
Using the Internet to Strengthen the Indigenous Nations of the Americas

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In October 1994, a team from the Oneida Indian Nation of New York visited Washington to view a new Internet site at the White House. The press release describing the visit is reproduced below to introduce the topic: how the Indigenous nations of the Americas are using the Internet to support their struggle for self-determination.

A Nation team comprised of Dan Garrow, Management Information Services director, Dan Umstead, Internet coordinator, and Brian Patterson and Marilyn John for the Nation Leadership, viewed the site, and reported it to be well organized with extensive access to a variety of general legal and government information. The White House's Web site could be utilized on a regular basis for research and could supplement the Nation's cultural and educational programs, they reported. They did note an absence of specific information in reference to Indian history or treaties, points which in American Indian viewpoint, are integral to the formation of the United States

... The Nation, in accordance with its government-to-government philosophy and recent White House initiatives to communicate directly with Indian Nations, is providing a direct-link access from the Nation Web Site (URL <http://nysernet.org/oneida/>) to the White House Web Site for the ease of Internet users. (Oneida Indian Nation of NY, 1994)

Indigenous peoples and nations are now a specific presence on the Internet, and they have made the global computer network a site for information exchange, analysis and action on self-determination. This article will describe and attempt to provide a context for these activities.

Communications Support for Self-Determination Struggles

The Internet is being used to support political struggles in South, Central, and North America. Most of the 30 million Indigenous peoples of the Americas live in Latin America, where their political and land rights are only beginning to win recognition. The consequences of political recognition by the dominant

nation-states become clear when one considers that Indigenous peoples represent more than 60 percent of the population in countries such as Bolivia and Guatemala. Despite centuries of brutal repression, Indigenous movements in these areas constitute a major political force. However, due to their uncompleted process of citizenry, Indigenous peoples remain marginalized as political actors. (1) A recent example is the Maya uprising in Chiapas, which has had a profound impact on the Mexican political system. The Zapatista leaders have been using the Internet to support this struggle, a novelty widely reported by the press. (2)

In North America, most Indigenous nations have treaty relationships with Canada or the United States. The governments of both countries have been fighting land and treaty rights in the courts for more than a century. During the past two decades, significant legal advances have been made, and some nations have become key political actors. For instance, a barrier to the Quebec sovereignty movement is the opposition of First Nations in the province who seek guarantees of their own rights to territory and self-determination. Statements to this effect by the Mohawk, James Bay Cree, Innu and other nations in Quebec have been appearing on the Internet for several years.

The presence of Indigenous nations on the Internet is one facet of a growing movement to rekindle "international" communication and trade links that existed in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans but were suppressed under centuries of colonial rule. In keeping with this movement, the UNDP recently announced plans to set up a trust fund to provide seed money for trade and development projects between Indigenous nations in the North and South of the Americas. Significantly, confederations are solidifying across the political borders of nation-states. For instance, a pan-Mayan movement is emerging in Central America – across the boundaries of Guatemala, Honduras, Belize and Southern Mexico – with a focus on self-valorizing strategies such as research and support for native languages, self-defined rural development, education, libraries, and pan-Mayan literatures. This pan-Mayan movement is linked by radio broadcasting, publications, telephone calls and faxes and, increasingly, by Internet e-mail.

The Indigenous nations of the Americas have a strong tradition of building communication and media networks to support their self-determination goals: In the US, Indigenous nations have been publishing newspapers since the early 19th century; in Canada, Indigenous peoples currently control more than 60 newspapers and almost 50 radio stations; in Latin America, Indigenous leaders recently announced plans to expand existing networks by training more Indigenous journalists. This strategy has been described as creating media networks run by Indigenous peoples for Indigenous peoples (Delgado, 1993). Indigenous media see their mission as serving the interests of the Indigenous movement in its historical struggle against the assimilationist policies of the dominant nation-states. Indigenous media – recognizing that

self-determination requires peoples to be respected as belonging to different nations, with their own cultures and territories – perform the radical task of informing the public about experiences that are consistently manipulated by the mainstream media to discriminate against Indigenous peoples. These media networks democratize and serve as a complement to the distorted image of citizenry as it applies to Indigenous peoples.

This communications strategy has expanded to the Internet, where Indigenous nations and organizations are providing public information sites over which they have complete control and using existing Internet sites and networks for their own purposes. Significantly, initiatives are underway in North America to develop a full-service computer network owned and operated by Indigenous peoples.

Using the Internet to Develop Indigenous Nations

'Using the Internet' means using a computer to send and receive electronic mail (e-mail) or search for information stored on other computers ('surf the net'), or to make information available by hooking up a computer containing data files. Every person connected to the Internet can send and receive e-mail but not all have the connection needed to 'surf the net.' An estimated 90 percent of Internet activity is e-mail.

The Internet is being used to support a wide range of activities, including biodiversity and resource management, arts and cultural activities, and others. The selected activities described below fall into three overlapping categories: research, education, and political networking – different but related strategies for nation-building.

The research conducted by Indigenous nations ranges from historical research for court cases on land and treaty rights, to general research to assist day-to-day operations. The Internet is being used to tap into information stored on computers around the world. For instance, the Oneida Indian Nation of New York noted the URL address of their World Wide Web site (the computer where their files are stored) in their press release; a computer can be directed to link with this site and then view and retrieve their treaty research files. Information files are located on machines controlled by Indigenous peoples and others set up specifically for their needs, such as the INDIANnet Census Information Computer Network Centre and the Fourth World Documentation Project. Universities have made their "Native Studies" information available. A comprehensive information resource is the NativeNet World Wide Web site; NativeNet also operates Internet mailing lists used by researchers to exchange information that will further their work.

The Internet supports education programs in various ways. Teachers use Internet mailing lists to exchange pedagogical information and they access information from Internet-linked computers when preparing courses. The Native Education Centre Electronic Library Internet site, for instance, contains the texts of historic speeches and relevant book reviews. Students can retrieve music from the *Cradleboard* bulletin board service, designed by Cree musician Buffy Sainte-Marie to teach Indigenous children about their heritage. The Internet offers particular advantages for distance education in remote communities. When online, "students are able to keep in touch with their instructors quickly and efficiently because Internet e-mail takes just minutes to send or receive anywhere in North America." (Armstrong, 1994) A concerted attempt is underway to extend the NII (the US National Information Infrastructure) to all the Indigenous-run colleges and universities in the US. Specialized institutions are using the internet to connect with the larger community – such as the Native Literacy Centre in Oaxaca, Mexico, which uses computers as a tool for preserving Indigenous languages.

Indigenous nations and organizations network by private e-mail with each other and with their supporters. To keep the general public informed of their activities, they routinely e-mail press releases and bulletins to public Internet sites. Postings appear regularly from, among others: the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, working to halt Alcan's Kemano 2 project; and the Lubicon Lake Indian Nation, working to stop the Daishowa Corporation's plans to clearcut unceded territories. The Lubicon Nation is also using Internet e-mail to help coordinate a boycott of Daishowa paper products. Thousands of miles south of Lubicon Nation territory, a network of environmentalists regularly e-mails updates on the demise of the Amazon rainforests.

Electronic mail has proved particularly useful in times of crisis. CONAIE, the Indigenous organization in Ecuador, used e-mail to coordinate their historical national mobilization to reject the government's plans to privatize lands belonging to the Indigenous peasantry. E-mail communication played an important role during the Yanomami crisis when Garimpeiros (gold miners) killed members of that Tribe at the Brazilian-Venezuelan border. In this case, CIMI, the Missionaries Council, acted as an intermediary to send information out by e-mail that was reproduced throughout the world. The impact of some e-mail activity has been considerable. An article about the infamous Chase Manhattan report calling for the "elimination of the Zapatistas" to improve Mexico's financial prospects had limited circulation in the publication *COUNTERPUNCH* but after it was posted on the Internet, the situation changed dramatically. Reposted widely, the story was soon being discussed in the press in Mexico, the US, and Europe (Cleaver, 1995). During the resulting international furore, the Chase Manhattan Bank fired the author of the report.

In addition to one-to-one private e-mail exchanges, more than a dozen Internet mailing lists exist for public discussion of Indigenous issues. The mailing list technology allows interactive, one-to-many communication among

subscribers: a message e-mailed to the central computer is distributed automatically to everyone on the list. Using e-mail to exchange information and ideas encourages a continental, if not universal, understanding of what it means to be a citizen of an Indigenous nation dealing with the assimilationist policies of dominant nation-states. Communication between people, communities and nations across vast distances brings home the realization that natural resources everywhere, especially lands and territories, have suffered similar fates under systems of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The authors believe the most important outcome of the e-mail networking activity is the awareness of the need to coordinate a conscious struggle for true self-determination. Given that this is not a one-way struggle, communications have helped to create strong alliances between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples who now have the opportunity to understand the situation from a comparative perspective. There are indications that the networking activities are contributing to a growing commitment to build a society based on mutual respect and protective of its nurturing base.

Emerging Issues

The South and Meso American Indian Rights Centre (SAIIC) and NativeNet recently sponsored an afternoon Internet workshop at the University of California, Berkeley, where participants raised two key concerns: access and information security.

Most of the 30 million Indigenous peoples of the Americas have no direct Internet access, and this situation is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. The top level of Internet access is a direct link with the high-speed "backbone" joining major urban institutions in North America and Latin America – universities, governments and large organizations. The next level of direct Internet access is telephone connection to the high-speed link. Direct Internet access is therefore limited to people affiliated with major institutions or people who have access to a computer, modem, telephone, and the money to pay for Internet connection, telephone charges, training and support. In areas of Latin America, monthly wages for an Indigenous person can be as low as \$30 US, and there may be no telephone infrastructure, even satellite telephone, for hundreds of miles. In North America, some Indigenous communities have unemployment rates reaching 90 percent, inadequate health and social services, high suicide rates, no electricity, no running water, no paved roads or no telephones. In these areas, Internet connectivity would hardly be expected to be a pressing individual or community priority. Nevertheless, the urgency to be connected to a larger system has been clearly understood. Increasingly, Indigenous representatives negotiating aid assistance or participating in NGO solidarity projects are asking for computers, training, and connection to the Internet.

Another Internet access route is indirect access through an intermediary – a friend or associate. Opportunities exist for people with access to the Internet to post messages on behalf of those without. Preliminary observation suggests that indirect access is an important feature of the Internet participation of Indigenous peoples: many of the press releases and reports describing their activities have been posted on their behalf by an intermediary. An example is CEDIB, a research centre advocating in favour of coca production by traditional Aymara and Quechua Yunga peasants in Bolivia. CEDIB offers to post Internet messages on behalf of the Indigenous peasants who have recently mobilized to defend their traditional production of coca. Acting as an intermediary allows solidarity and support while leaving the message to be communicated in the hands of Indigenous peoples.

In addition to cost and physical location, other barriers to participation on the Internet include language, literacy and gender. Research on the general population suggests that the Internet may be largely restricted to the wealthy, educated, articulate and male members of society. One danger is that unequal access to the Internet – similar to unequal access to telephones – could intensify existing power imbalances within and between Indigenous communities and nations. As people increasingly turn to the Internet for information about Indigenous peoples, those without access could be unable to represent themselves. As networks of Indigenous communities and nations increasingly depend on the Internet, those without access could be left out.

The second issue, information security, is of general concern to Internet users but has specific implications for Indigenous nations. This concern is understandable in light of recent events. One can easily point to, for instance: the wide-ranging plans for Internet surveillance by the US government and its agencies; the swift action by Canadian authorities to cut the telephone connection to journalists and Mohawk activists behind the barricades during the "Oka crisis" in 1990; and the suspicious circumstances surrounding the breakdown of the Mexican Internet connection after the Maya uprising in Chiapas. (3) In the future, the widespread use of public key encryption technology will help keep e-mail private, but network connections will always be vulnerable to political interference.

There is a growing tendency to envision the use of the Internet by Indigenous peoples as a counter-hegemonic practice. Daniel Linger (1993), looking at vertical lines of patronage within the Brazilian context, has suggested that "the cultural weapons forged get turned back on their makers." To some extent, the Internet activity can be considered a counter-hegemonic, or non-traditional, strategy of cultural revalorization. Framing the situation this way helps explain the recent breakouts of "Mayan hackers" – Mayan professionals trained in universities outside Guatemala who are returning home with the computer know-how necessary to push for the decolonization of the realpolitik used to discriminate against the Maya. (4) In fact, some Mayan leaders consider decolonization the access to computer technology in order to learn

how to use it rather than being used by it. (5) In this sense, Guatemala is becoming global as the Maya further their presence not only locally, but also nationally and continentally.

An obvious question emerges about the effects of these activities: Can the Internet help increase the strength of Indigenous nations and the power of the movement for self-determination? The answer rests with Indigenous peoples themselves, on how consciously and strategically they and their allies will use and modify the new communication technologies to meet their self-determination goals.

Notes

1. For a good analysis of the situation in Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala, Colombia and Ecuador, see the Indian Movements and the Electoral Process theme issue of *Abya Yala News*, 8(3) 1994.
2. 1995 articles include: The hi-tech Robin Hood, *The Guardian*, 20 February; Mexican Rebels Using A High-Tech Weapon: Internet Helps Rally Support, *Washington Post*, 20 February; When Words are the Best Weapon, *Newsweek*, 27 February; Rebels use Internet to Argue Cause, *The Independent* (UK), 7 March.
3. Related to this last case, one analyst observed that: "Whether or not the government was responsible, the general panic that erupted when the network was broken shows how essential the LANETA connection has become." Halleck, D. (1994). Zapatistas On-Line. *NACLA, Report on the Americas*. Vol XXVIII(2) Sept/Oct. 30-32.
4. Personal communication with Diane Nelson.
5. Personal communication with COMG Mayan leaders.

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