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The Electronic Colonization of the Pacific

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The recent developments of server-based technology have seen the Internet become more and more pervasive. The "information superhighway" or "infobahn" has been touted far and wide as heralding a new age. Certainly the World Wide Web offers a wide range of options for communication and for the exchange of information. But what does this mean for the indigenous cultures in the microstates of the Pacific? There is a need to consider the sorts of impact the technological developments may have in order to sensitize the users and developers of the Web to these issues and to explore avenues to mitigate negative impacts.

Traditional views of communication might take a value-neutral stance to technology. However, while modern technologies empower, economic inequalities restrict access. Moreover, the nature of web communication isn't all that egalitarian, which raises the question of whether the Web brings enablement or exploitation, with the Webmasters as sorcerer's apprentices.

In the end, we raise questions of where we may go from here--the current Web is set to divorce the indigenous cultures from control of their own cultural material.

Electronic Colonialism

"Traditional" colonialism has always seen a physical on-the-ground presence of a colonial power. Both political and economic imperialism had its occasional set backs in such circumstances. The termination of the Coca-Cola license in India in the 1970s (since then reversed) is a case in point (Hirsch 1995). The technological development of the information age, however, allows full blown imperialism without the need for a physical presence in the country. Mass media such as television, for example, beamed in via satellite from a metropolitan country, or from elite centers within the same country, to peoples living in peripheral situations represent a massive penetration of dominant cultural and economic values. Thus, peoples living in remote rainforest settlements, in desert camps, or on tropical atolls can view twenty-four hour a day televised messages from the First World, or be further saturated by such cultural values via VCR format.

While considerable work has been done on "TV as cultural technology" (see O'Regan 1990, for example), much less work has been done on the newer computer-mediated communication technologies, Internet, World Wide Web, etc. Such communication modes, unlike TV with its central control and mass audience aspect, have been hailed as a democratizing communication breakthrough which greatly expands individual freedom and autonomy. As a recent Australian newspaper article confidently proclaimed, for instance, "the Internet may turn out to be a means of ensuring freedom of expression and access to information" (Cooke 1995). Yet, this attitude is completely at odds with many traditional theories of knowledge and points to a potential head-on clash of values between Western ideologies of open access and a more traditional ethic of information restriction.

Traditional Communications in the Age of the "Infobahn"

There is a conventional notion that technology is somehow "autonomous from society and value neutral, since it is seen as neither good nor bad in itself..." The implicit theory here is that "science and technology induce progress autonomously--a belief represented by the metaphor of 'the arrow of progress'" (Escobar 1994, p. 211-212). [Chander outlines the stances toward technological determinism.] This conventional view of the "technological imperative" contrasts sharply with an emerging view within anthropology and related disciplines that "any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it brings forth a world, it emerges out of particular cultural conditions and in turn helps to create new ones." (Escobar 1994, p. 211).

While we cannot address all of the relevant issues here, the question of knowledge, its nature, construction, transmission, distribution, political economy of etc., are all crucial issues with respect to minority and indigenous peoples. With respect to alleged value neutrality, we need to reflect on two contrasting ontologies of knowledge. One is the post-industrialized Western's world's notion of universal access to knowledge by all individuals. This also implies a particular construction of the individual self as a primary actor who has freedom to know all that he or she is physically capable of knowing. From the time of childhood in the West (North), a sense of the autonomous individual who is free to choose and to act is strongly engrained (Bader & Nyce 1993, p. 66). Such a construction of self and personhood is consistent with the world of hypermedia with its implicit ideology of free and open access to information.

The above pattern contrasts sharply with more traditional societies which take a communal or corporate view of social life and do not adhere to the West's ideal of extreme individualism. Rather, adherence to group values and norms which contribute to the greater communal good is the preferred behavioral ideal. In most traditional communities, this implies a restriction on knowledge, on what an individual or category of people may or may not have access to. Such restrictions are usually demarcated along lines of age and stage of the life or ritual cycle, spiritual development or ritual specialist, gender, clan or family grouping, social and political status, and so forth. Questions of taboo, avoidance relationships, spirit-mediated communications, specialized and restricted language codes all come into the equation as well.

Related to this is the question of ownership of knowledge.

Ownership of Knowledge

In a traditional economy of knowledge, specific stories, clan oral histories, ritual performances, songs, and so forth are owned by particular individuals who control the access to and their contexts of performance. Some of this material lies in the domain of the secret and the sacred. However, one could foresee a situation where such control is lost and such material is distributed widely via new technologies, thereby debasing a once powerful performance medium. Thus, in such communities, the free and open access to knowledge grounded in a North American ideology of rugged individualism could become a cause of considerable conflict and be seen as a real source of outside, "imperialistic" threat to cultural tradition and to a way of life.

Indeed, the new World Wide Web built-in ideology of freedom of access and decision-making on the part of the autonomous self, could be quite menacing to a traditional community's social economy of knowledge and its access. It could threaten established lines of authority and communication by totally undermining and destabilizing the position of elders and other custodians of community values. [Monberg observes how technology can shift collective and individual identities.] One can easily envisage a situation in which a young person with access to the Internet would be free to completely transcend the traditional regimes of knowledge and

access anything thing in the world, no matter how inappropriate by community standards. This could include locally inappropriate information and explicit images of the sexually taboo, a variety of cosmopolitan cultural information at variance with local religious and ethical norms. Moreover, since young children can access information inappropriate to their social age and status, a situations may be arise where knowledge is undermined, hierarchies are disrupted, and other types of role reversals are created.

This type of conflict can wreak considerable havoc with local meaning and belief structures, often exacerbating conflict between old and young, and between male and female. Many young people may find themselves in a cultural no-persons land where traditional meanings and authority structures have been severely undermined but not yet replaced by any viable alternative. Subjected to the jumble of free floating messages and contradictory meanings from the West via computer-mediated forms of communication, many young people experience a sense of anomie and alienation, sometimes leading to suicide, crime, or other anti-social behaviors.

In the end, the impact of these processes is that local knowledges are destabilized and de-legitimized. Valid knowledge comes to be equated with that which originates outside in the distant metropolitan centers of power and control (see Hobart 1993).

Modern Technologies as Empowerment

Yet, a number of indigenous communities who have the requisite resources presently use the Internet to their political advantage by maintaining a community home page, distributing information pertinent to their political struggles and aspirations, and establishing and maintaining links with other well-connected indigenous peoples and their struggles around the world, creating a global consciousness of such peoples, struggles, and issues. This is indeed a positive and creative use of the new technologies which enhances the community and may even promote 'traditional' values and identities. Because the development of material on the Web does not require substantial brick and mortar infrastructure, it allows minorities to project a global presence. A good example is the web set up by the Cape York Land Council in North Eastern Australia. The Center for World Indigenous Studies in Olympia, Washington in the United States also serves as an Internet clearing house of indigenous issues and information of use to various indigenous struggles around the world.

Economic Inequities

There is also a micro-economic aspect to the question of access. Indeed, not all indigenous people or micro states will necessarily enjoy equal access to Internet technologies in the first instance. Cost factors in the provision of hardware, infrastructure, and software will no doubt exclude many such peoples from the possibility of even possessing and using such technologies. Moreover, cost may limit use and possession to local elites with the effect of strengthening their privilege.

Much has been made of the relatively poor saturation of many developing countries with computers. The rapid technological developments disadvantage developing countries, where average household income levels are such that the purchase of a US\$1,500 computer is out of the question. The small Pacific Island countries have an economic basis reliant on outmigration and returning remittances, foreign bilateral and multilateral aid, small tourism revenue and some cash crop or mineral exports (cf. Odgen 1994c). Computer networks are limited and commonly do not even permeate the country's government at the LAN level. Since the external communications networks are owned by multinational companies, communications charges

contribute to the foreign debt of the nations, a factor which mitigates against the development of large, government-funded networks hooked up to the Web.

A recent (September 1995) survey of the register of World Wide Web servers in the Pacific Area (excluding Australian and New Zealand servers) prepared as part of this paper has shown that there are extremely few servers: While a number of Pacific Island countries have their own universities or offshoot campuses of the University of the South Pacific or the College of Micronesia, servers are limited to the University of Guam, the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and, of course, Hawaii, where web servers are maintained by the Hawaii Community College, Brigham Young University, Hawaii Pacific University and the University of Hawaii.

Web Communication

There is a strong sense of anarchy on the Web. Although webmasters seem to control information, there is a clear domination in the peer group of the Web by males and the English language. There has also been a rapid commercialization of the Web.

Anarchy on the Web

There can be little doubt that there is a strong sense of anarchy on the World Wide Web. At present, the infobahn is a free-for-all: everybody can publish web pages without spatial or social distinctions, as long as access to a server is available. Such servers are maintained by commercial companies, by online providers and by educational institutions. In many cases, copyright is flaunted or blatantly violated both in content and in terms of computer code. The anarchy is fostered by independent-minded academics controlling much of the content, and it is further fueled by "technophiles" or "techno-junkies." Any development of teaching packages on the World Wide Web is endangered by creeping technological determinism, whereby educational paradigms and communication ethics are overlooked or blatantly ignored in the name of technological progress (December 1995). As the Web grew in popularity, institutions quickly realized its potential for publicity. Finally, the entry of commercial interests into online services has served to entrench competition between sites as the norm.

Webmasters and the Control of Destiny

Having a server or having access to one empowers webmasters to project their own ideas, world-views and values to the entire world. People or groups lacking access to a server have no voice within the emerging cyber-community. Their attitudes and values are not expressed. The anarchy of the Web makes it difficult to discern the relative merits of available information. Where information is scant, web users are likely to accept whatever they can find, regardless of quality or bias. There are many instances where the only source of online information about third world countries comes from elsewhere. The United States Central Intelligence Agency is one of the biggest suppliers.

Domination of the Web by Males

There is a clear domination of the Web by a small group of professional males. This issue is of concern to equal-opportunity professionals across the world, as numerous studies have shown that computer ownership and computer use is predominantly male and that the level of online access and use follows a similar pattern. A literature review by Spennemann (1995a) has shown that the data of a number of sources confirm this fact: about 10% of those publishing on the Web in 1994 were women, however this figure stood at about 15-19% in late 1995, with women's membership/access growing at a rate outpacing that of men. There is, however, considerable

variation between Europe and the United States, with fewer European women accessing publishing on the Net. O'Reilly and Associates surveyed Internet users (rather than publishers) in early 1995 (O'Reilly & Associates 1995). Of these, 34% were female and 66% were male (n=1,000).

Domination of the Web by English

The dominant language on the World Wide Web is English, specifically American English. With the exception of languages other than the main "competitors" of English (such as French, German or Spanish), little respect is paid to other languages. Even publishers in French, German, or Spanish on the Web strive to comply with the dominance of the English language by providing English-language abstracts or alternative English-language home pages.

The rise of English to preeminence in the academic world began in the post World War II period when the sheer number of U.S. American universities and the large amount of funding poured into them resulted in a large output of research and publications, thus documents written in English dominated and saturated the market. In a concurrent development, the dominance of the U.S. market economy saw English rise to preeminence in the area of business and communications. The Web combines the characteristics of both scientific publishing on the one hand and business and communications on the other--and thus reinforces the dominance of English, especially American English. This take-over of American culture also occurs in Australia, which may serve as an example that even large countries are not immune.

While some languages have a large number of speakers and territorially cohesive populations, such as German, French, Spanish, Russian and Japanese stand a good chance of survival in the electronic world; however, others, such as Marshallese or Pohnpeian (each with less than 100,000 speakers world wide) do not stand any chance at all. Even large languages, such as Mandarin and Hindi are not likely to be prominent on the Web, due to the heterogeneous nature of the countries and the number of "competitors," such as Urdu in the case of India, and Cantonese in the case of China.

The jury is still out on the future of languages reliant on no Latin characters and their display on the Web. Such languages include: Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese and Hindi, Urdu and Japanese. Even though the market for pages written in these languages is substantial, the current Web browsers used to view the HTML code need the addition of specific software to view such character sets. Such software is language-dependent and in a number of cases, has not been developed.

Commercialization of the Web

Marketing companies have entered the scene, with market research (such as GVV Center 1995; O'Reilly & Associates 1995), as well as billboard-type advertising in "public spaces" (cf. Netscape's search engine page). To date, the most common commercial applications of the Web have been promotion and advertising. The predominant model is the "honeypot effect" in which organizations provide interesting or useful information (the "honey") to attract users (Green 1995). Hence, the provision of information is seen as a marketing strategy, rather than an end in itself. As a typical example, a tourist agency might provide online information and pictures about (say) the Pacific Islands as a means of attracting potential clients. Such services may provide some useful information, but the emphasis is on making the service appealing rather than being reliable, complete or authoritative. The competitive approach also leads to much duplication of effort, and leaves many gaps.

A significant development is the provision of country-focused home pages by commercial providers. Presently, the material provided on these pages is free for all. This is of little surprise, however, as most of the pages are still under development and as there is a need to (i) attract more users to these pages, and (ii) to attract new material, either as documents or as links to the site. The problem posed by these commercial sites is not only that the material is provided by outsiders (which in itself may be culturally inappropriate), but also that, with the introduction of charges to access these sites, outsiders will profit economically from the information thus amassed.

Enablement or Exploitation?

The virtual community is a reality when one considers that modern technologies can retrieve information quickly and easily without the user being aware of its physical location. There can be little doubt that the Web can act as the great leveler as well as a source of communication and information in a global environment.

The implications of the supply of information and dis-information need not to be spelled out in great detail: it is becoming ever more complex to keep the flow of information controlled. The Web has the potential to develop into a tool with great political leverage (Odgen 1994a). It is no wonder, then, that political pressure groups have used the Web as a medium. It has been argued that Pacific Islands governments need to be aware the political potential of the Web (Odgen 1994b). Unfortunately the costs associated with Web are exorbitant and those who do not have access to the Web are being further isolated politically, economically and culturally from the rest of the world. Therefore, costs are a significant barrier to equality between all of the countries on the information superhighway. In addition, we find traditional social barriers associated with gender are exacerbated with the use of the Web.

Rather than being a leveler, the Web has the potential to create even greater inequalities between the so-called rich and the third-world countries. Since the currency of the twenty-first century is information, the dichotomy between the haves and have-nots will widen. Many third-world countries do not have the resources nor the expertise to surf the information superhighway. Therefore, information about third world countries will most likely be generated by interested third party groups purporting to be the "authorative" or "comprehensive" site on a particular country. This has the potential for such groups to dominate the information about a country's cultural, economic and political status. More importantly, it allows these interested groups to place an interpretation on the information that suits their own needs. This is already evident with the CIA's The World Fact Book and the material provided by US State Department on Human Rights issues (US State Department 1995). It is therefore critical that such information is interpreted in view of its source. It has been understood by the Internet community that there is a variety of information, and that much of it is not very accurate or authoritative.

Masters or Sorcerers' Apprentices?

C.Quinn (1994) stated that "webmasters are riding it [the Net] like crazy." That may be so. But even though the technophiles drive the Net at present, the commercial providers wait in the wings, positioning themselves for a lucrative future. Both seem to have the same restrictive, or even destructive effect, on traditional cultures, albeit for different reasons: the technophiles out of ignorance and carelessness, and the commercial providers out of financial 'greed'. While the total lack of social conscience of commercial providers may be understandable, that of the webmasters and the Web community is not. The webmasters and the "surfies" pride themselves on the anarchic nature of the Web and their own streaks of anarchic behavior. But doesn't this

anarchy also demand the basic respect for others' identities? How can cultural imperialism be reconciled with such concepts? And how does the commercialization of the Net fit in?

In view of the discussion above, one, indeed, wonders whether the webmasters are not merely sourcerers' apprentices, whose magic has spun out of control and developed a dynamic which is currently being harnessed by the forces of the commercial world. The growth of the Web has seen new players enter the scene and there is an urgent need for a discussion of the ethical underpinnings of "netiquette." The ethics of present and future webmasters need to be challenged to ensure a more equitable environment that is equitable towards women, equitable towards those economically weak, and equitable towards cultures with languages other than English.

Where Do We Go from Here?

So where does it all lead to? Given the anarchic conditions on the Web and the "free for all" attitude which disenfranchises the economically weak and marginalizes non-male, non-English speaking people, is there a future for communities which espouse or embrace the traditional concepts and controls of ownership of knowledge and the communal rather than individualistic approach to knowledge acquisition and transition? Or will these communities be under pressure to conform to the new 'standards'? And while these communities debate the issue, will the void be irreplaceably filled by commercial providers, thus marginalizing the creators and originators of the traditional knowledge even more?

There is a real danger that the appropriation of cultural property will now lead to an economic exploitation. The current developments on the Web are set to divorce the indigenous cultures from control over much of their own cultural material--and this impact may well be permanent.

In the realm of the international law, there is the laudable UNESCO Convention on Cultural Self Determination of Indigenous Peoples. This includes the right of indigenous people to determine their own political fate, the appearance, maintenance and transmission of their cultural concepts on their terms. The standards that apply should be those of the people concerned, and not those of the western technocrats, commercial interests and researchers. Yet, the unregulated development of the Web has led to a new wave of cultural imperialism, an intellectual goldrush, so to speak, with all the hulla-balloo and machismo behavior associated with that anarchic frontier mentality.

For developing countries, the challenge is to face up to the issues posed by the growing need to provide information via the Internet, especially the question of developing a low-cost model for user access. It is here that international organizations such as UNESCO, the Asian Development Bank or the European Union should provide technical and financial assistance to empower the communities to project authoritative information as they deem appropriate.

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