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# Managing Indigenous Knowledge And Traditional Cultural Expressions: Is Technology The Solution?

**Amber Burtis**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses current issues surrounding the management of indigenous knowledge (IK) and traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) in libraries, archives and other cultural institutions. It addresses the need for: (1) ethical policies for the management of these knowledge systems, (2) critical approaches to the dominant library paradigm of information management, (3) recent efforts by the World Intellectual Property Organization and the American Library Association to craft policy on this topic, and (4) the need for and examples of collaboration with indigenous communities. Implications for social change with the implementation of socially responsible management systems are also considered.

**INTRODUCTION**

Even as globalization opens up more opportunities for worldwide democratic participation in the information society, the digital divide continues to grow larger for the cultural groups that have already benefited the least from the development of information and communication technologies (Appadurai, 1998, cited in Srinivasan, 2006). While this paper will specifically consider indigenous communities, the discussion is also relevant to other communities that are disadvantaged.

At least in the United States, the library and information science (LIS) profession subscribes to the idea of technological utopianism, or that technology

will lead to the creation of a perfect society (Segal, 2005). This progression toward a utopian society will include the cataloging of all information that is pertinent to the promotion of scientific and technological development. I argue that a movement toward a utopian information society would not be of equal benefit to all members of our global society. Collective ownership of the world's knowledge would continue to disadvantage those who have already been exploited by dominant world powers. Of concern is the unequal relationship between those who control global information systems (i.e., corporations, publishers, IT developers, libraries, archives, etc.) and those in less empowered positions who are the subject or creators of a part of this information.

With the creation of a global information society, and the collection and storage of information related to it, has come the increased opportunity for misuse and misappropriation of indigenous knowledge (IK) and indigenous peoples' traditional cultural expressions (TCEs). National policy ensuring proper handling of IK and TCEs would likely be the most effective approach to addressing these issues. Since such policies have not yet been implemented, LIS professionals must take it upon themselves to address this issue.

## INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

IK refers to the knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous groups in matters related to agriculture and environmental management, medicine and health, art and language. Traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) are also part of IK. Like IK, TCEs have been passed from one generation to the next (orally or by tradition) and are an integral part of a culture's identity and heritage. These expressions include, but are not limited to: music and song, stories, symbols, dances, rituals, architecture, arts, and crafts (Franklin, 2008). Both IK and TCEs are found in libraries as original artifacts but are just as likely to take the form of audio and video recordings, photographs, and as textual descriptions of expressions (i.e., song, dance, stories).

Since the 1980s, indigenous knowledge (IK) has been a topic of discussion among scholars of anthropology, geography and disciplines related to development studies. Today there is broadening interest from a variety of fields: ecology, soil science, health, medicine, botany, water resource management and

many more. The interest is driven by research into sustainable development practices in developing countries and the scientific community's concern over loss of species and ecosystems (Nakata, 2002). The LIS field has only recently taken note of this important topic of concern.

IK and TCEs are represented in library and archival collections, but often LIS professionals make no attempt to put them into a cultural context. In support of intellectual freedom, we skillfully catalog, digitize and display information so that the public can access it. A noble goal, but as Wendland (2008) notes:

> "…indigenous claims for greater protection of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural materials lie, albeit perhaps only superficially, at right-angles to some of the core objectives of libraries and other information services, such as: freedom of speech, intellectual freedom, diffusion of knowledge, research and learning, access to information, and preservation of cultural heritage" (p. 2).

For indigenous communities, IK and TCEs are not "things" that exist separately from their culture. The discord with LIS systems lies in the orientation of the field toward a scientific logic of 'information retrieval' and 'information access.' In this discourse, knowledge becomes information, divorced from the context in which it was created (Pyati, 2006). This process allows indigenous cultural capital to be commodified in the name of intellectual freedom.

## THE RESPONSE TO IK AND TCEs MANAGEMENT CONCERNS

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is one of the leading authorities on IK and TCEs. The organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations and acts as forum for policy debate regarding international intellectual property (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2009). In 2000, the WIPO created an intergovernmental committee to consider legal protection of TCEs, IK and genetic resources. In response to the committee's work, the American Library Association (ALA) Office of Information Technology Policy (OITP) (2009) has stated that:

> "The committee's work is gaining momentum within WIPO and its member states. International treaty decisions made at WIPO may have a negative impact on the library's mission to provide access to and preserve the cultural heritage. ALA must be prepared with a position on the management and protection of TCE in the hope of influencing the WIPO discussions in the best interests of libraries and the public, including traditional cultures."

In the United States, the ALA has come to the table fairly late in the game. Australia, particularly, and a number of other countries have clearly been working on the issue for some time (see Nakata and Langton, 2005). The OITP was founded in 1995, with the mission to "advocate for public policy that supports and encourages the efforts of libraries to ensure access to electronic information resources as a means of upholding the public's right to a free and open information society" (American Library Association Office for Information Technology Policy, 2009c). The OITP has taken on the responsibility of advocating for policy related to IK and TCEs, and, some might argue, taken a cautious approach to this issue. Notice the language in the following statement from the OITP's website (2009a) (emphasis added):

> "*Some fear* that opening TCEs to the world creates the risk that the work may be misused or misappropriated, threatening cultural identity by dishonoring the original meaning and value of the cultural work. The management and protection of traditional cultural expression is a long-standing issue that is greatly magnified by the digital environment. Digital technologies and the Internet elevate the discovery of and access to cultural works to a potential world audience. TCEs can be easily modified without authorization and then further distributed by digital technologies and networks. Increasingly, libraries collect, store, make available, preserve and digitize cultural works without a clear policy position on how TCEs should be managed or protected. *This is an area in which library values can conflict with the interests of traditional cultures, making policy decisions difficult*."

In November 2008, the OITP convened the conference: *Cultural Heritage and Living Culture: Defining the U.S. Library Position on Access and Protection of*

*Traditional Cultural Expression*. The office then drafted a principles statement, which will serve to direct the ALA's position with regard to the WIPO, entitled: *Librarianship and Traditional Cultural Expressions: Nurturing Understanding and Respect* (American Library Association Office for Information Technology Policy, 2009b).

The statement, which has not yet been approved as ALA policy, is still open for comments (post comments at http://wo.ala.org/tce/). Developed in collaboration with librarians, archivists and indigenous communities in the United States, the document summarizes five key concepts in the management of TCEs:

- Meaning and Social Context
- Respect, Recognition, Understanding
- Responsibility
- Reciprocity and Collaboration
- Stewardship

These concepts will also frame the following discussion on ideas for collaborative management of IK and TCEs.

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

LIS professionals must first seek to understand the context in which IK and TCEs came to be in their collections. In general, indigenous cultures have been oppressed and exploited under colonial rule. Display of cultural expressions (i.e., language, ceremony) was often suppressed and punished by the ruling power. For this reason, libraries may have materials that would, for instance, be important to a group attempting to revitalize their language.

As Nakata (2002) points out:

"The documentation of such knowledge by scientists, the storage of information in databases in academic institutions, whether they be gene banks or electronic networks, all looks remarkably similar to former

colonial enterprises which co-opted land, resources, and labour in the interest of their own prosperity through trade and value-adding" (p. 282).

A rare recording of an endangered language may be of great value to a university library (by increasing research opportunities and the institution's prestige), but the value of this "document" to the group who is in danger of losing their language would be much greater. When libraries shift from seeing themselves as the owners of these materials, and instead as caretakers, a dialogue can begin between LIS professionals and indigenous communities.

Part of this dialogue must also include a conversation about sensitive materials (sacred information related to spirituality or religion, or private information meant for a certain gender, age or social group within the culture). Providing public access could disrespect the values and norms associated with these types of materials (American Library Association Office of Information Technology Policy, 2009b). The two main approaches to collaboration which are being seen include: (1) working with indigenous communities to develop policies for preservation, access, and repatriation of materials (especially sensitive materials) and (2) using indigenous community participation to inform the development of electronic information systems. As the first approach has been discussed in length elsewhere (see Underhill, 2006; Nakata et al, 2008), the following section will focus on the second approach to collaboration by highlighting examples of collaborative work being done in both libraries and museums.

## COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

Technology has allowed some indigenous groups the opportunity to create their own cultural narrative in the digital world, but as discussed earlier, the digital divide is still wide enough that many do not have this opportunity. Furthermore, since technology has contributed to the degradation of indigenous cultures, we should ask if it makes sense to use technology as a solution to the problem of indigenous peoples' loss of intellectual property rights. Should indigenous communities be part of the process of designing, implementing, and

evaluating information systems which provide access to IK and TCEs? Can indigenous people trust the developers of these information systems?

A recent trend in the scientific community is to create IK databases. In reference to these databases, Gosart (2009) states that: "While composed with assistance and help from the indigenous peoples, these information resources often bore little relevance to the needs of the communities from whom the information was taken" (p. 2). This observation points to the need for a better and clearer understanding of the needs of the community in question.

Another approach, which does make use of community goals, is the community-driven ontology approach to database creation and population (i.e., metadata related to description and rights and tribal care annotations to digital images, video or 3D representations). An ontology is a conceptual map of the world according to a specific culture. When a community organizes its own content in accordance with its own culturally specific ontology, the project becomes much more relevant to the people involved (Srinivasan, 2004).

Examples of current projects related to IK and TCEs, some of which make use of community-driven ontologies include:

- Two multimedia projects (*Village Voice and Tribal Diaspora)* initiated by a professor in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California – Los Angeles. Both projects use a community-driven ontology for the knowledge architecture of the database which manages the narratives of various communities (i.e., Somali Americans and American Indians) (Srinivasan, 2004).

- Database software to support a program at the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian (*Culturally Sensitive Collections Care Program*). It allows for indigenous rights annotations and community-driven ontologies. The designers aim to use the software in collaborations between museums, archives and indigenous communities to facilitate cultural repatriation. Software will be downloadable and freely available to indigenous communities (Hunter, J., et al., 2004).

- *Ara Irititja Project* (a project supported by the South Australian Museum). The project partners with local Aboriginal organizations to collect and

preserve both traditional and current Anangu material and stories. Through an interactive multi-media archive database, the materials are then "given back to the community" (Ara Irititja Project, 2009).

- *The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America* (a joint project of the Departments of Anthropology and Linguistics and the Digital Library Services Division of the University Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin). The archive preserves and makes accessible narratives, ceremonies, oratory, conversations, and songs in the indigenous languages of Latin America and is especially concerned with making the collection accessible to indigenous communities and asks for users to register and agree to terms and conditions concerned with intellectual property rights (Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

In the United States, the LIS profession has been preoccupied with collecting, preserving, and providing access to materials, and has done little to challenge the assumption that this approach is the most appropriate for all information. Should the profession move from its traditional role as owner of collections, and accept the role of caretaker, then important steps can be taken toward the ethical management of IK and TCEs (including repatriation and the proper handling of sensitive materials). Collaboration with indigenous communities is integral to this process. Merely being a librarian or an archivist who manages indigenous materials is no longer acceptable, the LIS profession must work to facilitate a process that involves indigenous communities in the planning and implementation of appropriate and useful knowledge management systems.