Intercultural Communication In the Internet Age

From the Indigenous Perspective

The Apple representative seemed confident of his information when he told the story. After all, the story came from a reliable source and no one had refuted it before:

> "The iPod is so user friendly that it is considered a great tool to win over people who are otherwise afraid of technology. Why, a teacher I know working with Native American students, who are *afraid of using our modern technologies,* reported having great success getting them to accept the iPod."

When I challenged his stereotypical statement the Apple rep attempted to defend his belief that somehow Native Peoples and technology are a miss-match. Is it possible that my experience was different from his informant's experience? She was working with a grant program on the Navajo reservation. When I informed him that I had worked for the last eight years with 22 Indian schools from around the country, including four on the Navajo reservation, and, yes my experience was very different, he began to see the light. By the end of our

conversation he understood that, when it comes to technology, Indians are no different then any other race of people and agreed not to promote that stereotype again. But the incident left me curious . . . Why do people think Indians are afraid or unaccepting of technology?

This paper begin with an emphasis on how America's Indigenous population is using telecommunication technologies today. Primarily, my interest was in discovering how we, as a people are taking these new technology tools and making them our own. Like a lot of projects, though, during the research process the emphasis changed. As I dug through countless documents, weeding out the ones that didn't show Indians use of telecommunication and other technologies and articles that were too old to be of any relevance (the oldest articles I use are from 1993 with most articles written after 2000) I came up with 16 relevant, timely papers on which to focus my analysis. By the time I read through the articles my question had expanded from how are we using the technology to include how are we perceived to be using the technology and where and how are those perceptions propagated. As a result of this research I came to these conclusions:

- Native American uses of technology are extensive and varied despite many barriers to access and training.

- Perceptions in the general population of American Indian acceptance and use of technology are inaccurate and based on deep rooted stereotypes of Indian people in general.
- Research of Native Americans access, use and acceptance of technology is sorely lacking.

I use these three conclusions as the focus of my analysis.

Native American Technology Use

A 1997 article, "Cyberspace Smoke Signals: New Technologies and Native American Ethnicity" chronicles the early days of Native American telecommunication adaptation. In the beginning there was NativeNet. Initially set up in 1989 as a mailing list, NativeNet, America's first Native controlled computer-based international Native network, quickly evolved to include six highly active independent listservs by the mid-nineties. Linking thousands of Native Americans throughout the hemisphere, this early foray into cyberspace is credited with the successful, massive well-organized Columbus Quincentenary protests in 1992. (Bruguier et al., 1997)

Another widely accepted technology in Indian Country is the CD-ROM. The large storage capacity allows vast bibliographic collections of treaties and other important documents to be easily disseminated. (Bruguier et al., 1997) Equally valued are the multimedia language and culture CDs being created by the tribal colleges and other universities. One reason for the success of multimedia technologies is the non-linear sequencing model of many CDs and websites. (Barta et al., 2003) Barta, Jette' and Wiseman wrote, ". . . information (in this media) can be considered to exist in a multitude of concentric circles, or situated within a multidimensional framework. . . that reflects more characteristics of an indigenous paradigm than that of a western-based thinker." (Barta et al., 2003)

In addition to the wide acceptance of commercially produced multimedia CDs is the sudden availability of cheep computers and CD "burners" flooding the market. Now, any Indian with a few hundred dollars can purchase the equipment and software to make their own audio CDs. Last April during the Gathering of Nations Powwow I followed my brother, a struggling hip-hop artist, through the maze of vendor booths crowding The Pit. Every few yards we would stop while he chatted with other musicians attending the event. Each visit inevitably resulted in an exchange of CDs. By the end of the day my brother had a stack of CDs to listen

to on the long drive back to Oklahoma. Most of these CDs were home made demos. Like my brother, these musicians were using the technology to get their music out to the public. Who knows, one of these demos may end up in the hands of a DJ or music promoter. In addition to providing music for radio play or other promotion, the homemade CDs circulating the country are building a large underground Indigenous music movement. The fan base these CDs create fill casino and small venues enabling relative unknown Native artists to make a modest living touring the country performing and selling CDs, stickers and T-shirts. All this would not be possible without affordable, accessible technology and the skill to use it.

Fast on the heels of CDs in growing popularity is web-based communication. Like CDs, websites are a non-linear format of information delivery and are increasingly becoming more affordable. Free web development tools, free or very low cost web hosting and easy Internet access through school or work has made the Web a popular method of communication for many American Indians. Most tribes have their own websites and many individuals and Indian owned businesses have websites as well. As the Technology Coordinator of a small all-Indian school in urban Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I was surprised by the number of my seventh and eighth grade students who had their own websites.

As we have seen, today's technologies are being used by American Indians to enhance communication between Native peoples, preserve language and cultural traditions and provide an outlet for the creativity of our artists. Yet, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Among new technologies being put to use in Indian Country are GIS and related technologies. (Hafnor, 2003) In his article, "Native Americans Embrace Geotechnology" John Hafnor quotes Lakota scientist, Jhon Goes In Center's explanation: "Native Americans are comfortable working with aerial or satellite images, because these images show a world without political boundaries. And that is how we've always viewed the earth." (Hafnor, 2003)

My own experience has reinforced this understanding. As a student at a tribal college I vividly recall my amazement when our instructor placed a satellite image of the black hills next to a photograph of a human heart to illustrate the Lakota belief that the Black Hills (Paha Sapa) are the heart of the world. The images were nearly identical. While such experiences with technologies have served to reinforce our long held traditional beliefs they also give us the "hard evidence" needed to convince the scientific community of the relevance our traditions have in the modern world.

The use of databases, scientific probeware and complex computer analysis software by tribes to analyze soil, water and air samples on tribal lands has confirmed the detrimental effects of pollutants our traditionalists have warned about for many years. All this considered, is it any wonder that American Indians have embraced the use of new technologies?

The "Native Americans Fear Technology" Myth

Given the deeply ingrained, long held stereotypes of American Indians that exist both in the American mainstream culture and throughout the world, it is no surprise that perceptions of Indians use of technology is subject to stereotypical ideas as well. Indeed many beliefs about American Indians and technology come straight out of the pages of the previous generation's "Noble Savages," "Vanishing Race" anthro-babble. Take, for example, the following passages, all written by educated, professional writers or academics:

1. "Native American communities have long been isolated—from each other as well as the rest of America." (Rayl, 1993)

2. "Native Americans fear that computers will . . . further negative values. (McClanahan, 2001)

3. "The use of emerging technologies in traditional cultures is detrimental to their unique heritage . . . " (Evans et al., 2000)

Such assumptions, like the isolation of Native American communities, persist despite proof of long established trade routes and close relationships between distant communities. Perhaps the real fear of technology's impact on Native cultures comes from the outside. Evans and O'Neil of the Georgia Institute of Technology write, "It seems a bit patronizing and paternalistic for those of us accustomed to the widespread use of technology in our everyday lives to conclude that traditional cultures are too inexperienced to cope with the negative influences that technology is certain to have on their cultural character." (Evans & O'Neil, 2000)

Even the best journal articles can be marred by questionable assumptions. Barta, Jette' and Wiseman writing in "Dancing Numbers: Cultural, Cognitive, and Technical Instructional Perspectives on the Development of Native American Mathematical and Scientific Pedagogy" promote the theory that Indigenous world views are shaped by the "hunter-gatherer" perspective. (Barta, et al., 2003) They contrast this perspective with the "Western world view" which, they claim is based on "more agrarian ways of living and seeing." (Barta, et al., 2003) This assumption

is quite shocking considering the Indigenous group they focus the article on, the Mohawk, is descended from the Moundbuilder culture which is one of the oldest agrarian cultures in the world!

Clearly, well-intentioned non-Indians can get so caught up in their desire to save our cultures for us that they fall into the "Vanishing Race" mindset and end up overstating the potential of technology in Native communities. A prime example of this is the 1993 *Omni* article titled, "The Fate of Native American Tribes Depends on Preserving Past Traditions With Future Tools." While it is true that many Native cultures have been or are in danger of being lost forever due to American and European genocidal practices, there are still many thriving Indigenous cultures in the world today that don't need to be saved by the white man.

To be fair there are community members in Indian Country who express concerns about technology use just as there are in any other American community. Dorr and Akeroyd writing in "New Mexico Tribal Libraries: Bridging the Digital Divide" quote Indian Outreach Coordinator, Jean Whitehorse of the New Mexico State Library, "Many of them (Indian elders) felt bringing computers would take children's interest away from their community traditions and families and would expose them to bad things." (Akeroyd & Dorr, 2001) Through on-site training in

tribal libraries and community outreach, Whitehorse and her staff have managed to gain community support of the new technologies introduced to New Mexico Indian communities through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Native American Access to Technology Program. (Akeroyd & Dorr, 2001)

Native Americans & Technology – Where's the Research?

Kade Twist asks the questions on many Native American leaders' minds, "A Nation Online, But Where Are the Indians?" In his aptly titled *Digital Divide Network* article, Twist questions the repeated omission of data relating to American Indians in federally funded studies of American Internet use. (Twist, 2002) Not since the 1999 "Falling Through the Net" report were Native Americans included in this major federal study. Does this omission affect current writings on the subject of American Indian technology use? A quick survey of three articles published in 2001, 2002 and 2004 would suggest so:

- A *Computers in Libraries* article, "New Mexico Tribal Libraries: Bridging the Digital Divide," compares **1990** census data on Native American Internet access to **2000** data on all American households Internet access.

(Akeroyd & Door, 2001) Did the authors assume that nothing changed in 10 years for America's Indian population?

- "Native Americans and the Internet" published in 2002 by Dawn McClanahan, opens with 1990 data on Native American Internet use and goes on to cite data on rural Native American households with out informing the reader that two-thirds of the American Indian population lives in urban or suburban areas. (U.S. OTA, 1995)
- A 2004 Yahoo! News article, "Native American Family Technology Journey to Help Weave Technology With traditions" quotes 1999 "Falling Through the Net" data. Although, the article does distinguish between rural and "overall" Native American households, one still must wonder how five-year-old data impacts information that should have been updated with the 2002 report. (Duart, 2004)

Now, it's understandable that some writers are limited due to lack of current data but is that always the case when writing about Indians and technology? Do writers intentionally choose outdated research to promote their ideology where Indians and technology are concerned? One example of such questionable writing practices is the Spring 2000 article, "Native People and the Challenge of

Computers: Reservation Schools, Individualism, and Consumerism" published in The American Indian Quarterly. Of the 26 notes cited in the article fifteen were from sources ranging from twelve to 22 years old at the time of the article's publication. With resources such as "The Domestication of the Savage Mind" author ecologist, C. A. Bowers proceeds to berate tribal leaders and educators for throwing away traditional knowledge in favor of the lure of computers and the Internet. (Bowers et al., 2000)

Sadly, Bowers article was cited as a resource in other articles I read which promoted Bowers' (a non-Indian) work as the opinion of "many Native Americans." A quick analysis of the 26 notes cited in Bowers' article reveals only one piece written by a Native American on the specific topic of technology and American Indians: "Cyberspace Is No Place for Tribalism" published in **1988**. Evidently things have changed dramatically in the last sixteen years for both the author, Craig Howe, as well as "Cyberspace" itself. Howe's bio from the Grinnell College website notes his current work as a developer of innovative hypermedia tribal histories projects. Howe has even founded a company committed to developing multimedia educational materials, the very thing Bowers rails against in his article. (http://www.grinnell.edu)

Exclusion from federal research coupled with the proliferation of unreliable resources on Native American technology issues has serious implications for tribal leaders, educators and others trying to address the "digital divide" in Indian Country. Twist quotes Victor Rocha, founder of Pechanga Net:

> "What is most frustrating to me is that our effort and potential is being ignored. There is a lot of persistent, hard work that has gone unmeasured and unacknowledged. It's more than tribes wanting people at the federal level to understand our digital divide. We also want them to understand how we're making progress." (Twist, 2002)

The incredible pace of technology evolution demands research that keeps pace with the technology if we are to provide an accurate assessment of technology's impact in Indian Country. In addition, both researchers and writers must be held accountable for the information published. As Kade Twist points out, "We must be appropriately aggressive. . . Indian Nations must stand up and demand to be appropriately counted." (Twist, 2002)