



Aboriginal Culture in the Digital Age

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Introduction

As the digital age continues to change Canada's social, political, and economic landscapes, Aboriginal peoples are responding. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada are experiencing a cultural renaissance that is strengthening and renewing their distinct identities within Canada while at the same time emphasizing that Aboriginal cultures are alive, dynamic and diverse.

While it is possible to identify commonalities between the cultures of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit, each nation has its own history, tradition, values, and language that remain the foundations for a way of living and of knowing. Having resisted overt assimilation and initiating a process of restoring identity, Aboriginal cultures face new challenges. Some are more immediate threats such as the passing of older generations who are the repositories of history and knowledge; while others, like the urbanization of Aboriginal peoples, may have permanent and profound consequences for the preservation and transformation of Aboriginal cultures and cultural relations amongst Aboriginal peoples.

The pervasive reality of information and communications technologies (ICT) is a new challenge for Aboriginal Canadians. ICT is having a transformative impact on our everyday economic, social and cultural lives. The new technology, especially the Internet, holds promise for Aboriginal nations and the hope for the future is that ICT can be effectively and appropriately harnessed by Aboriginal peoples to propel forward their process of cultural renewal. Indeed, some of the most promising ICT applications are in the cultural field.

The preservation and protection of Aboriginal languages, ecology and heritage is of utmost importance to sustaining Aboriginal cultures. Although technologies can serve as tools to enable the transfer of cultural information – language, stories, practices and symbols – they also pose risks. A critical challenge for the future is the identification and mitigation of the potential risks of ICT such as misrepresentation and misappropriation of culture and cultural homogenization. The continuity and renewal of Aboriginal cultures are deeply rooted in the self-determination of Aboriginal peoples and how they wish to shape and evolve their cultural futures. This is no less true when it comes to Aboriginal peoples harnessing the potential of ICT.

Role of ICT in Cultural Continuity and Community Renewal

Connectivity offers the potential for enhancing cultural continuity and rejuvenating community ties. An accumulating body of evidence has demonstrated a direct correlation between a community's economic and social wellbeing and the cultural identity of its residents.¹ Whether the emphasis is on the match between indigenous culture and institutions, or on the importance of the preservation and rehabilitation of threatened cultures, the core message associates strengthening the Aboriginal cultural fabric with improving a community's overall health and social wellbeing.

Language Preservation and Growth

If there is a starting point, cultural continuity and community renewal lie in the preservation and learning of Aboriginal languages. As the primary articulation of culture, language connects individuals to their community. As vehicles for culture, Aboriginal languages reflect a worldview and connect individuals to a system of values. Language retention and new speakers have decreased dramatically in recent decades and cultural knowledge and traditions have become threatened. According to UNESCO (1996), approximately half of Canada's 50 Aboriginal languages are facing extinction or are endangered. Part of this can be attributed to the passing of Elders, who act as the gatekeepers of Aboriginal wisdom and knowledge, and, by means of oral traditions and customs, pass on cultural information to younger generations. In this respect, personal and collective interactions are as important in the transmission of culture as the use of language itself.

Given the subtleties and nuances of language and dialect, one of the challenges arising from the use of

ICT is to ensure the intricacies of Aboriginal cultures are not lost. If used appropriately, ICT can play a key role in cultural and linguistic preservation and promotion in new and exciting ways. For example, in Iqaluit a former schoolteacher has recorded popular English children's songs on CD in the style of Inuit *ayaya* singing, using songs to recount stories about the past in entertaining and engaging ways. CD recordings by no means replace *ayaya* singing, nor are they intended to. What is pertinent is that technology has been employed to reintroduce the dwindling cultural tradition of *ayaya* singing while at the same time acting as a device for language learning.

What must be kept in mind is that Elders retell events in a language that is as rich in nuance as it is in detail. While it will never replace face-to-face contact with Elders, teachers and peers, ICT may serve as tools to reinvigorate language usage, especially with the younger generations who, by and large, have experience with technology and a high level of comfort with it. For example, visual technologies such as video-conferencing can relay the facial expressions of a storyteller and the intonations of his or her words.

Notwithstanding the continued threat that the English language poses to the survival of Aboriginal languages in Canada, it can function as a unifier in certain instances, especially with regard to inter-cultural learning. In an information age, connections are unlimited so long as there is a common language for communication. If Aboriginal groups, each with a distinct language and history, employ ICT to communicate on issues of vital importance, English enables them to articulate common cultural threats and develop unified strategies for protection.

Cultural Preservation and Transfer

A second point of departure for cultural continuity lies in the preservation of cultural knowledge and its transfer to future generations. With the passing of older generations, the risk of losing the history and

¹ Stephen Cornell and Joseph Kalt, "Sovereignty and Nation-Building: The Development Challenge in Indian Country Today", Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2001.
Michael Chandler and Christopher Lalonde, "Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations", *Transcultural Psychiatry*, V.35, June 1998.

knowledge of Aboriginal peoples makes preservation a critical priority. Although not without issues, communications technology of every sort has become a vital thread in the process of retaining cultural and historical knowledge. The second half of the equation, however, is equally important. For the culture to survive and remain vital it has to be absorbed and made relevant to a new generation of Aboriginal young people, many of whom will grow up in large urban environments often quite disconnected from traditional community roots.

The early years are particularly important in the formation of values and language development. The intergenerational transfer of culture has to start here, in providing Aboriginal children wherever they live with opportunities to learn their culture and language. ICT has a powerful role to play in ensuring that Aboriginal children and young people can grow up in a culturally-rich environment that helps instil in them a sense of pride and knowledge about who they are. For example, the First Nation Help Desk (www.firstnationhelp.com) provides online cultural resources such as talking books, language lessons, and children's songs.

The Internet can also greatly increase the capacity for cultural interaction by removing physical barriers. Most post-secondary education and employment opportunities exist outside Aboriginal communities, and, as a result, younger generations have become increasingly mobile and more removed from the communities that are traditionally the nurturing places for Aboriginal culture. As a tool for communication, ICT has the potential to remove "distance" and keep individuals connected with family and other community social supports through online cultural forums, chat rooms and email, thereby allowing for cultural transfer on an informal or formal basis. The recent launch of www.Métisradio.fm, which archives historic recordings and solicits and promotes new artists across the Métis homeland, is an excellent example of how disperse Métis populations are informed of cultural and political events – connecting community members' traditional cultural practices using a contemporary medium.

Role of Culture & Learning in a Knowledge Society

ICT tools are now an integral aspect of the learning process – the use of technology and the application of skills are taught at the point of entry into school and persist throughout the span of our lives, in our personal, work and business practices. This requires a great shift in learning, including developing a whole new range of literacies and capacities. But what does the integration of technology and learning mean for Aboriginal learners or their culture?

First of all, ICT are tools that can be used to integrate culture and learning in ways that are much more conducive and culturally appropriate for Aboriginal learners, possibly ensuring a more holistic experience akin to what Aboriginal learners received in the past. Aboriginal perspectives on learning primarily involve education by example and experience, include storytelling and continue from birth to death. Although the technology and skills are for the most part homogeneous, they can be adapted and used to incorporate the way that Aboriginal peoples see the world, the way that they learn, and to create culturally-appropriate learning environments (including learning in one's own language).

In instances where eLearning tools have been utilized, school retention and enrolment rates have increased as a result. The Sunchild eLearning Community (www.sccyber.net) is a model of how technology has been tailored to fit the needs of First Nations students. Since 1999, Sunchild has delivered eLearning programs to students ranging from grades 7 through 12 as well as adult learners, successfully improving the overall levels of education for Aboriginal peoples in Alberta. What's more, eighty percent of students enrolled in its Grade 12 program graduate with many continuing to post-secondary education. Part of the success can be attributed to its education model that has been developed with keen consideration for the specific learning needs of Aboriginal peoples including First Nations' sense of time, relationships, and personal

and family factors which might interrupt the learning process. Not only is this education model culturally relevant and socially sensitive, the courses are available without high-speed access, which begins to address some of the issues around accessibility.

Learning environments must ensure that youth are engaged in their traditions and are equipped to perpetuate them. If it is the case that Aboriginal youth leave their communities and become immersed in mainstream culture, mechanisms such as video-conferencing, online courses and CD-ROMs allow Aboriginal youth access to rich cultural practices “any place, any time.” However, in addition to allowing for culturally appropriate learning, eLearning also allows children to stay within their communities, breaking the cycle and history of relocation (such as residential schools), which has had irreparable damage on community cohesion, family bonds and individual educational retention. The Keewatinook Internet High School (www.kihs.knet.ca) is one example. This First Nation run online high school in northern Ontario has an enrolment of some 300 young people who receive a full grade 9 and 10 curriculum in their local schools all day, each school day supported by trained teachers. Without this alternative these young people would be leaving their communities to get schooling. With this option they can remain in their communities until they are older and better equipped to cope with living in a city or town sometimes hundreds of kilometres away from home.

Sharing Aboriginal Culture in the New Economy

When individuals have the skills and the confidence to use ICT, the knowledge economy presents new opportunities for economic development that extend beyond the boundaries of Aboriginal communities. These opportunities are often in the cultural industries. Currently, First Nation, Métis and Inuit entrepreneurs are engaged in a large number of culturally-based eEconomy

activities including:

- Using ICT as a tool to expand markets for Aboriginal cultural products;
- Integrating technology into traditional activities to showcase talents in music, dance and other arts;
- Expanding commercial opportunities such as eco-tourism to global economies;
- Using indigenous knowledge to assist in environmental management preservation; and,
- Commercializing unique and culturally-appropriate service delivery models in areas such as eLearning.

The Internet also allows for an increasing visibility of Aboriginal artists and opens new markets for cultural products. ICT has already been introduced into traditional Aboriginal artistic expressions with great success. For example, technology plays a critical role in the visual arts. Whether it is Buffy St. Marie using computers to “paint” or Douglas Cardinal pioneering computer applications for his earthy, curvilinear architecture, by using mediums such as film, video, and digital photography, Aboriginal artists are able to bring new exposure to “living traditions” of Aboriginal culture.

Making Cultural & Historical Knowledge Public in an Information Society

One of the best ways to preserve a culture is to practice and disseminate it as widely as possible. Given its unlimited potential, the Internet can function as an ideal tool for making Aboriginal cultural information easily and readily available. Inroads have already been made in the online storage and access of histories, important documents and letters online; artefacts can be archived into electronic databases; and, it is possible to map sacred sites in a protected

manner to allow for virtual teachings and tours. For example, online archives are serving as repositories for Elders' teachings and connect Aboriginal youth with their heritage through such vehicles as the Virtual Circle – The Aboriginal Community (www.vcircle.com) website. In many First Nations, Métis and Inuit schools, students undertake learning projects to trace their roots and post information on the Internet, a learning process which successfully engages youth in technology as well as serving to strengthen their cultural identity.

Once culture has been posted and preserved online, technology can be a powerful tool for intercultural learning, particularly amongst young people. The reach and openness of the Internet offers opportunities to build awareness and understanding of Canadian and Aboriginal cultural diversity. Communities can share information and traditions, and heritage can be exported to larger, non-Aboriginal communities. Knowledge can also be shared between indigenous peoples from the North and the South, developing intercontinental and global partnerships.

Protecting Culture & Indigenous Knowledge - Mitigating the Risks

While the potential of the Internet as an open access system to increase the availability of cultural information is desirable, the pervasiveness of the Internet creates certain concerns that will have to be addressed if the Aboriginal community is to readily accept ICT as tools for cultural preservation. In the information age, the threat of misappropriation of knowledge is strong and of foremost concern to Aboriginal groups, particularly the threat of appropriation of cultural knowledge and symbols for commercial use. It is well known in Aboriginal communities that many songs and dances are tied to spirituality and their sanctity is derived from live performance, thus, there are concerns around seeing these performances out of context, say, over

the Internet. Decisions need to be made about what is appropriate to put online and what is to be considered authoritative cultural content. This is not as straightforward as it appears. Elders, youth and general community members all have a vested interest in cultural protection and expression.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples can use many methods to protect and preserve their cultural knowledge and skills for the benefit of their communities. First and foremost, there is a level of security in the use of Aboriginal languages; only those who can speak and read the language can retrieve it. Also, by implementing a variety of mechanisms such as password protected sites and virtual private networks, cultural information stored online can be protected. Communities can impose limits on networks to keep unqualified people or non-community members from gaining access to culturally sensitive information.

Information Governance

Ownership, control, access and protection of cultural information is a vital issue for Aboriginal peoples. Standards and mechanisms, such as community protocols and Elders' committees, can be put in place when deciding what information should be made public on the Internet and what information is considered authoritative cultural content.

Customary laws which govern the use of culture – including the appropriate environments and conditions (the where, when and how) – should be reflected in formal guidelines and agreements. These protocols would outline the principles and contexts for the uses of certain information and will provide a working framework to ensure that customs are respected and misrepresentation does not occur. Communities can employ a strategy that not only clearly defines procedures but also effectively communicates an understanding of these protocols to all members. Then, once indigenous culture and knowledge are posted on the Internet, communities

need mechanisms to control and maintain it. For example, the Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch, a governing board that defines the processes and outputs for using Mi'kmaq knowledge, has developed principles and guidelines to ensure that the ownership of Mi'kmaq heritage rests with the appropriate communities.

Self-determination, Self-government, and Culture

Having a recognized and respected community-based system of information governance, while critically important, is not enough to deal with the challenge of a digital age when information is so easily captured and used by others for unintended purposes. Indigenous knowledge is a case in point.

This knowledge is held by an Aboriginal group and is widely regarded as a collectively-held as opposed to an individually-held right. Intellectual property rights focus on the individual when it comes to knowledge and artistic creations. Because these laws do not encompass collective rights, collective privacy and collective ownership, they do not offer appropriate or adequate “digital rights” protection for indigenous knowledge. Indeed, they may present a risk for Aboriginal communities that make their cultural knowledge openly accessible on the Internet.

In commenting on what is required, Dr. Marie Battiste notes that: “With respect to indigenous knowledge, we stress the necessity of recognizing and respecting, in both national legislation and international law, the principle that any acquisition, publication, scientific use, or commercial application of indigenous knowledge must be in accordance with the customary laws of the peoples concerned, as determined by them.” Such laws would go a long way to ensuring that when community knowledge has entered the public domain, those who access the information will adhere to a community’s laws.

It therefore becomes fundamental to Aboriginal culture for Aboriginal governments to have the authority to establish formal, transparent rules and regulations to govern their information and cultural practices, including their digital expression. Having Aboriginal governments with this capacity requires the recognition of their inherent right of self-government, the necessary jurisdiction to enable communities to make laws that better protect their cultural ways of life and the need to have these laws enforced both inside and outside the community. Unfortunately, at the moment, little progress is being made on putting in place the legal framework and governance capacities that will give Aboriginal peoples and their communities the tools to tackle the challenges of protecting their knowledge and heritage.

Conclusion

A people’s culture represents the most fundamental expression of who they are. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples as nations onto themselves - political and cultural groups with distinct values and ways of life. As Aboriginal nations become further integrated into the knowledge society and economy, ICT will play an important and vital role in the protection of their cultures and in the promotion of language, culture and community connectedness. ICT provides many opportunities for renewing, preserving and strengthening the social and cultural fabric of Aboriginal communities. As a response, political agendas need to prioritize the protection of indigenous knowledge and the enhancement of language and culture.

If First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples integrate ICT into their communities on their own terms and at their own pace, they maintain ownership and control of its use. Non-Aboriginal technologies have often been

introduced into Aboriginal communities supplanting traditional ways of cultural engagement. Technologies, if adapted and modified to mesh with Aboriginal cultures and needs, act as an enabler for the transmission of culture and language.

Self-determination and self-governance are strongly tied to the protection, expression and renewal of Aboriginal languages and cultures, providing the authority that allows Aboriginal communities to ensure programs are adequately designed for their needs and implemented in ways that are culturally appropriate and relevant. It enables Aboriginal communities to create institutions and governance structures that are culturally meaningful and relevant to them, which as we have highlighted, increases the prospects for the health and socio-economic prosperity of communities.

Finally, ICT, especially through the Internet, offer powerful ways to acknowledge and promote the diversity and history of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples within Canada and to engage in a spirit of intercultural sharing and learning. In so doing we all benefit as Canadians by enriching the texture and understanding of our country's vision of diversity and citizenship.

About the Writers

Marcia Nickerson, BAH, MA, is Head of the KTA Aboriginal Practice Group. Marcia has experience in undertaking small and national scale policy-related research and analysis projects; facilitation of policy workouts, focus groups and roundtables; federal-provincial strategic evaluation and consultations; and collaboration with Senior Management in forging new policy directions. Most recently Marcia has responsibility for the Aboriginal Voice component of the Crossing Boundaries National Council (CBNC) and co-authored Aboriginal Voice's first *Policy, Politics and Governance* publication *Finding an Aboriginal Digital Voice* (July 2004).

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About the Culture Working Group

The Aboriginal Voice Culture Working Group was established to explore the relationship and impact of information and communications technologies on Aboriginal cultures and identity. Its purpose was to bring together a small group of knowledgeable individuals with a cross section of experience and backgrounds to develop this discussion paper. The ideas, perspectives and questions developed in this paper are intended to guide and stimulate further dialogue on issues of Aboriginal identity and culture, as well as influence thinking within the broader Aboriginal policy community.

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KTA Centre for Collaborative Governance

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Aboriginal Voice

Aboriginal Voice is a Crossing Boundaries National Council project. This is a collaborative initiative between several federal departments and National Aboriginal Organizations designed to engage Aboriginal peoples in a multi-stakeholder discussion on how information and communications technologies (ICT) can or should be used by their communities, organizations, and governments. Aboriginal Voice was launched in March of 2004 with a National Forum. To date, there have been regional forums in the Atlantic, Ontario, Alberta, and Manitoba. In addition, Aboriginal Voice has created an online space where discussions on Aboriginal issues can be fostered. You can find the website at:

www.crossingboundaries.ca/aboriginalvoice

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