

**April 23, 2000**

## **WHEN VILLAGES GO GLOBAL**

### **How a Byte of Knowledge Can Be Dangerous, Too**

**By SIMON ROMERO**  
**New York Times**

SÃO PAULO, Brazil -- The prospects seemed bright when the Internet was recently introduced in a remote part of the mountainous Cotopoxi region in Ecuador. Under the guidance of aid workers, Quichua-speaking peasants planned to gather crop information and sell their crafts over the Web.

Soon, though, it was discovered that some of the men were using the computer to visit pornographic sites.

Dismayed, the women began to question how the men were treating them, and a debate ensued over the common practice of beating women. Although use of the Internet was later curtailed, its introduction unexpectedly generated discussion on a once taboo topic.

The changes created by the Internet in rich industrialized nations are well known, affecting everything from how people date to how they work. But less is known about the impact on societies with limited contact with the rest of the world. As such experiments multiply, at least one outcome seems certain: the way people in these communities relate to each other and with the world is likely to be altered forever.

The Ecuadorean peasants were a case in point. "The impact was huge, but as it almost always is when the Internet makes it to such a community, quite surprising," said Amalia Souza, a Brazilian technology expert familiar with the project who has been an adviser on programs that bring the Internet to poor communities in more than 40 countries.

A year and a half ago the women of the impoverished Wapishana and Macushi tribes of Guyana were introduced to the Internet in a project sponsored by Bill Humphries, who headed Guyana Telephone and Telegraph at the time and was optimistic about technology's money-making potential. The tribal power structures were shaken.

The women began making money by marketing their intricate hand-woven hammocks over the Web at \$1,000 each. Feeling threatened, the traditional regional leadership took control of the organization, alienating and finally driving out the young woman who ran the Web site. The weaving group fell into disarray.

"The events should be a case study for students of economics and social work," wrote Indera Ramlall, who is Guyanese, in a letter to a newspaper in the capital city of Georgetown. "Economic advancement is not just about technology and markets; more fundamentally, it is about human relationships."

The Alliance for Progress was the great hope of the Kennedy administration in the early 1960's. Its aim was to thwart communism with American aid to Central America, bridging the gap between poor and rich societies by building roads, factories and bridges. But aid to El Salvador tore the social fabric, contributed to the oppression of the poor, increased the holdings of the land-owning classes and helped fuel civil war.

For many people in developing countries these days, inspiration is increasingly drawn from William H. Gates.

Some of the outwardly successful development projects, like the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, are trying to deal with the unforeseen impact on the people they are trying to help. The Grameen Bank provides small amounts of credit to more than two million poor people, mainly women, enabling them to invest in raising livestock or entrepreneurial ventures like buying rickshaws. But critics say the focus on women, who are considered more reliable borrowers than men, has caused considerable tension between the sexes.

"Redistributing income from men to women, sharing out the misery of a shrinking cake, is not going to solve the people's problems," said Para Teare, a London-based social scientist who has studied such micro-lending programs, in a critique of the Grameen Bank.

Now, as technology starts to blur the distinction between industrialized countries and developing ones, social transition, if not transformation, has become an issue in some of the world's most remote regions. A recent issue of *Cultural Survival*, a magazine that covers indigenous people and ethnic minorities, described projects to bring the Web to communities as varied as the reindeer-herding Sami of Scandinavia and northern Russian, the aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Territories in Canada, the ethnic minorities of Burma and native Hawaiians.

These efforts represent a departure from the idea that introducing new technologies to indigenous peoples will bring about negative results. Such thinking, which dates back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the 18th-century French philosopher who lured Europe into idealizing the simple lifestyle of the noble savage, appears to be coming undone in the digital age.

"It is not realistic to think that as the world gets smaller there should be enclaves untouched by Western technology," said Robert Whelan, a writer on indigenous affairs at the Institute of Economic Affairs in London. "But it is realistic to realize that traditional cultures can be very oppressive, especially for women and wildlife, and that technology can help change this."

Some people think the double-edged nature of technology's impact is beneficial. For the Grameen Bank, credit is considered a weapon for alleviating poverty and oppressive policies affecting women. Yet some societies are better equipped than others to deal with an onslaught of technological change. The American Amish, who are known for their rigid views about technology, have banned the car and computer but not the pocket calculator. A few Amish also use the Internet, albeit quietly.

Others, though, are not so sure about placing too much value on technology's liberating potential.

"When you introduce the Internet to people whose most urgent need is to get enough food to eat each day," said Karin Delgadillo, a coordinator at ChasquiNet, which provides technology assistance to remote communities in Quito, Ecuador, "you see there are other priorities that need to be taken care of first."

\* \* \*