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ASPECTS OF DIVERSITY, ACCESS AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS

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Abstract. This paper addresses the issue of access to Community Networks for diverse cultural and ethnic populations. It utilizes ethnographic research conducted at La Plaza TeleCommunity in Taos, New Mexico. The paper asserts that access issues are very different for the three dominant cultures in Taos and much of the Southwest; Hispanic, Pueblo/Indian, and Anglo. It examines this Anglo-managed community network and the difficulty experienced in introducing e-mail and the Internet to Hispanics and Taos Pueblo Indians.

Introduction

Taos is located in a high mesa valley (7000' elevation) next to the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo range, 135 miles from Albuquerque. It is the center of a region that is home to a rich tri-ethnic culture (Bodine, 1967) comprised of 65% Hispanic, 27% Anglo, and 7% Native Americans.

Twenty-five thousand people live in Taos County. Approximately 10,000 people live in the local telephone calling area. Many of the roads remain unpaved and cable television arrived only 15 years ago. The closest major library is 1.5 hours to the south in Santa Fe, and the local branch of the University of New Mexico provides classes leading to the Associates degree. Tourist-related services and retail businesses provide the majority of employment (Taylor, 1996). Local media is limited to a weekly newspaper, two Internet Service Providers, and a single radio station.

A report by National Institute of Standards and Technology (1993) on the National Information Infrastructure (NII) suggests:

> The promise and vision of the NII is that all Americans will have access to a wealth of information in a number of arenas, from healthcare to history, from poetry to physics. In the next century the NII will be the means by which most Americans receive information, and the data, the imagery and the sounds it conveys will shape the very ideas of what culture is....

President Clinton's Executive Order of September 15, 1993, defined the NII as "the integration of hardware, software, and skills that will make it easy and

affordable to connect people with each other, with computers, and with a vast array of services and information resources" (Civille, Fidelman et al. 1993).

The Clinton Administration's vision of access to the NII must have seemed remote to the people of Taos and Northern New Mexico. Even as Internet usage skyrocketed across middle-class America, most Taoseños had never even heard of the Internet. Taos County is among the poorest regions of the country, with an average income of about $12,620 (Taylor, 1996). And with telephone coverage of only 65%, most Taoseños simply cannot afford personal computers and modems.

Until late 1994, dial-in Internet access was limited to a long-distance toll call in Taos. "The promise of an 'information superhighway' that links urban and rural areas with interactive voice, data and video connections" (Hines, 1996) was a remote possibility without local, affordable telecommunications technology. Clearly, there were huge gaps between the promises of the NII, and its practices.

In May 1993, a group of enterprising Anglos began to meet on how they could bring low-cost Internet access to Taos. Their organizing committee would soon become the *La Plaza de Taos TeleCommunity*. The name La Plaza was selected as a Southwestern metaphor for the old Spanish plazas which used to be gathering places to meet, gossip, buy, sell, and trade, and as a place of community.

The central mission of La Plaza was, according to one early participant, "to be an open system and provide free access to all Taos residents." The founding team recognized "The Taos Valley is rich in cultural diversity and provides an ideal environment to test new technologies. Native Americans, Hispanics, and Anglos have lived here for generations creating a diverse population in a rural and remote environment" (Finn, 1994, p. 5).

In December, 1996, La Plaza's total registered users numbered nearly 4700. The vast majority of users were Anglo. The number of users who accessed the Community network on a frequent (at least 3 times per week) basis was often under debate, but it was clear that number of actual users rarely exceeded 1500. The founder's goals for La Plaza were:

- to bring people together in new ways;
- to provide opportunities which do not sacrifice cultural identity;
- to promote community economic self-reliance;
- to give everyone access to new national resources (Finn, 1994, p. 5).

La Plaza's activists recognized that public access to computers and computer networks were not available to everyone in the community, and never would be if the community relied on federal funding. Their vision was one which brings social change with increased opportunities for communication, education, and economic development on the local level.

What is a Community Network?

A Community Network, via online technology, is an association that serves the communications and information needs of a group of people who have a common interest (Finn, 1996, p. 9). Like many Internet Service Providers, Community Networks provide Internet access and e-mail. They also provide information resources for their communities. A community network must fully be a part of the physical community by integrating with the cultural, economic, environmental, political and social fabric. Community networks facilitate communities as a geographically situated place, but provide an interactive communications medium that is not limited by time, space or geographical boundaries.

> I had been bargaining with a local plumber on the cost of installing an air conditioner in the room that houses La Plaza's central server and modems. We were negotiating a deal to trade for an access account for part of the installation costs. I have known the plumber since I arrived in Taos 14 years ago, so we were playing hardball with a smile. We finally reached an agreement and complimented each other on what good horse traders we were.
>
> After I got off the phone with the plumber, I asked myself "Is this community networking … trading access accounts for air conditioning?" The only answer is YES!

One of La Plaza's founders told this story with a broad smile on his face. Not only did his story exemplify so many Taos "business" interactions, it also illustrated the kind of frugal spirit needed to start and sustain a community network.

In December of 1994, La Plaza opened its "doors" to the Taos community. Until April of 1997, this distinctive network provided free networked computer connectivity to individuals, not-for-profit organizations, small businesses, and civic and service groups in the local calling area up to 15 hours per month. Training was free, as was access to the Learning Resources Center (LRC).

The Community networking movement seeks to help people form new associations within their local communities using computer technology. Early on, it became clear to community network advocates that their work was not about technology – it was about people. "They are about how people engage in communication with each other, develop relationships, dialogue about local and global issues, and plan and subsequently take action together" (Agger-Gupta and Strickland 1995, p. 39). Community networks seek to bridge the gap between cultures, institutions, places and communities by providing access, training, and the tools to bridge and build relationships in their locales.

Community networks are first and foremost advocacy organizations (Schuler, 1996, p. 369), driven by goals of social equity and justice. As such, community networks seek to enrich their communities by providing services

and opportunities they might normally have. The availability of Internet access to communities has the potential to better represent the “have-nots” (Anderson, Bikson, et al. 1995; Commerce, 1995; Marriott and Gegax, 1995) or underserved population. This population traditionally includes the poor, people of color, women, elders, the physically challenged and people with minimal formal education.

This paper recognizes that neither technology nor people are value-neutral. They shape and are shaped by each other, by constraints of the technological use and its side effects and by the community or group. Inherent in this lack of neutrality are the underlying values of people and the technical developers (Feenberg 1991, 1995; Mankin, Cohen et al. 1996; Sclove 1995; Wajcman 1991; Winner 1995; Zuboff 1988). To study the intersection of technology and people in community, it is essential to examine the systemic backdrop of culture, economy, politics and social relationships. To ignore any one aspect “separates technology from the social arena” (Latour, 1996 p. 287).

As a result, this research examined how computing technologies can act as a point of access and community resource. In my experience, it is also the place where we pay the least attention - where training is neglected or not provided, where confusion about how computers work is poorly addressed, misunderstood, ridiculed or ignored, where the learning process, and the different ways we experience computing, are sorely neglected..

Diversity and Culture in Taos

“Diversity,” simply defined, is all the ways we are different and unique. This includes gender, culture, race, age, socio-economic class, religion and ability (Agger-Gupta and Strickland, 1995). These issues are reproduced in Taos as they are in any rural or urban area in the United States. Political and social interactions seem to follow familiar patterns of domination, subordination, resistance and acculturation.

Limiting discussions of diversity issues to culture is simplistic at best. Taoseños take great pride in their diverse community, especially among the Anglos. Anglos take their own “difference” very seriously; individuals go out of their way to be “consciously” diverse.

The three ethnic groups in Taos “still occupy overlapping yet recognizably distinct ecological niches” (Rodriguez, 1987). The Hispanic and Pueblo niches are based in their traditional land and water base, which Anglo developers, in-migrants, and conservationists threaten. Anglos, in the roles of in-migrant and tourist, occupy the hegemonic niche of class, privilege, and wealth. Bodine (1967) labeled this condition the “tri-ethnic trap.”

The Tri-Ethnic Trap - Defined

Bodine (1968) describes the complexity of the tri-ethnic trap as a subordinate condition for the majority Hispanic population.

> In its creation the Anglos glorified Taos Indian culture and relegated the Spanish American to the bottom of the prestige structure (p. 147).
>
> … the Anglos … still [express] an attitude of tolerance and acceptance of both individual as well as cultural idiosyncrasy. While they sought from the two other ethnic groups proof of cultural difference which they found quaint, charming, mysterious and psychically satisfying, they never relinquished their claim to their own cultural superiority (p. 146).

Sylvia Rodriguez interprets Bodine's tri-ethnic trap as, "a dilemma in which Hispanos are confronted on the one hand with the devastating consequences of their land loss and subordinate status, and on the other with the Anglo glorification, advocacy, and imitation of Indian culture" (Rodriguez, 1990, p. 543).

Since 1968, land loss and water rights infringement, largely targeting the Hispanic population, have continued with Taos Ski Valley's expansion, the condo developments, and the overall upscaling of many historic buildings in town. Many older Hispanics no longer feel Taos is their home because, as one commented, of "all the Anglos coming in with their money."

Both the Pueblos and Hispanic cultures are "self-identified" (Rodriguez, 1987, p. 314). The dominant characteristic of a self-identified people, according to Rodriguez, is their opposition and resistance to domination and assimilation by the dominant culture. This is exhibited by the continued development of their own language, celebration of a unique cultural tradition, a sense of shared identity, and homeland. Both groups' ties to the land and scanty water resources of the region often put them head-to-head with Anglo in-migrants, developers and real estate speculators.

Lujan (1993) describes the discrimination Pueblos find in obtaining employment in Taos. Most jobs open to them are minimum wage as domestics, hotel maids, and casual workers. As much as 60% of the Taos Pueblo membership commute to jobs in Denver, Albuquerque and other large cities (Lujan, 1993).

On an economic level, it is clear the Hispanic population faces the trap most dramatically. While there are many jobs in local government and the schools, they are among the lowest paying in the nation. For example, an ad in the *Taos News* for one organization advertised for a full-charge bookkeeper with several years experience – with a salary of $6.00 per hour. According to Bodine (1968), even if Anglos were interested in such positions, the substandard wage scale dissuades them. I have also talked with several Hispanics who must work

second jobs to subsidize their professional positions as teachers, or government workers.

Most Hispanics believe tourism has robbed them of the traditional gathering places in Taos - the Plaza. Many are concerned with what the "Anglos, with all their money" are doing to their community. One Hispanic cultural informant was angry that the Hispanic traditions and events do not bring in tourism like those of the Pueblos.

In many cases, tourists and some Anglo locals only identify with Pueblos through their art, public ceremonies and dances (Laxson, 1991; Sweet, 1985). Through this same process, those Anglos who identify with the Pueblos through their rituals and "harmonious" ties to their land and nature, also remake those cultural experiences into "mirrors that reflect Western interests" (Adams, 1996, p. 111).

This phenomenon, dubbed "ethnic tourism" by Laxson, describes the stereotypical behavior exhibited by tourists towards Pueblo Indians. This behavior, grounded in Anglo cultural hegemony, consists of judging and evaluating others through their own lens of cultural values, and often ignores the continuing evolution of other cultures. Young (1990), discussing Foucault, adds that Western hegemony contains a claim to universal validity; claiming that Western truths and representations of reality are the *only* universally valid (p. 9).

Internet Access Issues and Community Networks

Community networks in rural communities like Taos clearly support the notion that the Information Highway is the key to success in any community of the future. Community networks provide a solution for the isolation of rural areas, for home-based businesses, for greater economic opportunity, and the opportunity to explore and compete in the global community.

Local content and interaction of this kind can make the Community network a dynamic force in building and redefining community. Karen Michaelson (1995) notes that many Community networks serve rural areas with declining economic bases, with little personal discretionary income and high unemployment rates, by providing affordable access to the Information Highway.

Community networks and Internet usage in general have long been the purview of white males (Barlow, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). No longer. Internet practice has evolved beyond the technology "toy" stage, making it potentially available to all segments of the population. It is no longer necessary to subordinate changes in social practices (ease of use) to technology. Community networks and the broader availability of the Internet are now driving more user-friendly changes in the technology.

On-line access itself is a universal issue discussed at length among Community networking, Internet, and telecommunications practitioners and theorists. It is a much broader issue than simply "how do I enter this thing" or "how do I learn how to use this thing?" Community networks, like La Plaza Telecommunity, are in the best position to address the task of bringing people access to the resources of the NII. However, access is clearly more than simply providing dial-in capability or a physical facility with networked computers.

> access may mean more than physical accessibility. The format and content of what is on-line can disenfranchise as easily as can physical access. Complex and sophisticated search tools and communications protocols distance those with less education from universal access. The most attractive World Wide Web page is unavailable to someone who reads at a tenth-grade level and needs the text modified to the appropriate reading level (Michaelson, 1996, p. 59).

I first became interested in the issue of Internet access for Taos' diverse population during the course of my dissertation research on La Plaza's community network, and talking with individuals in those communities. I observed that La Plaza's public access centers (Learning Resource Center, Convention Center and the Public Library) were used primarily by Anglos. I asked the volunteers who staffed the public access center about Hispanic and Pueblo participation. Their observations also revealed that Hispanic and Pueblo use of the LRC was much lower than that of Anglos. One volunteer trainer noted, "More ethnic roots need to be reached. There's not enough diversity there at La Plaza yet. You need to get some of the Hispanics in."

Providing access services is defined as the process of providing the framework, or infrastructure, so other types of access can be met. This includes, but is not limited to, maintaining the hardware and software, keeping Web pages up to date, and recruiting volunteers to act as trainers and helpers to provide the emotional and situational support. Providing services also considers the various levels of cultural and educational backgrounds. Therefore, I will discuss what I found to be the most problematical of these services at La Plaza - cultural access.

Cultural Access

Cultural access, according to Inga Treitler (1996), is governed by content, structure and context. Each cultural model contains "assumptions about the way the world works" (p. 62), how information is organized, and by rules of communication according to context.

This issue is one that challenges every community in the United States that wishes to provide access through Community networks. Many of the individuals who start and maintain the networks are Anglo professionals, who

faced with overwhelming technical and operational issues, often neglect issues of cultural access. They are also greatly influenced by the community itself, its attitudes, perspectives and values.

The provision of cultural access must be balanced with ensuring the CN remain open to many different cultural voices, in addition to implementation of those services most users need or request most. La Plaza's example indicates that simply providing a system for users is not enough. CN designers must be equally concerned about 1) whether the system provides relevant communication; 2) if it can be used effectively; and 3) what cultural messages are conveyed in Web page design and training. Treitler proposes,

> Much use of emerging telecommunications systems is by self-selected individuals who are in a sense frontierspeople or entrepreneurs and accept the challenge of crossing cultural barriers electronically. … However, beyond this elite group of individuals (who possess one or more of the characteristics of being employed, educated, or connected in some way with the mainstream), there are the vast majorities of the population (generally possessing one or more of the characteristics of dispossession, disenfranchisement, lack of adequate education, or difference from the mainstream) (p. 63).

Users, trainers, and community members helped to provide critical assessments of these questions. An early Anglo La Plaza supporter who has worked with New Mexico's Northern Pueblos noted,

> I think [the Pueblos] would be reticent to come into the LRC and sit down at a terminal and work like some of the other people do because they are such private people. The Native people I know who have computers love to use them and are very adept at using them. They use them in their businesses, play games on them, talk to each other just like anybody else. But they are more private people generally.

Community and American Indian activist George Baldwin (1995) discusses how, for Native people, face-to-face communication remains the "preferred mode of information exchange" (p. 138). However, even as the hostility of American Indians to Western technologies persists as a stereotype in the dominant culture, many Native peoples, including the Taos Pueblos, are quick to adopt those technologies that can benefit them. Computing technologies have been long employed on the reservations and preserves of North America, due in large part to government bureaucracies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Baldwin, p. 145).

Please note that I use "on the reservation and preserves." Herein lies the key to why the Tiwa and other Native peoples want the technology *on* the reservation, and at least in the case of La Plaza, will not journey off the Pueblo to use those services. Their homes are on those reservations. They are not comfortable in town or working in public facilities where their privacy may be invaded. Many Nations in New Mexico, including the Taos Pueblo and the Zuni

(Felsenstein, 1993) now have computing facilities on their land. One of La Plaza's founders agreed with this assessment, adding,

> That was why we were always pushing so hard to get it on the Taos Pueblo Day School. Get that wireless system going up there, because if they have a choice, they don't want to leave the Pueblo at all.

Projects such as "Postcards from Taos" brought the voice of the Hispanic community to life on the La Plaza system. The idea of the project was simple. Interview two dozen people from around the Taos community, emphasizing the Hispanic population. Take a photograph of them. Ask them three questions: 1) What is the most important thing to you? 2) What is your biggest dream? or alternately, What is the most fun for you? and 3) What do you like best about Taos? Post the whole thing on La Plaza's Web site.

Following a reception at La Plaza for the "Postcards" project, I received an e-mail describing the response from the community. The Hispanic sender noted,

> The postcards reception went great last night. I had the chance to show some of the local Hispanic people from the community whose ages ranged from 8-75 what the web is and what we are doing for the community of Taos. They were really excited in knowing that they can find information that they are interesting [sic] in without going to a library. A few of the them will be back to take the [training] classes with their children (Strickland, 1996).

It would seem that when personalized contact is made by other Hispanic community members, more interest is expressed in the Internet. However, most cultural informants agree that effective outreach in the Hispanic community must be undertaken with a door-to-door, or organization-to-organization effort by Hispanic community members.

Conclusions

The data represented here is only preliminary; much more work remains to determine actual percentage of Hispanic and Pueblo vs. Anglo Internet users in Taos, as well as the extent of cultural barriers in an Anglo organization like La Plaza.

La Plaza defined itself as an organization which served the community with a technological product: a socially constructed environment that worked for Anglos as a cultural and ethnic group who value the kind of individual initiative and inquiry required to learn the manipulation of new physical objects; that is, in this case, networked computer technologies. However, for the more communalistic culture of the Pueblos, and the family and relationship oriented culture of the Hispanics, this environment was not entirely suitable. It is also critical to consider whether this male Anglo-dominated organization could hope to conduct effective and long-term outreach in a community that has effectively

resisted such attempts for generations? The difference of course, was that they had a technological service, but not one that would be accepted by people(s) who had every reason to believe their best interests were not being put first. These conditions, grounded in historical context and behavior, Anglo assumption of representation, as well as the political and social rifts in the Taos community, prevented the success of such efforts.

Many questions remain to be asked, largely economic. Recent studies by Rand (Anderson, et al, 1996), and Bellcore (Katz and Aspden, 1996) sponsored by the Markel Foundation indicate the gap between the information haves and have-nots has widened since the 1980's. Their survey would indicate economics is the greatest barrier to interest in and use of the Internet. As the report adds "To the extent any demographic group becomes excluded from and under-represented on the Internet, it will also be excluded from the economic fruits that such participation promises."

It would appear from my observations, and those of some of my research participants, that the Anglo desire to withdraw from the larger community is also an unwillingness to recognize and participate in the cultural and ethnic diversity of the area. One such user insisted "…you don't have culturally sensitive people out there. And as multicultural as Taos is, and the [kind of] consciousness here, I think that Taos community organizations isn't probably open to accepting it."

The communicative and cultural practices of La Plaza were those of an Anglo organization. As such, the organization was managed according to those cultural precepts, as were the relationships made within and without it. In organizational culture, it was a representation of the Anglo community, and acted accordingly: manifesting white privilege, and acting on "behalf" of the whole community in representation.

It is clear that if La Plaza, and other Community Networks, hope to appropriately serve their diverse communities, they must seek not to represent those communities, but to bring those communities in as full contributing partners. Only in this way can the community determine the appropriate on-line content, build relationships with community organizational partners, and ensure appropriate access is available that represent all their interests.

Epilogue

La Plaza still exists, after a fashion. Following a hostile take-over in December, 1996, which forced the founders out of the organization, the 1997 elected board voted to impose users fees. The fees, set at $6 per month with five hours free usage, excluded many people living on the margin, many school children, and other low-income residents. One heart-breaking e-mail user wrote, "As a father, starting tomorrow I will have to limit my daughter's access to the Internet in

order to be able to manage the monthly fees that will now kick in." As of January 1, 1998, fees were raised to commercial rates to cover shortfalls when Foundation money raised by La Plaza's founders runs out. These rates denigrate the intent and spirit of community networks as community advocacy organizations which offer low- or no-cost access to the Internet.

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