Challenging Political Agendas through Indigenous Media: Hawai'i and Cultural Values

Abstract

Technology has become a transformative medium for the transmission of information within the indigenous, post-colonial Native Hawaiian land control movement. The movement has harnessed the power of the Internet to convey traditional knowledge and heritage values, and to disseminate information on Native Hawaiian political movements for self-determination and land control of heritage sites. Previous efforts to develop coordinated and effective movements were impacted by geographic distances in this Pacific Island state. The volcanic island landscapes posed difficulties in the dissemination of information and the ability of communities to respond in a timely manner to threats to heritage sites. However, with the introduction of advanced communication networks and technologies these difficulties have been overcome. Communication among community members is now instantaneous as technological developments, such as cell phones, computers and other personal technologies have become the primary means of communication. Information for community involvement in Native Hawaiian land control efforts to encourage, protect and preserve threatened heritage sites and practices now reaches not only the Native Hawaiian community on the eight major islands of Hawai'i, but also extends to Hawaiian diaspora enclaves within the continental United States, and indigenous communities throughout the world. Local concerns are now global discussions, with potential political impacts on Native Hawaiian heritage issues from communities of interest throughout the world.

Article

From the Arctic to Africa, from South America to New Zealand, indigenous people have been demonstrating that they can effectively harness the power of technology to tell the stories of their struggles and assert their rights by making community-based and produced video news media and airing it on the Internet. It is a revolution over the airwaves, and the Internet has become an effective tool for communication and empowerment, providing a medium to present an indigenous voice for disseminating ideas, issues, battles, and triumphs across great geopolitical divides. Through the use of the Internet, indigenous voices are reaching both local communities and fashioning alternative affiliations on distant shores. The use of the Internet has thereby changed the nature of indigenous struggles from local to global. As Maori media videographer Dean Te'Kupu Hepeta asserts, “Media is our nonviolent way to wage war.” (Veran, 2006:1)

The use of media as a means of cultural protection and indigenous empowerment is evident in the recent Native Hawaiian online efforts to protect the sacred mountain of Mauna Kea. The results have been dramatic. Chat rooms and social networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram have exploded with comments, support and encouragement. Views of YouTube videos of mountain protests have increased dramatically after online science, education, culture and other news websites posted article after article tracking the events as they unfolded. It is a gripping time for the indigenous world, and a triumph for the Native Hawaiian community as it employs the ancient cultural values of aloha (affection, compassion, mercy, kindness and charity) and pono (correct, proper, righteous, just and virtuous) (Pikui, 2003) to battle the construction of a billion dollar multinational telescope.

The political response to all of this online activity has been swift and dramatic. Within Hawai‘i, America’s smallest state, legislators have taken time to reconsider the permits that allowed the telescope project to go forward, and have temporarily halted the construction. Nationally, minority rights activists related the treatment of Native Hawaiians to recent police brutality in Baltimore, and posted their comments online. Native Americans, who are also indigenous peoples of the United States, held rallies and sent online messages of unity and brotherhood. And internationally, indigenous groups worldwide were brought into the discussion as the controversies on Mauna Kea were presented at the 14th Session of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York this year, with simultaneous broadcasts worldwide.1

Historical Issues

The indigenous Native Hawaiians have long faced the struggle for cultural preservation, self-determination and land control. Descendants of Polynesian people who came to the islands 300-750 ad., their society was transformed with the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of Christian missions in the 18th century. Their language, which had

supported a rich oral culture, including *hula* (dance) and chanting, and had provided a means for the transmission of knowledge, was codified, and the Hawaiians attained a high degree of literacy. Hawaiian language newspapers and literature flourished, spreading news and information throughout the islands. Cultural traditions suffered, however, as Western influence increased and Native Hawaiian practices and religion were discouraged.

By the end of the 19th century the population in Hawai‘i was transformed as well. American plantation owners began to bring in large numbers of agricultural workers from Asia, and promoted English in the schools over Hawaiian. In 1893 the politically and economically powerful American elite, with the assistance of the American military, overthrew the sovereign Hawaiian monarchy, and Hawai‘i was eventually incorporated into the United States as a territory.

Hawaiian cultural knowledge and language diminished during the period between the overthrow of 1893 and Statehood in 1959. The Hawaiian language, the primary traditional means of cultural transmission between generations, was banned from schools by territorial law in 1896 (Trask, 1999: 16), and children were severely punished for speaking it in classrooms. Authorities felt that banning the language would fulfill two objectives: it would unify the population by teaching the multicultural descendants of imported plantation laborers and children of the indigenous population a common language, and it would challenge the Native Hawaiian attempts to form a cohesive effort for renewed sovereignty. It was an effective political maneuver. By 1959 only 20% of the island population were of Native Hawaiian descent, they had become a marginalized minority on the islands (Trask, 1999: 17), and only a mere few thousand elderly native speakers of Hawaiian remained. (Warshauer, 1998; 2)

At Statehood, the Native Hawaiian future began to brighten with the appearance of educated and informed indigenous legislators, lawyers and judges who promoted indigenous rights, passing laws in recognition of the unique cultural and spiritual relationship between the Native Hawaiian people and the islands of Hawai‘i. Progress was slow for change, however, in changing attitudes, fighting discrimination and overcoming a century of social injustice.

American movements in the 1960’s and 1970’s for Native American and minority rights and environmental protection helped to inspire radical changes in Hawai‘i. Dismayed by military incursions into pristine conservation areas and large-scale development to satisfy a rapidly growing tourist industry, Native Hawaiian and environmental activists joined forces to protect the land and resources of the state. The resurgence of unified community effort inspired Native Hawaiian leadership to restore and rebuild a traditional cultural stewardship relationship with the land. In doing so, they inspired a period now known as the ‘Hawaiian cultural renaissance’, and brought back interest in traditional arts, music, dance, and most importantly, community involvement and pride. Traditional practice began to flourish, community involvement grew through cultural education, and political activism for restoration of rights became more prominent. (McGregor, 2007; 276,277) Getting the information on events and activities in a timely manner out to the Hawaiian community, however, was very difficult.

Challenges of Information Transmission

Installation of advanced worldwide communication networks in Hawai‘i was hampered by the geography and topography of the state, and the expense of bringing technology to the middle of the Pacific.

Geographically, Hawai‘i is located in the middle of the Pacific, 4000 kilometers from its closest neighbor. The population of 1.42 million is dispersed over seven different islands, and separated by dangerous and deep ocean straights. There are no connecting bridges, and no ferry service. Typographically, the islands are characterized by steep hillsides, deep ravines and valleys, oceanside cliffs and volcanic mountains. As a result, where other states can build terrestrial networks to connect rural and urban populations, the islands of Hawai‘i can only be connected to each other, or to mainland America, through submarine cabling combined with long distance overland connections. Such installations are expensive to build and maintain, especially for a state with a small population.

Technological Change Comes to Hawai‘i

The installation of trans-Pacific submarine networks with landings in Hawai‘i took place concurrently with the Native Hawaiian cultural renaissance. The first cable, TPC-1, was built in 1964, linking Japan, Guam and Hawai‘i with the U.S. mainland, and supplying 128 telephone lines. It was followed in the early 1990’s by PACRIM East, the first submarine fiber optic cable laid in the North Pacific region. This cable was unfortunately placed in an area that was prone to earthquakes and tsunamis, and was subject to repeated catastrophic which disrupted service. TPC-5 Cable

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4 See Appendix A for 2008 Broadband Availability Maps of the islands
Network was laid in 1996, guaranteeing continuous service to Hawai‘i. Each subsequent cable after that bypassed Hawai‘i as the Asian/Pacific markets expanded to North America. Demand was considered too small, and the return on investment could not justify the expensive installation on the islands. (The Auditor, State of Hawai‘i and RHD, 2008; 9) Faster service finally reached Hawai‘i in 2009 with the arrival of the Asia-America Gateway network.5

By October of 1996, there was a telecommunications explosion in Hawai‘i, with 40 applications to the authorities for the development of new services in the state. (Kelly, 1996; 1) The speed of development became rapid, as Oceanic Cable in 1997 developed and expanded high-speed service using new two-way fiber optic cables. Developers hoped that users would browse the internet and Web and use email through direct home cabling, and that local organizations would provide content and post proceedings of meetings and events. Most importantly, according Oceanic’s president, the company wanted to “build real communities, not just ethereal cyber-communities.” Just imagine”, he remarked, “the online discussions we could have about Hawaiian sovereignty, taxes, the library system, etc.” (Lynch, 1997) Those discussions became a rapid reality, as Pacific LightNet, the only carrier with fiber optic connections on six Hawaiian Islands, and owner of the largest submarine and terrestrial inter-island fiber network in Hawai‘i, continued this upgrade trend in 2004 to provide rapid and efficient statewide internet service. (Business wire, 2004)

Technology Use by Hawaiian Movements

The Native Hawaiian community recognized the value of the resources of the internet as early as 1995, introducing active daily debates on sovereignty and racial preferential treatment for minorities with, for example, the dueling websites Aloha for All and All for Aloha presenting opposing positions on indigenous sovereignty. (Omandam, 2000)

In order to revive Hawaiian as a living language, in 1998 Native Hawaiian literacy advocates began working with the University of Hawai‘i to preserve and restore Hawaiian, creating an online resource dictionary, developing new curricula for language, culture and community distance learning, and for the development of Hawaiian immersion schools. Archival material from museums was digitized and put online as a resource for teachers and community educators. However, with a limited number of Hawaiian speakers, and a large population of economically disadvantaged community members, home Internet use could not be guaranteed.

Public facilities, schools, libraries and community centers were therefore targeted for the distribution of computer equipment, computer education programs, and other cultural educational programing. This effort has continued, supported by UH and Hawai‘i State Public Library System and State Department of Education. There are currently 693 public access broadband computers in over 60 public facilities in the state, including within every public library, community college, and remote education center. (Vorsino, 2010)

Throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s communities also began to develop programming posting current events and presenting contemporary issues of concern to the Native Hawaiian population. Native Hawaiian organizations presented alternative views of political and social issues, and activist organizations posted protest march announcements to garner support and encourage attendance.

By 2000 Native Hawaiian organizations were creating web sites to promote issues, inform members, and communicate about upcoming events. Aloha First, for example, was a nonprofit focused on Native Hawaiian education. It spun off AlohaQuest, a producer of live “educasts’ webcasts on sovereignty and self-determination. (Omandam, 1999) Pacific Network Television was founded for public and educational service production and promotion. It is an internet-based network with HD cameras to produce news and original programming; 30% of the content to be about Native Hawaiian issues, and 70% about issues of global and state concern including cultural preservation and sustainability. Ulua Media & PeopleBridge have worked with TimeWarner to create what they called a “hyper local” video on demand service on the internet to enable Hawai‘i residents to upload media content created by local populations posting neighborhood events, arts and culture. (The Auditor, State of Hawai‘i and RHD, 2008)

Native Hawaiians have actively used these resources to develop and promote programing to protect and preserve environmental and historic resources significant to their cultural heritage. Video and social media platforms are currently used to inform and fight against use and development of GMO’s, (Kanehe, 2014; 342) to support sustainable tourism, and to promote green businesses and sustainability-oriented non-profits. (Kealoha, 2014; 209)

A generation of Native Hawaiians has now grown up immersed in their cultural heritage and history, hearing and/or speaking Hawaiian, and has been exposed to traditional ways and culture. They may be observers or participants in the movement for self-determination and cultural revival, but they have several things in common that prepare them for the future. They are fully fluent in the language of the internet, and aware and knowledgeable about the power of the media to influence political agendas, promote changes in attitude and social behavior, overcome geographical isolation,

5 Source: http://www.submarinenetworks.com/search?searchword=hawaii
4 Ibid.
and fight social injustice to restore native rights. Armed with these new resources for a digital war, Mauna Kea has proved that they are prepared for battle, and are now ready to become engaged.

Many scholars see indigenous media use not just as a local battle for recognition, but as a part of a larger, global struggle, not just for political sovereignty, but also as a means to shape a modern nationalistic identity in reaction to it. Such actions can, in fact, have a transformative effect on indigenous cultural identity. (Shohat & Stam, 1996; 145) The recent outpouring of online support for the Native Hawaiian efforts to preserve the sacred site of Mauna Kea demonstrates the power and effectiveness of global postmodern media in political efforts on behalf of indigenous cultural sovereignty. In the case of Mauna Kea, the physical protests stopped access to the proposed site of the world’s largest telescope, but online support and encouragement for Native Hawaiian cultural and environmental concerns contributed political pressure on state legislators and stopped the construction completely. The resulting social capital gain is enormous, and could not have happened without such an effective and efficient means to promote indigenous values, forge global solidarity and effect changes in attitude and behavior toward Native Hawaiian rights.
References


‘Pacific LightNet Communications Completes Phase One Upgrade of Hawaiʻi’s Largest Inter-Island Optical Network’, Business Wire (15 July 2004).


Appendix
Provided for reference only

Wired Broadband Internet Availability
Maps 2008
Source: Hawai‘i Broadband Task Force

Key to maps
Green: DSL coverage
Blue: Oceanic Cable service coverage

Broadband Internet Availability for the island of Molokai

Broadband Internet Availability for the island of Oahu
Broadband Internet Availability for the island of Kauai

Broadband Internet Availability for the island of Hawai'i (Big Island)

Broadband Internet Availability for the islands of Maui and Lanai