Living Cultural Storybases

Nurturing the oral heritage of minority cultures in a digital world

THE CHALLENGE

"It's like standing by watching the destruction of the ancient library at Alexandria, without trying to put out the fire."
(Bruce Batchelor)

The 370 million indigenous peoples, rooted to a particular place by history, legend and language, represent only about 5% of the Earth's population but more than one half of the intellectual legacy of humanity- its languages and cultures. Yet these same people are the most marginalized, fractured and least represented in society: being swept away by poverty, disease, conflict, land appropriation and inappropriate technology. Already one language disappears every ten days: half may be gone within 50 years. For every group dispossessed, urbanized or assimilated, a culture vanishes taking with it ancient knowledge of the environment, unique ways of living, alternative belief systems, irreplaceable skills, artistry and stories - the rich diversity of humanity. The digital revolution, rather than creating a "global village", has accelerated this worldwide cultural demise. ICT access is scant and inappropriate for oral cultures. The languages, interests and ideologies of the largest economic blocks dominate Internet content. We, all of humanity, increasingly need their living resource of alternatives.

LIVING CULTURAL STORYBASES

New technologies can strengthen the oral traditions of endangered minority cultures, if they are appropriable devices and systems which support a dialogue in the local language linked to their content. Many anthropologists have collected some of the rich stories from elders of tribal communities - 'last chances to preserve' the oral heritage for outsiders. We are going further, to create *Living Cultural Storybases* for the communities themselves. **Living Cultural Storybases are vibrant and accessible evolving digital repositories of cultural information that offer a channel to gather, search, share and access the cultural life of a community**. Spoken stories and visual material should be accessible by old and young alike, so they can record and contribute further content, understanding better their own identity within the context of their unique cultural system. This 'cultural capital' stimulates community pride, dialogue about their own heritage and the developmental choices they face. Aspirations for the future may lie with the young, but the old are the custodians of their proud heritage.

AIM: Self-Empowering Narratives

These same technologies causing the "digital divide" could nurture indigenous languages and cultures. Until now ICT initiatives have addressed the immediate developmental needs, rarely even acknowledging minority languages or oral traditions. 'Living Cultural Storybases' seeks to go further: facilitating appropriate, two-way access for all community members to gather and share cultural knowledge through spoken stories, poems or songs. Storytelling is at the heart of social life and personal identity. The recounting of oral narratives maintains ethnic identity and group solidarity. They encapsulate the deeper beliefs and values of a culture, promoting role models and morals, ways of living, behaving and believing. Stories have social functions, representing the collective memory of the people, combining the past with present and attaching meaning to space and time.

The Living Cultural Storybases' mission to *'nurture the oral heritage of minority cultures in a digital world'* is being realized by carefully balancing two approaches: social and technical. We are:

a) **Developing trustworthy and participatory methodologies** which engage and empower dispersed communities and their urban diaspora to celebrate, exchange, grow and re-interpret their traditional narratives. We have proven ways to strengthen their sense of cultural identity, motivate youth pride in their cultural inheritance, promote the elders' transmission of their oral heritage and support remote minority-language dialogue or decision making.

b) **Evolving a generalizable technology** which provides appropriate, secure, two-way access for the entire population around a dynamic database architecture for storing and sharing their own stories. The system should reflect and respect the culture, through the database's ontology, role-based access and protection of their intellectual property. Two-way spoken access will be via devices that are appropriate and easy-to-use by all within the community setting, thus encouraging further contributions and discourse.

www.storybases.org

'A culture survives when it has enough confidence in its past and enough say in its future to maintain its spirit and essence through all the changes it will inevitably undergo.' (Wade Davis).

OUR TENETS

- Cultural diversity is as precious as biodiversity
- Culture is experienced and enacted – it's *lived*, it can't be 'preserved' like an artefact
- Cultures are not static, they evolve
- Stories are at the heart of a culture, once the stories are no longer re-told, the culture is dead
- The communities must own the process, its pace and evaluation: a bottom-up approach, not top-down
- Outsiders can facilitate - bringing a global perspective and extracting the general principles and tools which can help nurture other minority cultures

LONG TERM VISION: INDIGENOUS INTRANETS

All too often the ICT solution proposed is PC-based - as if traditional knowledge, practices and oral heritage could be funnelled through a text keyboard. Current digital ICT solutions developed by, and for, the large urban power blocks in a cash economy using majority languages are inappropriate for indigenous peoples. Those solutions actually undermine minority cultures and inherently carry the wrong messages of cultural superiority: of urban mores, of Western education systems, mental models and aspirations. Cultural identity and ownership of intellectual property requires privacy and security - protection just like land rights against 'digital colonialism' or cultural piracy. Political enfranchisement requires social networks which can support private discourse across a minority culture.

Our vision is of community-managed 'Virtual Cultural Networks' (VCNs): 'TuaregNet', 'AkhaNet', 'InuitNet' etc. These are distributed cultural intranets running across public networks, supporting role-based access via a variety of simple digital devices, secure communications in indigenous languages and private cultural resources such as dynamic audio databases. By analogy, today's corporate virtual private networks (VPN's) are impoverished, but offer a basis for development. This virtual landscape is completed by common meeting grounds where stories of similar experiences, multi-lingual dialogues, shared knowledge and cross-cultural understanding are fostered, aided by interpretation and audio searching tools.

CORE LCS TEAM

Our team combines world-class skills in technology innovation with a sensitivity for working with communities, a track record of founding previous relevant initiatives and common passion to both empower indigenous peoples and foster cultural diversity. We have particular experience in developing cheap, easy-to-use mobile devices that can be used offline even without any electricity supply. These handsets can support *interactive, two-way* audio 'podcasts' and asynchronous voice messaging in indigenous languages, proven by a major pilot to foster community capacity and identity, see http://voices.stanford.edu . Our experience ranges from being invited by indigenous Australians to establish a database of traditional ethno-biology knowledge for community use, to integrating new technologies in disadvantaged schools, to providing ICT for underprivileged groups: see http://www.pluggedin.org LCS also builds on an initiative celebrating artistic photos and strong stories from the Andes via multimedia exhibitions in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and France, see http://www.conversationsdumonde.net/ Our eminent advisors include academics, entrepreneurs and master storytellers. Unesco's Intangible Heritage Section have recommended our NGO for Unesco accreditation.

FIRST STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

LCS works incrementally with a few communities at a time in a partnership of trust, evaluating methodologies and technologies which connect the generations, nurture oral heritage and cultural cohesion. We progressively learn more general methods, tools, architecture and insights to help the next engagement. Since 2006 LCS has been supported by The Christensen Fund for successful pilots with the nomadic Tuareg in the Malian Sahara and Quechua villagers in the Peruvian Andes, combining local staffing of field activities with global knowledge accumulation and technical prototyping. We have been invited in 2010 to work in Papua New Guinea, Ethiopia and Central Asia.

JOIN US! We wish to talk with sympathetic sponsors, possible partner communities, experts in oral cultures, potential technology components providers and skilled or experienced volunteers. LCS has US 501c(3) status through a fiscal agent.

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