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Anti social-computing: indigenous language, digital video and intellectual property

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Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies have been hailed as a new paradigm in Internet communication.[1] They offer a web-based experience that encourages user-generated data, active engagement with the material, and the sharing of ideas, thoughts and information. Often referred to as the 'social' web, Web 2.0 tools are open to anyone to access, critique, comment on and reproduce.

We use the term 'anti-social' because we refer to the fact that using Web 2.0 tools in the context of restoring a declining indigenous language might not always be appropriate. We reflect on how Hul'q'umi'num'-speaking communities based in Southern Vancouver Island, Canada, have experimented with using blog-based mash-up tools – and have subsequently chosen to retain and distribute the information using media that they can control more satisfactorily.

Background

Of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken in the world today nearly half are in danger of extinction and likely to disappear in this century. In fact, one falls out of use every two weeks.
New York Times, September 2007

[1] For a definition of Web 2.0, see glossary, p.123 and overview, p.8 (this issue).

Language is the essence of culture and identity. It situates people within the place from which they come. It is the living expression of – and means of sharing – local knowledge and cultural understanding. It is both a bridge to the past and key to the future survival of cultures worldwide.

In Canada, as in many other former colonial nations, indigenous languages are close to being lost forever. The Hul'q'umi'num'-speaking communities – which include Cowichan Tribes, Chemainus First Nation, Penelakut Tribe, Lyackson First Nations, Halalt First Nation, and Lake Cowichan First Nation – are no exception. The survival of their language now lies at a critical juncture. As the Hul'q'u-mi'num' Treaty Group (HTG) website clearly states, 'Assimilationist policies, particularly residential schools, largely wiped out the use of our language.' There remain fewer than 100 fluent Hul'q'umi'num' speakers alive today out of a community of approximately 10,000 – the majority of whom are over 60 years old. Fluency levels continue to decline amongst younger generations.

HTG is an organisation that acts of behalf these First Nations. They have begun a major language revitalisation project in collaboration with researchers from the University of Victoria and University of British Columbia Okanagan. It is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Community University Research Alliance programme. The project engages university researchers to test the use of digital multimedia in

Filming Willie Seymour, one of the remaining fluent Hul'q'umi'num' speakers, in Kuleet Bay, in Chemainus First Nation's lands.

language learning. The ultimate aim is to support the rein-corporation of the Hul'q'umi'num' language into the community. It is guided by an elders advisory board made up of interested and fluent language-speaking elders from these six Hul'q'umi'num' communities. There are already a number of important and ongoing Hul'q'umi'num' language projects in the community.[1] However, elders recognised the need to take language from a classroom and expert-oriented environment and bring it back into the everyday lives of community members. The interactive digital video disc (DVD) and Web 2.0 components described here have attempted to achieve this goal. Work began in May 2004 and is still ongoing.

Digital technology is becoming easier and cheaper to access, produce and distribute. Many groups are now using new media (including audio, video and text-based materials) to document and communicate their positions and information. Language learning in particular lends itself well to digital multimedia – especially digital video. Video is visually

appealing, easily accessible to the viewer and involves a strong creative endeavour. These are important elements for engaging elders and youth in the community in crafting and evaluating language-learning materials. It can increase access to – and visibility of – the language in schools, language classes, communities and to the general public.

They also offer an unprecedented opportunity to help foster an interest in the language and subsequently provide materials to help learn it. The hope is that these tools might help to revitalise the Hul'q'umi'num' language and help bring it back from the brink of extinction.

Methods and processes

The tools used by the project have changed dramatically over the past five years, reflecting the continuing advancements of digital technologies. We began by using a range of digital video tools to produce a series of interactive DVDs to document and communicate the Hul'q'umi'num' language in an engaging and educational manner. Later, we began to experiment with Internet-based Web 2.0 technologies. Throughout each stage, we employed the principles of

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[1] Among others these include a Hul'q'umi'num' dictionary project, a language mentoring programme and evening school.

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participatory video to ensure that the community considered all the digital media productions as their own endeavour – and that they maintained exclusive ownership of the final product (see Lunch and Lunch, 2005). Community members were key decision makers in the design, filming location and content of the DVDs.

The role of the technology intermediaries (in particular the university collaborators) was to provide community members with hands-on training and skills in filming and DVD production. An advisory board was created, comprising of representatives, both men and women, from each of the Hul'q'umi'num'-speaking communities. Perhaps more importantly, the project developed a close relationship with the existing HTG elders' advisory boards. They considered it important that the DVD subject matter would not only focus on language, but also contribute to the revitalisation and strengthening of cultural practices and understanding. They identified themes including documenting traditional forms of public ceremonial speech and cedar-bark harvesting and weaving. These became the principal projects on which we worked.

The advisory board also gave guidance throughout and was instrumental in the approval process for each of the projects. This was particularly important because the first major project that we worked on, Bighouse Speaking, is considered very culturally sensitive (see Box 1). Bighouse Speaking deals with ceremonial protocols and it is one of the principle fora where the Hul'q'umi'num' language remains of central importance. The elders recognised the importance of documenting the language associated with the Bighouse, but the project needed to be approached with great care and sensitivity. It was important to work closely with elders throughout the project, to ensure that the message, content and presentation of the material were correct and appropriate.

With both the Bighouse Speaking and cedar bark projects, the CURA/HTG project partnership wanted to combine language-learning with a cultural activity. The aim is that when both are combined the subsequent materials are more

Box 1: The Bighouse Speaking Project

We worked closely with Willie Seymour to produce two DVDs. Willie is one of the most respected bighouse speakers in Southern Vancouver Island and a fluent Hul'q'umi'num' speaker. Willie was raised by his grandparents and his grandfather was a bighouse speaker. He remembers much of his childhood growing up in the bighouse. The project filmed Willie discussing the significance of the language, the role of the bighouse for the Hul'q'umi'num' people, the current state of the language and his hope for its future revitalisation. Willie also described a bighouse naming ceremony. During the filming, Willie discussed his personal experiences and stories told to him by his elders. He would speak first in Hul'q'umi'num' and then in English. Throughout the filming process a community elder was also present to ensure that the material was correct and appropriate.

This footage was then captured onto a computer. Language experts in the community transcribed and translated the recordings, to use as subtitles. Stories and other materials were worked into interactive learning exercises that were also included on the DVD.

likely to be relevant to and engage community members. The process works directly with local language speakers that are also knowledgeable of the cultural activity. The elders' advisory board worked with the community to identify these knowledge holders through a series of consultations. The knowledge holders (such as Willie Seymour discussed in Box 1) determine the material, content and location for the video and continue to work closely with elders to develop the rough footage into a finished product.

Although community elders approved and validated the information throughout, we showed the finished product to the wider community for their evaluation and approval. This was an important step in handing over ownership to them. In a series of public screenings, community members would provide feedback and suggest changes. In every session minor recommendations were made and these were immediately incorporated to the DVD materials.

We initially chose to use DVDs rather than Internet-based tools. With DVDs, people can access language-related information in their own homes without relying on costly high-speed Internet access to view or download multimedia content. At that time only 10-15% of community members had access to high-speed Internet access at home, due to poor broadband access on the reserve lands. In comparison, over 90% had access to DVD players. So instead, project collaborators decided to emulate the sort of user interactivity that is more commonly found with web-based technologies.

The digital DVD content includes language drills, word exercises and other user-determined material. The DVD menu allows the user to select the type of information that

Cover of Xe'xe' Sqwal (the Sacred Language) interactive DVD.
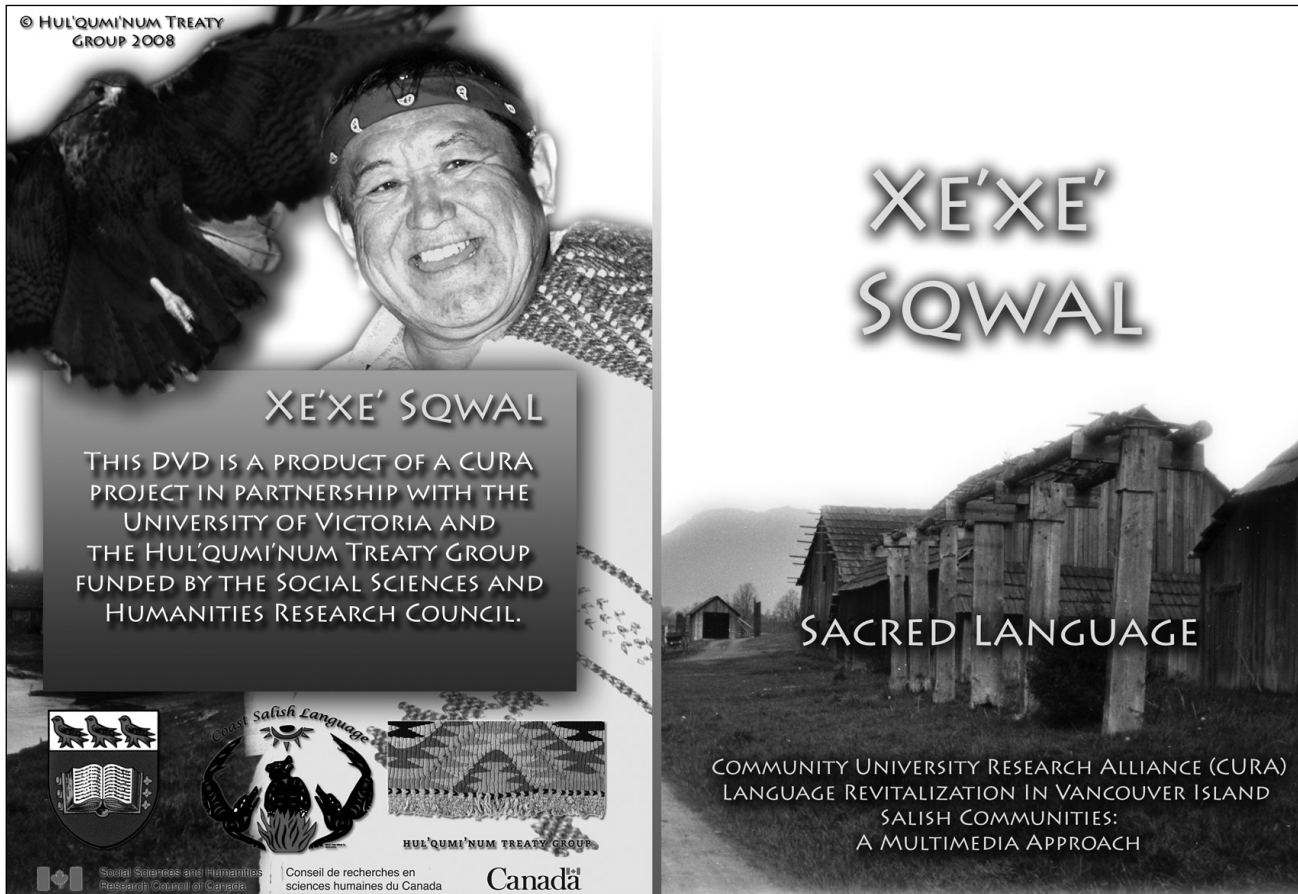
they want to access, achieving a high level of user choice and interactivity. In addition, users are unlikely to access all the content in one go. Instead, they can access short sections of information as and when they want. This flexibility makes the DVDs a robust language training tool that can be used easily at home or in the classroom.

The role of Web 2.0 in Hul'q'umi'num' language revitalisation

By early 2007, the collaborators proposed reusing the video materials in a Web 2.0 format. They hoped to increase the range of people accessing the language material. In particular, they wanted to encourage the input of younger community members. Hul'q'umi'num' youth were increasingly using online social-computing technologies for entertainment and communication. More and more people had access to broadband either at home or using publicly accessible computer services (for example in the Cowichan Tribes youth centre).

Community project collaborators began developing a blog-based mash-up.[2][3] It combines photo, video and audio materials housed on Picasa Web Albums and YouTube with text and dictionary-based materials in text form.[4][5] Selected sections of video from the earlier DVD project were reused in this new format. The blog can be easily updated by community moderators. In theory, this provides fresh material on a regular basis, encouraging users to return to the site to access new language material. It can also allow registered users to comment on material on the blog, helping to contribute to a growing online Hul'q'umi'num' language learning community. Initially there was interest and Hul'q'u-

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[2] *Blogger* is a free blog publishing tool from Google where you can post text, photos and video. See www.blogger.com
[3] A mash up is a web application that combines data from more than one source into a single integrated tool, e.g. using text, photos, videos and audio files. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup
[4] Picasa Web Albums is a website where registered users can upload, view and share their photos online for free. See www.picasaweb.google.com
[5] YouTube is a video sharing website where users can video clips. See www.youtube.com

Screen capture of the Hul'q'umi'num' blog mash-up.
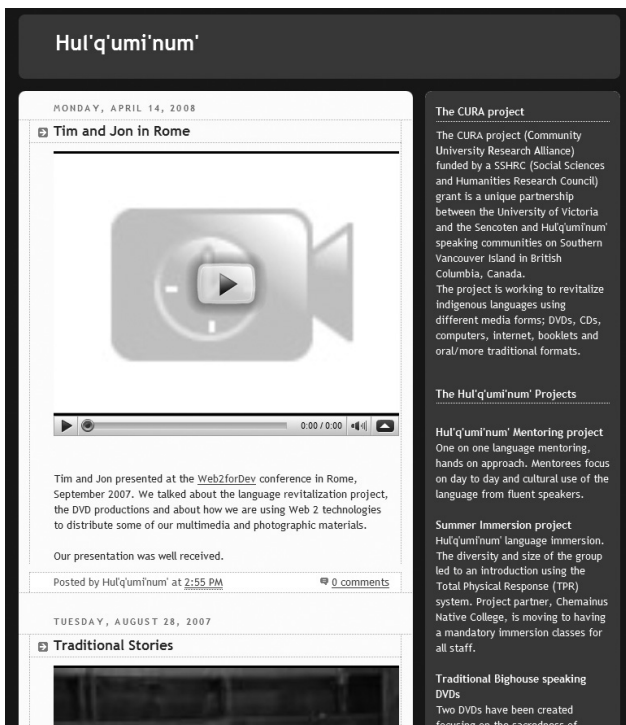
mi'num' community members made a number of comments. However, populating the blog with fresh material on a regular basis has proven to be challenging because of competing time pressures on the moderators. As a result, community interaction and comments have dwindled.

Lessons learnt, critical reflections and analysis

Since 2004 we have learnt a number of significant lessons. Most important was the need to keep elders and community members involved and up-to-date throughout the process, ensuring that their comments and ideas were incorporated into the final media products. However, community members are geographically dispersed so this was not always easy. We organised a series of open screening sessions, which were advertised in community newspapers and newsletters. Often turnout was reasonable with up to 30 people attending. We screened the DVDs during National Aboriginal Day, when up to 200 people viewed the video materials. These open venues gave community members the opportunity to talk with both community and university project members about the materials.

Our second general lesson was that producing these media products takes substantially more time and commitment than we had initially considered. We (the technology intermediaries) found ourselves working on several projects simultaneously. Our time was often split between different community organisers and knowledge holders. We had to prioritise certain projects, which affected our ability to finalise others. Added to this we needed to involve members from all six of the communities involved and other project partners, in evaluating the finished media. As one team member noted,

Whenever we pushed back a timeline we always ended up pushing it back even more. And that wasn't wrong. If you give projects the time to build on their own and allow them time to develop their own momentum, then that will ensure a successful end.

Lessons learnt: Web 2.0 applications

Undoubtedly the transition from DVD to web-based technologies was good for the Hul'q'umi'num' language revitalisation project. Several obvious benefits included:
• we could reach a broader and far-reaching audience (in particular the Hul'q'umi'num' youth);
• it helped promote and develop an interested online community; and
• the technologies were affordable (i.e. free) and easy to setup, update and maintain by project moderators working on a voluntary basis.

Using Web 2.0 technologies had several other specific benefits. Establishing a 'traditional' static website for the project was expensive. It also took control away from community members. Users on a static website are treated as passive recipients of information, determined by the website creator and designer. With Web 2.0 application users have more influence. Any user can provide feedback, suggest and contribute content, and generally take a more active role in the website's scope and relevance.

Using online video-sharing applications (specifically YouTube) allowed us to repurpose and reuse material that we had already recorded in the project's earlier participatory video phase. We had high quality material – of great community relevance – which had not been used in the final DVD products, such as several stories told by Willie Seymour after filming for the Bighouse Speaking DVD.

When producing the DVDs, we often ended up with long video sections 20 or 30 minutes long, which are not ideal for language learners. On most Web 2.0 video sharing websites you can only upload short videos (e.g. on YouTube, files must be less than 10 minutes long). Initially we saw this as a weakness. However, it was an ideal length for 'learning segments'. They are short enough to maintain attention (particularly with school children). Once online, the user can select the specific

"Language learning in particular lends itself well to digital multimedia – especially digital video."

segments they want to watch. Short videos are also easier to edit and prepare than longer ones, often by using a single video camera (rather than two).

The CURA project funding is beginning to wind down. So using 'out of the box' Web 2.0 applications is very attractive. Both maintenance and the short to medium term management is low cost. The project partners can still use the equipment bought when the project started to record, capture and edit photographs, video and audio material – but rather than have to create and physically distribute interactive DVDs (an expensive and lengthy process) they can post their materials directly online, dramatically cutting distribution costs.

Assessing difficulties and successes

Elements of the project have been highly successful in generating interest in the Hul'q'umi'num' language, particularly the interactive DVDs. However, the Web 2.0 component has not generated as much community interest as anticipated despite initial community enthusiasm, demonstrated by comments made to project staff. Undoubtedly this is because the community and university moderators need to continually update material to maintain the blog. The difficulty is that the blog was not directly funded by the project, but set up and maintained on a purely voluntary basis. We have not been successful in outsourcing the moderating role to other community members.

Despite this, we do feel that the blog has the potential to be a good communication tool, helping to stimulate interest in language using many different forms of media, as well as contributing to developing a cohesive community of people interested in Hul'q'umi'num' language revitalisation. However, this requires hiring a dedicated moderator to act as a marketer and animator for the website. Their role would be to encourage community involvement and ensure that sufficient new content is uploaded to the website. However, our project could not support this position. As a result, the full potential for the Hul'q'umi'num' website has not been fully realised.

A word of caution using Web 2.0

Web 2.0 applications do offer enormous potential. However, there remain several significant issues. So we remain cautious of endorsing this medium for the revitalisation of the Hul'q'umi'num' language. These concerns are specific to the use of Web 2.0 technologies to communicate traditional knowledge and indigenous language materials, and in particular, intellectual property rights. This caution has also been voiced by several community elders. As one team member noted,

Just because you can record it, doesn't mean that you actually have to record it and put it on the Internet. We've recorded many things that actually stay with specific families.

Most significantly, material shared via the Internet is usually considered to be public. There are few controls in place to manage how that material is used, reused, misinterpreted, manipulated, distorted and controlled. This is particularly important when considering the difference between 'information' and 'knowledge'. There is a clear distinction. Information is data that is passive until we interpret and process it (David and Foray, 2002). Much material posted on Web 2.0 websites can be categorised as information – inert, transient and often self-indulgent. Knowledge is the sense that people make of information. As Scoones and Thompson (1993) note,

Knowledge is not just ready to be picked like an apple on a tree. It is embedded in social contexts and attached to different power positions.

Knowledge in society is not objective or static, but ever changing and infused with the values, beliefs, skills, attitudes and practices of those who have it (Panos, 1998). However already, much user-generated information found on Web 2.0 social networking applications is considered by many as transient and unimportant.

The Hul'q'umi'num' language reflects knowledge that has accumulated over time immemorial by successive generations. It is a vital element for community identity and maintaining cultural distinctiveness in the face of colonisation. It is embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and ritual. Different types of knowledge exist simultaneously within a community. Although much is common or shared knowledge, held by many, much of it is specialised knowledge, held by a few with special training (IIRR, 1996). Formal traditional systems facilitate the transfer of some of this knowledge, such as ceremonies, festivals and other processes. For example, the Bighouse Naming Ceremony DVD contains sensitive information that is only available (and relevant) to Hul'q'umi'num' speakers – on the request of community elders it is not available for public distribution.

The key point is that the Hul'q'umi'num' language is intrinsic to the identity of a people facing both an accelerating loss of culture and rapid changes in the natural environment. Releasing this knowledge onto the Internet might devalue the significance of the knowledge to the status of information. The knowledge of the Hul'q'umi'num'-speaking communities has been expropriated for generations. Community elders do not want to find themselves in a situation where what remaining information they do control also becomes expropriated.

With DVDs, the information exists in a physical form, which is hard to copy. As with the Bighouse Naming Ceremony DVD the community can regulate who has access to it. If this material is uploaded to the Internet, any level of restriction and control is lost. This is a highly significant issue for many indigenous groups around the world and greatly influences their willingness to use the Internet (and particularly social networking applications) to share important cultural information between community members, or more generally with the public.

A second caution is that language revitalisation is not a short-term venture. Though the Hul'q'umi'num' language has eroded relatively fast (within two generations), to bring it back into everyday use by community members will take an enormous effort, funds and, perhaps most importantly, time. We question whether Web 2.0 applications will continue to be offered as a free service – or even offered at all. This is particularly relevant given the current downturn in the global economy. If services are removed, or universal access is curtailed, what will happen to the materials housed on those Web 2.0 applications? How easily will it be repatriated? Will it simply be lost? Important information should not be stored exclusively on these websites. More traditional systems of data archiving are as important as the ways in which we can distribute knowledge.

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Conclusion

The initial project results suggest that digital multimedia and Web 2.0 applications in particular, have the promise to contribute to the ambitious goal of language revitalisation. However, we are conscious that the excitement of working with new tools might create a sense that the technology is the driving force for the project, rather than the need for language revitalisation and using the best medium by which language-learning content can be delivered. The words of Arthur C. Clarke seem particularly relevant to the role Web 2.0 might play in language revitalisation:

Before you become too entranced with gorgeous gadgets and mesmerising video displays, let me remind you that information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, and wisdom is not foresight. Each grows out of the other and we need them all.

Realistically, these tools can contribute to helping create community, particularly a community that is interested in language-learning. However, in order for language revitalisation to take place in a meaningful and sustainable manner, community members have to actually engage with the elders in the community. There is no substitute for face-to-face contact.

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