EASA Media Anthropology Network
E-Seminars Series

E-Seminar on Fay Ginsburg's working paper
"Rethinking the digital age"

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Dear All

Welcome to the EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar series. On this occasion we shall be discussing a working paper by Faye Ginsburg (New York University) on indigenous media, entitled "Rethinking the digital age". The seminar opens now and will end in a week's time, on Thursday 10 May at 9 pm GMT. A PDF of the paper is now freely available on our website at

http://media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm

Faye Ginsburg is Director of the Center for Media, Culture and History, and co-Director of the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, where she is David B. Kriser Professor of Anthropology. Her work focuses on cultural activism in different contexts, from the abortion debate to the work of indigenous filmmakers.

The discussant will be Maximilian C. Forte who teaches anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal. Max specialises in Caribbean print and internet media in relation to the indigenous Caribs of Trinidad & Tobago. He is the editor of KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology (at www.kacike.org).

As usual, the discussion will open with the discussant's comments, followed by a response from the presenter, after which everyone on the list is free to post (probably sometime tonight GMT). To contribute to the discussion, please post your brief comments or questions directly to medianthro@easaonline.org with no attachments.

It's over to Max Forte now for his comments on "Rethinking the digital age".

John

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Commentary on
"Rethinking the Digital Age"
by Faye Ginsburg

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There is a book in Faye Ginsburg's paper, "Rethinking the Digital Age." The multiple strands of Faye Ginsburg's arguments, not to mention the fascinating ethnographic cases that she brings to our attention, all deserve to be expanded upon and elaborated. One of the first points that struck me after reading this paper is that the notions of a "digital age" and a "digital divide" ultimately do not deserve the attention of anthropologists, for all of the reasons that Ginsburg's critical analysis brings to the fore, and a few more that we might wish to add. This necessitates a paradoxical practice on our part: we devote attention to a notion in order to show that, in the end, it is not worthy of further attention. I will first add some comments on the digital age/divide perspective and then discuss some of the more striking ethnographic

aspects of Ginsburg's paper and some of its possible implications for larger debates on indigeneity, cultural politics, and "cosmopolitanism".

Ginsburg is right in my view to shine a hot, bright light in the face of the "digital age" and "digital divide": this perspective on putative information equality resembles the Eurocentric narrative of the "development gap" that was popular among international development technocrats of the 1980s (and still is in many quarters). Going back further, the narrative echoes modernization theory, and further back than that, cultural evolutionism. The idea that there is a "digital age" sounds too much like older notions of a "stone age" and an "iron age", of the savagery-barbarism-civilization schemes of nineteenth century evolutionism to escape critical attention. The idea worth criticizing here is that there is a technology for every "time", and to every technological time there is a "people," in some woeful state of backwardness when compared to the ever more advanced "us." In this case, indigenous peoples, mired in "poverty," remain stuck in another time. To extend the point further, "poverty" itself is often defined in terms of the "not-middle-class-us" – so that somehow, well by definition really, persons living without electricity or running water are "poor," regardless of their self conceptions, their preferred customs, or their active life choices. It is really fortuitous that Ginsburg"s paper, which only superficially resembles one about "indigenous peoples and the Internet," opens out on to such larger debates, both classic and current.

When "people" speak of a digital divide, do "they" mean a divide in terms of "access" to information (i.e., the presence of a computer enabled with Internet access, where "access" may suggest an act of consumption as demonstrated in the form of the download), or a divide in terms of production (i.e., the upload)? I am not too clear about this, and it sounds like we potentially have two very different divides, and that the productionist divide "might" be very pronounced regardless of the society in question. In terms of production, it's not something that can be measured by the number of telephone lines or ISPs. One has to find out what the proportion of bloggers, website developers, YouTubers, Napsteroids (whatever they are called) is with reference to the total population of Internet "users"... and I have not seen such statistics before, let alone on a worldwide scale. In my own research, even those without telephone access in their homes have access to the Internet (see below), and those with computers do not use them to create or exchange anything.

What might cause some confusion – at least it caused me to pause and backtrack – is whether or not there really is a culturally significant digital divide in place anyway. Ginsburg presents some incredible innovations, but there are many other, less striking, even banal forms of engaging the Internet that render the notion of a divide to be even more tenuous. I have spoken elsewhere about patterns of cyber-brokerage, which speak to the collaborative alliances built between indigenous communities with no access to the Internet and activists and supporters outside of these communities who, for example, develop websites for/with those communities. Then there are those individuals without even telephone service – I think here of some of my own Carib collaborators in Trinidad – who make their way to public library branches and Internet cafes to check email or look for information. Private foundations, NGOs, development grants, all of these have helped to introduce computers and the Internet into Carib communities in Trinidad and Dominica (and from a productionist standpoint, to absolutely no avail as these technologies are still being used to quietly lurk on lists, to download web pages, and to rarely send emails at most). Aside from this, one can have access to the Internet by some rather rudimentary means, what I call the snail-mail download: pages printed from the Internet and sent to one's indigenous friends by post, which I often did from Australia all the way to Trinidad. In the end, even on empirical grounds, let

alone philosophical or cultural ones, this divide notion really seems to be untenable, or at the very least, overwrought. In the case of the snail-mail download, the boundaries of the digital, the defining properties of the "digital age," also become cloudier.

For my part, there remains one very large question that is lurking behind the deeply engaging ethnographic presentation in Ginsburg's paper, pertaining to all of these extremely innovative, intelligent, artful indigenous uses of new media such as Igloolik Isuma, UsMob, and Raven Tales – and that question is simply: Who is their intended audience, and "why" have they selected that audience as one worth communicating to? I think that in an expanded version of this work, Faye Ginsburg might consider an examination of circulation and consumption, to balance the paper's currently heavy leaning on the production of indigenous culture through new media. I found the ethnographic cases to be not just very vivid, but also perplexing, because in some sense they seemed to validate the idea that these technologies "really are needed", which would then reinforce liberal technocracy's concern for the "digital divide." This may be either an accident of the way Ginsburg presents these data, or my own misreading.

With reference to Igloolik Isuma, Ginsburg quotes Katarina Soukup who does not mention any Inuit-to-Inuit communication and culture-sharing goals as part of the project. Is it a case of wanting to share one's culture for the world, for the sake of it, as an end in itself, and thus an example of cosmopolitan indigeneity? I am starting to think that it may be latter, at least in the case of the Raven Tales example, where Simon James states, "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," followed by Ginsburg herself who explains: "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." It's a simple question really: but why did Simon James feel the need to recruit witnesses from outside his community?

In connection with UsMob, Ginsburg notes that the "project had its origins in requests from traditional elders in the Arrernte community in Central Australia." What were the elders requesting specifically and why did they want it?

Reading beyond the "technicalia" (I wonder if this clumsy term will ever be accepted as a way of speaking of the minutiae and the intelligibilia of technological engagements) of indigenous uses of digital media, certain questions came to mind concerning the cultural politics of indigeneity. I worry about making knowledge something that can be packaged, projected, labelled, and then valued as property. This goes beyond indigeneity and touches on wider debates about the fragmented clustering of the world into gated knowledge communities. Such a prospect would seem to be a cold shower for the perspective offered by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, quoted by Ginsburg, who point to "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." While this latter perspective is one that I actually find very appealing, I worry that there is a lack of self-criticism in presenting this as "resistance," as if resistance means "getting out there and mixing it up with the big boys," as opposed to what often escapes being designated "resistance," such as the practice of total indifference to the latest ride in the amusement park of modern culture.

Whatever the cautions and criticisms that come to mind, I have to agree with Ginsburg's statement that "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."

What is also striking about the Internet and its role in the cultural politics of indigeneity – and this is no surprise now – is the extent to which it has not only helped to foster a growing transnational organization of indigenous peoples, heightening mutual awareness, but also the transfer and exchange of indigenous symbolism and indigenous political discourses across diverse communities in different parts of the world (possibly something that merits more attention). Beyond inter-indigenous networking, Ginsburg presents a strong argument about how "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." The objectivation (and I really do mean objectivation) of indigenous culture helps to project indigenous cultural representations into "dominant cultural imaginaries that, until recently, have excluded vital representations by First Nations peoples within their borders."

Faye Ginsburg's paper, with its memorable case studies and its strong conclusion, was helpful for provoking rumination on a wide variety of subjects ranging from self-determination to self-representation, from development to resistance, from locality to cosmopolis. As I stated at the outset, there really is a book in this paper, and I am thankful that I was asked to serve as a reviewer for this contribution to a very fertile area of investigation.

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Many thanks to Max Forte for those comments. It's over to Faye Ginsburg now for her response, after which you are all very welcome to contribute to the discussion.

John

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Response to Max Forte's comments

I very much appreciate Max's thoughtful comments – coming from a grounded and committed concern for the kinds of research and analysis that emerges for those of us who have been working on indigenous media (and related areas) for the last number of years. I also understand the spirit behind statements such as:

"the notions of a 'digital age'... do not deserve the attention of anthropologists",

but here I would beg to differ with Max – or perhaps elaborate on what was intended as a rhetorical point. If we as anthropologists who study media do not attend to the discursive regimes that frame the way cultural difference is organized and understood through a variety of technologies, then we relinquish one of the important ways in which we can not only build

our own theory, but contribute as public intellectuals to the opening of debates in key areas: the underlying logics of new media are very seductive and it is hard to penetrate the rhetorical traps that they set. This article is my effort to try and do that. I know when I am teaching, it is hard for my mostly First World students to imagine there are parts of the world where media access that shapes their daily lives so completely might be unavailable, or used in profoundly different ways because of deep differences in everything from cultural logics for the organization of metadata to issues of cultural property vs. open access.

Indeed, I just received comments from two colleagues who I cite in the paper, Ramesh Srinivasan and Kim Christen, who presented last weekend (April 27-29) at the most recent MIT Conference at MIT, Media in Transition 5: Creativity, Ownership and Collaboration in the Digital Age. They wrote me the following responses to that event at MIT – the temple of new media – confirming the lack of critical, culturally informed thinking in this arena, and demonstrating what contribution we can make.

The MIT conference was pretty strong though uneven. There was still too much unbridled acceptance of blogs, tags, and other networked community systems, simply for the fact that they attract large numbers of users. The cultural questions still remain somewhat unscrutinized (Ramesh Srinivasan).

Although much of the conference was a bit of a technology celebration (which was no surprise), a few panels such as mine did try to open up the conversation, and in the last plenary session it seems at least some of our messages hit home (Kim Christen).
(See also her comments on her blog: http://www.kimberlychristen.com/

Clearly, we have work to do! It seems from the minute I entered into work on indigenous media in 1988, polemics were almost inevitable, from the early debates as to whether "natives" would be "corrupted" by cameras (the Faustian contract debates), to the much more recent questions as to whether separate indigenously run TV channels in Canada (APTN 199, Maori TV, NZ 2004, and NITV in Australia later this year) might constitute "media reservations" as much as opportunities for media sovereignty. People like Danny Miller and Dan Slater did a terrific job early on with *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000), showing the complex and culturally embedded ways in which such technologies are taken up in places like Trinidad, and demonstrating how un-helpful it is to fetishize media as if it were an object apart from social practices and cultural desires; a number of excellent ethnographic studies have come out since then, some of which have been discussed in this forum.

Rethinking the Digital Age builds on that work, but is a bit more of a polemic, trying to understand why terms like the digital age are so problematic yet absolutely taken for granted. Max raises excellent points linking these two approaches the polemic / critical and the ethnographic – underscoring the value of ethnographic work that attends to a range of differences in the ways new technologies might be used, differences that are usually not considered, including the otherwise hard to measure complex ways in which people access the internet, as he points out.

Regarding the digital divide, to summarize the debates, the digital divide usually refers to disparities in opportunity to access the internet and the information and educational / business opportunities tied to this access. The fault lines are assumed to fall between social classes and countries with resources to invest in ICT infrastructure, on the one hand, and those social groups and countries who do not. Some argue that this difference in rates of IT progress is

widening the economic disparity between the most developed nations of the world and the developing ones in a very particular way, creating a gap that is accelerated by disparities in digital access. What I am hoping to do – along with some of the excellent researchers whose work I cite – is to show how this is more complex than simply a matter of access. The technology is not culturally neutral, and it is important to attend to that fact, and to the particulars of how it is not, but also to see how it can nonetheless be indigenized and mobilized.

Max also raises valuable points about the difficulty of getting accurate statistics on the shift to the digital; even with statistics in hand, it is difficult to figure out what the statistics actually mean on the ground, as he points out with his excellent examples. (An interesting and provocative article on this front was written in 2002 by the always interesting media maker / theorist / NYU professor Clay Shirkey. His, piece "Half the World interrogates the oft reported quote" (attributed to Thabo Mbeki's speech at the Information Society and Development Conference in 1996) that "Half of humanity has not yet made a phone call".) http://www.shirky.com/writings/half_the_world.html

Max is also right to bring in his very significant ethnographic examples of the far more modest, everyday ways that indigenous or other people use computers and the internet on an everyday basis, uses, which are no doubt far more prevalent than the spectacular cases that I used. My article probably betrays its origins in a public talk where I was more inclined to use rather "flashy" examples of new media use in indigenous communities by practitioners who have unusually well-developed skills and insights into media and its use for any population. I chose those cases in part to demonstrate to audiences who might have no knowledge of indigenous media that I was not advocating a Luddite position. In other words, I wanted to impress upon them that I am not arguing against the uptake of new media in indigenous communities, if that is of interest and value for people living there. I wanted to show the potential for creativity and culturally distinctive media practices that can emerge from indigenous communities who have the opportunity to take up these technologies on their own terms and for their own purposes. In analyzing out the problems with the dominant DISCOURSE of the digital age, I simply wanted to point out the vast array of assumptions smuggled into that rhetoric, a very distinctive change from the kind of rhetoric that shaped the world of analog video in the 1980s what we might call The Video Age. I use the cases not only to underscore that despite the problems with the digital, the actual ways in which people are creating projects using these newer media platforms demonstrates their potential productivity. It also underscores that people should always keep in mind what the particular limits are in this technological universe. I suspect I have not made this sufficiently clear, given that even with Max's careful reading, he finds that disjunction confusing. The question about circulation and consumption is certainly well-taken, although at this juncture that is rather difficult to get, methodologically, and that would be, as they say, another story.

Regarding "internal" and "external" audiences: this seems a complicated divide to sustain. I doubt that Max means to intentionally create such a wall between internal and external intended audiences. As with all media, the works I discuss – and most mediations – are bound to escape the orbits where they are first launched. But let me discuss those in each case.

 In the case of Igloolik Isuma's website http://www.isuma.ca/thejournals/en/, I think the goals were to reach multiple audiences, including Inuit kids in Igloolik, and Nunavut more broadly (a primary goal) as well as many other audiences in Canada where negative stereotypes of Inuit persist and knowledge of the history of that region is very poor; and then of course, there

is the circuit of audiences of people like the readers of the list. (I hope to get more data on the intentions and outcome of that project).

In the case of Simon James' comments about *Raven Tales* http://www.raventales.ca/, they were made in a very particular context. He was directing himself to a large mixed audience in New York City, following a screening. His words could as easily have been said to an audience of his relatives back home on the Northwest Coast. *Raven Tales* is first and foremost directed at native youth who rarely see their own cultural idioms such as the *Raven Tales* – reflected back to them in media identified with modernity. Part of the hope attached to that project is that it will encourage younger people to imagine a cultural future embedded in their own histories and traditions but in a way that can also take advantage of the technologies and possibilities of modernity that computer animation might represent. In the speech that I quote, Simon James brilliantly found a way to rhetorically hail a non-native audience socially so that they became more than viewers – or even voyeurs – but felt themselves invited into the project and its success.

In the case of Us Mob (http://www.abc.net.au/usmob/), while I thought I had made this point clear, the Arrernte elders are very concerned about the growing alienation of young people, who increasingly are drawn to self-destructive activities such as petrol-sniffing, drinking, and culturally problematic practices such as developing romantic relationships that violate kinship restrictions (all of which are addressed in the short films on the website). Most recently, the introduction of video gaming both in town and at home has become almost an addiction for many young men in particular, and Us Mob was seen as a way to take on that technology in ways that might have positive forms of cultural identification for town camp kids.

The tensions between these new projects of self-objectification, and the lurking prospect of commodification that Max points out are always there. I strongly recommend the work of Jane Anderson and Kim Christen writing on indigenous cultural property issues in Australia and the creation of archives and use of new media in such cases (both of whom I cite) as well as Fred Myers foundational book, *Painting Culture*, on these problems in relation to Aboriginal art practices.

Thanks so much for the great comments and conversation. I feel a bit guilty as I have been more of a lurker rather than active participant on the media anthro list -- which is really fantastic -- in the interest of getting my book done this year, so I am especially grateful for the comments and great thinking, and pointers on what needs to be clarified. Once again, big thanks to John for all his work on keeping the list such a lively and useful forum, and to Max for his really helpful comments. I feel strongly that work in media anthropology has much to offer not only to anthropology, but to public conversations about media of all sorts, to help people sort out the complexities and assumptions of the discursive fields that shape how we and others understand and use new (and old) media technologies. I hope others find that to be the case as well.

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Christen, K. 2005. Gone Digital: Aboriginal Remix in the Cultural Commons. *International Journal of Cultural Property* 12 (315-344).

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Myers, F. 2002. *Painting Culture*: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art. Durham: Duke University.

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
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Thanks very much for that response, Faye.

The discussion is now open to all on the list. To post simply write directly to
medianthro@easaonline.org

Please keep your posts brief and bear in mind that posts may sometimes take a while to reach the list and/or their senders.

John

Daniel Taghioff (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)
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I have three main objections to what has been discussed in the seminar:

1) Even if we dislike the way ideas are formulated, does that mean we can afford to ignore the ways in which they are mobilised in practice. Max's comment that the digital age is a notion not worth engaging with for Anthropologists seems to rest on this idea, or alternatively the idea that such things as a digital divide etc. do not exist in practice. Well they do exist in practice, at the very least as representations that mobilise practice.

This relates to my second objection:

2) Why oh why, after Urban Anthropology of the Chicago School, must we confine Anthropology to Hokey notions of indigeneity?

Attending a Badaga festival in the Nilgiris was surprising for me: There were so many people there that were taking pictures with phones. I assumed they were Indian tourists, but was informed by a Badage friend that they were mostly Badagas recording their own traditions. So this idea of modernity as distinct from indigeneity is plainly only relevant in a very few particular cherry picked cases. This suggests the tail is wagging the dog, and that such indigeneity is some sort of fetish for Anthropologists to brandish at dinner parties, rather than the pervasive phenomenon it would appear to be if you took Anthropology as a mirror of the world. Faye's paper betrays this kind of apriori indigino-fetishism, but Max's comments compounds this by his seeming rejection of even considering modernity as a part of Anthropology's possible object of study!

Just think about climate change for a few seconds, then wonder if we can consider the traditional as "indifferent" to the modern for very much longer.

3) Faye's critique of the "digital" carnival is timely and accurate in many places, but does not go far enough in many ways, at least to my mind: The pervasiveness of "information society" and "digital" and "capacity building" and "information" in development discourses, leaking into thirdwayism by way of Sen Lukes, and Giddens, act as a strong cover story for assumptions drawn from economic theory. This is a really significant issue in terms of discourses on governance and development, and it affects many, many people in their lifeworlds.

I really like that Faye stepped into these kind of discussions, but aren't Anthropologists ethically bound to engage with the less powerful, even if they don't have the mark of the indigene upon them?

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I agree with Max that there is a fascinating book in Faye Ginsburg's paper, and I hope that is the book Faye referred to in her response.

Another issue that I think might merit further exploration is the question of inter-generational conflict that these varied case studies of indigenous media production seem to throw up. I was struck in particular by the moral contrast expressed by the 'elders' and their film-making advocates – and reproduced in Faye's own analysis – between positive, creative, indigenous, communitarian uses of media and the violent, addictive, non-indigenous alternatives on offer (for instance, in the Australian example, p. 9). When Vadiveloo, the film-maker, is said to be following 'community wishes' (p. 8), I was wondering whether that meant the 'elders' wishes. What did young people in this and other locales make of these interventions? Did some of them resist these cultural experiments arising from the concerns of their parents' and grandparents' generation? Surely there must be some creative uses of mobile phones, games, etc, to be found as well? By asking these kinds of questions I suggest a rich comparative domain opens up beyond the realm of indigenous groups.

Some of the inter-generational conflicts over media studied by anthropologists range from middle-class families in London and their early domestication of personal computers (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992) to case studies of TV in Belize (Wilk 2002) and mobile phones in Japan (Ito 2005).
Why not do a Max Gluckman and, to quote G. Marcus, 'follow the conflict' over new media artefacts in indigenous areas as well?

John

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Maximillian C. Forte (Concordia University Montreal)
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Hello everyone,

I don't intend to try to dominate the discussion by intervening at every point, but I do need to clear up some misunderstandings that seem to be coming through here. First, I am nowhere rejecting "modernity" as a presence that impacts upon and is dealt with, in this specific case, by indigenous peoples.

Second, it is certainly my fault if some understand me to be saying that we should not think about this "digital age" and "digital divide" couplet – what I am arguing is that, as concepts, they are useless to anthropology, much like concepts such as "stone age" and "development gap." I explained that the digital couplet, as a pair of concepts, suffers from poor definition, ambiguous boundaries, Eurocentrism, and as concepts were not even sustainable on empirical grounds because even the absence of direct Internet access does not mean that the Internet has no presence. So what do they help explain as concepts? What do they refer to? It is not up to me to be convinced by these concepts as a matter of someone else's mandate; I do not owe you my attention. For now, I remain unconvinced of these concepts' utility. Seeing them brandished as clubs turns me off even more.

Third, what makes indigeneity a "hokey" notion? What makes it more "hokey" than "modernity"? Should we pretend that indigenous peoples do not exist? Should we presume that they have no identities, no ways of living, and no ways of articulating representations of these identities? Is that what the "Urban School of Anthropology" advocates for? If so, it deserves to be rubbished but I suspect someone is merely trolling.

Lastly, and this is related more to my specific comments on Faye's paper – yes, I think one can sustain a distinction between internal and external audiences. There can and will be slippages between the two (and so once again the "divide" notion is rendered ambiguous) but it is not such a challenge to distinguish between different social fields, different communities of interest, changes in intentionality, and the fact that what one says to one's neighbours and kin in private can be very different to what one says to strangers, while standing on a stage five thousand miles away in New York and speaking to a set of raised eyebrows or adoring smiles.

Cheers,

Max

Daniel Taghioff (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)
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OK Max, sorry for perhaps being a bit too provocative.

Let me refine what I am saying: Trolling was not the intention, and 'someone' is called Daniel.

Indigeneity is "Hokey" in precisely the same way as "modernity" as it is a fairly empty signifier. It is filled up by Anthropologists looking for something to write about, and groups looking for special claims about their status. To my mind it is more coherent to see degrees and kinds in indegeneity as ubiquitous, since we are all nomads and all undergoing changes on our practices, in the long view. These people have identities, but that does not make them unique.

I am objecting to the sense of disengagement from wider issues i.e. the digital discussions, since it is not seen as a worthy subject matter for Anthropologists, who by implication should rather be engaging with issues of indigeneity.

If I have misread your position, perhaps you might clarify it.

Daniel (That's 2 of my 3 gone :-)

Anna Horolets (Warsaw School of Social Psychology)
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Dear Faye,

Thank you for an interesting paper which indeed triggers many important issues.

First, I would be very much interested to know you opinion on other sort of "indigenous" people, especially since this concept has already raised debate on the List. I was thinking about the people of the former Soviet Union, who after 1991 have started building nation states but at the same time (re)constructing their cultures. (I will return to 'culture' in my second point).
I am wondering if you have some ethnographic evidence from the area where "indigenous" is at the same time newly made dominant culture and in what ways the political rationale of building national culture (which First World was doing the in 19th century) affects the ways in which the digital age / divide works or can be overcome. (I hope that John will also reflect on this issue since nation-building is a theme of his book).

I mainly thought of such additional factors as extreme conflation of politics and culture, culture and high culture which in many such states (especially Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan etc.) produced greatly centralised practices of culture production and to a considerable degree suppressed grass root culture activism.
To put it in other way, the problem perhaps is not primarily in the access to / availability of technologies but in the practices of cultural production, or cultural activism. I assume that in the US, Canada, Denmark – due to legal and political differences – these practices are conceptualised and carried out quite differently.

And here comes my second point. I was wondering about the meanings of 'culture' in the context of digital age / divide. On the one hand of course it is not high culture in Adorno and

Horkheimer's sense. But it is also not everyday culture / praxis (such as possibility to phone abroad via Skype from an internet cafe where there are dozens of other people around).

If I am not misinterpreting your paper, creativity is an important semantic component of indigenous ways of using new technologies. Among other things, creativity is associated with such notions as taste or artistic value, and as Bourdieu was demonstrating the definitions of taste or aesthetic value depend of power relations. It implies an assessing subject (e.g. you are mentioning Cannes festival). I was wondering if in your rich ethnographic material there is some evidence of fight over recognition in these "aesthetic-power" terms both inside communities you study as well as externally.

Sorry for a lengthy comment.

Best regards,

Anna

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Hello,

I am a media professional from Turkey. I would like to thank Professor Ginsburg for this intellectually stimulating paper, and Dr Postill for letting me to be involved.

I would like to make two points, hoping that they would be relevant, and are not too obvious. If so, I would like to apologize for taking your time.

The first point I would like to make is about policy-making and the digital age. Today, many states have started to adopt policy-making that not only encourages but sometimes also requires the use of internet to get services. This attitude which I witness in a semi-peripheral country that aspires to be in the core yet in many senses is in the periphery, does create an extra burden for some people if not deny them some services. Moreover, the ongoing inequalities are reproduced through the internet as well. For example, even though there are a very significant number of people in Turkey who do not speak any language other than Kurdish, they are not provided information or service in their language. In that sense, digital age becomes an age in which same inequalities are reproduced through different means on the state level as well.

My second point is about the tools of the digital age, such as computers or cell phones. Aside from their actual purposes, these may play a different role in the reproduction of culture as well. My example would again be from Turkey. Turkish soccer, as a medium for the reproduction of masculinity, has a well-established tradition of violence. Therefore, the security measures have been increasing, in many cases making it impossible for people to take cleavers or bags of coins to the games, no matter how necessary they can be. A few years ago, people started selling old second hand cell phones in front of the stadiums. These rather heavy phones had proven to be satisfactory weapons against the referees and the players, and people bought them solely for that purpose. In that sense, I believe that we can talk about the role of the gadgets of the digital age for the production of local cultures, beyond their "digital

aspect." Yet, it is the digital age that has normalized the ownership of these gadgets, and made these alternative uses possible.

Ertug

Giulia Battaglia (University of London)
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Dear list,

As a newly PhD student working on the effect of digital technologies in documentary filmmaking in South India, I got pretty interested in this on-going e-seminar discussion.

One of my current major problems in developing my research is the connection between digital technologies and indigenous media. We can identify initial forms of indigenous media before the 1990s explosion of digital technologies as forms of self-determination or representation (e.g. Canadian Inuit, Kayapo of central Brazil or the Aborigenal Austalian televisions). Though, we can also say that one of the major counter-power effects of digital technologies had been the open, cheaper, more portable access to technologies, which from a 'creative' perspective, has become a potential tool of expression for indigenous communities. Here my dilemma starts.

Instead of connecting digital technologies to indigenous media, can we rather associate pre-digitalization indigenous media with local activism, 'cultural activism', or political activism? The more I go on my doctoral research the more I have the impression that digitalization is de-indigenizing indigenous groups which are rather becoming part of a more extensive group of 'minorities' (whether they be political, social, economic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic etc, minorities). Digitalization has transformed local activists, political activists and cultural activists in MEDIA ACTIVISTS who to different extent look at local as well as global issues connected to their own communities – whether they be in a third, second, forth or first world – through various media forms.

Having said this, I do not want to go back to what has been theorized as a technological determinism but I would like to consider the 'digital era' as a complex contemporary phenomenon, which not only builds on already existent technologies (see Briggs and Burkes 2002) but also on the already existing practices connected to that technologies. In this respect, I would like to stress the importance on the 'practices' of cultural productions which differ from place to place. Thus, digital indigenous media can be only one of these practices (see for instance www.rekombinant.org;www.seeingisbelieving.ca; www.indymedia.org; www.critical-art.net; www.telestreet.it; www.nettime.org; among others).

If taking from this perspective, the debate will consider all the different 'alternative' practices under the name of media activism (including contemporary Indian documentary filmmakers, or the past phenomenon of Italian micro televisions - see for instance www.telestreet.it). Accordingly, media activists could work as new 'agents' of the digital age opening up questions connected to 'resistance' or counter-power from below.

I thank Faye Ginsburg for the inspiring paper and the entire list for the suggestive comments on this topic - useful for my work in progress. More comments are welcome.

Best,

Giulia Battaglia

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Hi all,

I want to jump in here as someone who was successfully awarded a 3 year research fellowship for a project with "Digital Technologies" in the main title and an indigenous cultural group after the colon.

In response to particularly to Daniel, I don't think Faye is for one moment suggesting that indigeneity is distinct from modernity – on the contrary I understand her to be exactly pointing towards the refractions of modernity (and thence destabilising or refiguring of the concept) that digital technologies potentially enable.
Furthermore, by highlighting, and problematising, seemingly self-evident discourses such as 'digital divide' as it informs policy and funding etc, Faye is directly exploring processes that exceed the conventional bounds of the 'local' (and any old fashioned anthropological understandings of it) in a myriad of important and innovative ways. Indeed, on of the strengths of this paper, and her work more generally, lies in the ways that she locates indigenous media productions – and the changing discourses that shape their very possibility – as vitally significant new circuits through which culture is made and re-made.

I do understand the desire to further interrogate overarching (and potentially hollow) terms such as indigeneity and modernity, and I think it's important. But it seems to me that rather than casting indigenous media research as a domain of out-dated preoccupations and categories, what is required (as Max has already suggested, with Faye in agreement) is close ethnographic study of both the production and reception of these kinds of projects. From my own experience, I would argue that such an approach can not only add depth and understanding of the specificities of the individual projects, but can potentially challenge our preconceptions about the nature of 'modernity' and indeed, media technologies and notions of indigeneity.

While we may 'all be nomads' (especially while our research funding lasts), from my own experience of working with Yolngu media makers on projects for a variety of audiences, I would argue – at least in the case of the self-identified indigenous people that I work with – that there are cultural and historical particularities, indeed (at least potentially) uniqueness, that matter here.

For example, as John suggests, generational divides are a central concern. For Yolngu the introduction of digital technologies potentially amplify them, while also providing for innovative ways of addressing them. To this end, the people I work with are taking up digital photography to actively close gaps between the past and present and future – as well as the living and the dead. But that is a story for another time.

My point is methodological really. Looking at Yolngu media in the context of broader media usage and cultural practices (over the past 14 years) has allowed me to understand the ways that local cultural concerns inflect Yolngu uses of media and, in turn, enabled me to better appreciate what is at stake for Yolngu as they take up and adapt the potentialities of digital media as part of a cultural politics that is directly concerned with addressing the many kinds of divides that shape and limit their lives. This, as has already been noted by other discussants, raises all kinds of important questions about the nature of the reception beyond the local - and the efficacies - of these forms of 'cultural activism'.

Yet equally, the very possibility of something called 'Yolngu media', and my study of it, about has arisen out of wider discourses about indigeneity, technology and cultural futures, such as those that Faye identifies and analyses here. These discourses also profoundly influence the ways my Yolngu colleagues make and use and talk about media.

From my perspective, I am not sure that I share Faye's optimism in her conclusion, cautious as it may be. It seems to me that while there is no end to the creative ways that Yolngu can and do use digital media (when they can access it), and even though there is an on-going interest by policy makers in installing the next generation technologies (generally without any consultation or knowledge of the cultural context that they will be installing it in), the practical and social realities are that Yolngu don't have the same kind of access and opportunities in the 'digital age' as I do. Partly geographic, partly cultural, partly economic, partly about literacy, a version the digital divide is enacted in my own research as I pack up my laptop at the end of my trip, making lists of photos to enlarge, laminate and put in the post.

But then again, I am reminded how practised Yolngu are at working spaces (in which the gaps are broader than technological and the social extends more beyond the local) when I get a call at midnight to email a photo of a young girl who has gone missing in town to the police. Or a text message to call so and so who needs a little money deposited via internet banking.

Enough. Thanks to all for the opportunity to participate. (I'm away next week so have taken this as my only chance to jump in).

Jennifer

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Ertug's comments raise an important point about technological imperative as well as the privileging of particular languages online (namely English as Lisa Parks addresses in her essay on kinetic screens, 2004).
Of course, the Internet can be used to teach and preserve languages, including those considered 'indigenous' as Dr. Ginsburg points out.
Language carries with it important ways of knowing, and many argue that with the loss of language comes the loss of a way of life. But, the Internet and kinetic screens are not culturally neutral and can further enable the wide distribution of information outside of the group (rituals, sacred practices, etc.) that may be considered sensitive to many (Brown, 2004 addresses this point). The discussion about audience and the fetishization of culture as well as the biases of technology are serious issues. In addition, while the Internet may preserve oral

cultures and traditions, English and written communication is privileged online, further privileging those who have and / or desire access to both. Moreover, the implications of built-in obsolescence with new media and what actually happens in the process of turnover are also not considered in the rush to digitize culture. (I.e.: hazardous waste is produced and economically depressed, non-Western people make their livelihood through the scraps as they live among dangerous technology refuse, human and environmental health compromised in the process. Parks addresses such concerns in her essay). I am not sure how this bodes with the environmental concerns of specific groups considered indigenous (not well, I would imagine), but technology is often valorised for its inclusive potential while it continues to bring with it its own set of troubles. I believe this is what Dr. Ginsburg refers to as the Faustian contract. In considering the relationship between indigenous people and media, I find it productive not just to consider issues of production and reception (audiences), but the physical, material implications of technology. I do not wish to minimize the potential of activism including new media, especially in the context of dangerous struggle over land rights (see for example the 2002 documentary *Seeing is Believing: Handicams, Human Rights, and the News*), but continue to view it as somewhat of a 'sticky wicket.'

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Hi Fay and the list,

I have some questions and reflections on your paper.

As I understand the aim with this paper, it is to contest the discourse of the 'digital age' and to put forward the necessity of inserting the subjugated voices of the other into this discourse. But I find the nature and content of this discourse a bit unclear. You give some illustrations of expressions of the discourse, mainly from an economist point of view. But is this all of it? I would like to include a lot more into it, and a much wider range of themes, strains and attitudes.

The discourse of the digital age is interpreted in an evolutionary frame, expressing ethnocentrism, exoticism and the attitude that we, the enlightened ones, are waiting for the others to catch up with us. I have some questions regarding this. You are questioning the evolutionary point of view but to me the approach that you put forward in the paper to a certain extent resembles the normative relativism that appeared as a reaction to the evolutionary paradigm and the unilineal stage theory that was proposed in the end of the 19th century. Normative relativism is represented by i.e. the American historical school and Boas and the British functionalism.

The aim was descriptive, classificatory and comparative, and the goal was the categorisation and explanation of the diverse societies and cultures. Secondly, I get the feeling that the concepts of digital age and digital divide have become a bit blurred and the digital divide appears as some kind of epiphenomenon to the concept of the digital age in the paper. Digital age denotes a discourse constructed in reality and context and that also is significant in the construction of this reality, as is pointed out in the conclusion. On the contrary, the digital divide is a well-documented fact. We may call it digital divide or something else if we want, but people have different access to the new technologies due to a lot of different factors as for example lack of infrastructure, cost, the language question, the rate of literacy, the rate of computer literacy, and so on. The divide is complex and multidimensional. The countries of the south have a more restricted access to it than the countries of the north. I haven't checked the exact figures lately, but according to the report made by UNDP (1999), in the developing countries, 18,5 % of the population had a radio, 4,5 % - TV, 0,4% had access to a telephone line, 0,7 % had a computer and 0,05% had internet access in 1998.
Marginalised groups have less access than the elites in the societies. My own experience from Kolkata is that the new technologies are mainly used by the urban upper middle class and it is also to a certain extent related to ethnic belonging. My research category, the Kolkata intellectuals, (Bengali Hindus) is more and more turning into a transnational elite category, while the lower groups in the society is left out and the distinction has become sharper. According to my point of view those factors deserve proper attention.

Finally, a short remark on the concept of 'cultural brokers' used to describe a new way of using tradition and culture to promote social and cultural community awareness. Social, cultural belonging and unity are often expressed in traditional and cultural aspects and I think that the introduction of the new technologies might be described as a transformation in terms of means of transmission and outreach and not something original or new?

Kerstin

Reference

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First, wow, what a story of old cell phones as weapons – speaks so efficiently to the materiality of media, to conceptions of the very slim category of what is considered new technology, and how identity is judged in relationship to that technology (old phones as 'only' good for throwing as weapons).

I think it's quite interesting that, as Faye mentioned, issues around indigenous media do create such polarizing debates, and perhaps these debates do stem from the experiential and knowledge divide regarding indigenous communities. While indigenous peoples' use of media seems utterly matter of fact for many indigenous people and some analysts, it is quite new and unexpected for many others; for still others, the notion that there remains any seriously uneven distribution in technologies is surprising. This is one thing which makes Faye's careful explication of these extremely creative and productive indigenous media practices so valuable: media worlds remain quite local, and even virtual media often have distinct, localizable effects, though sometimes across geographical networks of great

distance, as in the case of Zacharaius Kunuk's work (like Atanarjuat and The Journals of Knud Rasmussen).

I'll weigh in that the term indigenous will still have value even if we are all 'nomads' until the histories of settler and other kinds of colonialism no longer effect people's lives and deaths as profoundly as they do today. I think this is in fact one of the great contributions of Faye's article, along with another article co-written with Fred Myers (2006): it's certainly true that indigenous media makers have diverse and fluid identities relating to their lives in indigenous communities, in nation-state cities, to their cultural work, etc., but this critical issue of history, in many cases, has never been fully acknowledged by nation-states or their citizenry. Many indigenous media makers have taken on the task of making known indigenous dispossession (for example the question of Australia's Stolen Generation) to national publics. In this sense, media are tools by which indigenous activists may remake their relationship to states. Media are not so much tools of de-indigenization as of re-assertion not only of identity but perhaps even more importantly of history (and futures). Digital technologies offer new ways of drawing attention to this history, in many different styles. In the case of UsMob, for example, the requirement of a permit to enter and play seems to be a symbolic reassertion of spatial control and an allusion to a history of colonial domination.

Faye's conclusion regarding why it is so important for anthropologists to study terms like the Digital Age is compelling:

> "I explore the term The Digital Age because it so powerfully shapes frameworks for understanding globalization, media, and culture. [...] 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, 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."

Echoing Daniel regarding how the digital divide is important as a discursive field that structures practice, I feel this is a reminder of the salience of media anthropology in general, which is so often studying up, over, around the corner, or across the campus. Study (and production) of indigenous media has often been guided by the exchange between Navajo elder Sam Yadzie and John Adair during the path-breaking Navajo Eyes project, in which Yadzie asked Adair, "Will making movies do the [Navajos'] sheep good?" Perhaps the sheep are digital now (you know, you can sell virtual swords for video games and make a fortune! See 'Play Money, Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Struck it Rich in Virtual Loot Farming' by Julian Dibbell), perhaps they are something else entirely, but the stakes for indigenous media making in a field of digital production that does still have serious global divides and also still operates with many preconceived notions about peoples and time, remains extremely high.

Thank you all for this engaging discussion, and especially thanks to Faye for this paper and John Postill for organizing! I'm sorry I've been a bit of a lurker while finishing dissertation and acclimating to a new job. I hope to be more active in the coming months.

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Kunuk Zacharius at http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/eng/rose/kunuk_z.htm

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It is interesting to note that a focus on Indigenous media emphasises a sense of "tribe" over sense of "class" (socio-economic markers of consumption, distinction etc.) or senses, in an Indian context, of Caste.

Now whilst none of these terms have strong borders or clear content, the absence of the two of them at the start of discussion has some interesting implications.

Amita Baviskar talks of alliances between Dalits and Adivasis in India being very important in terms of political campaigns for subalterns. She points out that a politics that stresses indigenous identity as innate, tends to operate exclusively, in a similar fashion to other conservative politics, in the Indian case she cites Hindutva:

see   http://www.utexas.edu/law/news/2005/042105_baviskar.html

So does a starting point of 'indigenous media' predispose us to represent poverty and disempowerment in all its forms, or to a more arbitrary focus: How many anthropologists per capita are studying "Dalit Media" or "Urban Poor Media" rather than Indigenous Media?

And what of wider politics as well as socio-economic identification? There are Adivasi villages on the Sigur Plateau that lack clean drinking water, but have colour TV sets. This is because the state is giving them away; coincidentally one of the head politicians involved also owns a cable TV company, the only channel available under this deal.

(see: http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/blog/prospect/ do jump in, it's lonely out there!)

This spread of TV amongst the poor has some interesting implications. One NGO head spoke of how dowries had been increasing recently amongst the scheduled caste groups she was working with, with people routinely asking for mopeds in the area she worked in. She attributed this to television, and the expectations it brought. So here is something interesting about Dalits, socio-economic markers and advertising. But is it indigenous?

Now if indigenous media is about empowerment rather than reception and about championing the underdog, then that is all well and good. But if so, should it not be about championing all underdogs. It is clear that such empowerment implies a change in the situation of those empowered, and that this fits more with ideas of identification than of identity. It is also clear that it makes sense to look at a range of indentificatory practices. This does not sit so very easily with a focus on "the indigenous." Nor does Media, as that which is 'in between' people and groups, thus blurring the distinctions somewhat.

There was third cinema, so why not subaltern media?

Daniel Taghioff

Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)

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Dear Faye and all,

Thank you for a well elaborated and nice to read paper. I am trying to hook on to a few earlier comments. I have been absent for a week and maybe this has already become irrelevant in the flux of the discussion. If so, my apologies.

As in earlier discussions, I should like to bring the attention to the very question of terms and their meanings, especially the term 'digital age'. Clearly, on the surface the term seems easy to be used and understood. If we live in an age where technology is dominated by digital processing, then this is a digital age. So far, so good.

However, as with hypertextualisation of texts and electronic / virtual environments, all of these being terms that have been subjected to strong myths and misconceptions, the exact bandwidth of what "digital age" means depends on the cultural context of the cultural phase that makes use of digital devices. Hence, we should be careful not to coin a term that is then universally meaningful for each and every culture.
From which I deduce that cultural anthropology is indeed needful and necessary to evaluate the cultural phase that is shifting towards the digital is some way. After all, digital technology is not meaningful in itself but the meaningful result of its usage. I agree here with Cassirer who defines the technological progress of culture as the result of the needs of said culture. Hence, our understanding of "how digital" a culture has become in our reckoning of the cultural meaning of the word must first be evaluated in the field. The mere existence of digital devices in everyday life does not tell us anything.

Naturally, I am not an anthropologist, but a media semiotician. My remark is the result of an extensive study on the usage of media in a large timeframe in different societies and the documented discourse on this usage. I keep finding astonishing differences between what scholars as well as people in general CLAIM technology does and the REAL effects of a technology according to data on usage.

We have had a discussion about processes and practices. So, let me conclude that the "digital" is in my perspective a practice defined by media technology that is in itself a process which is again in itself defined by cultural local / global parameters. This is the point where data on the local cultural sphere is necessary to make the abstract notion of "digital age" a worthwhile concept to be embedded in pragmatic research.

All the best and thank you for your patience in reading this comment.

Guido

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Dear All

While Faye Ginsburg gathers her thoughts on the numerous issues raised so far, a reminder that our present e-seminar on "Rethinking the Digital Age" will end in only 48 hours, that is this Thursday at 9 pm GMT. Let's keep those posts coming in, the more the merrier, and if

possible please remember to add a signature with your institutional affiliation, as this makes easier the job of transcribing the session.

Many thanks

John

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Greetings to the list,

I think Kerstin's distinction between digital age as a 'discourse constructed in reality and context and that also is significant in the construction of this reality,' and the digital divide as an epiphenomenon is important. And, although Kerstin points out that the digital divide is a 'well-documented fact,' I think 'epiphenomenon' is actually even more appropriate. Digital divide is most productively addressed as a discursive construction arising out of digital age discourses, and the many different directions in which the digital divide discourse has gone speaks to the interests and anxieties of various stakeholders in digital age discourses, for example, the digital divide being presented as a digital opportunity to tech businesses in 2000 by the World Resources Institute. Digital divide discourses have been constructed out of the documentation of statistics around access ('bits per capita') and the digital divide was originally addressed as a problem to be solved with universal access. Much of the struggle around the digital divide discourse has been an effort to qualify (or discard) this category once complicated questions of what constitutes 'access' or benefit arose. Since then statistics indicating the manifold increase in technological takeup in certain communities / populations have been used to proclaim that the digital divide has been resolved; at the same time digital divide statistics are almost presented at country level and do not account for the variation of experiences across class that Kerstin describes. As 'best practices' in digital divide projects have been increasingly 'context-appropriate', the institutional frameworks in which they have been deemed best practices have also been increasingly aligned with the frameworks that establish and broadcast development goals.

Faye's invocation of digital divide discourses is not, of course, meant to portray indigenous communities according to digital divide frameworks but to show that local experiences of digital technologies and the new acquisition of 'capacity' need not be understood according to the logics of the digital age discourses. This argument does tend to suggest a polarized relationship, which I think rightly invites Daniel's suggestion that the production of digital age discourses be more seriously explored. (Daniel is correct to raise the point that digital divide discourses have naturalized certain economic arguments; I see these particularly around the rationalization of international cooperation around trade as opposed to aid driven development (see *The Economist* issue that Faye cites).

I'd just like to raise the point that "mainstream" digital age discourses are not monolithic; there are many and although they articulate with one another, the representations of the digital age in WIRED differ from those of the Media Lab, from WSIS, from the IMF, etc.
In popular discourse, we have many ways of addressing the presumptive-epochal shift: 'digital age', 'information age', 'knowledge society', 'network society'; these terms all follow roughly parallel courses and share influence over the shaping of influential institutional

frameworks, but speak to different audiences and position stakeholders in different ways. It's in relation to all of these that the variety of local / indigenous discourses offer different experiences of the digital age.

Thanks to Faye, Max, and John, and to the list for a very interesting discussion.

Leo Hsu

Faye Ginsburg (New York University)
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Hi Guido and all,

Thanks for so many interesting comments which I will try to respond to this AM. Forgive me for not doing so before this but I was sick with a terrible flu and am only able to sit up today. Let's hope my brain is working!! I will address each commentator individually to make things clear.

All best,

Faye

Guido
I think we are fundamentally in agreement about the need to do careful study of media praxis, and that is indeed a far more informative and important way to understand media. However, we would be remiss to not attend to the discursive field (in the Foucauldian sense) that shapes lives (and media practices) in the "out of the way" places where many of us work in terms of the political economy and practice as well as semiotics of media (as if these can be separated!!!). It certainly has been striking to me to see how much things have changed in 20 years in the shift from analog to digital video and the very different notions of cultural possibility and "developmentalism" attached to these regimes.
But now I am in danger of repeating myself, and perhaps I did not catch Guido's point completely.

More great stuff to read!
Also, I want to recommend two more things for readers who have an interest in these issues. First, is Jennifer Deger's excellent recent book, Shimmering Screens (2006), on her long term work with the Yolngu community in Gapuwiyak, which looks at the negotiation of various media – photography, radio, video – with Yolngu cosmologies and concerns
http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/D/deger_shimmering.html

And this latest, insightful article by Michael Christie just came to my attention, once again underscoring the arguments I have tried to put forward in the arguments around the digital: the problematic ethnocentrism of the discourse surrounding it, AND the ways that other cultural subjects nonetheless find ways to deploy these techne to their own ends. In this case, Christie points to the fundamental alterity of Yolngu (indigenous Australian) ontology, AND the ways that a traditional elder has "struggled against the grain of digital technologies designed to represent, in using them in Aboriginal Australian knowledge practices where knowledge is always actively performative rather than representational... this man exploited

possibilities the technologies offered for representation in achieving political ends in dealing with representatives of mainstream Australia."
Deploy   http://www.humantechnology.jyu.fi/current/abstracts/verran-christie07.html

Faye

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Thanks Leo for helping us sharpen our thinking about the complex vectors shaping the digital field "from the top"; I tried to give a sense of the range in the paper, but inevitably galloped through that material. What I think is important here is that we often get very caught up in the local worlds of the more remote places and people with whom we work, forgetting the amount of cultural production that goes into producing these fields, and naturalizing discourses that have different genealogies and ideologies but which nonetheless intersect.

It's really helpful to have younger scholars like Leo who are doing ethnographic work with "digerati" to give us a sense of how these ideas are being produced and acted upon in particular locations and from specific cohorts.

Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)
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Dear Faye and all,

Indeed I think that we are very close in our understanding, and my remark was made to support your perspective.

In the very discursive sense, media practice cannot possibly be separated from the cultural, social, and political phases to which the individual is subjected and through which the group manifests itself.
Hence my pledge for the "big perspective", which you support also in your email.

Best,

Guido

Faye Ginsburg (New York University)

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Hi Giulia,

I think we disagree on some points. Forgive me if I misunderstand your arguments.

First, I would love to know more about what gives you the impression that: "digitalization is de-indigenizing indigenous groups which are rather becoming part of a more extensive group of 'minorities' (whether they be political, social, economic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic etc, minorities)." That is not my observation, (and definitely not my argument although I don't think you are saying that) and in any case, I am disinclined to "technological determinist" arguments (vs. recognizing the way dominant media introduce certain discursive fields that are not determinative but are ideological.)

The extraordinary proliferation of media activism that digital technologies have helped catalyze for the kinds of groups you cite (www.rekombinant.org; www.seeingisbelieving.ca; www.indymedia.org; www.critical-art.net; www.telestreet.it; www.nettime.org; among others) is amazing, interested in open software, anti-globalization, human rights and democratic exchange, but in my experience, these are rarely the kinds of locations where you would see work coming from indigenous groups of the sort you first mention – such as Native American, Indigenous Australian, Amazonian, Maori.

Indeed, this split between these kinds of social universes was very apparent to me at the recent meeting of Our Media in Sydney http://www.ourmedia07.net/the-conference/ . This is a wonderful meeting (the 6th, each held in a different locale) bringing together international and national experts, researchers, policy makers, activists and local community development practitioners to discuss ways to ensure a sustainable future for building participatory community, alternative and citizens media.   Even with an organizer like Juan Salazar, totally committed to keeping indigenous media in the mix, it was difficult to sustain, and the differences between the "new media activists" and folks who live in parts of the world where electricity is intermittent   despite everyone's best intentions and desires to bridge those gaps.

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Jennifer,

Thanks so much for clarifying these points – each of these terms is so loaded: Indigenous, Media, Digital, etc. – that clearly each deserves an entire chapter unpacking the histories of the debates etc, so I much appreciate your helpful explication here.

The optimism question:
I totally take your point, and it won't be the first time I am accused of being too positive, but that stance is a strategic one, as I am the last person to want to contribute to writing that might in any way undermine support for the kinds of important projects that you (Jennifer) have been doing with Yolngu, or any of the others that I cite. Even the phenomenally successful group, Igloolik Isuma, has a hard time sustaining their work, and intergenerational issues are prominent there as well (I have written about that elsewhere).

For me, the whole point in writing this piece was to show how already deep inequalities are being re-inscribed in terms of access and cultural protocols under new technological regimes, but that despite that, people find creative and culturally appropriate ways to take up these techne. My optimism is very cautious indeed; perhaps I am wrong, but to be pessimistic indigenous work will not help raise awareness, visibility, and therefore support for these important social experiments. To be critical of the dominant discourse and the way it marginalizes Indigenous communities in terms of media uptake, on the other hand, is a central part of what we can do to help improve the situation.

All best,

Faye

Faye Ginsburg (New York University)
fg4@nyu.edu

Hi Amahl and everyone,

That use of recycled cell phones will stay with me forever! What an amazing example. Thanks Amahl for that gracious clarification of things that I might have rushed through in this paper.

All best,

Faye

Faye Ginsburg (New York University)
fg4@nyu.edu

Daniel,

Thanks so much for your comments.
I think a lot of your points have been addressed by others, but I must take up point 2 below. I am the LAST Person to fetishize "indigenous" – indeed, it must be the first time I have been accused of THAT! So I am baffled to find my work read in that way. Since the early 1990s, I have taken much public heat for embracing the complex and multifaceted ways that remote living indigenously identified people have taken up media of all sorts as wonderfully confounding contemporary subjects who take up technologies to serve their cultural and other interests in a variety of ways, including, for example, Aboriginal Australians of mixed race descent who have been denied their Indigenous ancestry by the state, but are now making feature films that interfere with that narrative of erasure! (See also the film festival I co-curated held at both the Museum of Modern Art and the National Museum of the American Indian, http://www.firstnationsfirstfeatures.org/). It was a strategic and labor intensive act to be sure that those 20 feature films by indigenous directors were shown not only in an indigenous venue but also at The Museum of Modern Art.

All best,

Faye

Faye Ginsburg (New York University)
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Thanks Guido for confirming that, and everyone on the list for their generous and lively input. I will stop plaguing you all with responses now. I got up from my sick bed this AM in a panic that I had not responded to anyone but now you will be sick of me!

All best and thanks to John once again for his terrific care and feeding of the list!

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
jpostill@usa.net

Dear All

It's now time to close our seminar on Faye Ginsburg's paper "Rethinking the digital age". Special thanks to Faye for getting back to us with those responses despite having been struck by the flu these past few days, to Max for his insightful opening comments, and to all those of you who've contributed to the rich set of posts we've had. A PDF transcript of the session will be available shortly.

Our next presenter will be Carsten Wergin (Bremen) with the working paper "Sounding out hybridity: world music, a medium for unity and difference?," this coming 22-29 May, 2007. As usual the paper will be up our website as soon as we receive it.

All the best

John

PS: Speaking of indigeneity, yesterday Jean and John Comaroff gave a superb keynote titled "Indigeneity, Inc" at the CASCA-AES conference in Toronto. I'll find out whether it will be made available on the Web or elsewhere and let you know.