Rethinking the Digital Age

Faye Ginsburg[1]

In March 2005, the United Nations inaugurated a long awaited program, a "Digital Solidarity Fund," meant 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." 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 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.

In this paper, 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. 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 naturalized 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 Paleolithic's" association with certain kinds of stone tools for paleontologists. This seems even more remarkable given certain realities: only 12 % of the world is currently wired (according to statistics from the January 2005 World Economic Forum in Davos), and only 16 people in every 100 of the world's population are serviced with telephone land lines. 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. 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 paper, 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-Westernize media studies. Looking at work new (and old) media that are being produced in indigenous communities suggests how this new work 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 (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 characterize 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-developmentalist 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 epicenter–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 5 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.

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 onto the world a kind of "allochronic chronopolitics" 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 of the digerati of the possibilities of a 21st-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' 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 organizational form of the Information Age*: the network*. In his 2003 book, *The Internet Galaxy*, Castells' 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 marginalize 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 that 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. In, 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 conditions of the globe's poorest people. As he put it at the time:

> O.K., 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, p. A1)

His clear disdain for the notion that the world's poorest people constitute a significant market for high-tech products has had an impact. Gates' priorities are with health care, in particular the development and distribution of vaccines which account for two-thirds of the grants offered by the $21-billion-dollar Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. At the 2005 World Economic Forum meeting, while technology guru Nicholas Negroponte was marketing his mock-up of the $100 laptop computer hoping to capture China's 220 million students as possible consumers of digital technology (Markoff 2005),[8] Gates was reported to be "in the thick of plenary discussions… considering ways of eliminating poverty and disease that do no encompass information technology" (Markoff 2005).

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 grassroots leftist political sentiments organized 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 successfully to break down communications barriers, shaping what some call "the network logic" of anti-[corporate]-globalization movements and smart mobs, as well as its uptake by loosely-linked Islamic terrorists. Additionally, a number of researchers have noted how the internet, like prior influential shifts in communications technologies, has in many cases reduced what is referred to as the price of entry into a cultural field, creating openings for actors and organizations who were previously unable to get their work into the public, as the inclusion of bloggers during the presidential conventions in 2004 made evident, as well as their insidious impact in the elections (Massing 2005). Clearly then, digital networks can enable the global dispersion of creative and political activity.

At the same time, over the last decade, as digital media have developed at an accelerated pace, consolidation and concentration of ownership has outpaced open source and file sharing efforts. In 1983, media scholar Ben Bagdikian warned about the dangers of a media monopoly in the U.S. when the media industry was controlled by about 50 corporations. By 2004, and the 7th edition of his influential book *The Media Monopoly*, the U.S. is dominated by five conglomerates.

In their March 12-18, 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 cell phone 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 cell phones may be the forms of digital technology that make the difference, once basic needs are addressed (Norris, Bennett and Entman, 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 88% 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? Recent developments give some insight into what it might actually mean for indigenous subjects. As Kyra Landzelius (2006) argues in her introduction to a forthcoming collection,
Although indigenous peoples are proportionally underepresented 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, Landzelius 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. It is that latter initiative that I would like to address in the at least one example that demonstrates what some of these possibilities look like, via the work of Arrernte living in town camps in Alice Springs, Central Australia, who have created an innovative interactive project called Us Mob. This project was made in collaboration with a number of agencies to indigenize 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 importantly for their own cultural futures.

UsMob: Central Australia

A recent digitally-based project has been developed by activist lawyer and documentary maker David Vadiveloo in collaboration with Arrernte Aboriginal youth in 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 website. 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 February 25, 2005 and simultaneously on ABC TV and ABC online.

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). UsMob 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 UsMob 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

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 UsMob 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 and 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 organization, 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 program 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 characterize 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". 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 UsMob 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 a get a permit to come onto 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 (UsMob website, n.d.).

UsMob and Hidden Valley suggested another perspective on the digital age, one that invites kids from "elsewhere" to come over and play on their side.

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 as virtual witnesses to their traditions, histories and daily dilemmas.

Conclusion

To return to the concern that motivated this article, I want to underscore the way that the term The 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 peoples' 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 self-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" . This position is crucial to their work but is effaced from much contemporary cultural theory addressing new media that emphasizes dislocation and globalization. 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 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 productions are consistent with the ways in which the meaning and praxis of culture in late modernity has become increasingly self-conscious of its 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 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 Nations peoples within their borders. The capacity of such representations to circulate to other communities--from indigenous neighbors to NGOs--is an extension of this process, across a number of forms of mediation, from video and film to cyberspace.

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, media are linked to larger battles over cultural citizenship,

racism, sovereignty, and land rights, as well as struggles over funding, airspace 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 The Digital Age because it so powerfully shapes frameworks for understanding globalization, media, and culture, creating the "common sense" discourse for institutions in ways that disregard the cultural significance of the production of knowledge in minoritized communities, increasing an already existing sense of marginalization. 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, naturalizing shifts in support for a range of cultural activities. In government, foundation, 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 recognize, 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 modernization or image-cultures of the postmodern" (1996, p. 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 its relationship to the circulation of culture more generally in 21st 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.

Indigenous media offer an alternative model of grounded and increasingly global interconnectedness 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 coordinates for understanding what such an interconnected world might be like outside a hegemonic order. 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 21st century. Perhaps it is time to invent new language.

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[1] Department of Anthropology, New York University.