deserts, and uploading their own video stories. The site, in English and Arrernte, with English subtitles, was launched at the Adelaide Film Festival on 25 February 2005 and simultaneously on ABC television and ABC online.<sup>14</sup>

The project had its origins in requests from traditional elders in the Arrernte community in central Australia to David Vadiveloo, who first worked with that community as their lawyer in their 1996 historic Native Title claim victory. Switching gears since then to media activism, Vadiveloo has made six documentaries with people in the area, including the award-winning works *Trespass* (2002), *Beyond Sorry* (2003), and *Bush Bikes* (2001). *Us Mob* is the first indigenous project to receive production funding under a new initiative from the Australian Film Commission and ABC New Media and Digital Services Broadband Production Initiative (BPI); it received additional support from the Adelaide Film Festival, Telstra, and the South Australian Film Corporation.

The *Us Mob* project was motivated by Vadiveloo's concern to use media to develop cross-cultural lines of communication for kids in the camps. As he put it:

After ten years of listening to many Arrernte families in Town Camps and remote areas, I am trying to create a dynamic communication bridge that has been opened by the Arrernte kids of Alice Springs with an invitation extended to kids worldwide to play, to share, and to engage with story themes that are common to all young people but are delivered through *Us Mob* in a truly unique cultural and physical landscape.

(Quoted in Ginsburg 2005a)

In keeping with community wishes, Vadiveloo needed to create a project that was not fictional. Elders were clear: they did not want community members referred to as 'actors' – they were community participants in stories that reflected real life and real voices that they wanted heard. To accomplish that, Vadiveloo held workshops to develop scripts with over 70 non-actor Town Camp residents, who were paid for their participation. The topics they raised range from Aboriginal traditional law, ceremony,

and hunting to youth substance abuse and other Aboriginal health issues. Building bush bikes is the focus of one of the two *Us Mob* games, while the second one requires learning bush skills as players figure out how to survive in the outback. Producer Heather Croall and Interactive Producer Chris Joyner were integral partners for Vadiveloo. Apart from raising finance, they wrote the project together with Vadiveloo; then, final scripts were written by indigenous screenwriter Danielle McLean. Camera work was by Allan Collins, the indigenous award-winning cinematographer and Alice Springs resident. The final project has been approved by traditional owners and the Indigenous organisation Tangentyere Council.

In creating this project, Vadiveloo hoped to create a television series about and by Aboriginal youth, raising issues relevant to them, as well as an online programme that could engage these young people to spend time online acquiring some of the skills necessary to be computer-literate. He was particularly concerned to develop an alternative to the glut of single-shooter games online and the constant diet of violence, competition, and destruction that characterise the games they were exposed to in town. 'When kids play and build together,' Vadiveloo explains, 'they are learning about community and consequence, and that is what I wanted to see in the project' (quoted in Ginsburg 2005a). And, rather than assuming that the goal is that Aboriginal children in central Australia catch up to the other side of the Digital Divide, based on someone else's terms, he wanted to help build a project that dignified their cultural concerns. This is charmingly but emphatically clear in the first encounter with the *Us Mob* home page that invites you in but, as it would be if you visited them in Alice, notifies you that you need a permit to visit:

Everyone who wants to play with us on the full *Us Mob* website will need a permit. It's the same as if you came to Alice Springs and wanted to visit me and my family, you'd have to get a permit to come on to the Town Camp. Once you have a permit you will be able to visit us at any time to chat, play games, learn about Aboriginal life and share stories.

We love going out bush and we're really looking forward to showing you what it's like in Central Australia. We'll email you whenever we add a new story to the website. We really hope you can add your stories to the website cos we'd love to learn about your life too.<sup>15</sup>

*Us Mob* and Hidden Valley suggest another perspective on the Digital Age, one that invites kids from 'elsewhere' to come over and play on their side.

### *Raven Tales*, north-west coast of Canada

*Raven Tales: How Raven stole the Sun* (2004) is the first of a series of experiments in digital animation by Simon James (Kwakwaka'wakw)

and Chris Klentz (Cherokee) that create new versions of centuries-old stories to be shown across Canada on that country's Aboriginal People's Television Network. This work reworks famous north-west coast myths from Kwakwaka'wakw, the Squamish, and Haida peoples – in particular the Raven trickster figure, along with Eagle, Frog, and the first humans. It includes voices ranging from well known native actors such as Evan Adams of *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre 1998) fame to the voice of hereditary chief Robert Joseph. Cutting across both centuries and generations, it uses the playful spirit of animation to visualise and extend the lives of these myths. These stories and the distinctive look of north-west coast design have been proven, as producer Simon James joked during the Q&A at the New York premiere of this work in the fall of 2004, by '10,000 years of local market research' (quoted in Ginsburg 2005c).

Spicing up these stark and complex traditional stories with some contemporary humour and the wonders of digital animation is always a risk. But clearly it was a risk worth taking, when the murky darkness of the Myth Time is suddenly (and digitally) transformed from barren smoky greys to brilliant greens, the result of the Raven's theft of the gift of light and its release into the world.<sup>16</sup>

At the New York premiere, animator Simon James's father, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist and elder, came on stage with his drum, embellished with the distinctive raven design. Inviting other Native media makers who were present to join him on stage, he sang 'Wiping the tears' to remember those who have come before and are gone and to praise the work of this new generation. When Pam Belgarde, a Chippewa woman who had produced another work shown in the session, came up, he dressed her in the traditional black and red regalia, a stunning full-length button cape with appliques of wild roses and a regal fur hat. As he draped the cape across her shoulders he explained, 'When we meet someone we are honored to meet, we dress them to show that we are willing to go cold in order to keep our guests warm.' Simon began to beat the drum and asked us to look at the empty seats in the theatre and think of those who came before; the media producers on stage lowered their eyes. At the conclusion of his song, he addressed the audience and said, 'All our ceremonies need witnesses. And as witnesses we ask you to be part of that tradition, and go and share with others what you have seen today.'

In each of these cases, digital technologies have been taken up because of the possibilities they offer to bring in younger generations into new forms of indigenous cultural production and to extend indigenous cultural worlds – on their own terms – into the lives of others in the broader national communities and beyond who can serve, in the way that Simon James expressed, as virtual witnesses to their traditions, histories, and daily dilemmas.

## Conclusion

To return to the concern that motivated this chapter, I want to underscore the way that the term Digital Age stratifies media hierarchies for those who are out of power and are struggling to become producers of media representations of their lives. It is an issue that is particularly salient for indigenous people, who, until recently, have been the object of other people's image-making practices in ways that have been damaging to their lives. And, unlike other minorities, questions of the Digital Age look different from the perspective of people struggling to control land and traditions that have been appropriated by now dominant settler societies for as long as 500 years.

In an effort to underscore what their work is about, I use the term *cultural activist* to describe the conscious way in which they are – like many other people – using the production of media and other expressive forms as a way not only to sustain and build their communities but also as a means to help transform them through what one might call a 'strategic traditionalism' (to borrow from Bennett and Blundell 1995). This position is crucial to their work but is effaced from much contemporary cultural theory addressing new media that emphasises dislocation and globalisation. The cultural activists creating these new kinds of cultural forms have turned to them as a means of revivifying relationships to their lands, local languages, traditions and histories and articulating community concerns. They also see the media as a means of furthering social and political transformation by inserting their own stories into national narratives as part of ongoing struggles for Aboriginal recognition and self-determination.

Increasingly, the circulation of these media globally – through conferences, festivals, co-productions, and the use of the internet – has become an important basis for nascent but growing transnational network of indigenous media makers and activists. These activists are attempting to reverse processes through which aspects of their societies have been objectified, commodified, and appropriated; their media productions and writings are efforts to recuperate their histories, land rights, and knowledge bases as their own cultural property. These kinds of cultural production are consistent with the ways in which the meaning and praxis of culture in late modernity have become increasingly conscious of their own project, an effort to use imagery of their lives to create an activist imaginary. One might think of media practices as a kind of shield against the often unethical use or absolute erasure of their presence in the ever-increasing circulation of images of other cultures in general, and of indigenous lives in particular, as the indigenous position paper for the World Summit on the Information Society makes clear. At every level, indigenous media practices have helped to create and contest social, visual, narrative, and political spaces for local communities and in the creation of national and other kinds

of dominant cultural imaginaries that, until recently, have excluded vital representations by First Nation peoples within their borders. The capacity of such representations to circulate to other communities – from indigenous neighbours to NGOs – is an extension of this process, across a number of forms of mediation, from video and film to cyberspace (Danaja and Garde 1997).

Indigenous digital media have raised important questions about the politics and circulation of knowledge at a number of levels; within communities this may be about who has had access to and understanding of media technologies, and who has the rights to know, tell, and circulate certain stories and images. Within nation-states, the media are linked to larger battles over cultural citizenship, racism, sovereignty, and land rights, as well as struggles over funding, air space and satellites, networks of broadcasting and distribution, and digital broadband, that may or may not be available to indigenous work. The impact of these fluctuations can be tracked in a variety of places – in fieldwork, in policy documents and in the dramas of everyday life in cultural institutions.

I explore the term Digital Age because it so powerfully shapes frameworks for understanding globalisation, media, and culture, creating the 'commonsense' discourse for institutions in ways that disregard the cultural significance of the production of knowledge in minoritised communities, increasing an already existing sense of marginalisation. Rather than mirroring the widespread concern over increasing corporate control over media production and distribution, and the often parallel panic over multiculturalism (Appiah 1997), can we illuminate and support other possibilities emerging out of locally based concerns and speak for their significance in contemporary cultural and policy arenas? Institutional structures are built on discursive frameworks that shape the way in which phenomena are understood, naturalising shifts in support for a range of cultural activities. In government, foundations, and academic institutions, these frameworks have an enormous impact on policy and funding decisions that, for better or worse, can have a decisive effect on practice.

Other scholars who recognise, more generally, the significance of locally situated cultural practices in relation to dominant models point instead to the importance of the productions/producers who are helping (among other things) to generate their own links to other indigenous communities through which local practices are strengthened and linked. For example, Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake point to such processes as part of 'an aesthetic of rearguard resistance, rearticulated borders as sources, genres, and enclaves of cultural preservation and community identity to be set against global technologies of modernisation or image-cultures of the postmodern' (1996: 14). Indeed, simultaneous to the growing corporate control of media, indigenous producers and cultural activists are creating innovative work, not only in the substance and form of their productions,

but also in the social relations they are creating through this practice, that can change the ways we understand media and their relation to the circulation of culture more generally in the twenty-first century.

Such efforts are evidence of how indigenous media formed over the last decades now find themselves at the conjuncture of a number of historical developments: these include the circuits opened by new media technologies, ranging from satellites to compressed video and cyberspace, as well as the ongoing legacies of indigenous activism worldwide, most recently by a generation comfortable with media and concerned with making their own representations as a mode of cultural creativity and social action. They also represent the complex and differing ways that states have responded to these developments – the opportunities of media and the pressures of activism – and have entered into new relationships with the indigenous nations that they encompass.

I conclude on a note of cautious optimism. The evidence of the growth and creativity of indigenous digital media over the last two decades, whatever problems may have accompanied it, is nothing short of remarkable. Formations such as these, working out of grounded communities or broader regional or national bases, offer an important elaboration of what the Digital Age might look like, intervening in the 'left behind' narrative that predominates. While indigenous media activism alone certainly cannot unseat the power asymmetries which underwrite the profound inequalities that continue to shape their worlds, the issues their digital interventions raise about the politics of culture are on a continuum with the broader issues of self-determination, cultural rights, and political sovereignty, and may help bring some attention to these profoundly interconnected concerns.<sup>17</sup> Indigenous media offer an alternative model of grounded and increasingly global relations created by indigenous people about their own lives and cultures. As we all struggle to comprehend the remapping of social space that is occurring, indigenous media offer some other co-ordinates for understanding. Terms such as 'the Digital Age' gloss over such phenomena in their own right or as examples of alternative modernities, resources of hope, new dynamics in social movements, or as part of the trajectory of indigenous life in the twenty-first century. Perhaps it is time to invent new terms to remind us of the issues of power at work from a position that interrogates the hegemonic order implied in the language of the Digital Age.

## Notes

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- online journal *Flow*, in January 2005, and a lecture of the same name delivered 22 February 2005 at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in their Scholars Programme series. Thanks to Pam Wilson and Michelle Stewart for encouraging me to write this piece, and to Jason Toynbee for his insights.
- 2 For information on the 2005 WSIS see <http://www.itu.int/wsis/index-p1.html>.
  - 3 As the site's founders explain at <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/about.html>, 'The CyberPowWow project, conceived in 1996, is part web site and part palace – a series of interconnected graphical chat rooms which allow visitors to interact with one another in real time. Together the web site and palace form a virtual gallery with digital (and digitized) artworks and a library of texts ...'
  - 4 See the web site at <http://www.odn.net.au/>.
  - 5 For discussion of these statistics at the 2005 World Economic Forum see <http://www.weforum.org/site/knowledgenavigator.nsf/Content/New+Technologies>. For an excellent discussion of the complexity of accounting for telephony statistics see Shirky (2002).
  - 6 The system, developed by First Mile Solutions, based in Boston MA, uses a receiver box powered by the motor cycle's battery. The driver need only roll slowly past the school to download all the village's outgoing e-mail and deliver incoming e-mail. Newly collected information is stored for the day in a computer strapped to the back of the motor cycle.
  - 7 Thanks to Leo Hsu for passing this reference on to me.
  - 8 Thanks to B. Ruby Rich for this reference.
  - 9 My citation of Bill Gates – one of the world's wealthiest men, who has only recently adopted such a stance – is meant to some extent as a provocation, but also to point out that there are indeed different positions within the world of the digerati that are worth taking seriously for those of us interested in finding a wedge in the discursive and political fields.
  - 10 For other examples see Landzelius (2006), Prins (2002), and Christen (2005).
  - 11 See their web site at <http://www.isuma.ca>.
  - 12 See <http://www.atanarjuat.com> for the film's web site.
  - 13 See <http://sila.nu/swf/journal> and <http://www.sila.nu/live>. The web site is financially supported by Telefilm Canada's New Media Fund, Government of Nunavut (Department of Sustainable Development), Nunavut Community Economic Development, Heritage Canada (Canadian Studies Programme), National Research Council (Industrial Research Assistance Programme). Nunavut Independent Television Network (NITV) is a collaborating partner, along with sponsorships from Ardicom Digital Communications, SSI Micro, and Stratos Global Corporation.
  - 14 For web site see <http://www.usmob.com.au>.
  - 15 Us Mob web site at <http://www.abc.net.au/usmob>.
  - 16 *Raven Tales* premiered in Los Angeles in 2005 at the National Geographic's All Roads Film Festival (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/allroads>), which gave the project completion funds, the only digital animation in that project. It was slated to air on Canada's APTN aboriginal television network in 2005.
  - 17 My thanks to Jason Toynbee for his helpful reminder to keep those connections alive.
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