

Chapter 11

Tlowitsis Re-Imagined: The Use of Digital Media to Build Nation and Overcome Disconnection in a Displaced Aboriginal Community

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ABSTRACT

Using the case study of the Tlowitsis, a dispersed indigenous community in British Columbia, Canada, this paper explores the role of ICTs, and in particular participatory video, in nation building. Also, the paper identifies factors that affect both the involvement and exclusion of the membership and addresses the challenges faced and lessons learned. ICTs, in particular new media technologies, offer great potential to overcome the geographic barriers caused by dispersal. However, it remains uncertain how they might contribute to the process of nation building. In this regard, the authors present six fundamental requirements for nation building, and then use these requirements to structure an analysis of the Tlowitsis case study.

INTRODUCTION

The territory of the Tlowitsis Nation¹ spans the coastal area of Northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia (BC), Canada. These lands have been occupied and used by members of the Nation since time immemorial. Seasonal travel routes, food processing spots, burial and cultural sites and other

named places extend across the entire territory. Karlukwees, located on remote Turnour Island, became a central settlement for the Tlowitsis Nation since the turn of the 20th century. In the early 1960's, the provincial government halted essential services to Turnour Island. With little prospect of schooling and access to health care, the Tlowitsis community began to leave the island. In the ensuing diaspora, community members have become

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culturally, as well as physically, removed from their traditional territories. A rapidly rising urban population with little attachment to these lands has dramatically reduced the opportunity, as well as ability, for community members to take an active and informed role in community governance and planning. As a consequence of this displacement, the Tlowitsis Nation, now numbering 400 members and administered out of offices in Campbell River on Northern Vancouver Island, faces a set of unique challenges as they engage in land-related negotiations as a part of the BC Treaty process.

Since 2006, the Tlowitsis Nation in collaboration with the University of British Columbia Okanagan have developed and begun to deploy a number of information communication technologies (ICTs) that seek to directly address these issues. Ranging from Participatory Video (PV) production through to the development of a web portal, all of these tools emphasize and support virtual community connection and interactivity, as well as explicitly tie much of the material back to the land-base. This paper provides an empirical case study that explores the role of ICTs, and in particular participatory video, in nation building. It identifies factors that affect both the involvement and exclusion of the membership and address the challenges faced and lessons learned through these ongoing projects and partnership. ICTs, in particular new media technologies and PV, offer great potential to overcome some of the geographic barriers caused by dispersal. Yet it remains uncertain how they might contribute to the process of nation building.

THE TLOWITSIS NATION

The Tlowitsis Nation's traditional territories spanned a large area of northern Vancouver Island from ancient history until the early 20th Century. Prior to this time, Tlowitsis members engaged in a range of land-related subsistence activities such as gathering plants, fruits and berries, hunting

and trapping fish, elk, deer and moose, and clam digging. They occupied a number of seasonal village sites scattered across islands along Johnson Strait and on Vancouver Island. Seasonal travel routes, food processing areas, burial and cultural sites and other named places extended across the entire territory. Most of their activities were concentrated along waterways, marine channels and passages, river systems and freshwater lakes (Galois, 1994).

In the 18th Century British and Spanish explorations occurred in the area simultaneously. In July 1791, the ships *Santa Saturnina* and *San Carlos* explored the Strait of Georgia, identifying places along the east coast of Vancouver Island (Wagner, 1933; cited in Kennedy & Bouchard, 2008). This contact heralded the era of colonization that continues to influence Tlowitsis governance and decision-making until today. During the fall of 1879 the Indian Reserve Commission began to designate reserve lands for Tlowitsis. Despite the range of territories and resources utilized by the Nation prior to contact, only 11 reserves were allocated through an exclusionary process that did not consult Tlowitsis leadership. Many of these reserves are tiny in size (less than a few hundred square metres) and in remote and inaccessible locations (see map below). In 1914, Tlowitsis Chief Johnnie Clark petitioned the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia arguing the inability of reserve lands to meet the needs of the Nation and the failure of the Crown to consult his people.

No one has been to my Band or my land to sell them; no one has asked me how much, how big or where we want a reserve... I and my people were born on this land and our people before us, from the beginning. We have not come from a strange country; we are not foreigners. This country is ours. Chief Johnnie Clark, 1914 (cited in Kennedy & Bouchard, 2008)

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