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(eds./éds.)

## Canada in Grainau/ Le Canada à Grainau

A Multidisciplinary Survey  
of Canadian Studies after 30 Years  
Tour d'horizon multidisciplinaire  
d'Études canadiennes, 30 ans après



PETER LANG

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- McLaren, Malcolm, dir., writ., and prod. *Neighbours*. National Film Board of Canada, 1952. 8 min.  
 Mehta, Deepa, dir. *Water*. Deepa Mehta Films, 2005. 114 min.  
 Shum, Mina, dir. *Double Happiness*. British Columbia Film Commission, 1994. 87 min.  
 Stopkewich, Lynne, dir. *Kissed*. Boneyard Film Company, 1996. 78 min.  
 Wheeler, Anne, dir. *Better than Chocolate*. British Columbia Film Commission, 1999. 101 min.

## Indigenous Media Technology Production in Northern Ontario, Canada

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### Introduction

When there was the Biafra famine back in the 1980s, the First Nation community of Sandy Lake in Northwestern Ontario was raising money to support the aid agencies that went down there to help the starving people. To raise these funds, the women of the community went to the communication centre where they switched off the TV transmitter from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). They did this just before Saturday night ice hockey was going to be on, which is one of the most popular TV events, particularly among the community's male inhabitants. After shutting off the transmitter, the women went on community radio and announced that they wouldn't turn the transmitter back on until the men had given a certain amount of money. There was another popular program broadcast by the CBC, a soap opera called *All My Children*, which was on every day and particularly watched by the women of the community. The following Monday, the Sandy Lake men went down to the communication centre and shut off the TV transmitter. This time they said that they wouldn't put the program back on until the women had donated so much money. This is a nice example of how members of a community take control and ownership over media technologies. Even though the technical equipment for receiving TV signals did not belong to the community – it was the property of the CBC – people used it for their own, very special, purposes.

In this paper, I want to take a look at indigenous media technology production in the geographical and socio-cultural contexts of Northern Ontario, Canada. By introducing two case studies, the paper intends to show how indigenous people have taken control over the production and uses of media technologies over the last 35 years. In both cases, indigenous organizations have been taking the initiative to produce and distribute their own media and technology services. The ethnographic research for this paper was conducted within the scope of my Ph.D. dissertation project during the summer of 2006.

### Indigenous Media Technologies and Anthropological Research

According to Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin (2002) media anthropology research can be categorized into three branches within a socio-political continuum:

1. On one end of this continuum, anthropological research is dealing with the production and distribution of mass media through commercial organizations and governmental institutions, the most powerful media actors, as well as with the consumption of these media products (cf. Abu-Lughod 2002; Mankekar 2002; Wilk 2002; Yang 2002).
2. In the middle of the continuum, processes and contexts of media production and consumption by diasporic and minority groups are the focal points of research (cf. Hobart 2002; Morris 2002; Schein 2002).
3. Finally, on the other end of the continuum, we find anthropological research on media practices that aim to empower indigenous and disenfranchised people (cf. Ginsburg 2002a, 2002b; McLagan 2002; Michaels 1994; Prins 2002; Turner 2002).

Within the latter, anthropologists are particularly interested in how indigenous people have started to 'talk back' to structures of power that neglect the political, cultural and economic interests of these marginalized people by producing their own media. To "underscore the sense of both political agency and cultural intervention that people bring to these efforts", Ginsburg refers to this media practice as "cultural activism" (2002a, 8; 1997).

In the case of indigenous media production, many anthropologists have become media activists, and hence cultural activists themselves, by working together with indigenous people to produce videos (Turner 2002), websites (Forte 2006), and films (Ginsburg 2002a; 2002b). Taking into consideration the difficult and sometimes even desperate situations under which many indigenous people have to live, it is understandable that researchers turn into activists not only studying and describing, but actively supporting, for example, media projects. Through this form of support anthropologists become deeply involved and incorporated into processes, procedures and practices which they initially intended to analyze more from the 'outside'. A lot of ethical as well as moral questions are emerging here, which are discussed particularly within the fields of applied and action anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In addition, many indigenous people strongly reject the objectification of their lives and cultures through anthropological and ethnographic research by allowing only work and research that contributes to projects owned and controlled by their people (e.g. Smith 2005).

Ginsburg identifies a growing tendency of "strategic objectification" of indigenous culture among native media producers, caused by the use of indigenous "culture" as a "source of claims for political and human rights" (2002a, 9-10). A classic example of this development is the struggle of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, which has also made its way into cyberspace. Images and imaginations about the region's indigenous peoples and their situations were distributed and represented on the internet, mainly by non-indigenous support organizations and networks, to create what could be called an "electronic solidarity-scape" (Budka 2004, 40; cf. Budka and Kremser 2004).

For Ginsburg, indigenous people are successfully applying media technologies to their specific socio-cultural needs, creating in this way their own 'indigenized' media (2002a; 2002b). Other anthropologists are convinced that modern media technologies, developed in the 'Western' industrialized world, are causing the assimilation of indigenous people and hence the loss of indigenous cultures (cf. Mander 1991; Weiner 1997).

On the one hand, there is hardly any doubt that 'Western' media technologies lead to linguistic adaptation and acculturation without necessarily entailing a loss of distinct cultural features. It is also obvious that the production and consumption of mass media is controlled and dominated by powerful economic and political agents. On the other hand, media technologies are providing indigenous people with the possibility to make their voices heard, to network and connect, to distribute information, to revitalize their cultures and languages, and to become politically engaged and active. New information and communication technologies (ICT), such as the internet and its applications, offer many of these possibilities to marginalized people (cf. Landzelius 2006c). I will attempt to take a critical approach to both of these perspectives by introducing two case studies of indigenous media technology production.

### Wawatay – Aboriginal Media Production in Northern Ontario

One organization that pioneered the production of indigenous media technologies and content is the Wawatay Native Communication Society; they provide the approximately 45,000 Aboriginal inhabitants of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which covers most of Northern Ontario, with newspapers, radio and TV programs as well as online news.

During the 1970s, several Aboriginal newspapers and newsletters came into existence across Canada following the release of the White Paper on Indian policy by the Canadian government (cf. Demay 1993). In Northern Ontario, the bilingual *Wawatay News* was published for the first time in 1973, providing the

First Nations of the region with news in English and Oji-Cree. Most of the money for media production came from the federal Native Communication Program, which was also established in 1973 (cf. Avison & Meadows 2000). However, when the Canadian government cut the funding in 1990, some newspapers (e.g. *Kanai News*) were forced to cease publishing while others, such as *Wawatay News*, commercialized and had to include advertisements at the cost of other content (cf. Demay 1993). Though government funded, these media production initiatives depend on regional Native communications societies and organizations that emphasize local Aboriginal control over production and access.

The Wawatay Native Communications Society also established a community radio system for Ontario's northern First Nations. After the first community radio station was established in 1974, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) licensed the Wawatay Radio Network, which provides programming in Oji-Cree and Cree language, in 1986. Particularly in the most northern communities where these languages were spoken by a majority of residents, the radio network's programs used to reach up to 80 percent of the population (Karam & Zuckernick 1992, 43).

Since the majority of the younger generations are no longer fluent in the native languages, Aboriginal radio broadcasting has lost some of its audience to the English-language media of television and the internet. This of course primarily depends on community politics and the local engagement of people with their native language. In the communities of Deer Lake and Fort Severn, for instance, children begin learning Oji-Cree and Cree, respectively, in kindergarten.

Following the launch of the Anik satellites at the end of the 1970s, several Aboriginal broadcasters, such as the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, started to provide Native-language programming (cf. Baltruschat 2004; Roth 2005). In 1983, the Northern Broadcasting Policy and the Northern Native Broadcast Program, created the basis for a northern satellite distribution system which eventually resulted in the launch of Television Northern Canada (TVNC) in 1991. Until 1999, "TVNC remained the only Aboriginal television network in the world that broadcasted programming from indigenous sources" (Baltruschat 2004, 3). In that year, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) was launched after TVNC was approved for a national broadcast license. APTN blends multi-lingual programming about Aboriginal cultures, lives, traditions and histories, with news and public affairs in a mainstream broadcasting style. In doing so, it depends on local and regional Aboriginal media producers, such as Wawatay, for content.

Wawatay is not only producing Aboriginal media content and providing a local communication infrastructure, its mandate is also to preserve Aboriginal culture and language:

Wawatay Native Communications Society is a self-governing, independent community-driven entrepreneurial native organization dedicated to using appropriate technologies to meet the communication needs of people of Aboriginal ancestry in Northern Ontario, wherever they live. In doing so, *its founders intended that Wawatay would serve their communities by preserving, maintaining and enhancing indigenous languages and culture.* ("Mandate" 2008, emphasis added)

The society therefore also receives money from the Canadian Heritage Fund for radio and TV broadcasting. Whereas radio programming is almost exclusively in Oji-Cree and Cree, the TV shows produced for APTN and the Wawatay newspaper have a considerably smaller portion of native language content. Wawatay has constantly tried to improve and integrate communication technologies in the northern First Nations by, for example, installing community radios and providing training programs for utilizing and handling this technology. Community radio has become one of the most popular communication media in First Nation communities – used by all age groups, both sexes and for all kinds of occasions, such as radio bingo or fundraising. To produce media content emanating directly from the First Nations, Wawatay employs freelance writers and photographers in some communities to provide the newspaper with local stories.

New ICTs have become an important aspect of engaging and integrating community members into the production of media and their content. Digital video and photo cameras, audio recorders, and internet connections allow for the creation of multimedia stories and reports that can easily be edited and used on the Wawatay News website,<sup>2</sup> the communities' websites, the newspaper and the radio program. Thus, one story can be used and reused in several ways and formats. That people in these remote First Nation communities are able to utilize technologies like the internet, is mainly due to the Kuhkenah Network (K-Net),<sup>3</sup> which is one of Canada's and the world's leading indigenous ICT organizations.

#### K-Net – Digital Media Technologies for First Nation Communities

In the early phases of global internet technology distribution, one of the strongest reasons for indigenous peoples, groups and organizations "having a presence on the Internet [was] to provide information from a viewpoint that may not have found a voice in the mainstream media" (Cisler 1998, 20). In the spring of 1994,

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: <<http://wawataynews.ca/>>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see: <<http://www.knet.ca/>>.

the Oneida First Nation of the State of New York were the first, worldwide, to put an indigenous owned website online; some months before the first official website of the White House went online (cf. Polly 1998). The Blackfeet Confederacy in Alberta established the first aboriginal Canadian web presence one year later (cf. Prins 2002).

Landzelius refers to those "self-authored engagements" of indigenous peoples in ICT usage as "indigenous cyberactivism" (2003, 8; 2006a). In doing so, she distinguishes between 'outreach' and 'inreach' activities, which can be further divided into different subcategories according to intended audience or objectives. Since the agendas of these "genres regularly crisscross and are mutually reinforcing", Landzelius suggests to think of indigenous inreach and outreach activities as a "spectrum of orientations" (2003, 8). Indigenous outreach initiatives via ICTs include public relations and tourism management, sovereignty campaigns, liberation movements and common-cause partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. The second category of indigenous ICTs practices, identified by Landzelius (2003; 2006a), is oriented towards an internal public. These inreach activities cover public services (e.g. e-health and e-learning), cultural revitalization, reconciliation, pan-indigenous networking and personalized communication and representation.

Since the mid 1990s, the Kuhkenah Network (K-Net) has provided ICT services to First Nations in the remote region of Northwestern Ontario that fit within the inreach as well as the outreach category. The organization/network is part of the Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) tribal council, which consists of the six Oji-Cree and Cree speaking First Nation communities of Deer Lake, Fort Severn, Keewaywin, McDowell Lake, North Spirit Lake, and Poplar Hill.

Besides offering technical infrastructure and support, K-Net established some programs and services that have become very popular, not only among KO tribal council members, but also among many other First Nation people within the Nishnawbe Aski and beyond. Telehealth, the medical and health support service offered via new media, in particular through video conferencing, allows people to be treated within their own communities without incurring the expensive and exhausting travel time to hospitals in the urban centres of the South.<sup>4</sup> And students can stay longer within their communities by attending the KO Internet High School that offers a full grade 9 and 10 program.<sup>5</sup> These ICT supported programs are tailored for this remote and isolated region, where communities during the summer months can only be accessed by plane.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. <<http://telemedicine.knet.ca/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <<http://kihs.knet.ca>>.

The K-Net service I will concentrate on is MyKnet.org.<sup>6</sup> This service provides free webspace and e-mail addresses, particularly for the youth of the region's First Nation communities. In August 2008 there were more than 30,000 MyKnet.org accounts listed, 20,000 of which are quite likely to be actually used to set up webpages. This number is particularly impressive, since the overall population of the Sioux Lookout District in Northwestern Ontario, where the KO communities, among other tribal councils, are situated, is 25,000 people living in an area roughly equal to the size of France.<sup>7</sup>

MyKnet.org was established in 2000 to provide a "safe and healthy on-line space for young people" where they can construct their own personal webpresence (MyKnet.org 2006). Many of the personal homepages in MyKnet.org are used to reflect directly on the daily life of people in a world on the margins, where roads come to an end at the settlement's border and where friends and families are split up to attend school or to find work in the urban South. Thus, these homepages can be considered as local representations of Aboriginal cultures, lives, and identities within the global technologies of the internet and the World Wide Web.

Results of an online survey conducted in 2007 indicate that 47% (N=992) of MyKnet.org users are between 15 and 25 years of age (Budka 2008). Asked about the main reason why they use MyKnet.org, 78% (N=1202) stated that they use it for keeping in touch with family and friends. This online environment supports the reconnecting and networking of family and friends by bridging temporal and spatial distances to chat, discuss, share stories, music, and pictures. Since all homepage users have to register with their real and full name, it is relatively easy for friends and relatives to locate someone's presence within MyKnet.org.

MyKnet.org is mainly a media technology that is used and discussed at home and between family members and friends. People also (hyper)link their homepages primarily to relatives and friends. Community and cultural events are being celebrated and integrated on MyKnet.org by sharing photos, stories and music. In doing so, the majority of users are able to maintain their personal representations on the World Wide Web without the help of others. The online social environment thus also becomes a learning space where people learn how to set up simple homepages, upload and edit pictures, and write diary/blog-like texts and comments. This is also why MyKnet.org has been integrated into formal educational settings within schools and training courses.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <<http://myknet.org/>>.

<sup>7</sup> MyKnet.org is also being used by a lot of Aboriginal people outside this area, all across Ontario and its neighbouring provinces.

MyKnet.org is of course not the only online social environment on the Web. Almost half of the survey respondents (N=1204) also have a homepage with other, commercially-oriented website providers. In particular, social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo are fast becoming popular within First Nation communities. Nevertheless, people keep their MyKnet.org homepages to stay in touch with family and friends and to access and exchange information about people and communities by browsing through this online environment. That MyKnet.org is a dedicated First Nation service, is another strong reason for people to stay with it. A survey respondent declares: "[...] to have a native web page [...] for the whole world to see, i guess... LOL". Another respondent writes that she likes MyKnet.org because it provides an Aboriginal place in cyberspace: "[...] knowing native people have a place to visit on the www" (Budka 2008).

As a 'cyberactivist' project, MyKnet.org raises questions about how global and local processes of identity construction and self-representation are negotiated within this Aboriginal online environment. How do global and local cultures, their representatives, icons, and artefacts interact on these self-authored homepages? How do people from the local communities "make themselves a(t) home in a transforming communicative environment" (Miller & Slater 2000, 1)? Even though this online social environment has very strong ties to the local First Nation communities and the region of Northwestern Ontario, it is at the same time also part of the World Wide Web that connects millions of webpages, their content, their producers, and users.

If users and producers of MyKnet.org homepages consider this online environment their own space within cyberspace, where they can make themselves, their families, communities, and cultures at home, Appadurai reminds us also that "home" is not a simple construct, but a rather fragile "production of locality" (qtd. in Landzelius 2006a, 3). In an age where different processes of globalization, such as the transnational flows of people, technologies, ideologies, media, and money, are constantly speeding up, the production of locality is constantly contested. In addition, globalized technologies, such as the internet, challenge the definition and the phenomenology of locality, "leading to repositionings in the experiencing and significance of centres and peripheries, and the meaning accorded them" (Landzelius 2006b, 293).

### Conclusion

The indigenous people of Northern Ontario started to develop their own media technologies quite early. Wawatay as well as K-Net have deployed media technologies such as radio, newspapers and the internet to give First Nation people a

voice, to connect communities, families and friends in remote areas, and to create indigenous representations in the global media landscape. By concentrating on the actual situations and life worlds of Aboriginal people in Northern Ontario, both media producers have tried to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate alternatives to the mainstream mass media.

Within the processes and practices of media technology production, authorship as a "cultural principle" and concept allows media producers to negotiate and challenge authority, ownership and control over media technologies and their content (Peterson 2003, 193). That is why community radio and MyKnet.org, in particular, are popular as media technologies developed for the people of this specific geographic and socio-cultural region. These technologies are easy to use and they strongly support communication and interaction, particularly in non-literate and oral societies. Schröder and Voell refer to this ability of new media technologies, such as the internet, to support communication modes in traditionally oral societies as "modern orality" (2002, 12). Whereas community radio as an oral communication technology was introduced already in the 1970s, and is therefore particularly popular among the older generation, MyKnet.org is used mainly by younger age groups that have learned to write and speak primarily in English.

Control and ownership of media technologies is also limited in respect to the funding of these technologies. Both indigenous media producers have been dependent on non-indigenous funders such as governmental institutions and organizations. K-Net is investing, very successfully, a great deal of manpower and money in applying for regional and federal project funds. Wawatay had to increase the amount of commercial content in their media, which, e.g., for the bilingual newspaper means more ads – and so less space for indigenous language content.

In producing media technologies, indigenous peoples also contribute to the constructing and reconstructing of their (cultural) identities, which in the case of MyKnet.org is influenced by the different worlds that First Nation teenagers in particular live in. Indigenous media can thus be understood as tools for mediating culture and identity (cf. Ginsburg 2002b, 216).

Do media practices, as described in this paper, necessarily fall into the category of cultural and political activism, as both Ginsberg (1997, 2002a) and Landzelius (2003, 2006a, 2006b) state? As long as indigenous people are excluded from the (mass) media discourses of non-indigenous societies, which consequently leads to socio-cultural, political and economic disenfranchisement, all indigenous activities and initiatives will continue to have an activist ap-

proach. New media technologies, and the internet in particular, hold a tremendous potential for indigenous peoples' activism; as Kyra Landzelius emphasizes:

[...] historically marginalized peoples are not only taking roles, but in certain respect taking the lead, as savvy, technoscientific actors themselves 'colonizing' global media channels and converting them into fertile habitats for the exercise of identity and voice across distance. (2006b, 300)

### Interviews

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## Shooting Back from the 'Other' Side: Aboriginal Documentaries in Canada

Kerstin Knopf  
(Greifswald)

Aboriginal people in Canada are continually struggling with colonial legacies: geographical colonization – the displacement from and/or massive reduction of traditional land bases; cultural colonization – the forceful imposition of Western philosophies, values, norms, religion, and governmental and social structures upon their own; discursive colonization – the genesis of neo/colonial discourses that legitimize neo/colonial politics, uphold Western cultural and political hegemonies, transmit neo/colonial views on the colonized 'others', and silence Aboriginal voices and those of other marginalized groups; and mental colonization – the self-perception of the colonial subjects is channelled through colonialist discourse and creates 'colonized minds'. Aboriginal people for the most part perceive their own culture through the eyes, mindset, writings, and lenses of the colonizing group and 'learn' a Eurocentric framework of thought: Aboriginal cultures and religions are inferior; Aboriginal people are deficient in effectiveness, rationality, intelligence, and organizational competence; Aboriginal people are second-class citizens.

In many realms of society, Aboriginal people battle for recognition, participation, and control over their own affairs as the many successful land claim settlements and self-government agreements show. Likewise in the media, they are striving for participation and productive control over their images that are fed into the mediascape. Their voices are emerging in all kinds of media outlets, be it television, radio, news media, or film. An array of Aboriginal radio stations bear witness to this self-empowering development – for example NCI FM in Winnipeg, the Aboriginal Voices Radio network with its first and main station in Toronto, the Wawatay Radio Network in Sioux Lookout – as well as the first Indigenous television channel with a country-wide broadcast license in the world, APTN. The tradition of Aboriginal documentary film in Canada began in the 1970s, when Alanis Obomsawin as the first Aboriginal person started to direct documentaries with the NFB. Large-scale Aboriginal dramatized filmmaking had its beginning in the late 1990s, with the 1998 CBC television mini series *Big Bear* by Gil Cardinal, the first major Aboriginal film in Canada to receive