ICT for Social and Cultural Capital in Pacific Island Communities

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INTRODUCTION

When new technology arrives in a society, it enters an already existing order of social hierarchies, power relationships and a knowledge base. The adoption of the technology can enhance the position of individuals or groups in the social order and isolate those unable to co-opt it easily for their own benefit. It can widen class, gender and generational gaps. For example, young people are able to interact with new information and communication technologies (ICT) more easily then their parents. Women and rural dwellers, on the other hand, benefit the least from ICT diffusion through lack of access (Joshi, 1998). In developing countries, adoption is further constrained by the fact that the technologies which are introduced have been primarily developed for use in industrialised societies. The frustrations of rural communities, attempting to adapt to products which were designed for urban consumers, have been the cause of mirth as well as desperation among local users. The incompatibility of technology, human needs and lack of knowledge and infrastructure in developing countries is exemplified in the following anecdote which the writer first heard when working as a journalist for the *Fiji Times*:

A rural dweller, Jone, arrives in the city of Suva to visit his niece. In the morning, when he awakes, his niece plugs in the electric kettle to boil some water for tea. Not having seen such technology before, Jone is amazed at this "miracle". He decides to buy one and take it home for his wife. Upon his arrival in the village, Jone gathers the clan to show them his new miracle appliance. He takes the kettle out and plugs it into the wall of his thatched bure and they wait…and wait…and wait. Of course, nothing happens because Jone had missed out on one minor detail when he purchased this new technology. He needs electricity to boil his water and his village is still unconnected. Instead of enhancing his position in the clan as an early adopter, this lack of knowledge makes Jone a laughing stock of the village.

BACKGROUND

Pacific Island nations together make up a population of 8.5 million, or less than 0.01% of the world's population. The islands are among the last places on earth to receive television and Internet access. In a global environment of commercialisation and consumerism how do small nation states with insignificant populations harness ICT for their own benefit?

Governments in developing countries see the introduction and adoption of ICT such as the Internet as the new "miracle" technologies which might help their nations out of an economic quagmire and towards a prosperous information society. But the hype surrounding communications technology overshadows the end users and the impact technology has on them. "What's new *for society* about the new media?", asks Sonia Livingstone (in Flew, 2002, p. 10). In his discussion of technology and society, Castells points out: "Technology does not determine society. Nor does society script the course of technological change…the final outcome depends on a complex pattern of interaction" (2000, p. 5).

Scholars such as Herbert Schiller, Theodore Roszak and Frank Webster have emphasized the importance of differentiating information on qualitative grounds. Roszak argues that too much has been made of "quantitative measure of communicative exchanges" in the information society debate (Webster, 2002, p. 11). In his discussion of Roszak's critique of the information society, Webster points out:

His examination emphasizes the importance of qualitatively distinguishing information, extending to it what each of us does on an everyday basis when we differentiate between phenomena such as data, knowledge, experience, and wisdom (Ibid).

There is a difference between knowledge and information. While the former is situated within the realm of enlightenment and betterment of society and is transformative in nature, the latter is an accumulation of data. Indeed one person's knowledge may be another's data. Information becomes knowledge when it makes a qualita-

tive difference to the lives of those engaged in its adoption. Does this information have value for me? Is it going to change me or my community in any meaningful way? In other words, it must have a development potential resulting in an improved quality of life. To use Nepalese journalist, Kunda Dixit's words: "… To be useful, information must help people communicate, participate and allow them and their rulers to make informed choices" (2000, p. 1).

Despite being located on the fringe of the information technology boom, it is still possible for island communities to engage actively with ICT for community empowerment and participation at a local level using alternative media models to develop local content which are closer to local realities reflecting cultures, traditional values and individual aspirations.

MAIN THRUST OF THE CHAPTER

Internet in Fiji

As a developing nation, Fiji presents a challenge to most forms of media with its multiracial population and recent history of civil strife. It is politically volatile, multi-lingual with widely divergent audiences in terms of culture, age, rural-urban divide and social observance (see Table 1). Yet Fiji enjoys a vibrant media environment. There are three English language dailies, weekly newspapers in Hindi and Fijian, two business magazines, numerous commercial FM radio stations along with the two public service stations, one commercial free-to-air television and three pay television channels. The community media sector has also grown, following changes to the broadcasting legislation, with one community television station, a women's radio frequency and several Christian-based radio stations broadcasting in various parts of Fiji. As a new communications network, the Internet has held a low profile in this communication milieu for a number of reasons as will be discussed.

As a decentralised communication network, the Internet holds great promise for a diverse population. It can facilitate the preservation and sharing of indigenous

Table 1. Fiji: A demographic profile (Source: Fiji Islands Statistics Bureau)

Population:	840,000 (2002 est.)
Ethnic Groups:	51% Fijians
	44% Indians
	5% Europeans, Rotumans and others.
Median Age:	23.7 years
Literacy:	94% (15yrs and over who can read and write)
Languages:	English (official), Fijian and Hindi
Urbanisation:	49%

knowledge, provide an essential network for information and communication exchange amongst the community sector and government agencies, and enable learning and skill-building for the growing youth population.

Internet use in Fiji has been growing steadily in recent years in the commercial and government sectors, but has made little inroad in the domestic market. The first use of Internet in Fiji was at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the late 1980s when it was used for intranet connection. As a result, the domain name .fj, registered in 1995, is held by USP, which is responsible for registering all second level domains in Fiji (Minges & Gray, 2004). The first Internet Service Provider (ISP) was set up by the domestic carrier Telecom Fiji. Internet usage is mainly limited to Government and business sectors which were among the first to sign up as customers. Very few homes, even in the urban areas, have Internet connections. The costs of computers and of ISP connections are beyond the means of many people. One positive area of growth has been the Internet cafes which enjoy vigorous business from the youth population. From the author's observation, in urban centres such as Suva and Nadi, more than 70% of Internet users are young adults and school students who use it for emails, chat lines and to research school projects. Fiji's Internet penetration is 2.7% or 22,000 connections, mainly in the workplace (ITU, 2003). This represents a growth of 193% compared to the 2000 figure of 8,000. The ISP, Connect, estimates that there are 50,000 users in Fiji raising penetration to 6.1%(Minges & Gray, 2004).

Fiji enjoys a well-developed infrastructure compared to its regional neighbours.

62% of homes in Fiji are connected to electricity. Remote island communities use generators for power. Just over one third of Fiji's households are connected with fixed telephone lines. The mobile phone penetration rate is 11.4%, 90% of which are pre-paid customers, based predominantly in urban areas (Ibid).

Impediments

Major impediments to Internet development in Fiji have been unequal telecommunications access between urban and rural population, prohibitive costs, existence of monopolies and lack of awareness and knowledge of the Internet.

For many, the price of Internet connections is prohibitive, with the cost of connection in 2004 starting at around $F34 for 15 hours of access per month and $F5.00 for each additional hour (Connect Internet Services, 2004). Compare this with the average annual income of around $F3500 ($F290 per month). With the post-coup economic woes and business closures many wage earners are paid far less than the average weekly rates. Users

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