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## **NEW MEDIA AND SELF-DETERMINATION: PUBLICLY MADE AND ACCESSIBLE VIDEO AND REMOTE AND RURAL FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES**

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**ABSTRACT:** This working paper explores the potential for New Media to provide a means for members of remote and rural First Nations communities to challenge problematic mainstream representations of First Nations identity. Video on public access sites such as YouTube and Google Video, as well as on websites that act as hubs for First Nations internet users in remote and rural areas, allow for the accumulation of a critical mass of videos, providing complex, contemporary, and fluid images that “speak” to one another across distance and time. Such an accumulation may provide the means for a social movement—the public dissemination of self-determined identities by members of remote and rural First Nations communities thus growing in power to become a counter-hegemonic practice that undermines the misrepresentations of First Nations culture and identities in mainstream Canadian media.

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*As for the radio's object, I don't think it can consist merely in prettifying public life.... [R]adio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: Change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes.*

--Bertolt Brecht, 1932

*When capitalism “invented” one-way television it would have been equally possible to have designed a two-way system in which each television receiver would have a video response capability, the responses to which could be broadcast in turn.*

--Dallas Smythe, 1981

*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.*

--O'Donnell and Delgado, 1995

## Introduction

This is a working paper that represents a preliminary inquiry into the possible ways that new media, in particular publicly-produced, publicly-available online video, might provide people in remote and rural First Nations communities a way to disseminate self-determined identities by variously and contextually challenging problematic “mainstream” representations of Aboriginal identity. This is an exploratory, ongoing project and I welcome any feedback. For now I’ll give a bit of background on the project and explain the context of my ideas-in-progress.

This paper is part of a larger study called VideoCom, a SSHRC-funded project that operates in partnership with First Nations organizations that support the use of video communications by rural and remote communities. Video technology provides a way for remote and rural First Nations to open sightlines and to close both proximal and vast distances. While videoconferencing began in these communities as a way to provide healthcare (telehealth) and education services, it is now being used more broadly by community members in their everyday lives. Most significantly, First Nations community members are finding ways to adapt video communications to balance traditional value systems with technological advancement.

In another of our papers, presented by my co-author Susan O’Donnell this past March at the Aboriginal Policy Research Conference, we looked at how the *visual* aspect of real-time communication over digital networks is important for remote and rural First Nations communities. In interviews with community members about their experiences with video technology all interview participants said that having a visual connection is important when communicating at a distance—and one participant stressed the cultural value of the visual aspect of video communications in particular:

We’re visual people, as humans, in general, and Native culture is even more so. I think there’s a misconception when we talk about oral traditions. We tend to think only about sound, but I believe that oral traditions are audiovisual. When the granddad was telling those stories, and you were sitting around the campfire you were thinking thoughts that had images attached to them. It’s very definitely audiovisual... it’s not just sound. (interview participant in Atlantic region)

Examples of First Nations using video technology to create audiovisual culture at a distance already proliferate: Elders across Cape Breton speak to one another in Mi’kmaq once a month via multisite videoconference and First Nations students across Nova Scotia and Newfoundland regularly link multiple classrooms via videoconference just to keep in touch with their peers in other locations. Recently, First Nations actors, comedians, and artists rallied together with schoolchildren via multisite videoconference to ease the suffering and depression faced by First Nations youth, suffering which culminated in suicides in Eskasoni. The rallies’ host, comedian Glen Gould of the Membertou First Nation, spearheaded the events with

reverence, yet did not fail to spice the occasion with laughter—even humourously performing a virtual smudging ceremony to unite the various tuned-in sites.

And these are only a few examples. Notably, each one of these examples involves *multisite* videoconferencing. Beyond simple point-to-point communication, this breadth of visual connection provides a web of interconnecting voices and locations. Likewise, many of the videos made by First Nations community members “speak” to one another across time and space. Recorded multisite videoconferences, videotaped interviews, and short educational/political films are not only posted on public networks like YouTube and Google Video, but also on networks provided by community-run hubs, such as K-Net in Ontario or the Atlantic Help Desk in Nova Scotia. Public access provides an opportunity for community leaders, community members, filmmakers, Elders, and youth to know about the video-work already being done in their communities, and thus to innovate their own unique relationship with videocommunication technology in order to provide layered responses to pertinent issues.

Because this videocommunication technology is community controlled and publicly accessible, we suggest that such media leads to a groundswell of social action leading to self-determination, privileging First Nations’ traditional cultural practices while simultaneously allowing communities and individuals to express their contemporary identities. As a case study, we are interested in the collection of First Nations voices that together present nuanced, contemporary, complex, and relevant First Nations perspectives. Individually, each video can offer a uniform, authoritative voice and a potentially enlightening perspective. Together, however, they are much more powerful. Resounding off one another, they operate as a chaotic but fruitful cacophony—a noisy collection of media that, through its very mass and complexity, offers at once a challenge to mainstream hegemony and also an alternative hegemony to compete with (mis)representations of First Nations in other media.

### **Context of the Study**

Media and its diverse potential for representation is certainly not a new issue. In particular, social scientists, philosophers, and cultural and communications theorists have been investigating the ways in which the internet can act as a site of political action and identity formation. Manuel Castells and Alberto Melucci, for instance, have both argued that, while the internet can be a problematic site for disenfranchised groups, it can also be an empowering tool potentially co-opted by groups seeking a voice in the public sphere (Castells 1997; Melucci 1996). Such a voice might find its maximum power by communicating aspects of everyday life—the power of *present* (temporal and spatial) identities.

While European theorists like Castells and Melucci can provide a global context for some of the issues facing First Nations, perhaps we should start closer to home. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis’s discussion of representations of “Parallel Voices: Indians and Others” (1993) can provide a starting point for a discussion of First Nations’ use of video technology. On the representation of First Nations, Valaskakis writes:

For Indians at this time in history, otherness is related to issues of identity and cultural struggle entrenched in representation and appropriation, in how they are represented, and how these representations are appropriated by others in a political process which confines their past as it constructs their future. (online, 1993)

Struggles over (mis)representation are fraught and long-fought in this country and we still question, as Lorna Roth says, both "Who has the right to write history and to document culture?" and "Can history and cultural development processes be owned and controlled as cultural property?" (online, 1993).

Valaskakis, in her most recent book *Approaching Indian Country* (2005), provides further treatment of representation, helping readers to understand how the media can both support and thwart First Nations identities. She discusses the ways in which the media has offered "a mélange of Native images and texts that circulates in a cultural terrain filled with blind spots and pitfalls" (3). Such images and texts have operated together to reinforce a hegemonic racism in Canada that has solidified into caricatures and anecdotes. New Media, however, offers the opportunity to raise a counter-hegemony, multiplying the strength of what Valaskakis identifies as "Narrative Voices" in First Nations culture (3). Such voices gain strength from storytelling, which, as an important feature of First Nations identity-formation, is particularly relevant to a study of interconnecting First Nations videos. Valaskakis emphasizes that identity is formed "through a process that involves our individual identification with the cultural images and narratives that dominate our ways of seeing and representing the world" (3). Yet these images and narratives do not offer a unified perspective—instead,

linkages between different elements of discourse and social forces ... unify dissimilar experiences, practices, narratives, and meanings in structured relationships that are neither determined, absolute, nor constant. In the continual shift of social forces, relations of dominance and subordinations build "unities" through the linkages of particular discursive expressions, historical conditions, and social realities. These "unities" dissolve and emerge, constructing identities and ideologies that are continually changing. (Valaskakis 2005, 4)

Significantly, New Media allows a public platform for such continually changing unities. Hubs like the Atlantic Help Desk provide enough storage that online videos can exist as part of the site's long-term memory—more videos can be added each week, each month, each year. Each video alone represents an up-to-the minute perspective on child-rearing, or dealing with death, or self esteem, or religion; but together, over time, the videos interact to create a nexus of continually changing unities whereby First Nations identities emerge out of discontinuity, conversation, experience, and practice. In other words, a complex, contemporary First Nations identity with the public power to compete with dominant hegemonic representations of First Nations in the media can come to exist as its own mainstream entity. Online video provides the vehicle for public storytelling, storytelling that forges identities

“through a continual process of adopting and enacting allied or conflicting representations and the ideological messages they signify” (Valaskakis 2005, 4).

Speaking of the powerful potential of New Media, however, it’s important not to underestimate some of the technological challenges faced by remote and rural First Nation communities. In another co-authored VideoCom paper, we explored the roadblocks to broadband in remote and rural communities—we still have a distance to go in order to make New Media a part of everyday life for community members. The technology is expensive and often communities don’t yet have the infrastructure to support highspeed traffic. Beyond the practical challenges, Manuel Castells warns of some of the more social problems inherent in the information age. In his book *The Power of Identity* (1997) Castells argues that at the same time that globalisation and “informationalization” are transforming the world, they are also disenfranchising societies. One of our interview participants commented on the inherent contradiction between the possibilities and the negative effects of the transformation that technology promises:

using technology to preserve the language, there’s a positive in that, because you can record that and preserve it in packages and you know it’s always there, it’s not lost. ... [but] while technology is a positive move towards sustainability in part of your language I think at the same time I want to point my finger at technology and say “hey you, because of you I am losing my language” ... if I want to use the computer I have to use the English language, if I watch television, it’s all in the English language, if I go to my school it’s all in the English language. But I think basically technology is not helping me to preserve my language and promote my language. It’s, as a matter of fact, it is hindering my language. (interview participant from the Atlantic region)

Our participant’s dual vision of technology dovetails with Castells’ view that social movements are rooted in the resentment that people feel because of their loss of control over their lives, jobs and environment. If publicly-produced, publicly accessible video does indeed have the potential to capitalize on the positives of technology and minimize the negatives, potentially starting a social movement that, for instance, privileges First languages and reignites the possibility for those original languages to be primary in First Nations identities, then the technology also has the potential to counteract its own erosive effect on First Nations culture.

A central theme in Castells’ analysis is his insistence that all social movements are different from each other and must be understood within their cultural, social and political context. Technology, thus, needs to be specially adapted, and we would argue that technology already *is* being adapted by our partners, to take into account the specific context of First Nations cultural, social, and political values and to self-consciously provide a venue by which to nurture First languages and cultures. The Atlantic Help Desk homepage, for example, provides a special menu for “Aboriginal Language” that includes lessons, vocabulary, songs, talking books, posters, prayer, and a Mi’kmaq dictionary; on their “Dear Elders” pages, they also include Elders giving advice and telling stories in both English and Mi’kmaq.

Taking hubs like the Atlantic Help Desk into account, this particular study is interested in whether publicly accessible video on the internet can provide advantages to remote and rural First Nations community members to have direct access to public opinion for just such nurturing of language and culture. In *Challenging Codes: Collective action in the Information Age* (1996), Melucci posits that the world media system “operates basically as the manufacturer of master codes at the world scale,” with gatekeepers deciding the language used, selecting and organising the information broadcast and published, making decisions about the popular culture market, controlling the languages of computers and other information and communications technologies, and generally organising the minds of people (Melucci, 1996: 179).

Social movements, Melucci believes, have the power to reverse the symbolic order, through their alternative use of symbolic codes. Alternative media, including “music, bodily signals and clothing, radios and images, theatre and art, communication networks and virtual reality,” can be used to alter and evade the codes imposed by mass society. Following on from this view, Melucci believes that collective identity is not a given but rather a starting point for investigation. Within social movements many resources are allocated to create and maintain a specific identity rather than to pursue external objectives. Melucci provides context in which to discuss the ways in which technology, in being adapted to promote First Nations languages and culture, evades the codes imposed by mass society. Significantly, “collective identity” can be expressed in publicly shared videos, especially in that the videos provide a web, a network of voices “speaking” to one another.

Significantly, to combat the kinds of identities Valaskakis sees imposed by mainstream English and French media in Canada (she uses the Oka Crisis as a case study [Valaskakis 2005]), First Nations in Canada use the internet as a forum by which to provide the public sphere “discursive constructions with different ideologies and meanings, representations and narratives ... formed in lived experience and public text, in the discourse of everyday action and events—individual and collective, dynamic and diachronic, interactional and mediated” (1993).

## **Conclusion**

To end, I would like to invite feedback once again on any of the topics raised in this paper. Considering the quotations beginning the paper, we attempted to provide a discussion of the ways in which the internet has allowed some remedy to the one-sidedness of radio and television identified by Brecht and Smythe. Finally, we don't want to suggest that the internet has provided a utopian forum of information exchange, but only to posit the ways in which two-way technology can be used to fuel social movements of self-determination by providing public forums for the kind of intersecting narrative voices Valaskakis identifies at the root of identity formation.

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