

# Calling up culture: information spaces and information flows as the virtual dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

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Revised from a paper presented at IFIP WG9.4 Conference: Information Flows, Local Improvisations and Work Practices, Cape Town, May 2000

## **Calling up culture: information spaces and information flows as the virtual dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.**

### **Abstract:**

*Most understandings of globalisation assume a flattening of the cultural terrain. In contrast, this paper, using examples from Africa, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and Canada, demonstrates a more complex interaction between traditional cultural practices and modern communication forms. The new information technologies enable universal access to authentic local voice. Archiving social and cultural practices provides for cultural continuities and reflexivities: this has historically been the business of museums, universities, and indeed oral traditions of song and poetry. New information technologies enable the routine archiving of social and cultural practice at a minimal cost through hypertext, web pages and universal access. The "globalisation of culture" so often discussed needs to be reframed with reference to this highly overlooked indigenous capability to archive own culture. This paper attempts to provide such a reframing.*

### **Introduction: the globalisation of symbolic life.**

Archiving social and cultural practices provides for cultural continuities and reflexivities ([note 1](#)): this has historically been the business of museums, universities, and indeed oral traditions of song and poetry. New information technologies enable the routine archiving of social and cultural practice at a minimal cost through hypertext, web pages and universal access. The "globalisation of culture" so often discussed needs to be reframed with reference to this highly overlooked indigenous capability to archive own culture ([http://www.geocities.com/the\\_odyssey\\_group](http://www.geocities.com/the_odyssey_group)). Globalisation has generally been viewed as a process that is eroding difference and producing a seamless global system of cultural and economic values. For example, Castells' view of "informational politics in action" (Castells 1997 p.333) focusses on globalisation as the reliance on simplified mass communication with the inevitable outcome of a reduction in the complexity of political discourse. Simultaneously, however, and in the same volume, he describes very different and complex forms of electronically mediated communication by dissident minorities: Zapatista rebels in Mexico and Militia groups in the U.S.A. (in both cases movements premised on the championing of the local and specific and a rejection of the global economy are achieving a presence and a voice in a global arena through the appropriation of the technologies of globalisation). Castells, along with many other theorists of the new information order, has registered the new relational tensions which accompany the emergence of highly distributed access to information technology in a context of current global cultural domination - to provide a shorthand understanding, the Macdonaldisation of culture .

In contrast, this paper alerts social theorists, and policy makers, grassroots organisations and technology developers alike to the new combinatorial opportunities for the extension and enlargement of multi and parallel cultural voices and visions that inhabit the world of global communication. The structure and format of Internet based communication has created a proliferation of software applications which operate as multi-voicing mechanisms. At the very lowest level they permit the intermediation of language through instantaneous translation facilities, enabling many highly detailed views and images of the world to be accessed simultaneously. Social theory has yet to reflect on the extent to which the development of the Internet and accompanying software applications has resulted in the ability of cultures and cultural groups to more actively communicate their world views in the global frame. Equally the consequences of such capabilities and choices for the formation of identity, both at the individual and at the community level must be addressed. Social theory is, however, substantially behind

the economic practices of cultural marketing now present and readily distinguishable on the Internet. On line cultural sites developed expressly with the intent of selling through the net also carry active links to indigenous use of the mode for a range of economic, cultural and social purposes. There is a symbiosis between the use of the Internet for e-commerce purposes and the maintenance of living and differentiated culture, a pattern which is already evident in Canada, Africa and Indonesia. By a sampling of voices from geographically disparate locations, and in contrast to the dominant thesis of Castells (informational politics in action), a complex dynamic between traditional cultural practices, modern communication forms and the enrichment of global symbolic life is revealed.

Many discussions of the impact of the Internet and the globalisation of communication on local culture and material practice focus on the 'Macdonaldisation' (MUSIQUES TRADITIONNELLES DU MONDE <http://www.abm.fr/fgt97/recikersal.html> ) of symbolic life. Global communication is seen as flattening the cultural terrain in the direction of the dominance of the modes and material practices of the global economic leaders, most particularly the United States. The US ownership of the strategic components of global communication technology, most particularly the dominance of Microsoft, is seen as an important element in this flattening of the terrain. Equally important in this doomsday scenario of the destruction of a rich and varied cultural and symbolic life is the emergence of English as a global language. Whilst it would be foolhardy to deny the validity of this scenario as a potential state of the future world of global communications, it ignores many of the new cultural capacities of new forms of global communication. Just as Crystal (1997) argues that the global English language is no longer under the control of its original native speakers, so are the technologies of globalisation appropriated by users at the margins.

The technical ability to provide sites which operate in many languages simultaneously enables the insider a channel to communicate with the outside and the outsider a channel to communicate with the inside. The consequences for cultural development are necessarily emergent and not specifiable in advance of the interactions which take place through the new mode. What the new mode does offer almost exclusively is the ability to check out the authenticity of the voice which is communicating its message on the global stage. There is a range of technologies coupled with an internet backbone that can offer new options in the development discourse, for example, global positioning systems and their tracking capabilities provide a mechanism for determining the origin of voice.

Satellite linked, solar powered, hand held technologies have already found use amongst the illiterate bushmen of South Africa. The Cybertracker makes use of oculacy to enable the bushmen of the Kalahari to instantaneously transmit information beyond their local boundaries. By touching of an icon on the screen of the handheld set or by drafting of an animal form through the etch-a-sketch function of the technology important environmental management data can be sent to a receiving agency. This technology could be used in the provision of services and extension of political participation for this very same community. In this context: the etch-a-sketch function could provide an important oculate signal in the calling of assistance in a situation of crisis, for example, a simple drawing of an ambulance or of a person in sickness could relay the need for services at a minimal scheduling cost. Similarly, handheld technologies can be used to register, record and relay communal choices in the political domain. Non-literacy need no longer be a constraint on the full global participation of the poor and the grassroots.

### **Electronic Mediation/Electronic Disintermediation**

As with the evaluation of other technologies, the capabilities revealed in the extreme circumstances of the remote bush inform and frame more mundane applications. The new global

communication technologies have the capacity not only to accommodate an infinite number of voices and faces but also produce a ground for the development of more inter-sur-faces. The external world can be invited in to domestic discussions and discourses: the distributed character of both the reception and transmission locations of the new communication technology enables both the ability to invite in cyberneighbours and to break out to other cyber political spaces. These dynamics are nowhere more apparent than in the recent cyberpolitics of Malaysia (<http://legacy.unl.ac.uk/relational/papers/malaysia.htm>) and Indonesia (<http://www.icw.or.id/>).

Africa has seen a major renaissance in the celebration of its indigenous culture and art, both traditional and modern, through the new communication technologies. Local African radio (JOY FM from Accra, Ghana) is available globally through the Internet; African dance can be viewed globally through the same mode, the texts and tales of oral legends and beliefs are now available on line and all serve the perpetuation of an Africa base to identity in the African diaspora ([http://www.geocities.com/margaret\\_grieco/kente/kente.html](http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco/kente/kente.html)). Not only can members of the recent diasporas from Africa access this identity base but so too can members of the ancient diasporas - black America now has an accessible, authentic, African cultural base which it can readily access in the reshaping of its form. Africa is not a simple recipient of culture across the Internet but rather a panoply of African voices are taking an active hand in the shaping of both the cultural and policy content of the Internet (<http://www.ghaclad.org>): similarly, indigenous African business is making use of the Internet for conducting commerce, most particularly the marketing of craft goods and the organisation of tourism. An interesting and important use of the Internet in South Africa is found in the area of industrial relations (<http://www.cosatu.org.za/>): African unions are connecting up both internally within Africa and globally in the advancing of the interests of labour (<http://www.geo-cities.com/unionsonline/>). They are originators of action as well as receivers of the industrial relations agenda: the global coordination enabled by strategies such as 'web' or 'union rings' permits local determination in the context of global synchronisation.

In Japan, the Internet has been widely used for political (<http://www.jlgc.org/> ; <http://www.kobe-airport.gr.jp> ; <http://www.agora.stm.it/politic/japan.htm>) as well as economic purposes (<http://www.ecplaza.co.jp/>). The Japan Local Government Center has set up a site through which it links with local governments globally in the search for solutions to new urban problems (<http://www.jlc.org>): its format is designed to open up the interaction between Japan and other agencies, most particularly in the United States, but it does so in a proactive ground of emergent intelligent urban development. It maintains rather than loses Japanese voice in the conceptual bargaining over appropriate governmental forms for the new information age. In the same frame but from a different political perspective, alternative and oppositional groups in Japan are also making use of the Internet to influence internal Japanese politics by attracting external allies to their cause. A good example of such a case is the campaign to oppose proposed developments at Kobe airport (<http://www.kobe-airport.gr.jp/>); the bulk of the site is in Japanese but there is an English translation facility which provides the opportunity to sign on to the campaign electronically.

So far, we have drawn attention to the new voicing and interaction capabilities of the new information communications technologies in a variety of settings. These capabilities have the potential to host the emergence of new complex, varied and highly distributed cultural patterns. What the outcomes are in terms of ultimate convergence or the emergence of the multi-channelling or modulisation of cultural experience can not be readily determined, what is clear is that there is as much reason to expect the revitalisation of local symbolic life through interaction with the web as there is to expect the impact of new technology to be the extinction of local culture.

## **Cyber-culture: new social and political practices.**

Cyber-culture has many new and unique features: the feature which we wish to concentrate on here is that of 'social memory'. The distributed character of the new information technologies enable many voices to participate in constructing the content of stored meanings. Each voice or group of voices can make a contribution without drowning out, muting or obliterating another. Each voice or group of voices has the ability to determine a location in which they have sole control of the script that is to say there now exists the capability of presenting identity without the possibility of disruption. Identity can be presented in such a way that it can be accessed from every other location at any time and without disruption to the schedule or resources of the authoring self.

At the same time discourses can be shaped between a self and another without requiring the consent of the other to the discourse. Each self can construct a pattern of integration between other URLs (Universal Resource Locators) and own location, the patterning creating an effective discourse. The home page of Jennifer Flowers ( <http://www.genniferflowers.com> ) provides an example of such a constructed discourse.

The full range of meaning patterns can be stored through archiving, integrated through hyperlinks and accessed at will through information technology according to templated connectivity paths designed by the authoring voice or voices or with the assistance of search engines. This constitutes a new form of social and cultural memory: a memory which contains full detail whilst reducing the problems of loss through overload.

The complexity of the new social, cultural and political memory is a matter for further analysis: at this point we simply wish to draw attention to the implications of the existence of such readily available detail on past and present meaning and practice for future behaviour. The ease with which voice can now access its own past behaviour raises issues of the impact of consistency requirements on present choice of action. The auditing capabilities of the new information technologies in respect of performance profiles at every level of hierarchy and in every domain leads to the prospect of every agency being its own Big Brother - that is to say the technology opens up the prospect of a monitoring of self which never previously existed. Indeed, the chip placed under the skin of a leading British computing academic to provide feedback and ultimately govern his reactions to his environment is a logical step onwards from current electronically monitored home confinement practices or the in-flight monitoring of civil aircraft performance. In both these cases, monitoring may be conducted on a different continent from the activity monitored (see Aungles, 1994, 1995).

Much has been made of the way in which members of online virtual communities construct for themselves, often experimentally, identities which radically differ from those they present in 'real life'. Insofar as the social salience of identity is emergent from the interaction between personal claim and social ascription, much more might be made of the potential impact of the technology on such interaction. The technology's ability to provide for archiving whilst enabling instant access potentially affords novel modes for the maintenance of identity claims. Thus, in the employment arena, resumes and curricula vitae, in summary form and in cascading levels of detail through hyperlinks, may be made publicly and transparently available, thus making recruitment decisions available to public scrutiny with significant implications for issues of equitable treatment. In the political arena, maintenance of personal and group/ communal reputation is aided by the degree to which supporting information is made widely and transparently accessible, undermining the traditional methods for attacking reputation, ie 'rumour', 'gossip', and 'smear'. Where identity has been 'spoiled' and reputation lost, the technology provides for possible *relational repositioning*, ie the re-presentation of self in relation

to others, to past self and to future self.

At the same time, we should note that the technology also enables attacks on reputation (<http://legacy.unl.ac.uk/relational/papers/malaysia.htm>), the distributed nature of the internet providing significant opportunity for perpetrators to escape detection and resist silencing of their voices. The ease with which sites may be established has resulted in many political oppositional groups duplicating and shadowing their sites to pre-empt attempts to close them down. Like the many-headed Hydra, the technology is resistant to such efforts.

### **E-markets for cultural goods: wealth from virtual tourism.**

Canadian authorities and agencies played a key role in setting up e-commerce sites for indigenous communities of Canada (<http://nunavut.nu/> <http://aboriginalmap.ic.gc.ca/>). The cold weather climate of Canada, the geographical distances between communities, and the demography of Canada have contributed to major investment by Canadian agencies in digital communication forms (<http://www.ecc.ca/>). Not surprisingly, Canadian agencies have also been at the centre of promoting the use of electronic communication forms in development management (<http://www.globalknowledge.org/>). E-commerce focused on craft goods represents a form of virtual tourism which can generate wealth for indigenous communities which are either too remote or too vulnerable to experience or endure physical tourism. Virtual tourism enables remote communities to present their view of themselves to external agencies without the necessity of experiencing the face to face interaction which necessarily generates convergence of language or body movement and cultural style.

Virtual tourism can generate a number of economic benefits. Within physical tourism the number of cultural items that can be purchased and transported in the luggage of the tourist is limited, with virtual tourism in an ecommerce framework the number of return visits is not so limited. Ecommerce sites intended to support the economic welfare of remote low income indigenous communities can theme goods and display goods on line within this thematic setting. Etourists can then purchase the whole context item by item.

Of course, any interaction changes boundaries and changes a system but there is a need to consider the ways in which the new communication technologies can be used to preserve the range of cultural experiences. Any such consideration must necessarily engage with the consequences of poverty for the migration of the young to more lucrative locations. Within this frame, the consideration of ecommerce and etourism becomes a useful step to take.

In Indonesia, as with many of the Canadian and African sites, the selling of cultural goods through ecommerce is highly connected with cultural descriptions and information which testify to the authenticity and the cultural importance of the goods on display. This cultural presentation of self in some cases and cultural presentation by another in other cases offers outsiders a path into the various components and interrelationships which form cultural identity:

- Bali Imports - offers a selection of Bali handicrafts including dragons, masks, and candle holders. <http://www.bestofbali.com/>
- Balicraft Artshop -wooden Balinese art statues and carved objects for decoration. <http://www.balicraft.com/>
- <http://www.indocraft.com/>
- <http://www.javacraft.com/> Welcome To Javacraft Webstore Here you will find various Indonesian products offered such as rattan furniture, Balinese art statues, wayang golek, wayang kulit and some Indonesian cultural programs that we support like angklung,

calung and more.

The Javacraft site provides access to a range of detailed materials on Indonesian culture, materials that increase the complexity of cultural understandings rather than reducing the world to a macdonaldised approach of the simple selection of independent items for purchase. The meaning of goods is embedded in a greater understanding and this is the mode in which they are sold:

*SAUNG ANGKLUNG UDJO: We also supports some Indonesian cultural programs to preserve them against modernized age. [www.javacraft.com/udjo](http://www.javacraft.com/udjo) Here you will find the Sundanese traditional bamboo musical concert that is performed by a group of small children. See their dynamic performances and natural expression. SPECIAL INFORMATION Sometimes we have special programs that is performed every year or on special occasions. If you are interested in these special programs, let us know your email address and we will contact you a few months before the programs are happening.*

A very interesting site in terms of the preservation of diversity is that at <http://www.javafred.com/> which is a web site for contemporary Indonesian art. This electronic gallery provides Indonesian art with exposure but without dilution. The ability to gallery globally but separately is a new competence. On this particular site the work of a street artist appears. The site offers a combination of visual images and associated political comment:

*Sense of Chaos Colors Contemporary Arts by Chandra Johan.*

Excerpted from The Jakarta Post (May 23,1999)

The violence and brutality witnessed in the last year as a result of the New Order (Suharto) and its demise are finding expression in contemporary Indonesian art.

A new phase in the cultural and social reality of modern Indonesia. This article mentions a number of galleries and contemporary artists.

The exhibition of the work of street artists on a global gallery opens up a new type of opportunity for the talented poor. Due to the embodied talent and authenticity they signal, e-commerce can help enable items with low production costs but high commercial value obtain a market in which the selling price is transparent to the original producer. The Java art site indicates the potential for further diversification as opposed to the flattening of the aesthetic terrain through the mode of e-commerce

### **Authentic communication: grassroots access to ICT**

In the discussion of the 'flattening' of cultural terrains, a key charge levelled against the new communication technologies has been that they further concentrate communication amongst the educated and the wealthy producing an even greater marginalisation of the poor. Communications technology has been seen as a tool of the developed world in the control of the developing world. But views are changing ([http://www.geocities.com/margaret\\_grieco/working/iad.html](http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco/working/iad.html) <http://www.ghaclad.org>) and now the call to extend ICT to the grassroots of the developing world has been made by the President of the United States of America, a call which will push forward even further agencies such as the World Bank (<http://www.worldbank.org/devforum/current-connectivity.html>) in their attempts to extend the opportunities of global communication to the world's poor (<http://www.netaid.org/>).

The international agencies are seeking immediately to extend connectivity to the poor and poorest within the framework of tele-servicing on health and education - a situation where the

poor are primarily recipients of services and knowledge. They have also begun to consider the importance of the poor taking an active part in the shaping of the content of the communications exchanged. Increasingly, there is an emphasis on the importance of making use of the new technology to incorporate the poor into feed back systems in the search for good governance ([http://www.geocities.com/margaret\\_grieco/working/iad.html](http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco/working/iad.html) <http://www.globalknowledge.org>). The interactive capacity of ICT and its distributed character change the contours of social and political discourse. The ability of grass roots voices to impact in a collected and cumulative fashion on the key policy agencies is not dependent on the consent of the policy agencies: sites which shadow the performance of the policy agencies are easily constructed and local messages are readily transformed into global impulses. The development agencies can of course enhance grass roots abilities to communicate by resourcing such communication but the ability to close down local and authentic messages of criticism by a rich and powerful agency has been severely curtailed.

Providing grassroots with functional access to the ICT domain in order to cut the costs of health and educational servicing (and this is clearly one of the dynamics presently in play in both the developing and developed world) and in order to improve economic performance through e-commerce modes necessarily opens up the channels for new forms of global bargaining, bargaining in which the transaction costs for the least powerful to give voice have clearly been greatly reduced.

This alteration in the transaction costs of political engagement at the local level produces important resources for the proliferation of voices and from a proliferation of voices we would expect more complex cultural and symbolic terrains than those produced by the muting of voices which has been the historical experience to date.

In Bangladesh, we have seen the Grameen Bank (<http://www.grameen.org/>) lead with the extension of communication technologies to poor village women as part of their empowerment : communication technologies give these women an ability to check on market prices and to better organise their finances and production. In India, we find that the Self Employed Women's Association has made use of the new information communication technologies to promote its cause of advancing the interests and improving the situation of poor women (<http://www.sewa.org/>).

In Asia, the use of the new information technologies has been widely embraced: these developments would appear to be connected to the role played by Asia in the electronics industry. There is an industrial familiarity which breeds new social and political communication competences. Local sources give the scale of the new interactivity in communications in Indonesia as about 80,000 internet users registered via Internet Service Providers in Indonesia. Research into Indonesia revealed a number of IT associations: APKOMINDO; ASPILUKI; Asricitra Pratama; LPPSKI; KPLI; Pariwara; ANIMA; KADINnet (<http://www.emp.pdx.edu/htliono/travel.html>). Cyberspace discussions are currently taking place in Indonesia:

*We collected data via a chat / discussion group called Pariwara in the Internet from various player in Indonesian IT industry located in Jakarta, Medan, Bandung, Semarang and Surabaya end of November 1997. We also received input from our members in APKOMINDO (Asosiasi Pengusaha Komputer Indonesia) and LPPSKI (Lembaga Penelitian, Pengujian dan Sertifikasi Komputer Indonesia). Using the cyberspace, discussion was made easier, because we break the barrier of time and space. Anybody can edit, forward messages anytime and anywhere in Indonesia. Information was collected from various people like Kunarto, Hidayat, Chris Japari from APKOMINDO, Adrie (Bandung), Holiwati (Semarang), Wismin, Kasim (Medan) and others from Pariwara. <http://www.emp.pdx.edu/htliono/travel.html>*



The speed of Internet development and the links between tourism (cultural perceptions by the other interacting with cultural presentations of self) and telecommunications is very evident in Indonesia.

*Currently there are more than 40 registered Internet Service Provider (ISP) in Indonesia, mostly operated in Jakarta although around 20 are in difficulty due to the undervalue of Rupiah. Last year more than 30 registered with the Ministry of Tourism, Post and Telecommunication (Menparpostel). But at least five of them has operation in various cities in Indonesia, extended to the remote islands / provinces such as Irian Jaya (Tembaga Pura), Maluku (Ambon), and Sulawesi (Ujungpandang). Hundreds of other cities in Sumatra, Jawa, and Bali also connected thru this network telecommunication, forming an embryo for the Nusantara 21 project to connect the whole Indonesia into a future national information superhighway.*

The development of a communications industry coupled with a tourism base which generates a familiarity with an outside world has resulted in discussions of political matters on line. These range from relatively innocuous explorations of the impact of government policy on the industry to full scale political mobilisation - mobilisation which presents itself in English as well as local language in order to ensure the outsider understands the issues (<http://www.icw.or.id/>). The very societies known for their obedience to authority were the societies in which the electronics industries grew, industries which supported and developed the technology that enables widespread discourse, dissent and social challenge.

Grass roots access to information technology and the emergence of identifiable authentic voices which challenge old social orders are an innovative feature of the NIEs and one which is worthy of sustained political analysis. For our argument here it is sufficient to indicate on the present political evidence from Japan (<http://www.kobe-airport.gr.jp/>), Indonesia (<http://www.icw.or.id/>) and Malaysia (<http://legacy.unl.ac.uk/relational/papers/malaysia.htm>), the technology is creating a more diversified political space rather than flattening tastes and interests into a uniform and common convergence. At the heart of our analysis is the recognition that the technology greatly reduces the transaction costs in both mobilisation and diversification.

### **Conclusion: Calling up culture: routine access to infinite archives**

In this paper, we have drawn attention to the emergent development of readily accessed 'social and cultural memory'. We have provided a plethora of examples of the cultural and symbolic content of 'local life' being transmitted in the context of the emergent global economy. Even in the most global of social systems, local variations will remain dictated by topography, by climate, by the interaction of present demands with historic modes of expression and structuring. Local sensibilities retain validity and global communication forms can be used to feed and elaborate these sensibilities. The ability to routinely access the infinity of global archives of own and other experience provides a tool for exploring own identity and for better understanding self. It provides access to own history as well as to the history of others: for it is certainly the case that the history of imperialism saw the alienation of cultural products from their areas and peoples of origin. Through virtual technologies, such as virtual reality, the past can be recomposed and re-entered: the Elgin marbles can be returned to the Parthenon virtually and the building reconstituted and re-entered. Technology can be used to reconstitute as well as to fragment: the direction to be taken is a matter of social, cultural and political policy, an understanding which is clearly emergent in the new South Africa.

*What matters is not so much that everyday life in South Africa is saturated with images of*

*US-Euro pop (in the media, convenience stores and our homes), but that it is possible to construct, within this plethora of the familiar-alien, a local sensibility distinct from that represented in US-Euro popular culture. On a national and regional level, Africanisation is not a pure, uncontaminated rejection of US-Eurocentrism, but a rearticulation of 'Africanness' in the context of global capitalism and its articulations of multiple regionalisms (for example the Asia-Pacific)*

Van Staden, 1997 <http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/press/comca/222/vstaden.html>

### **Note:**

Formal organisations have routinised the archiving of work practice through e-forms - the paperless office. There has been a recognition of the control and power dynamics involved in such archiving practices (Romm & Pliskin; 1999; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al, 1999). The importance of such archiving practice for informal organisation and cultural identity at large remains uninvestigated.

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