Culture At the Interface: Collaborative Design and Information Management with Indigenous Communities

Christen, Kimberly (1); Dietrich, Craig (2); Srinivasan, Ramesh (3)
1: Washington State University; 2: University of Iowa; 3: University of California, Los Angeles

Digital technologies provide the platform for both preserving and producing cultural knowledge and materials. Indigenous and other subaltern cultural perspectives on access, authority, and accountability in relation to cultural materials and knowledge are often marginalized in dominant narratives about the possibilities of digital technologies. Mainstream notions of “search” and “open access” —guided by Google’s mantra of providing universal access to everything—often leave out, or too easily blur, the lines between the multiple forms of technological translations and “other” knowledge/property systems. While digital technologies have much to offer to museums and other archival institutions and their many publics, their use needs to call in to question the viability of universal logics of search and access.

Since the mid 1990s, museums, archives, libraries and especially land grant universities in the United States have recognized the need to direct their energies towards outreach to the indigenous communities whose materials they hold. Many archives have signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with indigenous communities promising access and support in retrieving materials. Digital technologies have allowed archives to produce online databases and expand their physical catalogs with digital repositories. At the same time, archival mandates to preserve information intersect with the capabilities of digital technologies to distribute information over networks. In the context of “information freedom” rhetoric and appeals for “access to knowledge” archives have found themselves at the center of information management debates and strategies for new models for information indexing and distribution.

Museums and archives, now enlivened by the possibilities afforded by digital technologies, are at a crossroads in dealing with emergent information management systems and the cultural, ethical, and legal commitments they have to their multiple stakeholders. Making their materials “open” on the one hand, and working with divergent protocols for access and distribution on the other. In addition, physical distances, educational and linguistic barriers, and high levels of poverty have all made traditional archives unapproachable places for indigenous communities whose cultural materials and institutional histories are preserved within them. However, in the last ten years there has been a groundswell of activity lead by local indigenous communities in conversation with museums, archives, and technologists to incorporate indigenous cultural protocols into the parameters of archival sensibilities, design, and infrastructure. Projects around the world are seeking to integrate indigenous protocols into their informatics.

The papers in this panel focus on collaborative efforts between museums, archives and local indigenous communities in Australia and Native North America to create digital
archival systems informed by indigenous practices and protocols. The panel members come from diverse academic and technological backgrounds representing the Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Their work is informed by interdisciplinary concerns shaping scholars’ understandings of the practical uses of digital technologies for underrepresented groups and the collaborative ways in which technology can be leveraged in service of cultural differences.

The first paper (co–presented by the principal investigator and software designer) based on ten years of collaborative work with Warumungu community members in Australia’s Northern Territory, examines the production of an indigenous community digital archive and its internal search functionality. The Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari archive, installed in the community in August 2007, leverages Warumungu protocols for the reproduction, distribution, and access to cultural materials and their associated knowledge within the design and structure of the archive. A series of restrictions and “sharing protocols” – designated by the Warumungu community—drives the searching, sorting and sharing of all materials in the system. The archive, thus, challenges dominant narratives of openness and accessibility in relation to intangible cultural materials and acts as a practical solution to issues of preservation, access, and distribution that face indigenous people globally.

The second paper describes a NSF-funded initiative which involves a direct partnership with the Zuni nation of New Mexico and the Cambridge (UK) Digital Museum Initiative. This partnership involves the study of how digital objects of excavated cultural materials can become the bases for indigenous engagement, and stimulate the release of indigenous and cross-cultural voices into the larger world of how digital systems are developed. It questions the assumptions that all “information is free” and should be widely disseminated without a sense of bounds, authorship, or culturally-specific forms of reception. Moreover, it questions the pre-existing classification systems for digital libraries and museums and argues for a more participatory model. Finally, it investigates the possibilities of creating information commonses based around diverse voices that indigenize processes of tagging, blogging, and commenting.