

ICTs for indigenous knowledge preservation

Public libraries in South Africa engage with local communities to preserve indigenous knowledge. This involves teaching them to use ICT tools.

Crowdsourcing and engagement

ICTs can play an important role in documenting and disseminating indigenous knowledge. In Durban, South Africa, public libraries started a crowdsourcing experiment to collect local indigenous knowledge, by engaging with local communities and encouraging them to use ICTs to share their knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge affects the well-being of the majority of people in developing countries. Some 80% of the world's population depends on indigenous knowledge to meet their medicinal needs, and at least 50% rely on indigenous knowledge for their food supplies. Because it is mostly stored in people's minds and passed on through generations by word of mouth rather than in written form, it is susceptible to rapid change.

Nowadays, ICTs can help to document and disseminate indigenous knowledge. In South Africa, it is mainly libraries that have accepted the challenge of preserving indigenous knowledge systems. For example, the consortium of eThekweni Municipal Libraries, which serves 89 local public libraries in the Durban area (Durban is the second-largest city of South Africa), started a crowdsourcing experiment to collect local indigenous knowledge.

This Ulwazi programme mainly records Zulu culture, but it has the broader aim of capturing the mix and

interaction of different cultures in the Durban area. Examples of indigenous knowledge collected through the Ulwazi programme are traditional celebrations, traditional clothing, Zulu proverbs, traditional folk tales, the use of spiritual herbs and traditional agricultural methods.

The Ulwazi programme has a collaborative online community memory database of local indigenous knowledge. It relies on the community to deliver content and post it on the web. The community assumes ownership of the database, while the library focuses on custodianship of the information resource. Community participation ensures that local knowledge is collected, recorded and preserved, and in the process it therefore shares knowledge, develops people's skills, creates job opportunities and empowers local communities.

The Ulwazi Community Memory website has been developed in the form of a wiki, an open-source webpage designed to enable contributions and modifications from multiple users.

Since the development of the mobile interface in 2010, which can be used on the simplest of internet-enabled mobile devices, access via mobile devices has increased dramatically, now accounting for 20% of all visitors. At the moment Ulwazi does not have a process for collecting indigenous knowledge via mobile phones, but this has been under discussion and should be rolled out in the next year or so.

Indigenous knowledge is collected from local communities through community journalists, members of the public who can register an account and submit a story on a more ad-hoc basis, and through direct engagement with local residents often through community groups. Community journalists are actively recruited. They are generally younger people from the communities with some ICT skills, an interest in heritage and culture, and a desire to acquire new skills and gain work experience. The community journalists collect stories through personal interviews, in the form of

audio recordings and video interviews. As such, this ground-level approach generates a much richer quality of content than external researchers could collect as they already have a relationship of trust with members of the community.

Community journalists are required to submit at least three stories a month and attend the monthly feedback meetings, where they discuss new entries. The real checks and balances are made by the community, whose knowledge it is.

The Ulwazi Programme keeps the costs to a minimum through the use of open-source software, existing government infrastructure and volunteers. However, some limitations to the model have been discovered. These include a high turnover of community journalists, who, because sourced from an unemployed sector of the community, leave the programme once employment opportunities arise. This places additional stress on the recruitment and training aspects of the programme.

While the decision to embrace a multilingual approach towards content has been successful, this has also created the need for selective translations. Content management takes time and requires a certain set of skills and relevant experience. Training and development of volunteers and community journalists has proven to be time-consuming, as the development of ICT skills is generally slow among rural communities in the municipality. The training of small groups and one-on-one support, while effective, is labour intensive. But in the end, the sharing of knowledge strengthens social coherence within communities and enhances tolerance between cultures. ◀



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