

Rethinking the Digital Age by Faye Ginsburg

Discussed by Maximilian Forte

There is a book in Faye Ginsburg's paper, "Rethinking the Digital Age." The multiple strands of Faye Ginsburg's arguments, not to mention the fascinating ethnographic cases that she brings to our attention, all deserve to be expanded upon and elaborated. One of the first points that struck me after reading this paper is that the notions of a "digital age" and a "digital divide" ultimately do not deserve the attention of anthropologists, for all of the reasons that Ginsburg's critical analysis brings to the fore, and a few more that we might wish to add. This necessitates a paradoxical practice on our part: we devote attention to a notion in order to show that, in the end, it is not worthy of further attention. I will first add some comments on the digital age/divide perspective and then discuss some of the more striking ethnographic aspects of Ginsburg's paper and some of its possible implications for larger debates on indigeneity, cultural politics, and "cosmopolitanism".

Ginsburg is right in my view to shine a hot, bright light in the face of the "digital age" and "digital divide": this perspective on putative information equality resembles the Eurocentric narrative of the "development gap" that was popular among international development technocrats of the 1980s (and still is in many quarters). Going back further, the narrative echoes modernization theory, and further back than that, cultural evolutionism. The idea that there is a "digital age" sounds too much like older notions of a "stone age" and an "iron age", of the savagery-barbarism-civilization schemes of nineteenth century evolutionism to escape critical attention. The idea worth criticizing here is that there is a technology for every "time", and to every technological time there is a "people," in some woeful state of backwardness when compared to the ever more advanced "us." In this case, indigenous peoples, mired in "poverty," remain stuck in another time. To extend the point further, "poverty" itself is often defined in terms of the **not-middle-class-us** --so that somehow, well by definition really, persons living without electricity or running water are "poor," regardless of their self conceptions, their preferred customs, or their active life choices. It is really fortuitous that Ginsburg's paper, which only superficially resembles one about "indigenous peoples and the Internet," opens out on to such larger debates, both classic and current.

When "people" speak of a digital divide, do "they" mean a divide in terms of **access** to information (i.e., the presence of a computer enabled with Internet access, where "access" may suggest an act of consumption as demonstrated in the form of the download), or a divide in terms of production (i.e., the upload)? I am not too clear about this, and it sounds like we potentially have two very different divides, and that the productionist divide **might** be very pronounced regardless of the society in question. In terms of production, it's not something that can be measured by the number of telephone lines or ISPs. One has to find out what the proportion of bloggers, website developers, YouTubers, Napsteroids (whatever they are called) is with reference to the total population of Internet "users" ...and I have not seen such statistics before, let alone on a worldwide scale. In my own research, even those without telephone access in their homes have access to the Internet (see below), and those with computers do not use them to create or exchange anything.

What might cause some confusion -- at least it caused me to pause and backtrack -- is whether or not there really is a culturally significant digital divide in place anyway. Ginsburg presents some incredible innovations, but there are many other, less striking, even banal forms of engaging the Internet that render the notion of a divide to be even more tenuous. I have spoken elsewhere about patterns of cyber-brokerage, which speak to the collaborative alliances built between indigenous communities with no access to the Internet and activists and supporters outside of these communities who, for example, develop websites for/with those communities. Then there are those individuals without even telephone service -- I think here of some of my own Carib collaborators in Trinidad -- who make their way to public library branches and Internet cafes to check email or look for information. Private foundations, NGOs, development grants, all of these have helped to introduce computers and the Internet into Carib communities in Trinidad and Dominica (and from a productionist standpoint, to absolutely no avail as these technologies are still being used to quietly lurk on lists, to download webpages, and to rarely send emails at most). Aside from this, one can have access to the Internet by some rather rudimentary means, what I call the snail-mail download: pages printed from the Internet and sent to one's indigenous friends by post, which I often did from Australia all the way to Trinidad. In the end, even on empirical grounds, let alone philosophical or cultural ones, this divide notion really seems to be untenable, or at the very least, overwrought. In the case of the snail-mail download, the boundaries of the digital, the defining properties of the "digital age," also become cloudier.

For my part, there remains one very large question that is lurking behind the deeply engaging ethnographic presentation in Ginsburg's paper, pertaining to all of these extremely innovative, intelligent, artful indigenous uses of new media such as Igloolik Isuma, UsMob, and Raven Tales--and that question is simply: Who is their intended audience, and **why** have they selected that audience as one worth communicating to? I think that in an expanded version of this work, Faye Ginsburg might consider an examination of circulation and consumption, to balance the paper's currently heavy leaning on the production of indigenous culture through new media. I found the ethnographic cases to be not just very vivid, but also perplexing, because in some sense they seemed to validate the idea that these technologies **really are needed**, which would then reinforce liberal technocracy's concern for the "digital divide." This may be either an accident of the way Ginsburg presents these data, or my own misreading.

With reference to Igloolik Isuma, Ginsburg quotes Katarina Soukup who does not mention any Inuit-to-Inuit communication and culture-sharing goals as part of the project. Is it a case of wanting to share one's culture for the world, for the sake of it, as an end in itself, and thus an example of cosmopolitan indigeneity? I am starting to think that it may be latter, at least in the case of the Raven Tales example, where Simon James states, "All our ceremonies need witnesses. And as witnesses, we ask you to be part of that tradition, and go and share with others what you have seen today," followed by Ginsburg herself who explains: "digital technologies have been taken up because of the possibilities they offer to bring in younger generations into new forms of indigenous cultural production and to extend indigenous cultural worlds--on their own terms--into the lives of others in the broader national communities and beyond." It's a simple question really: but why did Simon James feel the need to recruit witnesses from outside his community?

In connection with UsMob, Ginsburg notes that the "project had its origins in requests from traditional elders in the Arrernte community in Central Australia." What were the elders' requesting specifically and why did they want it?

Reading beyond the "technicalia" (I wonder if this clumsy term will ever be accepted as a way of speaking of the minutiae and the intelligibilia of technological engagements) of indigenous uses of digital media, certain questions came to mind concerning the cultural politics of indigeneity. I worry about making knowledge something that can be packaged, projected, labeled, and then valued as property. This goes beyond indigeneity and touches on wider debates about the fragmented clustering of the world into gated knowledge communities. Such a prospect would seem to be a cold shower for the perspective offered by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, quoted by Ginsburg, who point to "an aesthetic of rearguard resistance, rearticulated borders as sources, genres, and enclaves of cultural preservation and community identity to be set against global technologies of modernization or image-cultures of the postmodern." While this latter perspective is one that I actually find very appealing, I worry that there is a lack of self-criticism in presenting this as "resistance," as if resistance means "getting out there and mixing it up with the big boys," as opposed to what often escapes being designated "resistance," such as the practice of total indifference to the latest ride in the amusement park of modern culture. Whatever the cautions and criticisms that come to mind, I have to agree with Ginsburg's statement that "the evidence of the growth and creativity of indigenous digital media over the last two decades, whatever problems may have accompanied it, is nothing short of remarkable."

What is also striking about the Internet and its role in the cultural politics of indigeneity--and this is no surprise now--is the extent to which it has not only helped to foster a growing transnational organization of indigenous peoples, heightening mutual awareness, but also the transfer and exchange of indigenous symbolism and indigenous political discourses across diverse communities in different parts of the world (possibly something that merits more attention). Beyond inter-indigenous networking, Ginsburg presents a strong argument about how "these kinds of cultural productions are consistent with the ways in which the meaning and praxis of culture in late modernity has become increasingly self-conscious of its own project, an effort to use imagery of their lives to create an activist imaginary". The objectivation (and I really do mean objectivation) of indigenous culture helps to project indigenous cultural representations into "dominant cultural imaginaries that, until recently, have excluded vital representations by First Nations peoples within their borders."

Faye Ginsburg's paper, with its memorable case studies and its strong conclusion (which is almost worthy of being committed to memory and recited in public on special occasions), was helpful for provoking rumination on a wide variety of subjects ranging from self-determination to self-representation, from development to resistance, from locality to cosmopolis. As I stated at the outset, there really is a book in this paper, and I am thankful that I was asked to serve as a reviewer for this contribution to a very fertile area of investigation.