Chapter II

Indigenous Peoples and the Cultural Construction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Latin America

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Abstract

Indigenous media have become an intensely debated subject in discussions of cultural diversity and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). In many circles, the question of the equitable and affordable access to communication and information has begun to be conceptualized as integral to human rights and as an essential element in the foundation of a knowledge and/or information society. The purpose of
the chapter is to analyse current approaches to indigenous ICT practices in Latin America by examining several case studies that explore, enliven and criticize the often ethnocentric discussions of the digital divide. The analysis is placed in the context of the rise of coordinated indigenous movements in Latin America, the wave of media privatisation in the region and the impact of IT policy and reform. It argues that, beyond consideration of the social impact of ICT on indigenous cultures, it is also relevant to consider the cultural construction of new technologies of information and communication in order to better understand the ways in which indigenous peoples adopt and make use of new digital technologies according to traditional knowledge and systems of law. The chapter concludes by supporting the need for self-identification of local practices and knowledge within the communities in order to design adequate strategies to gain benefit from the use of ICTs.

Introduction

Today, halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is outstanding to see that a large number of indigenous organizations, collectives, groups, tribes and nations worldwide have been able to set up their presence on the World Wide Web. Moreover, several indigenous organizations actively use various information technologies for different purposes on an everyday basis, ranging from political advocacy to electronic commerce, film and television marketing or biodiversity research. Nevertheless, despite increasing access to information and communication technologies, indigenous peoples worldwide have made it clear that the promotion of the Internet by governments and non-governmental organizations alike may constitute yet another exercise in control and coercion. If digital division is cultural exclusion, digital inclusion has not necessarily meant cultural inclusion. In this regard, the dynamics of visibility/invisibility of indigenous peoples in the information society remain as complex an issue as ever before.

An important example of this is the inclusion of indigenous peoples in discussions on the information society, like the ones that took place as part of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in 2003 where a Declaration of Indigenous Peoples and the Information Society and a Programme of Action were articulated. On that occasion it was made clear that indigenous peoples do not seek inclusion in the information society at the expense of their civil rights, cultural identities, ancestral territories or bio-resources. Moreover, it must be indigenous peoples themselves who decide on how and when they access and use new technologies.
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