In March 2005 the United Nations inaugurated a long-awaited program, the Digital Solidarity Fund, meant to underwrite initiatives that address "the uneven distribution and use of new information and communication technologies" and "enable excluded people and countries to enter the new era of the information society." What this might mean in practice—which digital technologies might make a significant difference and for whom and with what resources—is still an open and contentious question. Debates about the fund at the first meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in December 2003 are symptomatic of the complexity of "digital divide" issues that have also been central to the second phase of the information summit held in November 2005 in Tunisia.

In this essay I consider the relationship of indigenous people to new media technologies that people in these communities have started to take up—with both ambivalence and enthusiasm—over the last decade. Why are their concerns barely audible in discussions of new media? I would like to suggest that part of the problem has to do with the rise of the term the "Digital Age" over the last decade and the assumptions that support it. While it initially had the shock of the new, it now
has become as naturalized for many of us—Western cultural workers and intellectuals—as a temporal marking of the dominance of a certain kind of technological regime ("the digital") as is association of "the Paleolithic" with certain kinds of stone tools for paleontologists. This naturalization seems even more remarkable given certain realities: only 12 percent of the world is currently wired (according to statistics from the January 2005 World Economic Forum in Davos), and only sixteen people in every one hundred of the world's population are serviced with telephone land lines. Digerati may see those numbers and salivate at the possibilities for entrepreneurship. But for an anthropologist and film scholar who has spent a good portion of her career looking at the uptake of media in remote indigenous communities, the unexamined ethnocentrism that undergirds assumptions about the Digital Age is discouraging. I am not suggesting that the massive shifts in communication, sociality, knowledge production, and politics that the Internet enables are simply irrelevant to remote communities; my concern is with how the language itself smuggles in a set of assumptions that paper over cultural differences in the way things digital may be taken up—if at all—in radically different contexts. These unexamined assumptions serve to further insulate Western thinking against the recognition of alterity presented by different kinds of media worlds, particularly in key areas such as intellectual property.

Concepts of the Digital Age have taken on a sense of evolutionary inevitability, thus creating an increasing stratification and ethnocentrism in the distribution of certain kinds of media practices, despite ongoing efforts to de-Westernize media studies. Looking at new (and old) media that are being produced in indigenous communities suggests how this new work might expand and complicate our ideas about the Digital Age in ways that take into account other points of view in the so-called global village. Whatever the nomenclature, there is never a neat division between so-called media ages—video versus digital, for example. In many indigenous communities, from the Arctic to central Australia, small-format video was enthusiastically embraced beginning in the late 1980s. This technology, which required little literacy and could be learned quickly, offered exciting possibilities for creating documentary practices—from the recording of elders' ritual knowledge to the creation of antic kids' stories as a way to engage a younger generation in speaking traditional languages. There is considerable interest in continuing this kind of practice, and in some cases communities are finding ways to link their documentary work with web-based platforms to make new kinds of links. But the path from here to there is far from clear.

A Brief History of Digital Debates. Within the ranks of those who have been writing and worrying about cultural production in the Digital Age and its global implications, there is some contestation as to "whether it is appropriate, given unequal access to advanced technologies (let alone more basic goods)" in different parts of the world, for the term "Digital Age" to be used to define the current period.1 This debate occurs in tandem with that attached to the digital divide, the term invented to describe the circumstances of inequality that characterize access (or lack of access) to resources, technological and otherwise, across much of the globe. Even as it
wants to express well-intentioned concern about such inequities, the term nonetheless invokes neodevelopmentalist language that assumes that less privileged cultural enclaves with little or no access to digital resources—from the South Bronx to the global south—are simply waiting, endlessly, to catch up to those more privileged. Inevitably, the language suggests, they are simply falling farther behind the current epicenter, whether that is Silicon Valley or the MIT Media Lab.

Some exemplary cases that have made it to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* provide charming counterpoints of hopeful possibility, stories of far-flung villages "catching up" to the West. For example, in a *New York Times* article James Brooks describes the work of Bernard Krisher, who represents both MIT's Media Lab and the American Assistance for Cambodia group. Krisher's pilot Motoman project in O Siengle, Cambodia, a village of fewer than eight hundred people on the edge of the forest, is emblematic of life for the millions of Asians who live on the unwired side of the digital divide. Through this project the village now connects its new elementary school to the Internet. Since they have no electricity or phones, the system is powered by solar panels. Brooks describes it:

An Internet "Motoman" rides a red motorcycle slowly past the school [once a day]. On the passenger seat is a gray metal box with a short fat antenna. The box holds a wireless Wi-Fi chip set that allows the exchange of e-mail between the box and computers. Briefly, this schoolyard of tree stumps and a hand-cranked water well becomes an Internet hot spot [a process duplicated in five other villages]. At dusk, the motorcycles [from five villages] converge on the provincial capital, Ban Lung, where an advanced school is equipped with a satellite dish, allowing a bulk e-mail exchange with the outside world.

Tellingly, this story was in the Business section of the *Times*, suggesting that part of the charm of Krisher's work is of its suggestion of new markets, the engine that drives even such idealistic innovation in consumer technologies. Within this longstanding pattern, perhaps the trade in computers and the Internet is hardly exceptional.

This techno-imaginary universe of digital eras and divides reinscribes onto the world the illusion that these remote "others" exist in a time not contemporary with our own, effectively restratifying the world along lines of late modernity despite the utopian promises made by "digerati" of the possibilities of a twenty-first-century McLuhanesque global village. Ironically, this throws us back into an earlier era of documentary practice—up through the early 1980s—in which Western documentary makers felt an obligation to represent "the rest" without imagining that these people might be interested in representing themselves (something that the accessibility and affordability of video has facilitated over the last two decades).

For the last two decades scholars have argued about (and mostly for) the transformative power of digital systems and their capacity to alter daily life, demographic politics, and personhood. The Internet—of course—has been met with some optimism by those sharing concerns of broader access for freedom of expression and social movements. Manuel Castells in *The Power of Identity* (1997) noted the range of dissident social actors, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico who in pre-Internet days used the fax machine to great effect. Today we would add to that list an array of groups from the grassroots leftist political sentiments organized by moveon.org
to right-wing Christians and militant Islamists to the Falun Gong in China. These and scores of other groups have used the Internet successfully to break down communications barriers, shaping what some call "the network logic" that is reshaping the globe. Additionally, a number of researchers have noted how the Internet, like prior influential shifts in communications technologies, has reduced the price of entry into a cultural field, creating openings for actors and organizations that were previously unable to get their work to the public. The inclusion of bloggers during the presidential conventions in 2004 made this opening evident.

At the same time, over the last decade, as digital media have developed at an accelerated pace, consolidation and concentration of ownership has outpaced open source and file-sharing efforts. In 1983 media scholar Ben Bagdikian warned about the dangers of a media monopoly in the United States when the media industry was controlled by about fifty corporations. By 2004 and the seventh edition of his influential book *The Media Monopoly*, the U.S. media was dominated by five conglomerates.\(^6\)

**Going Digital: Indigenous Internet "on the Ground."** So what does the Digital Age feel and look like in indigenous communities in remote regions of the world where access to telephone land lines can still be difficult? One example that demonstrates what some of these possibilities look like is the work of the Arrernte, who live in Hidden Valley, a town camp outside of Alice Springs in central Australia. They have created an innovative interactive project called Us Mob, enabled by the work of their collaborator, filmmaker and land rights lawyer David Vadiveloo, who first worked with that community as their lawyer in their 1996 historic native title claim victory. Switching gears since then to documentary work and media activism, Vadiveloo established Australia's only ongoing Town Camp youth video training project in 1998 and has made six documentaries with people in the area, including the award-winning works *Beyond Sorry* (2003) and *Bush Bikes* (2001).

*Beyond Sorry* is a quietly remarkable documentary that unfolds as we follow Zita Wallace, an urban Aboriginal woman, as she leaves her suburban home in Alice Springs at the age of sixty-four to take up life in the bush. She is returning to the Arrernte family in central Australia that she was taken from fifty-six years earlier under Australia's policy of removing "mixed-race" children, resulting in what has come to be known as the Stolen Generations. Rather than repeat complaints about the government's refusal to apologize to Aboriginal people (hence the title), Vadiveloo "wanted to focus on the extent of the aftershock, the ripples that these policies caused through generation after generation."

The short *Bush Bikes* uses the best of observational documentary technique in an utterly charming way that reveals the extraordinary lengths a group of young Aboriginal boys go to in order to build and maintain their bikes with whatever they find in the bush. The film's energy and embrace of the boys' unique view of their landscape offer a prototype to the short films made by and about Town Camp kids that are central to the Us Mob project. Us Mob was catalyzed by conversations Vadiveloo had with Arrernte elders in the Town Camp of Hidden Valley who were concerned about the alienation of their young people.\(^7\) The site is based on storytelling through short reality-based films as a way to generate broader understandings...
of Arrernte histories and cultures for wider audiences but most important for their own cultural futures. On the site users interact with the challenges and daily lives of kids from the camp who have the character names Harry, Della, Charlie, and Jacquita, following multipath storylines, activating video and text diaries, forums, movies, and games that offer a virtual experience of the camp and surrounding deserts. Users can also upload their own video stories.

The Us Mob project was motivated by Vadiveloo’s concern to use media to develop cross-cultural lines of communication for kids in the camps. In keeping with community wishes Vadiveloo needed to create a project that was not fictional. Elders were clear: they did not want community members referred to as actors. Rather, they were community participants in stories that reflected real life and real voices that they wanted heard. To accomplish this Vadiveloo held workshops to develop scripts with over seventy nonactor Town Camp residents, who were paid for their participation. The topics they raised range from Aboriginal traditional law, ceremony, and hunting to youth substance abuse and other Aboriginal health issues. Building on Vadiveloo’s earlier film, bush bikes are the focus of one of the two Us Mob games, while the second one requires learning bush skills as players figure out how to survive in the outback.

The games were developed as an alternative to the constant diet of violence, competition, and destruction that characterizes the games that Aboriginal kids were exposed to in town. And rather than assuming that the goal is that Aboriginal children in central Australia catch up to the other side of the digital divide, Vadiveloo wanted to help build a project that dignified their cultural concerns. This is charmingly but emphatically clear during a user’s first encounter with the Us Mob home page, which invites you in but notifies you that you need a permit to visit, just as you would if you visited the children on their lands in Alice Springs: “Everyone who wants to play with us on the full Us Mob website will need a permit. It’s the same as if you came to Alice Springs and wanted to visit me and my family, you’d have to get a permit to come onto the Town Camp. Once you have a permit you will be able to visit us at any time to chat, play games, learn about Aboriginal life and share stories.” Us Mob and Hidden Valley suggest another perspective on the Digital Age, one that invites kids from “elsewhere” to come over and play on their side.

In the case of Us Mob, as in other cases seen in indigenous communities, digital technologies have been taken up because of the possibilities they offer to bring 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 who can serve as virtual witnesses to their traditions, histories, and daily dilemmas.

Conclusion. The Digital Age powerfully shapes contemporary frameworks for understanding globalization, media, and culture, creating the current “commonsense” discourse for institutions in ways that disregard the cultural significance of the production of knowledge in minoritized communities, increasing an already existing sense of marginalization. Those who are out of power struggle to become producers of media representations of their lives, a project that has been enabled through work in video documentary over the last two decades. Indigenous media activists have found that
in using video to create documentaries about their cultural worlds and histories they were able to take some steps to reverse processes through which aspects of their societies have been objectified, commodified, and appropriated. Their documentary productions have been central to efforts to recuperate their histories, land rights, and knowledge bases as their own cultural property. They raise important questions about the politics and circulation of knowledge at a number of levels; within communities this may concern who has had access to and understanding of media technologies and who has the rights to know, tell, and circulate certain stories and images. One might think of these media practices as a kind of shield against the often unethical use or absolute erasure of their presence in national and even global narratives. Now, terms such as the Digital Age can too easily gloss over such phenomena in their own right, and viewing such work as salutary extensions of the Western media genre of documentary can as well. Rather than parroting the widespread concern with increasing corporate control over media production and distribution, can we illuminate and support other possibilities emerging out of locally based concerns? Perhaps it is time to invent new language and begin to use terms other than Digital Age that better fit a more inclusive future. After all, when the conceptual playing field is leveled, it is much easier to see beyond the immediate horizon.

Notes
3. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

**Wu Wenguang: An Introduction**

*by Chris Berry*

“DV: Individual Filmmaking” was written at a watershed moment in the history of recent Chinese documentary. Its author, Wu Wenguang, is one of the most prominent and prolific independents in the country. It gives insights not only into some