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indigenous
the Teacher's E-Zine to the Digital Revolution

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study guide for the **seeing is believing** project • Human Rights, New Technology and the Media

Aboriginal Rights and New Technology



>> The NAKAMATA coalition accepts state-of-the-art technology in a traditional Manobo ritual.

INTRODUCTION

Unit 3 focuses on the relationship between technology and human rights in the context of indigenous communities in Canada and internationally. How do indigenous communities relate to the media? What kind of access do First Nations have to media, and communications technology? What are the benefits, the dilemmas that new technologies can present for Aboriginal communities? The Global Positioning System (GPS) and its related technologies are featured because of the powerful tool they have become for Aboriginal peoples in land claims, resource management and protection of the environment. Most of the examples and links provided in this unit are drawn from stories that are available in the 'Technology' section of seeingisbelieving.ca.

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key quotes

Culture is not static. It is always changing, it is always modernizing. What are the tools of warfare today? It's the computer, or it's the college and high-school diploma. These things are there to help us live, help us survive, help our culture.

— Denny McAuliffe, former editor at the Washington Post, founder of the online Native student newspaper **reznet**.

The technology is being used to co-manage the land... The First Nations are saying, 'Hey, we can participate in the planning process from which we have been historically excluded.'

— Steve DeRoy, coordinator of the **Aboriginal Mapping Network**, a Vancouver-based group that helps First Nations use mapping technology to advance rights.

Now knowing the power of the video camera to deter all of these abuses, knowing the power of the camera to advance (Nakamata's) aspirations... they're able to engage in a different arena.

— Joey Lozano, Filipino media activist working with indigenous groups to regain ancestral lands, in **Seeing is Believing**.

My feeling is that because we have become so scattered and disrupted by the colonizers – between reservations and elsewhere – a lot of people lost touch with their own roots... The information is so scattered out there. We are trying to point out one place for it.

— Linda Lemonde (Ishgooda), founder of **NativeNews Online**.

When we're in the bush, we can teach our children about the plants, vegetation, respect, life. If we take a person away from the bush, the harder his heart gets. And if this is true, what is modern technology doing to us? Technology could kill my beliefs to a certain extent.

— Paul Dixon, Cree hunter and trapper in Waswanipi, Northern Quebec.



>> From Reznets, photo by Jill Cadreau
Clem Crazy Thunder of the American Indian Journalism Institute takes a walk under a threatening South Dakota sky.

1. HUMAN RIGHTS AND ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

The terms 'indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' peoples refer to the descendants of the original inhabitants of a place, who lived on the land before colonial settlement. In Canada, these are Indians, Inuit and also Métis, who are people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage. In North America, the term 'First Nations' is commonly used to replace the word 'Indian', which many people find offensive.

Many Aboriginal communities around the world share common histories of human rights abuses that are a legacy of colonization. Today, Aboriginal peoples engage in campaigns to regain their ancestral land, to govern their communities, to have access to the basics of food, shelter and education, and to revive linguistic and cultural traditions that were outlawed by colonial governments. In many ways, the land claims campaign of the Nakamata coalition in the Philippines resembles First Nations land claims across Canada.

In Canada, most government documents that describe the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of citizens do explicitly address the circumstances of First Nations. For example, Canada recognizes that Aboriginal people have an inherent right to self-government. The Canadian Rights Commission also noted in 1994 that despite considerable progress, "the situation of the Native peoples remains the most pressing human rights issue facing Canadians."

Communications technologies are creating the opportunity for greater links among Aboriginal groups working toward common goals. For example, the Indigenous Information Network is an online resource that began in Mexico and now provides the means of linking together more than 100 indigenous groups across Latin America. (Note: This story can be found on **seeingsbelieving.ca** in the 'Technology' section.) The site helps groups to organize, to build a community despite issues like geographic isolation, and to inform the rest of the world about issues affecting them. This has allowed Latin American indigenous groups to move beyond filing complaints with their local governments and to engage the international community.

Activity 1: Divide the class into six groups and have each one choose a continent: Asia, Oceania, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America. Have each group do research and a presentation on Aboriginal issues on that continent. Consider the following: What indigenous populations live there? What challenges do they face? What campaigns are they involved in? What means are they using to defend or promote their rights? Provide some examples of the way communications technologies are being used.

Close the session by doing a comparison study: For example, how do land claims in Australia compare to land claims in Canada or Siberia? How are the rights of indigenous peoples protected in the law? (Note: Some good places to look for information are the World Wide Web Virtual Library of Indigenous Studies at www.cwis.org/wwwvl/indig-vl.html, and the Center for World Indigenous Studies at www.cwis.org.)

Activity 2: Michael Ignatieff writes that legal documents like treaties and legislation protecting human rights don't create those rights; they just recognize and codify the ones we already have, and provide means for their protection. Rights are about giving grievances legitimacy, and legitimacy should lead to addressing the problems (The Rights Revolution, 2000).

- Investigate the way that rights of First Nations peoples are addressed in historical and current Canadian policy and legislation. (Note: Examples include the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the Canada Act of 1982, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and others.)
- Visit the Web site for the Assembly of First Nations (www.afn.ca) and research the successes and failings of efforts to ensure the rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and address historical wrongs from a First Nations perspective.
- Discuss your findings in class or write a brief report about your discoveries. What grade would you give Canada's human rights record regarding Aboriginal peoples today?

Activity 3: Witness is a New-York-based non-profit organization that helps over 150 'partner' groups around the world use communications technology to combat human rights abuses. In film and on the Web site, **Seeing is Believing** documents how Witness works with Nakamata, using technology to document and publicize abuses and recover their ancestral lands.

- Visit the Witness Web site (www.witness.org) and look at the descriptions of the indigenous 'partners' around the world. Choose one and describe who the group represents and what human rights issue it is working on.
- As a class, choose one of the groups that you would like to support. Brainstorm some ideas of how you could contribute to their human rights campaign. This could involve: raising money through a bake sale or event to help them purchase needed technology; organizing a conference for the school to educate students and staff about the group and the issue; organizing a letter-writing campaign to government officials urging action to prevent abuses.

(Note: As an alternative to supporting a Witness partner, you could choose a local group working on an issue that you feel is important.)

2. GPS TECHNOLOGY

Geomatics technologies have provided important tools for Aboriginal peoples in Canada and around the world. Geomatics describes the science and technology for land surveying, mapping, remote sensing, land and resource information management, computer-assisted drafting and mapping (CAD/CAM), geographic information systems (GIS), and global positioning systems (GPS).

The Global Positioning System is a worldwide navigation system made up of a network of 24 satellites and their 'ground stations' on earth. GPS uses the satellites as reference points to calculate positions anywhere in the world, accurate to within a few metres. When someone is carrying a GPS 'receiver', they can track things like their exact location, speed, direction, and distance to destination. Like most other kinds of communications technologies, GPS equipment is becoming more accessible as the 'receivers' become smaller and more affordable.



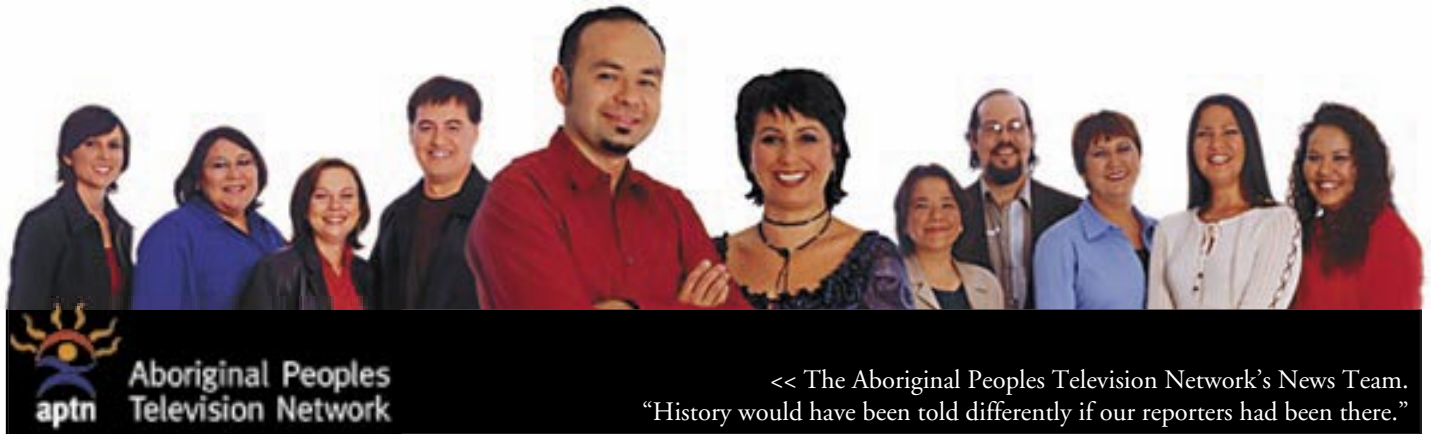
<< GPS unit: in the hands of human rights activists, these little tools can change the world.

In **Seeing is Believing**, the filmmakers document the indigenous tribal coalition Nakamata's use of GPS technology to document the boundaries of their ancestral domain for use in their land claims process in the Philippines. In Quebec, the Cree of Wasnawipi use it to track moose populations to document the effects of logging on their habitat. (Note: This story can be found on **seeingisbelieving.ca** in the 'Technology' section.) Geomatic technologies played an important role in drawing the borders of Canada's newest territory, Nunavut, which involved the largest land area and the most claimants of any Canadian land claim.

Activity 1: The Aboriginal Mapping Network offers workshops and an online resource to support Aboriginal mappers using new technologies. (Note: This story and Web links can be found on **seeingisbelieving.ca** in the 'Technology' section.) Explore some of the uses of GPS and related technologies by Canadian Aboriginal groups and communities. If you are part of a First Nations community, explore how it is being used locally, too. What specific kind of technology is being used? How is it being used? For what purpose? What has the use of this technology helped the group accomplish? Report your findings to the class.

Activity 2: Invite a member of your community who works with GPS technology to give your class a mapping demonstration and join you for a field trip. This could be a member of the geography department of your school, a hunter or trapper who uses GPS, a member of a mapping group or mountaineering club, et cetera. Using GPS receivers, try some of the following:

- Locate the latitude and longitude of your school and your home. Calculate the distance between the two.
- Create a map of the neighbourhood around your school. Include the locations of buildings and natural landmarks like hills and wooded areas.



3. ABORIGINAL PEOPLES, REPRESENTATION AND ACCESS TO MEDIA

Historically, Aboriginal peoples have been portrayed in the media by non-Aboriginal media-makers in ways that have created and perpetuated stereotypes. Think of the old Hollywood westerns or early anthropological documentaries portraying the lives of 'noble savages'. Whether it's in the form of documentary, fictional film, or the nightly news, having access to communications technologies, and owning the means of media production, give individuals and communities the ability to represent themselves in a way that reflects the realities of their lives rather than an outsider's perceptions.

In a human rights context, the ability to document one's own story gives a voice to a side of the issue that may not be seen in the 'mainstream' media. In **Seeing is Believing**, Nakamata's footage of an attack on its members provided investigators with evidence of abuses they suffer and disproved the accusation that Nakamata members were responsible for violence. The footage and their story also made it onto a top-rated investigative TV show, educating viewers about the issues faced by Nakamata's communities and the human rights abuses that they live with.

Activity 1: The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) went on air in 1999. First Nations, Inuit and Métis people now have a national television network in Canada dedicated to Aboriginal programming, including documentaries, news magazines, dramas, entertainment specials, children's series, cooking shows and education programs.

- Watch a news program on APTN if you have access to cable television. Are there issues or events covered that you don't see reported on other news stations? How does the news coverage compare to your local or national news? What did you learn from the program?

Activity 2: Native journalists now have access to online resources like Canadian Aboriginal (www.canadianaboriginal.com), AMMSA (www.ammsa.com), reZnet, and Native News Online. (Note: For stories and links to the last two sites, see the 'Technology' section of seeingisbelieving.ca.) Check out these sites and other links for Native journalists, looking at how Aboriginal issues are being covered. Choose a local, national, or international issue that interests you and write your own investigative report. If your school is located in a First Nations community, you could print the class articles in a newsletter for the school or the community.



>> *Atarnajuat, The Fast Runner* is the world's first all Inuit film, filmed in the Eastern Arctic and based on a traditional Inuit legend. It is one of Canada's most successful film in years, having won over 15 international film prizes, including an Oscar nominaton.

Activity 3: Until very recently, non-Aboriginal writers were responsible for how Aboriginal peoples were portrayed in films. Often, no attempt to show a true depiction of Aboriginal life, and stereotypes were presented instead. In the last fifteen years, the growth of Aboriginal media production houses means that we can now see films written by and about Native peoples.

As a class, view two films or excerpts from two films with prominent Native characters. For your first selection, choose a film made by a non-Aboriginal filmmaker. Examples: Any John Wayne western, *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). For the second video, select one directed by an Aboriginal filmmaker, such as: *Pow Wow Highway* (1988), *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Atarnajuat—The Fast Runner* (2001). (Note: *Atarnajuat* is almost 3 hours long. You may want to view it over more than one class or screen excerpts.)

- Compare the two videos. How, if at all, were the portrayals of Aboriginal characters and Aboriginal life different? Make a list of any differences that you can find.
- Did the film directed by an Aboriginal filmmaker use a different kind of narrative technique? How was the story told? Was a narrator or first person voiceover used? Describe the visuals. Did you notice any kind of new or innovative visual style to accompany the story?
- Write a short movie review for each of the films. Describe what you liked about the film and what didn't you like. What about the film did or didn't work for you? What could have been improved?

4. THE TWO-WAY STREET OF TECHNOLOGY

The Good and the Bad

While some people see technologies as tools to defend Native interests and help First Nations survive, others are worried that modern communications technologies are undermining the Native way of life. (See the 'Technology' section of seeingisbelieving.ca for more on this story.) For example, Paul Dixon, a Cree hunter and trapper from Waswanipi in Northern Quebec, acknowledges the benefits but warns that recording Native knowledge means that Native youth do not have to go into the bush and learn by experience. Aboriginal youth also have access to TV and the Internet, which are now reaching even the most geographically isolated communities, bringing the dominant culture into the homes and lives of Aboriginal peoples around the world. New technology makes new kinds of communication possible, but it also shapes the identities of its users and fundamentally alters the way members of a community interact with each other.

Activity 1: Invite an Elder to talk to your class about the impact that communications technologies have had on the community. (Note: If your school is not part of a First Nations community, see if you can find a speaker through a local First Nations organization.) Possible questions to ask:

1. What benefits does he or she think communications technologies have had for life in the community? Consider TV, computers, GPS technology, cell phones and others.
2. What have been the drawbacks?
3. How would he or she address some of the problems that technology has contributed to or created? What could youth do to address these problems? What could teachers do?

Technological Give and Take

So far, we have been looking at the impact of new technologies on Aboriginal peoples. But there are many ways that technical and scientific knowledge has passed from First Nations to non-Aboriginal societies. (Note: See the 'Technology' section of seeingisbelieving.ca for the full story.) From the early days of colonial settlement, non-Aboriginal people have used knowledge from First Nations in the fields of medicine, chemistry, environmental science, astronomy, farming, and the tools of transportation, hunting and fishing. In some cases, Aboriginal knowledge has been appropriated (taken without permission) or misused, as in the case of some grains or medicines that companies have patented (obtained the exclusive legal right to make or distribute a product.)

Activity 1: Choose one of the fields listed above. Describe the contribution that Aboriginal knowledge or tools made in the field. What impact did it have on the field? On non-Aboriginal societies? Have there been any controversies over 'ownership'? How is that knowledge or tool used today? Present your findings to the class. (Note: The Canadian Museum of Civilization's Web site is a good place to start, at www.civilization.ca/aborig/aborige.asp.)

>> Alanis Obomsawin is one of Canada's foremost First Nations documentarians. For almost 30 years, she has focussed her camera and her wisdom on the defining moments of First Nations history-in-the-making, such as Restigouche, Oka and Burnt Church.



<< The Mohawk flag became a symbol of First Nations' Rights during the Oka Crisis of 1990.

ADDITIONAL PROJECT AND RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

1. In the summer of 1990, a dispute between a Mohawk community and non-Native town council over a golf course in Oka, Quebec turned into a standoff between Native people, Quebec police, and the Canadian Army. An international spotlight was focused on the issue of land rights of Canadian aboriginal people for the duration of the 78-day standoff that became known as 'The Oka Crisis'. Filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin, a member of the Abenaki Nation, had her camera with her behind the barricades, and she used some of the footage she took in her documentary about the crisis entitled *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*.

- View the documentary and compare the filmmaker's portrayal of the issues with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) coverage. (Note: Video and audio clips and text are available on the CBC's online archives at <http://archives.cbc.ca/>.)

(Note: Obomsawin has made several powerful and engaging documentaries about the political and social struggles First Nations in Canada that you could also view in class. Some examples: *Mother of Many Children* (1977), *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), and *Is the Crown at War with Us?* (2002), all available through the NFB.)

ADDITIONAL PROJECT AND RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS (cont'd)

2. If you are living in a First Nations community, investigate what kind of new technologies are being used in your community. Make a list of places in the community where new communications technology might be used, such as the local radio station, band council, hospital, non-profit organizations, businesses, and even the school.

- Divide up into groups and have each group visit one of the places on your list. Report back to the class about how each organization uses (or doesn't use) new technologies in its work.
- Consider questions like: What kinds of communications technology does the organizations use? This could include satellite or cell phones, GPS technology, video-conferencing, Internet, et cetera. How is the technology used to promote First Nations rights?
- You might want to share some of your findings with the community by doing an on-air report with your local radio station.

3. If your school is part of a First Nations community, use some of the key quotes provided at the beginning of the Unit to generate a class discussion about the impact of technology on Native life.

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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through
the Human Rights Program, a program of the Department of Canadian Heritage

Canada 