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Web 2.0 for Aboriginal cultural survival: a new Australian outback movement

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Introduction

The Walkatjurra Cultural Centre is an Aboriginal organisation based in Leonora, Western Australia. This article reflects on their journey as they invest in the uptake of digital technologies, including most recently Web 2.0 applications, to revitalise their culture and enhance community development both socially and economically. We also highlight the outcomes of a community-based youth empowerment project involving university researchers and Aboriginal community members.

Fieldwork began in May 2005 with the creation of a participatory digital video disc (DVD). The DVD was used by the community as a vehicle to communicate traditional knowledge to help bridge the intergenerational knowledge divide, as well as to influence non-indigenous decision makers (local government and mining companies). Community members, building on their video skills, are now using a number of Web 2.0 technologies to expand both the scope and longevity of the original project. This project is still ongoing.

There were two principal purposes for using Web 2.0 based tools:
• to meaningfully engage Aboriginal youth in learning about their rapidly forgotten local knowledge and help them adopt new skills; and

• to facilitate the youths' direct participation in – and contribution to – the greater community development strategy.

Background

As with many indigenous cultures, the Aboriginal people of Australia strive to maintain a strong relationship with their country and culture. This place-based affinity is especially true for isolated rural communities. This connection to place exemplifies what it means to be an Aboriginal Australian. Many Aboriginal families rely on their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of the surrounding environment and natural resources for subsistence, cultural identity and employment. However, two significant issues contribute to limiting the role of this place-based identity in everyday community life:
• the breakdown of the intergenerational transfer of local knowledge; and
• that mainstream Australian society places little value on this knowledge, making it appear parochial and largely irrelevant in everyday Aboriginal life.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2003), 80% of the Aboriginal population speaks only English (similar to Australia's non-Aboriginal population). Only around 12% of the Aboriginal population speaks a customary

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language. The younger generation have grown up in a wider society that fails to recognise the significance of their knowledge and maintaining their indigenous identity. This has led to the apparent abandonment of Aboriginal culture in preference for a more dominant Western one.

In addition, large numbers of Aboriginal elders have limited experience and 'self-belief' in their ability to meaningfully engage in Western modes of communication, especially given that the written word is the main way of transmitting cultural heritage in the western world. The result is that many indigenous elders and parents face a significant challenge in communicating the importance of their knowledge to both the non-indigenous community and younger indigenous generations.

So how does an Aboriginal elder effectively communicate **across** cultures this connection to place, demonstrate their ability to effectively self-manage natural resources, and engage the community youth in promoting intergenerational knowledge transfer?

Recent literature suggests that more culturally adaptable modes of communication using information communication technologies (ICTs) may provide an answer (Chikonzo, 2006).

Aboriginal Australia, digital technology and Web 2.0

Remote Aboriginal communities in Australia have used a range of ICTs for over thirty years to create and maintain contact and networks outside their immediate space (Michaels, 1994).[1] Today, many indigenous Australian groups at the community level are using digital technologies for two main purposes:

- to get involved in some form of 'development', e.g. incorporating modern infrastructure into existing lifestyles and/or for mobilising resources – including Web 2.0, video and other Internet-based applications; and
- to strengthen processes to ensure history stays in place

Figure 1: Map showing location of Leonora, Western Australia
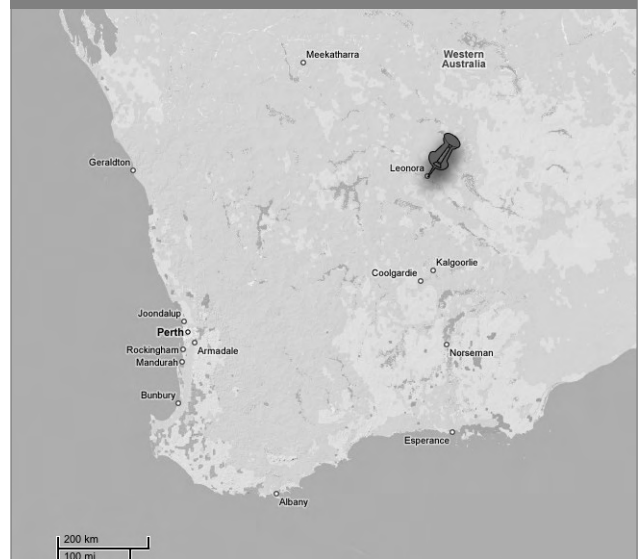
Source: Google

and/or for the enrichment of clan places, in what Christie and Veran (2006) describe as 'envelopment'.

Examples of such practices include:
- digital recordings of ancestral songs;
- collections of digital photographs to share stories and strengthen family identities;
- generating digitised maps incorporating Aboriginal place names to strengthen Native Title claims;
- creating videos of storytelling with reference to particular lands and places (history, management and ownership); and
- using video cameras to bring together groups of elders to pass on stories to the younger generation.

The most anticipated benefit of digital technologies (specifically Web 2.0 technologies) is their potential to bridge the generation gap as a culturally adaptable mode of communication.[2] The process of involvement in digital technology and associated end products has the potential for developing, building or enhancing individual capacities.[3]

Australian organisations such as UsMob and dEadly mOb use various multimedia tools to enhance indigenous participants' skills, abilities, social capital and technical capacities.[4]

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[1] In 1988 the first communication satellite was launched to provide remote communities in central Australia with radio and television. Today, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) broadcasts radio to remote indigenous communities. Imparja, a mainstream Aboriginal-run television station, focuses on contemporary indigenous issues mixed with mainstream interest shows, and the new National Indigenous TV (NITV) features 100% indigenous media content.

[2] By and large the inclusiveness of digital technologies does not discriminate between genders or age groups.
[3] E.g. knowledge archives, non-discriminate forums, cultural asset inventories, cultural validity etc.
[4] UsMob is the first project to be launched under the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and ABC New Media and Digital Services AFC/ABC Broadband Production Initiative (BPI). It supports dynamic projects developed and produced specifically for broadband delivery on ABC Online. See www.abc.net.au/usmob

Figure 2: Community youth members uses a video camera

This can help increase employment opportunities by easing the transition from school to workplace environments and in language maintenance and cultural awareness.[5] Many development agencies use positive changes in socioeconomic status and the cultural awareness of individuals as key capacity building/development indicators. Arguably, the use of ICT/digital technology discussed here represents potential examples of capacity building/development/enhancement in practice.

The digital tools used to achieve such development and envelopment objectives are increasingly in the form of videos, DVDs, digital photos, and audio files. All these technologies are readily available to most community members, making them relatively cost-effective. More recently, evolving Web 2.0 applications are becoming accessible tools for authoring and disseminating digital content.

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[5] dEadly mOb is a mentoring programme, which uses ICT to create online opportunities for Aboriginal youth.

Methods and processes
The Walkatjurra Cultural Centre in Leonora (Figure 1) is investing heavily in digital technologies. The explicit aim is to enhance both community development and envelopment initiatives. It began using many of the technologies outlined above, but is now beginning to focus on the implementation of Internet-based tools, and in particular Web 2.0 technologies.

The rest of this article describes an ongoing project that explicitly seeks to revitalise culture and enhance community development through the participatory use of digital technologies. With funding from the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (DKCRC), the project involved collaboration between the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre, Curtin University of Technology and the University of British Columbia Okanagan. The project process is divided into two distinct phases. The first involved training youth in the use of digital video recording, editing and production techniques. The second involved taking these skills and transferring them to a Web 2.0 environment. Both of these phases are described overleaf.

Walkatjurra digital video project

Participatory video (PV) is the use of video as a participatory communication tool. It has become increasingly popular over the last twenty years, and is a particularly good tool to use with oral societies and non-literate people. It is a process that supports community members to become 'generators, creators, transformers and users of communication, information, skills and education for their own benefit' (Norrish, 1998). Video cameras have become lighter, easier to transport and straightforward to learn and handle – as well as more affordable – even for relatively economically marginalised communities. The videos produced do not need to be studio processed and are easily disseminated.

Using the guiding principles of PV, project collaborators trained an enthusiastic group of youth from the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre in filming, editing and producing a DVD.

To date, a core group of five youth have been involved in such projects. This represents a small proportion of Aboriginal youth in Leonora. While inclusive participation is both a key process and outcome within such initiatives, initial interest and momentum was based around particular community kinship networks to get the project going. The initial stages of the project involved particular families in order to generate project momentum and direction. Later on, once the initial projects have been acquitted and evaluated, and the required resources are gathered, a broader number of community members can then participate.

This training took place during a trip into the bush with a group of community members comprised of elders and youth.[6] The trip lasted four days and was intentionally designed to acquaint the youth with several locally important bush foods. These included the bush tomato (*Solanum centrale*), silky pear (*Marsdenia australis*), emu, witchety grubs and kangaroo. As the youth learnt about these foods from the elders in the group (their seasonality, harvesting, preparation and consumption), they recorded the teachings using the video equipment. There was strong evidence that the young members in the group were absorbing and processing their elders' information, which might have seemed less interesting had the technologies not actively encouraged their participation. This was confirmed by the youth taking away the video equipment several times during the trip and filming their own short videos that documented the foods being harvested and eaten, in essence reiterating the information that their elders had taught them.

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[6] 'Bush' is a local term used to describe the outback or desert-like wilderness areas in Australia. Commonly used when referring to 'traditional Aboriginal lands'.

> **"Young members in the group were absorbing and processing their elders' information, which might have seemed less interesting had the technologies not actively encouraged their participation."**

On returning to Leonora the technology intermediaries, elders and youth spent three days producing a DVD. Often during participatory video projects there is less interest in the editing component of the project. It is time consuming and tedious work. Yet the Leonora youth were engaged throughout – providing advice, voice-over segments and a large dose of enthusiasm. The final product was screened to everyone in the community.

Over the next twelve months the DVD went on to be shown at several national DKCRC conferences where the youth members were invited to present their work. The youth and their DVD were also featured on state television and radio stations. This initial project set the foundation for several youth in Leonora to begin to really explore the video medium as a means to communicate information about themselves and their lifestyles to others outside of their remote rural community.

Walkatjurra and Web 2.0 development

Rural Internet access has increased and become more affordable in Western Australia over the last five years, largely due to the rapid increase of mining industry activity. As mining companies expand, so does their need for communications infrastructure, such as mobile phone towers. This has provided access to Internet and mobile communications to communities in regions that would normally be void of such technology. This is an unexpected benefit for communities from an industry that historically disrupts Aboriginal cultural activity.

This improved connectivity has enabled the next phase of the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre's digital journey. Members have built on and expanded their repository of cultural information and experimented with developing and implementing Web 2.0 technologies. This initially began with individuals creating private web pages. These became valuable tools for increasing awareness of community issues, activities and services, and overcoming the barrier of distance that often affects remote Aboriginal communities.

THEME SECTION

Figure 3: Community youth edit 'Papinmaru' in the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre

Photo: Jon Corbett

More recently, members have adopted the use of Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, social networking systems, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services.[7][8][9] The Cultural Centre set up several blogs with RSS feeds using Blogger, a free-to-use Google application.[10] They used them to share information about community issues, targeting both internal and external stakeholders. Internally, this provided community members with access to information outlining the progress of the Cultural Centre's activities. However, our informal observations showed that community members preferred to communicate either face-to-face or by using mobile phones, which were becoming increasingly available, rather than using the RSS feeds. Perhaps the categories of information displayed by the RSS feeds may have been too general and did not encourage people to use the RSS feeds to access information.

External parties such as private enterprise, government departments, partnering research institutions and other community-based organisations were provided with select parcels of general information. These related to cultural, environmental or political issues that might influence their relationship and subsequent level of support for the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre.[11]

At this point it is difficult to tell whether this strategy has changed how external stakeholders respond to related socio-political community matters. However informally, stakeholder

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[7] For a definition of 'VoIP', see glossary, p.123 (this issue).
[8] For a definition of 'blog', see glossary, p.121. See also Blogging p.106 (this issue).
[9] Online social networking tools focus on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities. For a full definition, see glossary, p.123. See also Social networking, p.112 (this issue).
[10] For a definition of 'RSS', see glossary, p.122. See also RSS feeds p.115 (this issue).

[11] Generally positive information regarding the community's achievements and future development plans. Controversial aspects of native title and heritage matters and sensitive internal community information would not be broadcast in this manner.

"By engaging the youth in positive technology interaction and permitting meaningful participation in the Centre's activities, older generations are increasing the likelihood of involving younger members."

Figure 4: The Papinmaru video on the Lonely Planet Less Than Three website

feedback suggests this strategy has increased their holistic understanding of the community's objectives – and how their decisions may impact on the community agenda. Furthermore, by providing access to regular updates via RSS feeds on the successes of the community youth ICT initiatives, donor bodies may also be more likely to support future funding applications because this information is more readily available and immediately accessible to them.
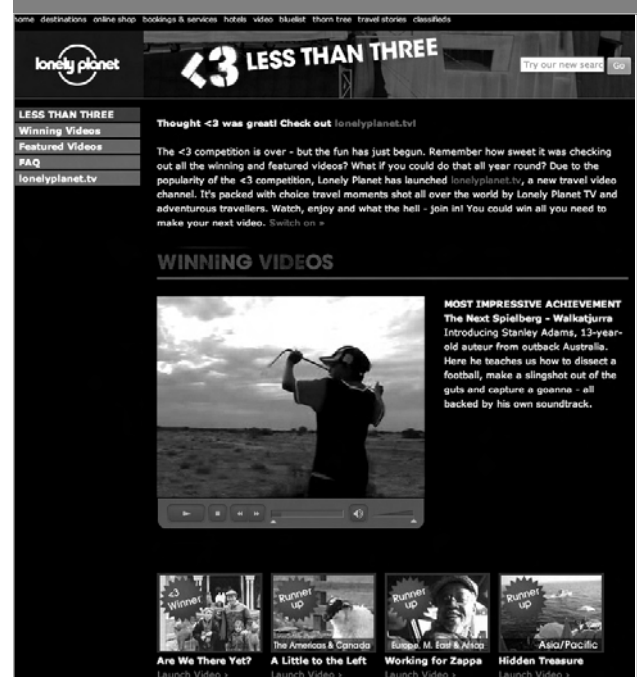
Online social networking tools have been used by several members of the Cultural Centre to increase access to information relating to the Centre's initiatives. A Facebook group was created to outline and debate issues of land rights advocacy – a topical issue for Australian Aboriginal peoples, especially members of the Cultural Centre. To date, 126 people have joined. Many are indigenous peoples from outside Australia, providing personal accounts of similar international experiences of land rights and indigenous counter-culture clashes with mainstream society. These strategies aim to increase awareness and political support for community issues. But again, their impact and effectiveness remains difficult to quantify.

VoIP services, in particular Skype, were set up on computers within the Cultural Centre. Due to the transient nature of community life, mobile phones are valuable tools for maintaining social relationships.[12] By using Skype, call costs are greatly reduced, permitting far longer call times. Skype calls can be diverted through their mobile phones, providing constant access. Although not widely adopted, it demonstrated that it could be a very powerful communication tool, linking other communication mediums (Internet, email, mobile phone, and landlines) at a very cost effective rate.

We also used Web 2.0 technologies to increase the impact and outputs of the youth video projects. Through the 'Lonely Planet: Less than three' competition, a web video competition hosted by the Lonely Planet travel company, the

youth created a short, less than three-minute, video documenting how they hunt *papinmaru* (a large lizard).[13] The video takes the audience into the bush and shows the youth successfully hunting and then cooking their prey. The video won broad acclaim and was awarded the runner-up prize in Lonely Planet's international competition. The Papinmaru video was posted on the official competition site and also linked to the Lonely Planet TV site.[14]

Community members and the youth used several websites to showcase their video. This meant the video could be easily promoted, accessed and further shared. This allowed for a wider international audience, which subsequently generated significant interest around the youths' win and related activities at the Cultural Centre. The video was also uploaded to the Cultural Centre website. Wherever the video was uploaded, it was tagged with references back to the Cultural Centre, marketing their activities, and the success of their youth.[15]

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[12] Aboriginal peoples regularly move between towns to fulfil kinship obligations such as births, funerals or ceremonies, making cost-effectiveness communication with dispersed families and friends important.

[13] *Papinmaru* or *goanna* have a prominent place in the culture of Aboriginal Australians, including totemic relationships and representations within their creation theory.
[14] Although the Papinmaru video is no longer available on the Lonely Planet TV website, for more information about the Less Than Three competition see: www.lonelyplanet.com/lessthanthree/winning_videos.cfm
[15] For a definition of 'tagging' see glossary, p. x. See also Tagging p. X (this issue).

Figure 5: Papinmaru DVD cover
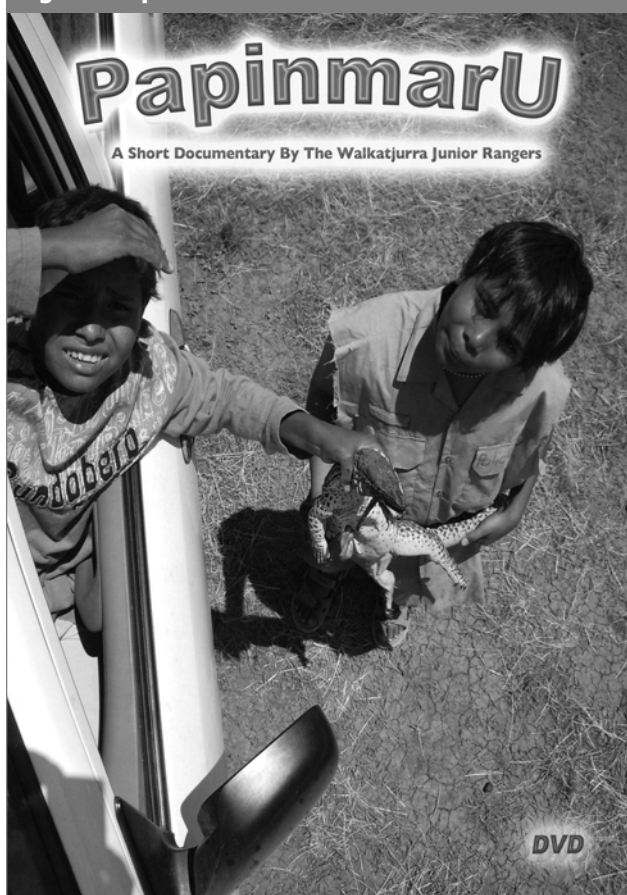
Source: Walkatjurra Cultural Centre

The youth also edited a longer, 10 minute version of the video helped by several older Cultural Centre members.[16] This turned it into a marketable product. It was offered for sale on the Centre's website and at related functions (art exhibitions, conferences, community events). Eighteen months after they won the competition, every copy of the video was sold, around 50 copies at $20 each. The youth have been able to generate a valuable product for the Centre.

By understanding the Cultural Centre's objectives and the range of technologies its members use to achieve them, the importance and relevance of the youth's Web 2.0 video experiences can be clearly acknowledged. By engaging the youth in positive technology interaction and permitting meaningful participation in the Centre's activities, older generations are increasing the likelihood of involving younger members to drive the Centre's activities in the future.

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[16] One of whom was non-indigenous and a university researcher.

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Lessons learnt, critical reflections and analysis

This project is a long-term undertaking. As a result, the process is adaptive. It has developed to accommodate and incorporate appropriate training curricula and tools required by the users of the technology. The innovative work, international successes, and high profile have greatly enabled the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre to continue to raise funds for projects. However, there still remains the need for longer-term commitment by participating youth – as well as more support by parents and other non-involved community members. Walkatjurra Cultural Centre organisers have attempted to incorporate a video and Web 2.0 teaching component into the school curriculum in order to generate greater participation in the community at large. However, this has been largely unsuccessful due to a lack of available finance from the school, and the view that such activities fall outside the range of core educational objectives for children (such as literacy and numeracy).

Researchers linked to the Centre have been approached by youth independent of the project and asked about future field trips and DVD productions. We noticed that participating youth often bring along friends to observe related activities in the Cultural Centre. Their friends have also shown a strong desire for future participation and inclusion. Community members have also inquired about how their child might participate in activities. This desire to participate was most notable after the youth made the Papinmaru DVD and won the Lonely Planet competition, once the positive outputs of the initiative had been publicly recognised. Improving future participation seems to rest with the logistical, financial and ethical capacity of staff within the cultural centre to meaningfully engage a greater number of community members.

Finally, and significant to both researchers and community members alike, is how to improve both the measurement and evaluation of ICT-related research. There is a gap between what community members consider valid evidence to support what they see as the impact of ICT and Web 2.0 usage within

the community, and the comparative academic evaluation of such findings. Participating researchers act as support mechanisms for the community. Therefore, if they initiate intensive project appraisals and assessments, community members may view this as distractive or inappropriate, or that their views and opinions are insufficient as stand-alone conclusions to questions they themselves have sought to answer.

Conclusion

This evolving exploration with digital technologies has been a largely positive investment of time and energy for the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre and the youth involved in the project. The community views the Papinmaru web video as a tangible success. It has encouraged the centre's youth to further develop their video-making skills. Four youth members took part in the Freemantle Film school programme in Perth, the state capital, in early 2008. Web 2.0 technologies have greatly expanded their reach and their message, moving their audience from a very limited one to an international forum. This has a strong impact on understanding their own potential and promotes the message of cultural survival and pride that is central to the Walkatjurra Cultural Centre's intent.

There are clear lessons learnt to date from this project. Firstly, that youth living in marginal and remote outback

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communities, if given access to tools and training, are capable of producing original and innovative video materials. Using Web 2.0 technologies these materials can be shared (for a minimal cost) with international audiences. This in turn can greatly raise the profile of the youth and other organisations involved in the project. It has the potential to influence both the general public and decision makers, by generating a better understanding of remote Aboriginal Australia. Perhaps it will also influence longer-term decisions related to rural connectivity provision.

Further community-based research on how other Aboriginal groups can engage similar Web 2.0 initiatives for positive change is needed. In particular, research needs to target and identify key sociocultural environmental conditions that promote meaningful ICT and Web 2.0 interactions. This may help to increase both the widespread adoption of such technologies and the breadth of applications Web 2.0 technology may hold for Aboriginal peoples.

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