

As the internet reaches the Brazilian Amazon, what ethical considerations must be taken for Indigenous peoples?

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Getty Lustila, assistant teaching professor of philosophy and religion, says local knowledge and connections are key to making contact with remote Indigenous peoples. Credit: Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

The internet has [reached a remote Indigenous community in the Brazilian Amazon](#), connecting it with the good—[and the bad](#)—of the world wide web.

But as the Marubo people deal with their digital connection to the modern world, what about their neighbors in the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory—in particular members of 19 tribes that have not been contacted by modern society?

Will they soon be connected, too? And if so, is there an ethical way of making contact with them?

Northeastern University's Getty Lustila, an expert on Indigenous philosophy and a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, says if contact is to be made, it should be made by a local expert.

"You have to—at the very least, have people who are local to the area—and have the degree of knowledge not only about the tribes in question, but also about the different power dynamics at play in the region," says Lustila, an assistant teaching professor of philosophy and religion at Northeastern. "It would have to be very local coordination."

Lustila says it's difficult to count the number of uncontacted Indigenous tribes, as groups often splinter when contact is imminent or first made and some members move toward contact and some move deeper into isolation.

The Marubo had been contacted in the 20th century, according to the New York Times, so technically the tribe was considered remote.

However, enabled by Starlink satellite-internet technology, the Marubo are connected like never before—and Lustila says the introduction of new technologies to a remote or an uncontacted tribe can have

unintended effects like changing traditional ways of life and upsetting traditional power dynamics.

That's the case with the Marubo. Some see the internet as a beneficial way to connect with relatives, emergency services and information across the globe. Others bemoan tribal teenagers gluing themselves to their phones, gossipy group chats and addictive social networks, scams and other modern-day pitfalls of the web. (Contrary to some reports, [the Marubo are not addicted to internet pornography.](#))

Indeed, Lustila says modern contact with remote or uncontacted tribes is made increasingly under the realm of people trying to be beneficent—for example, connecting Indigenous peoples on [remote islands](#) to tools to combat [climate change](#).

But while this doesn't fall into the traditional (and now antiquated) anthropological practice of treating Indigenous peoples as objects of study, it's not ideal.

"I think the worry is that lurking underneath that is a kind of a strange paternalism," Lustila says.

"Even in those cases, it seems like instead of assuming that they need help, or assuming that they need assistance, there should be more of a sort of equal footing conversation regarding whether this is even necessary in the first place."

Yet, Lustila notes that many people may argue that there's no way to have "equal footing" in such a context.

"You're not working with the same information base," Lustila says. "If you're coming from the Western context trying to interact with an uncontacted tribe, you have access to certain kinds of information that

these tribes may not have access to, so you kind of 'hold the cards' in a lot of ways."

On the other hand, one doesn't want to infantilize the tribes. After all, some [tribal leaders](#)—as in the case of the Marubo—may want to connect with new technology.

So, what should be done if connecting with remote or uncontacted tribes? It depends on many factors with many caveats, Lustila says, including who is making the contact, why the contact or connection to technology is being made.

Lustila recommends a lot of consideration and reflection.

"Like any set of negotiations or encounters, you try to do so respectfully and coming from a place with a good heart and mind and for good reason," Lustila says. "You have to think very seriously about, like, why you're doing it and then try figuring out ways to meet them in an ethical manner with consideration to the existing social and political realities."

"There's really not going to be a rulebook for this," Lustila says.

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