

TECHNOLOGY

Brazilian official pushes digital spread of culture

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Gilberto Gil

A government official from Brazil -- who was once an international figure in music -- is counting on the digital world to help narrow the cultural divide between the world's rich and poor.

"A few years ago, the virtual world was not considered real," Gilberto Gil told the Columbus Council on World Affairs yesterday at the Downtown Athletic Club. "Today, it's one of our most important realities."

Gil was a Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter in Brazil before becoming a government official five years ago. He was one of the founders of *tropicalismo*, a form of music developed in the late 1960s that incorporated socially relevant lyrics.

But the political content of his songs also led to his imprisonment by the military government then in power, and Gil was sent into exile in 1969. He returned in the 1970s after expanding his career in Europe and the United States, playing with groups such as Yes, Pink Floyd and the Incredible String Band.

He transformed his activism into a second career in government. Gil is a leading international voice on behalf of fostering arts and culture through digital means.

"The 'e' of electronics (such as e-mail) is becoming an 'e' of everything," said Gil, 64.

A cell phone that takes photographs -- which "organizes your life . . . publishes you on the Internet, in addition to being a telephone" -- is one example of the technology that can do "everything."

But such technology can threaten society.

"I think the divide (between rich and poor) can be worse than we already have if we don't include all people and nations" in the digital wave, he said.

He said the Brazilian program Cultural Points helps community centers in poor neighborhoods buy digital equipment and teach residents how to use it.

"Educational processes are going into the streets," Gil said. "A program like (Cultural Points) has the potential for empowering the poor, to enhance their political possibilities."

This new reality is uncomfortable to many, he said, and many governments and businesses oppose it.

"But that shall soon be resolved." Years from now, "I expect that we may not even remember them as obstacles."

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