# Chapter VI
# Invisibility and the Ethics of Digitalization:
## Designing so as not to Hurt Others

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## ABSTRACT

*The diversity of knowledge is crucial for finding credible and sustainable alternatives for living together. Yet, a preoccupation with content and connectivity obscures the role of information technology by making invisible different ways of knowing and other logics and experiences. How do we deal with diversity and difference in information technology? In this chapter, two cases are explored in which dealing with difference is a particular political and ethical concern. The designs of Indymedia, an Internet-based alternative media network, and TAMI, an Aboriginal database, are informed by the confrontations over different ways of knowing. They translate difference without sacrificing diversity, providing clues for building credible and sustainable design alternatives that will not hurt others.*

## ETHICS OF DIGITALIZATION: DESIGNING SO AS NOT TO HURT OTHERS

*Now we are faced with a global conflict that is so nebulous, so ill-defined and ill-conceived, that it may never end. All we are told is that there is our side, and there is the other side. ... But the horror of never ending war brings with it the chance for a truly global resistance. And so we will create a new side—the side that wants to understand, the side that seeks out the root causes of our struggle, the side that will triumph over conflict itself.* (Adbusters, 2005)

Information technology is one of the pillars of the global war. It is also a technology of development, as information and communication technology for development (ICT4D). Behind both lurks the metaphor of the digital divide. For the Pentagon, the digital divide is manifested in technological superiority over enemies on the battlefield. In development, the digital divide is a metaphor for the barriers to the digital flow of information and knowledge and the social and economic consequences thereof. In both, the digital divide metaphor suggests that information and communication technologies are solutions, bridges across the divide that enable the flows

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of knowledge and information to reach new territories and new targets.

The digital divide metaphor implies a conceptualization of knowledge as commodity, something that can be extracted and transported from one place to another. Accordingly, efforts to overcome the digital divide are connected closely with ideas about a global knowledge society in which everyone has the right of access to information and knowledge.[1] But the perception that technology has no intrinsic value, that it gets its meaning through use (UNDP, 2001), has obscured the social and political processes that led to the design or selection of a particular technology through which that information and knowledge is transmitted.

If we understand knowledge not as a commodity but as a process of knowing, something produced socially, we must ask about the nature of digitalization itself. As the Aboriginal elders say, "Things are not real without their story" (Indigenous Knowledge and Resource Management in Northern Australia, 2005a). The technology that produces digital connectivity also produces the nonexistence of people and their stories, the fabric of the social nature of knowledge. When confronted with the social embeddedness of knowledge, the digital divide becomes a divide, not between the information and knowledge haves and have-nots but between what can be digitalized (commodities) and what cannot be digitalized (social processes).

Whose knowledge and experiences, or what forms of knowledge and logic, have become invisible in the categories (Bowker & Star, 1999) and technological designs chosen to organize information and knowledge? How can we promote differences in a world in which credible alternatives are rendered invisible by the very solutions that claim to bridge the divide?

The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) argues that the richness of human knowledge and experience is actively rendered invisible. In a sociology of absences, Sousas Santos (2004) presents five modes in which this richness is produced as nonexistence, as noncredible alternatives to what exists:

- **The Monoculture of Knowledge and the Rigor of Knowledge:** The way in which modern science and high culture are the sole producers of truth and aesthetic quality. This monoculture produces nonexistence in the form of ignorance and lack of culture.
- **The Monoculture of Linear Time:** The way in which history has a unique and known direction and meaning (e.g., in the forms of progress, development, globalization). This monoculture produces nonexistence in the form of describing as backward whatever is not declared forward.
- **The Monoculture of the Naturalization of Differences:** The way in which the distribution of people according to categories, such as race and sex, naturalize hierarchies. This monoculture produces nonexistence in the form of insurmountable inferiority.
- **The Logic of the Dominant Scale:** The way in which the dominant scales of the West, the universal and the global, prevail and ignore contexts. This logic produces nonexistence in the form of noncredible alternatives such as the local and the particular.
- **The Logic of the Productivity:** The way in which productive nature and productive labor maximize fertility and profitability in a given production cycle. This logic produces nonexistence as nonproductiveness in nature in the form of sterility and nonexistence and in labor in the form of laziness.

How we deal with different ways of knowing is reflected in our moral choices about technology (Hamelink, 2000). In *The Companion Species Manifesto,* Haraway (2003) describes "caring about and for other concatenated, emergent worlds" (p. 61). Haraway's new manifesto is her "political act of hope in a world on the edge of

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