Translocalisation over the Net: digitalisation, information technology and local cultures in Melanesia

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ABSTRACT In the Western Pacific, the People First Network project has since 2001 been building a growing network of rural email stations across the conflict-ridden Solomon Islands. These stations are based on robust technology and consist of solar panels, short-wave radios and compatible modems, laptop computers and printers to provide email communication to rural people across the archipelago. The email stations are connected to the project’s Internet Center located in the capital city, Honiara, which operates as the ‘central email post office’ of the Solomon Islands and channels the traffic between the rural stations and the Internet. From the outset, the project has proved to be not only a local but an international success, receiving attention from various quarters. The project has significantly improved rural people’s opportunities in developing their grassroots businesses, connections with friends and relatives, and participation in national affairs. In the male-dominated local communities, a particular advancement has been the notable activity of women in using the email stations. The article analyses the project’s outcomes especially from the perspectives of translocalisation and contextualises the project in the wider digitalisation processes and the development of the information society.

Introduction
In the Western Pacific, the People First Network project (http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb/) has since 2001 been building a growing network of rural email stations across the conflict-ridden Solomon Islands. These stations are based on robust technology and consist of solar panels, short-wave radios and compatible modems, laptop computers and printers to provide email communication to rural people across the archipelago. The email stations are connected to the project’s Internet Center located in the capital city, Honiara, which operates as the ‘central email post office’ of the Solomon Islands and channels the traffic between the rural stations and the Internet. From the outset, the project has proved to be not only a local but an international success, receiving attention from various quarters. The project has significantly improved the opportunities of rural people in developing their grassroots businesses, connections with friends and relatives, and participation in national affairs. Within the male-dominated local communities a particular advance has been the notable activity of women in using the email stations. The article analyses the project’s outcomes especially from the perspectives of translocalisation and contextualises the project in the wider digitalisation processes and the development of the information society.

Besides reference to written sources the article is also based on experiences and reflections from my anthropological field research in the Solomon Islands in the 1990s and later correspondence with Solomon Islanders both home and abroad, where local acquaintances have commented upon the emergence of Internet services in the country. From these perspectives, and from my attempts to integrate anthropological theory into research of new information and communication technologies (ICT), I have been developing certain lines of thought to analyse the emerging
phenomena and fields of technology and computer-assisted communication. I conclude the article by focusing on certain aspects of social formation and communality that I have chosen to call ‘translocalisation’.

First, however, I will address the idea of digitalisation, because I consider it the principal and foundational technological process that influences local societies in the Pacific and elsewhere. It is also the basic technological process underlying all contemporary ICT, yet it often seems to be bypassed or ignored in recent discussions on modernisation, and in analyses of contemporary cultural change and the impacts of ICT in particular local settings. I consider digitalisation to be a separate and distinct phase of late modernisation. It should, furthermore, be distinguished from the concept of postmodernity, but we may refer to digitalisation processes within the postmodern phenomena. In that sense, some of the characterised features of postmodernity, for example artistic or cultural mélangé, relate to digital environments while others do not – a certain temporality should be observed, here. From digitalisation I will proceed to a case study of the Solomon Islands People First Network project. In my treatise, the PFNet will illustrate aspects of digitalisation and digital communication in a Melanesian context. It will also lead my argument finally towards the topic of translocalisation, which will conclude this article.

**Digitalisation in Culture**

Digitalisation refers to the process of transforming information into a binary electronic signal which consists of ones and zeros. This signal is typically employed by computers, but digital technology applications can be found in a far wider range of equipment and machines than the conventional-looking computers such as PCs, servers and mainframes; for example, digital signal is used in microwave ovens, watches, and state-of-the-art cars or keys. Especially in the last 15-20 years, digital technologies have penetrated surprisingly deeply into our everyday lives not only in Europe and North America and the rest of the West but also in the technologically less-developed countries, regions and local communities around the world. Digital technologies have displaced, and are currently displacing, existing older technologies and sociocultural practices, and digital technologies have been integrated into existing technologies and sociocultural practices.

The fundamental aspect of digitalisation is that things turn electric: we use electronic contents with electronic means, and these contents have been produced and distributed electronically. In the Pacific, the availability of electricity, and all the things that come with it, is not at all self-evident or obvious. The supply of electricity is already in itself a major source of cultural change, and a major parameter of modernisation in many Pacific communities (c.f. Friedman, 1994, p. 214). Alongside electricity, people will buy electronic equipment, which will eventually end up as non-biodegradable problem waste in their backyards and this transfers them into the vicious circle of eternal upgrading of gear – and in the digital environment, software. This is also a major mechanism in promoting people away from working on the land and the local barter economy towards the cash economy and wage labour of modernity (see also Akin & Robbins, 1999). In the rest of the article, I will focus on how this electricity has been put to cultural uses in local Pacific contexts.

Digitalisation, the ‘Big D’, characterises especially the technologically most advanced countries and is an increasingly central factor in globalisation processes, but digital applications are quickly becoming commonplace also in poorer countries and in remote areas. Practically every country in the world has current and up-to-date ICT strategies and plans. These computerisation projects cut across administration, healthcare, education, businesses, non-governmental and other organisations, and they are encompassing ever-increasing registers of social and cultural life. ‘Information society’, ‘knowledge society’, ‘wisdom society’, even ‘dream society’ are among the recent concepts used by social scientists. In relation to the associated discourses around these concepts, I would like to emphasise that when digital processes advance, the amount of data will increase correspondingly. It is obvious to me as a resident of an advanced digital environment in Finland that a more accurate characterisation in terms of the concept of society would be ‘data society’, simply because of the massive amount of ‘raw’ data needed to maintain the socio-technologic and economic structure and system.
Our treatise will benefit if we consider digitalisation as a particular discursive formation, which is the line of thought developed especially by Donna Haraway (1997) and Scott Lash (2002), among others. This discursive formation of digitalisation penetrates language, thought, and representations of sociocultural reality. It influences notably the world power structures in economical, political, military and various other ways. Yet, digitalisation is not equivalent to ‘digital technology’, nor is it the same as ‘information society’, although it relates closely to both concepts. Digitalisation is more: digitalisation is also a central vehicle and means of technological and economic globalisation. We may say that it is at once the technology and the product; it is metaphor and ideology; the context and the agent; the sign, the signifier and the signified; it is empirical reality and the utopian potential. In other words, digitalisation appears at least as fluid and transformative as modernity has been commonly described to be.

I will, however, leave these strategies aside for the moment and consider digital applications that are culturally relevant or interesting from my present perspective. I am now referring especially to Internet websites and email, Internet cafés, mobile phones, computers, digital cameras, digital video cameras, camera phones, and other such recent means of documentation and articulation that people use in intracultural and intercultural communications, in documenting their traditions and local knowledge, and in the arts.

Digitalisation makes things compatible. To a social scientist, this translates easily into structural isomorphism, standardisation, the disappearance of diversity, the advancement of cultural homogenisation, and the globalising media and common culture. However, I happen to belong to a more optimistic stock of researchers in that I am also interested in the more positive developments related to the advancement of Western ‘space-craft’ technology. Digitalisation offers genuinely new opportunities and platforms to preserve and maintain local language and culture, and to empower, diversify and improve the agency of local communities and villages in their activities. Digitalisation also contributes to the strengthening of local democracy, social and gender equality, and civil society. Certain optimists would even add to the list by stating that digitalisation may well contribute to solving some of the world’s current problems.

**Digital Incorporation**

We may describe one aspect of digitalisation as digital incorporation. Digital incorporation is the process where ‘analogical information’ is transformed into digital formats. For example, in digital incorporation, the existing cultural materials in museums and archives are digitised – scanned – and made into databases, presentations and other such applications, or the ‘analogical speech signal’ in verbal communication is processed into digital telephone signals, or writing is computer assisted and the results thus available in digital formats, or visual documentation is operated digitally. For us, here, some of these processes may appear trivial and mundane, but perhaps not so much in the Pacific, or in other remote or hard-to-reach places.

This digital incorporation should probably not be articulated primarily in negative terms. For example, digitalisation can provide safety copies of perishable cultural materials and documents, offer opportunities to reconstruct and model cultural settings, and, in particular, improve accessibility to local cultural materials held and stored elsewhere, for example, in Western museums and institutions. Digital incorporation also opens interesting new avenues of developing anthropological research and culturally relevant applications (note especially Pinney, 1994). One such example is the Australian Museums On Line (2005) project connecting Australian public museums and galleries into one searchable Internet collections database. Other such projects are currently being planned elsewhere, yet until now most major European museums have been surprisingly slow in revising their policies. This is partly explained by the pressing issues of repatriation of cultural materials – something for which the availability of digital versions of cultural materials may well offer one viable alternative to immediate artefact repatriation.

**Digital Communication and the Internet in the Solomon Islands**

The nation-state of the Solomon Islands in the south-western Pacific consists of a broad Oceanic archipelago of some 100 populated islands with almost as many languages and cultures located in
over one million square kilometres of the Western Pacific. From 1892 until Independence in 1978, the region was known as the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Independence and the post-colonial era have emerged as a laborious project for the Solomon Islands. The country has been forced to struggle with modernisation issues, or 'development', in all sectors of society, yet the British administration left few capacities for their former colony to cope with this, and the country has fallen prey to various operations executed by major international companies from Asia, Australia, USA and Europe. The emergence of the national economy has been based on industrial fishing and logging, and more recently also on mining, but these are largely operated and managed from abroad. They have also become sources of local anger and resentment, not least because of damage to local rainforest environments. Destructive business practices carried out by the logging and other international companies have also resulted in corrupting the fragile and barely emergent fiscal system of the country, where most people still live with one foot in their gardens and the barter economy (e.g. Hviding, 1996; Bayliss-Smith & Hviding, 2000). The Solomon Islands has experienced deep economic troubles throughout its existence and problems more recently culminated in the civil war and ethnic crisis from late 1998 until August 2003, the so-called Social Unrest Years.

The crisis years collapsed most existing government structures and functions, businesses and most other civil society structures in the country. In fact, at times only missions could reach certain communities and provide what assistance there could be delivered in the circumstances. Eventually, in early 2003, the government asked for help from the neighbouring countries and, especially, from Australia. This invitation eventuated in the Operation Helpem Fren (Solomon Islands Pijin: helping a friend) and the military occupation of the Solomon Islands by the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, or RAMSI, in August 2003. RAMSI is the Australia-led regional peace-keeping force that the Solomon Islands government invited to the country to help pacify the ethnic crisis and restore business and civil society structures. Although most military personal were withdrawn when local 'war-lords' (as they were called in the media) had been arrested, the RAMSI occupation continues (see also Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, 2005).

The violent unrest has been concentrated between groups from two of the main islands, Malaita (with the largest population) and Guadalcanal, where the capital city of Honiara is located. The crisis has centred on the question of Honiara and its uncontrolled expansion as a result of urbanisation and domestic migration. Malaitan and other local migrants have been moving in and establishing their own 'urban villages' throughout the period of Independence and taking over increasing areas of land from Guadalcanal landowners for their houses (e.g. Kupiainen, 2000, pp. 128-137). The years since 1998 have seen the capital city of Honiara turn into a lawless battle-zone with severe damage to the infrastructure, the government and commercial services. The national economy is still practically bankrupt and the large numbers of inhabitants (over 20,000 out of the estimated total of 80,000) who fled Honiara to their home islands during the ethnic crisis, are now slowly returning to the city. Current estimates of Honiara’s population approximate some 65,000. Despite this unfortunate setting, certain ICT services have been more or less operational throughout the crisis years.

Modern communication systems in the rural Solomon Islands have been underdeveloped or nonexistent. Telephone lines only cover a few urbanised centres with no services at all in most rural areas. The mail services to rural areas have been very slow, and in particular mail travelling beyond Honiara has been unreliable and insecure. An occasional HF (short-wave) radio transmitter in some villages may provide emergency and administrative connections to the outside world, but most islands still rely on hand-delivered letters and the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Company’s (SIBC) ‘service messages’, read regularly in the SIBC radio broadcast.

The Solomon Islands has very few roads, mostly around Honiara and the few urbanised centres, while most islands more or less lack any roads suitable for cars. Most villages in the Solomon Islands can only be reached by walking tracks or by travelling with motor canoes. Commuting between the islands (rural areas) and Honiara varies greatly according to the different islands that span an area of over one million square kilometres. Some areas (e.g. Malaita, Western Province) have regular and frequent shipping and air connections, while many other islands suffer from a lack of any regularity in shipping, and airline connections are based on small twin-otter planes operated
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by the Solomon Islands Airlines and missions – very little cargo is usually allowed in these planes. When we take into account the sociologically important phenomenon of domestic migration that has characterised the contemporary Solomon Islands society since the Second World War and especially since Independence (e.g. Chapman, 1992, 1998), and the necessity for inter-island and international communication related to it, the pressure to develop communication systems becomes evident.

ICT services in the Solomon Islands are technically provided by Solomon Telekom Ltd, a subsidiary of the international telecom giant Cable & Wireless. Telekom's services have until now been regarded as expensive for the majority of Solomon Islanders with little or no regular income to pay the bills. In particular, the Telekom Internet services, although available to the public since 1996, have been widely considered far too expensive for most locals. Therefore Telekom services only reach the more affluent middle class in the urbanised centres and in Honiara.

Aside from the technological infrastructure, the ‘information society’ in the Solomon Islands has mostly been developed in the People First Network (Pipol Fastaem) project, or the PFnet. It has been an non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiative to advance digital communication technology in the Solomon Islands rural areas, where over 80% of Solomon Islanders live on the margins of modernity and the monetary economy (e.g. Kupiainen, 2004; Chand et al, 2005; see also Akin & Robbins, 1999; Bayliss-Smith & Hvinding, 2000). The PFnet has already established a functioning communication network throughout the country. The rural email stations are located in remote places which commercial Solomon Telekom services do not reach. Although NGO managed, the PFnet assists the government in the national ICT policy planning in the Solomon Islands. The PFnet will also be my case study here.

Amidst the social unrest and conflict, the Rural Development Volunteers Association together with the United Nations Development Programme and the Solomon Islands government’s Rural Development Division of the Ministry of Provincial Government and Rural Development launched the PFnet project in January 2001 with the aim of bringing email and Internet to rural and remote areas throughout the country, and an Internet Café was opened in downtown Honiara soon after. The project operates the People First Network Internet portal, http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb, which is one major component of the network. The PFnet is building a network of a total of 25 rural email stations in the different islands and provinces across the conflict-ridden Solomon Islands. These stations are based on robust technology, and consist of solar panels, digital HF radios and the compatible modems, laptop computers, printers and digital cameras, to provide email communication and elementary Internet services to rural people across the archipelago. The email stations are connected to Honiara via the project’s Internet Center, formerly the Internet Café, which operates as the national centre for Internet and ICT services and the ‘central email post office’ of the Solomon Islands, channelling the communication traffic between the rural email stations and the Internet.

The network of rural email stations has already proven a local success, and its impact has been noticed internationally. The PFnet has received funds and support from the United Nations and the European Union; the governments of Japan, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan; Solomon Telekom and Cable & Wireless; and from the Pan-Asia Network. The PFnet is currently economically self-sufficient (Chand et al, 2005, p. 12). The project has also been associated with various governmental and non-governmental development programmes, organisations, agencies, networks, distance learning initiatives, micro-loan programmes and various information society initiatives. Increasing international attention towards the People First Network is worth noting:

- Finalist: the 2004 UNESCO IPDC Rural Communication Prize.
- The Project was presented at the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva 2003.
- PFnet replica projects currently planned for Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (United Nations Development Programme, 2005), with various impacts on rural ICT projects elsewhere in technologically less-developed countries.
- Media coverage: print, radio, television, Web; a BBC documentary, others in preparation.
- Academic interest: the focus of a University of the South Pacific research project 2003-05; the topic of seminar and conference papers and articles (PFnet, 2005a).
As of August 2005, seventeen of the planned 25 rural email stations are in operation, with confirmed plans for the remaining stations in Simbo, Santa Isabel, Shortland Islands, Malaita and Tikopia. While certain phases of the initial project were concluded by the end of 2004, the network’s operating concept continues and expands. Plans include additional stations around the archipelago as well as technological upgrading and expansion through associated projects, such as the Distance Learning Centres Project, which is funded by the Solomon Islands government, New Zealand and the European Union (Distance Learning Centres Project, 2005).

The currently operating email stations and the dates they were opened are: Sasamungga (Choiseul, 11 October 2001), Pirupiru (Ulawa, 13 March 2002), Kati (Temotu Province, 11 May 2002), Sigana (Isabel Province, 25 May 2002), Vanga (Kolombangara, Western Province, 11 August 2002), Silolo (Malaita, 9 September 2002), Kia (Isabel, 22 October 2002), Hutuna (Rennell, 3 March 2003), Pelau (Ontong Java, 23 April 2003), Rarumana (Western Province, 11 September 2003), Saa (Malaita, December 2003), Seghe (Western Province, December 2003), Santa Ana (March 2004), Bellona (22 May 2004), Waghina (Choiseul, June 2004), Pagoe (Choiseul, July 2004) and Avuavu (Guadalcanal, 8 September 2004) (see Figure 1) (PFnet, 2005b).

Figure 1. Map of PFnet email station locations (August 2005). Permission to publish has been agreed with PFnet.

**How the People First Network Operates**

The centre of the network is the Internet Center (formerly the Internet Café) in downtown Honiara, where customers can access 26 workstations with full (ADSL) Internet connections via Solomon Telekom. The centre provides an assortment of computer-associated services, such as CD-ROM burning, scanning and consultation. The Center organises workshops, seminars and training alongside continuing visitor surveys among the customers. The Center’s ‘national email post office’ hub maintains email services through a digital HF radio-based system to rural email stations around the country. This network of rural email stations provides limited Internet services to provinces and villages, connecting them to the rest of the world. The incoming and outgoing emails are loaded through the Honiara Internet Center several times daily according to a schedule. The connection is at 2 Kbps, but upgrades are expected to provide broadband in the near future through the SchoolNet Distance Learning project. Until then, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)-developed TEK search engine is the only expansion of the basic email application available to rural customers. The TEK search
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... system automatically sends search requests to the MIT server over whatever connection is available, and returns a packaged email attachment with 10-15 of the best web pages to fit the search query. Images are removed to reduce the file size. When the user receives the returned email, he/she opens the attachment and the contents are automatically loaded into TEK. The user will see the full text of the web page, not just the web page address. TEK then builds a library of web pages for each user, and subsequent customers are able to search this disk cache before requesting new material. (PFnet, 2003b; see also TEK, 2005)

The PFnet website and portal at http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb is maintained in Honiara and is the second important component in the PFnet project. The website provides local news and information, message boards, research data, project and funding databases, a digital library and other features nationally and internationally. The website serves as a specific development platform for the project.

The third main component of the network is the rural community email stations. They are locally managed, local operator assisted and accessible to everyone. The PFnet-trained local support persons (often women) maintain and operate the stations assisted by local committees that oversee the operations. Alongside literate youth and other interested locals they also provide secretarial and computer-related services to other villagers. Customers do not need to know how to read or write, or how to use computers, to be able to use the email services because the operators will provide typing assistance at a nominal price. Sending an email message will cost 2 SBD or 0.2 euros; receiving mails is free, except in some stations where printing costs are charged (Chand et al, 2005, p. 13).

The customer costs in using the email station are nominal by Western standards, but in the Solomon Islands rural areas customers are often living on the margins of the cash economy, and even small expenses may prevent people from using the system. To paraphrase slang used by telecom companies, we may refer to the ‘last meter costs’. The recent study completed by the University of the South Pacific research team in 2005 (Chand et al, 2005) included case studies of five rural email stations across the country. It observed, among other things, that in the five stations studied, 43% of customers belonged to the lowest income category earning less than 50 SBD or 5 euros per month, and that the average monthly income for all users was 187 SBD or 19 euros (Chand et al, 2005, p. 26). A Bellona friend, who lives in Europe and communicates regularly with his Bellona relatives in the Solomon Islands through the PFnet email network, told me that he voluntarily keeps the numbers of his sent messages to a minimum because of his anxiety about and awareness of costs related to receiving them on Bellona.

Another concern raised in the USP study was the issue of confidentiality related to sending and receiving mails. It is PFnet general policy not to let customers use the station laptops themselves for maintenance reasons. Instead, the operators type in the messages that customers have brought on paper in English or Pijin and send them on the customers' behalf. The emails are also received into the communal email address of the station, and they are printed out and delivered by the station staff, so private and delicate matters risk exposure in sending and in receiving. In fact, a few breaches of confidentiality among some station operators have been reported. This has also kept people away from utilising the stations to some extent. The USP study also pointed out that about one-fifth (19.4%) of customers considered the lack of confidentiality the main reason why their friends or relatives were not utilising the station (Chand et al, 2005, p. 32).

So what are Solomon Islanders doing in the PFnet? The USP study as well as the project’s own reporting from 2001 onwards clearly indicate that the primary reason and motive for email communication from the rural areas, and the wider Internet usage in the Honiara Internet Café and Center, is to stay in touch with friends and relatives living elsewhere in the country or abroad (PFnet, 2002, 2003a, 2004, 2005c; Chand et al, 2005). This orientation of the PFnet-associated correspondence towards relatives and friends is indeed dominant.

The kinship networks in the modern Solomon Islands are commonly referred to as the 'wantok system'; which is based on the idea of reciprocity of services among relatives and close friends associated with them. The Solomon Islands Pijin concept wantok is derived from English 'one talk' and refers roughly to family members, lineage or clan members, members of the same ethnolinguistic group, or even to close friends who are treated as kin. Wantok is a contextual and situational expression and meaningful in social contexts outside the village, where it can signify
quite varying groupings of people (see also Jourdan, 2002, pp. 257-258). For example, in the five stations analysed in the USP study, for the 469 respondents the three most important reasons for using email were communication with family and friends (46.7%), education (19.4%), and business (11.9%) (Chand et al, 2005, p. 28). In other words, almost half of the mails were sent to and exchanged with wantoks. Solomon Islands communities are ethnically very homogeneous, and customary social relations and village social structures largely dictate the parameters of in-group relations, especially in rural areas.

The urbanised centres and especially Honiara are different in this respect, but even there the wantok solidarity and associated networks provide most frameworks for social interaction. Even the most modernised sections of the Solomon Islands societies (excluding expatriates) are deeply involved in the wantok networks (Keening, 1992; Jourdan, 1996, 1997; Kwa’ioloa & Burt, 1997; Akin, 1999; Kupiainen, 2000, pp. 128-137). There is no doubt that the PFnet has generally contributed to developing the existing communication networks by offering new and more effective channels for their operation. From the local points of view, this is urgently important and its value should not go unnoticed. However, the People First Network has also established altogether new kinds of social networks and contributed towards new forms of social networking.

The PFnet project has significantly improved local opportunities for people in developing their grassroots businesses, connections with friends and relatives, and participation in national affairs. In the male-dominated local communities, a particular advancement has been the notable activity of women in using the email stations. This was also a particular highlight in the USP study, where an average of 31% of women users was estimated (Chand et al, 2005, p. 33). Furthermore, the USP study reveals in its 15-month monitoring period that the women’s portion of all emails sent was on average 27%, but there also existed a pronounced tendency that men were posting women’s emails on their behalf. The different email stations in the case study also performed quite varyingly in this respect. For example, on the Polynesian Rennell Island the Hutuna email station users were women and men in roughly equal portions, while on Sigana (Santa Isabel) and on Silolo (Malaita) the percentages of women were 16 and 19, respectively (Chand et al, 2005, pp. 33-39).

From the outset, the project has also emphasised the inclusion of women in its activities, and there has been a pronounced tendency to train women as station operators. This has been seen to activate those people who would otherwise consider themselves excluded as email station customers because of customary reasons, and to reduce the impacts of local social hierarchies and gender. This is a crucial development issue in local societies where traditional gender divisions and male dominance still largely prevail and continue to marginalise women. The PFnet helps to create opportunities for women and improves the agency of women in civil society development and education. Women attend dedicated training together with other professional and business workshops in the stations.

Translocalisation in the Digital Environment

For anthropologists, processes of digitalisation and digital incorporation, or projects such as the People First Network, appear first and foremost as sociocultural processes and action. The concepts of modernisation, postmodernity, development, progress, technological advancement, and globalisation have been used in describing such activities in the media and in development discourse. However, digitalisation and digital incorporation also translate into profound social and cultural changes in local cultural settings and should be approached as such by anthropologists. We will surely find negative as well as positive aspects in such processes, but it seems apparent that these processes will happen with or without the contributions of anthropologists. This is also a central motive for why anthropology’s role in this ‘development’ should be activated both in research and in policy making. We should focus more on this digital environment because this is exactly what our longstanding research objects, the world’s indigenous and ethnocultural communities, are currently actively doing when they employ digital technologies in the diversified forms of their everyday lives and construct ICT-assisted networks in diverse fashions.

A slight pause is in order here. The network is a complex concept (see also Wellman, 1997; van Dijk, 1999), and we may ask, what is a network? In digital contexts its meaning will resonate differently from that of traditional village communities and their social interaction modalities, yet
ultimately I am referring here to social relations and not technology; for even in the Internet digital environment, at least for anthropologists, *networks are social relations*. In focusing on social relations, we are entitled to ask how digital technology, or digital incorporation, or the Internet, or mobile communication, affect social relations.

Recent ICT developments indicate that the diverse geographical locations of communal members and their absence from home are becoming decreasingly important in the daily management of communal affairs (see also Jones, 1998; Mele, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000; Ginsburg et al, 2002; Miller, 2002). In fact, the Internet has reconnected the communal members residing overseas with their home relatives and communities in ways that are efficient, fast, often reasonably cheap or free and that contain elements of real involvement in the management of communal affairs (e.g. Howard, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000). Regular mail, travel, telephones and other such means of communication were certainly available before the emergence of the Internet in local settings, but email has brought about a decisive change in the ease and cost with which migrants can maintain active contact with their relatives and friends living elsewhere, and it has also revolutionised the level of influence the overseas migrants can have in the management of local affairs. A study from Trinidad clearly supports these observations and points to the rapid process of Internet utilisation among Trinidadian migrants in reconnecting them with their home communities (Miller & Slater, 2000; Miller, 2002). Email and chat applications in particular have emerged as a central means in this process, and Internet cafés and other access points provide opportunities for resident Trinidadians to keep in touch with their migrant relatives on a regular basis. This has in practice extended the active Trinidadian community into a wide geographical area far surpassing the island context, where distances are not as important as the commitment to communal affairs.

Particularly in the context of migration, we may talk of *translocalisation*. By translocalisation I mean the processes by means of which migrants in their host societies build up new forms of locality and communality based partly on their own cultural backgrounds and partly on the opportunities and sociocultural contexts of the host society in ways that interconnect the different localities. The concept of translocalisation is an analytical attempt to focus on those (contemporary) processes of identity formation that involve aspects of migration and the international distribution of members relevant to identity. Although translocalisation is not dependant upon the availability of the digital environment, translocalisation processes have benefited from digitalisation processes and the emergence of digital modernity.

Translocal commitment to a particular locality is one aspect of a personal identity which also consists of other, often equally or more relevant, layers of that identity. Translocalisation should be regarded as a looser process of identity formation than, say, ethnicity or cultural identity because the primary identification of translocality occurs through a place that is most often geographic in character, though not always – certain communalities clearly without a geographic basis nevertheless exist in the Internet, and the ‘geographical’ locality of such communities is the Net, cyberspace. However, commitment to a locality frequently translates as a commitment to a cultural or ethnic identity, and becomes conceptualised, operationalised and treated as such in the social everyday lives of its bearers (see also the discussion of ‘virtual ethnicity’ in Poster, 1998, and of ‘neo-tribalism’ in Maffesoli, 1996).

A commitment to a locality and its cultural identity may indeed result from a ‘melting’ of the two into each other, yet analytically they need to be kept separate. In comparison with cultural and ethnic identities, a translocal identity also allows for the inclusion in the relevant community of those members who would otherwise be marginalised in terms of ethnicity or cultural identity: spouses of different cultural backgrounds, bi-cultural or multi-cultural children born in migration, intercultural friends and activists promoting goals relevant to the community. For example, anthropologists who have fieldwork-based relationships with the communities they study become involved in and become members of that translocal community, which is also, in part, constructed and established through such interactions.

In translocalisation processes, the roles of the Internet and digital technology are becoming increasingly central. Information technology applications provide migrants with concrete means and vehicles to overcome geographical locality and extend communality into the Internet. In analysing locality, a key element would be the question of presence, or proximity. *Translocalisation*
processes involve the idea of establishing socially relevant and effective presences, proximities and agency across a distance while these processes are simultaneously motivated to maintain the community and also its cultural identity.

In translocalisation the clusters of migrants and their origin communities maintain a network of regular or even daily interaction, which occurs despite the actual locations of its members. Ethnicity studies in migrant communities have paid little attention to such networks of migrants and their home communities from the point of view of locality lacking a single definite geographical basis. Such aspects of migrant ethnicity and cultural identity have been more or less bypassed or ignored in most migration studies until very recently, and the Internet contributes increasing complexity to this question. What, indeed, is the locality of an ethnocultural community nowadays when its members live in diasporas somewhere else, but they still easily participate through means provided by ICT in the daily affairs of their home community? (See also discussion in Howard, 1999; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000.)

In the current academic jargon we possess a wealth and abundance of words and concepts that describe social and cultural formations and relations therein. We may also observe a certain ‘contest’ among these words and their related discourses in particular times and contexts. For example, culture and cultural identity; ethnicity, ethnos, and ethnic identity; indigenous peoples and indigeneity; tribes and neo-tribes; as well as society, community, class – and even ‘race’ – have each been promoted at some point as avant-garde explanatory and analytical conceptualisations of one and the same thing, a group of people. Each such concept highlights and frames the group of people in specific ways, but each concept also acts in the world in specific ways; concepts are, to varying extents, self-fulfilling prophecies. The concepts and their usage in discourses and parlance interpret, shape and frame the social world, and the analytical concepts become transformed into social and political objectives. Their usage produces particular interpretations of the signified social reality, and in their hegemonic usage reality is actively fitted to match the concepts and their running definitions. Thus, words have consequences; they can change the social reality by changing the socially shared interpretations of the reality. With this in mind, I have chosen to use the concept of translocalisation.

Translocalisation as a concept is akin to a few other neologisms that have emerged in recent years. To conclude the discussion I will relate the concept of translocal with the neighbouring concept of transnationalism, as formulated especially by the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz in his book, Transnational Connections (1996). Yet, transnationalism connotes ultimately nationality and nationalism, and a particular sense of real or imagined relationship is assumed that has to do with the nation-state formations and the state, although the concept also carries a distinct cosmopolitan denotation. Such denotations, connotations and dimensions are missing from translocality. The fixing-point, and the bind between people, is place instead of the more inflammatory identity layers of ethnicity and culture, social hierarchy, gender, or seniority and age. It allows us to refer to the interactions and common activities of people of different ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and social ranks when they establish communalities-in-action in a somewhat neutral framework of place, and the identity composed through it. In everyday cross-cultural interaction it can be occasionally well appreciated that we have vocabulary to establish a relatively neutral framework for interpreting and expressing the activities we are doing together (see also Smith, 1999).

The digital environment has been introduced into local settings so thoroughly that there is no turning back. Although traditionalist and culturally conservative enclaves may continue to exist, computer-based systems are being introduced everywhere, and, excepting North Korea, all countries are already online and intensifying their agency in the digital environment. Ever since Bronislaw Malinowski’s initial instructions in 1922, modern anthropology has been preoccupied by the ‘native’s point of view’ and world view (Malinowski, [1922] 1972, p. 25). In the twenty-first century, these world views and perspectives relate increasingly to the digital environment, which is rapidly being populated by the people we have been accustomed to study as anthropologists.

References
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