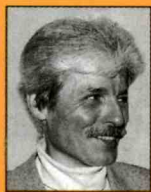


Digital impact on native communities

The contested property rights with regard to cultural heritage of indigenous people ask for new solutions of returning that knowledge or sharing it with the local communities where the data usually originated.



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Introduction

The digitisation, and sometimes unauthorised dissemination of cultural knowledge through the Internet challenges intellectual property rights. However, open access to knowledge is seen as a legitimate need of the global community and has become a prominent theme in recent debates within international science and cultural organisations. These pressing issues and controversial views had been discussed for the Russian and the circumpolar North at a conference at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle in 2002. In my key note presentation, I pointed out that contested property rights with regard to cultural heritage of indigenous people ask for new solutions of returning that knowledge or sharing it with the local communities where the data usually originated (Kasten 2004a).

Two possible solutions were put forward and have been partly realised since then; first, to provide local communities by means of the Internet easier access to scientific outcome, which are based on their particular cultural heritage; second, to set up the collected data in a digitised way that is in a form on of CD or DVD, so that it can be used effectively by local communities, for example in their educational programmes. So it can contribute to maintaining endangered local knowledge and to stimulate its enhancement. Through this parallel approach new information technologies are not viewed only as disseminating information at low costs, but also as efficient tools in learning and increasing cognitive capacities (cf. Kasten 2004b).

Sharing scientific results with indigenous communities through the Internet

The website <http://www.siberian-studies.org> is dedicated to the presentation and

dissemination of case studies about Siberia and the Russian North by social and cultural anthropologists. One special regional focus of this site is on Kamchatka. But Siberian studies are also placed into a wider circumpolar context. Because of historic and recent exchanges between Siberia and the people of Northern Europe and the American Pacific Northwest, the site includes corresponding themes relating to these people.

By providing electronic access to digitised publications on Siberia and the circumpolar North, the site enhances the dialogue within the scientific community. Beyond this, it aims in particular, at returning and sharing the outcome of ethnographic research to local communities where such activities are usually conducted in collaboration with native experts. Furthermore, in addition to the essays by international scholars, particular attention is given to publications by local and native authors. Beyond monographs, some of the edited volumes are the outcome of international conferences, while others resulted from local workshops and field projects in Kamchatka.

The electronic versions of books and essays cover a great variety of themes, which are seen as relevant in the current academic debate and which are felt as pressing by local people themselves. One of the main issues is post-Soviet socio-economic transformations and risks of jeopardising cultural diversity. Particular attention is given to the preservation of endangered cultural knowledge and to native languages and to the enhancement of art and craft traditions. Indigenous knowledge in sustainable nature use is another important theme, and how that knowledge could be best transmitted from the elders to the youth by specific educational programmes and learning tools.

"Spoiled beauty" Kamchatka peninsula

Situated in the Russian Far East, Kamchatka peninsula is touched by the Pacific ocean, the Bering and Okhotskoe seas. True to its title 'the land of fire and ice', Kamchatka is blessed with the beauty of diverse wildlife, 160 active and inactive volcanoes, more than 150 thermal springs, crater lakes, mountain glaciers, pristine nature and fascinating culture. Kamchatka was closed to foreigners and even to Russians for many decades because of its strategic location importance for Russia with a large presence of military establishment. Finally the doors opened later than 1991.

With harsh climate and wilderness, Kamchatka is very sparsely populated, averaging less than one person per square kilometer, and far away from modern ways of life. Most of the inhabitants live in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the largest city and regional capital. In the north of the peninsula, the indigenous people of Kamchatka, the Koryaks, the Itelmen, the Chukchies, and the Evens have maintained their traditional ways of life.

The untouched beauty is deceptive as Kamchatka is fighting with environmental pollution. The peninsula is filled with toxic pollutants as substantial military presence has contaminated the landscape with heavy metals, radiation, and other pollutants. Many NGOs have now started working to improve the ecology to computer education for the children of Petropavlovsk.

Source: <http://www.kamchatkapeinsula.com>



With these contents, this site offers a broad perspective on scientific, practically oriented and artistic works for this region. Differing viewpoints from a variety of backgrounds should help to stimulate fuller and more productive discussion and understanding among scholars, local and native experts and other practitioners of culture in the Russian North. Making such information more widely accessible even in remote communities of the region can best facilitate this.

Beyond providing indigenous communities more possibilities to participate in the debate on current issues that immediately affect their livelihoods, this site gives local scholars access to historical sources that provide complementary ethnographic information from the 18th to the early 20th century. These sources have usually been available so far only in distant libraries, in many cases as far as Moscow or St. Petersburg. Therefore, first electronic versions of historical sources on Kamchatka were produced in 1996 (Steller 1996), and the present website includes links to other institutions, which had become involved in similar activities since then.



For the realisation of the website, in-depth consultations with the individual authors and publishers had to be held to obtain the required permissions. Needless to say, that most authors have welcomed such a possibility for an even wider dissemination of their works. However, some of them have been concerned about unauthorised changes of the electronic editions of their texts, that is others might copy and paste fragments of their works for composing new texts of their own, without acknowledging the rights of the original authors. Although certain security options can be chosen for PDF files, there is no guarantee that these cannot be cracked. On the other hand, anyone who might intend could scan the printed copy and produce one's own electronic version with OCR anyway.

More complicated have been negotiations with some of the publishers. But eventually all of them agreed as they could anticipate that it would be only to their advantage, if additional attention could be directed to these books by showing them – with restricted printing option – in the Internet. It is understood that instead of being a hindrance this public attention would rather promote more sales in the end.

Digitised databases and electronic learning tools for indigenous communities

Since the late 1990s, electronic learning tools (the series Ethnographic library on CD-ROM) have been tested in various native communities by our team, in which I collaborate with the anthropological linguist and librarian Michael Dürr and a group of local scholars and native language experts from different regions and ethnic groups. In particular, the CD Itelmen Language and Culture (Dürr, Kasten, Khaloimova 2001) has turned out to be quite successful in responding to serious concerns by many Itelmen people to preserve speech varieties of certain local groups. In contrast to the – often hardly avoidable – standardisation of native language



school books in the past, electronic teaching tools with sound or video files provide more possibilities to pay attention to, and to maintain certain varieties of the given native languages, that local people usually identify with. Earlier standardised language education programmes had often been rejected by some local groups – as such language was not considered as ‘theirs’. New electronic learning tools on Itelmen language and those currently under preparation for the Even and the Koryak language aim to acknowledge the local varieties of these languages. They are quite popular

among the youth also for other reasons – as the use of ‘modern’ technology adds particular ‘prestige’ to these school materials.

Beyond preserving endangered languages, the prime aim of this work is to document and to analyse specific contents of the conversations with elder native experts during field sessions. For example, our team recorded recently indigenous knowledge in nature use and biodiversity conservation under the UNESCO-LINKS programme. After boarding school education since the 1960s, much of this traditional knowledge could not be transmitted appropriately from the older generation to the youth. New concepts of bi-cultural education (Kasten 1997, 2002) are more effectively supported by the mentioned DVD publications.

In contrast to previous CD publications, DVD technology offers more technical possibilities. It will use more good quality video files extensively with subtitles in the given native language, even with the option of switching between subtitles in additional Russian or English translations – as in the more recent DVD “Die das Rentier tanzen” (Kasten 2003). Here the English translation seems to be useful, as other indigenous communities in the American and Canadian circumpolar North are obviously interested in such “original” information on indigenous cultures and natural environments of the Russian Far East, and some of these publications are used even as learning tools in university courses in Alaska. Thus, beyond documenting and transmitting local

Is digital preservation a digital exclusion?

We are standing at the crucial junction in the digitisation of worldwide cultural information resources. Virtual museums, digital libraries and virtual markets for art and culture are cropping up all over the world. The debatable issue which arises here is, whether the preservation of cultural knowledge digitally and its open sharing through Internet truly benefit, the major ‘creators’ of those information. Does that knowledge reach those indigenous communities from where it originated and to people they belong to? Internet, though one of the most effective ways of communication and disseminating knowledge poses a great challenge to the copyrights¹ of individuals. Digital products with an open sharing outlook are easily replicable and thus far more easily susceptible to the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) violations than documents.

A meeting took place in Hilo, Hawaii on “Digital Collectives in Indigenous Cultures and Communities”, in August 2001 constituting of representatives of cultural institutions, academic experts, funding agencies and indigenous communities, which discussed the major issues for indigenous people in creating and accessing digital resources. Some of the guiding principles that came from the “Digital Collectives” collaboration report² are:

- Affirm indigenous communities as equal partners in future collaborations.
- Uphold cultural intellectual and property rights of communities.
- The cultural digital information should be developed and controlled by indigenous communities.

- The content creators should be the first beneficiaries.
- Understand the ‘importance of community-based guides (to digitisation) that express tribal values.

The principal recommendation of the report was that a group to be established from interested tribes (and indigenous peoples/communities), to formulate policies on access to the record – in both documentary and the digital formats. It was concluded that cultural expression when marketed as commodity can hurt the sentiments of natives and therefore the various digitisation collaborative projects should be inclusive of the communities who are being represented on the web.

Other declarations, “The Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples”³ and the “Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”⁴ highlights the cultural ownership and protection of indigenous knowledge.

In recognition to these issues, there also exists an open, electronic forum called Indigenous Knowledge Systems (INDKNOW) where one can participate for discussing issues associated with indigenous knowledge systems and traditional ecological knowledge. The list can be subscribed at listproc@u.washington.edu.

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2. <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may02/sullivan/05sullivan.html>
3. http://www.tpk.govt.nz/publications/docs/tangata/app_e.htm
4. <http://www.usask.ca/nativelaw/ddir.html>



cultural traditions within the given community, such electronic publications can make it more attractive at relatively low costs for indigenous peoples of the circumpolar North to enter into new forms of a stimulating dialogue on their respective cultures.

Main themes of these educational programmes on DVD are the documentation of endangered native languages and their local varieties, local histories or the remembered past of the elder generation, indigenous knowledge in traditional resource use, oral traditions – in particular a full set of Kutkh- or Kutkynnaku (Raven)-stories in its local variations, art and craft traditions. A DVD on the latter is produced for an upcoming ethnographic exhibition at the Zentral- und Landesbibliothek in Berlin (28.01.- 30.03.2005). That electronic catalogue illustrates for the visitor of the exhibit the creation or manufacture and the use of the shown objects in their local contexts. Simultaneously, the same DVD will serve – with native and Russian subtitles – as a learning tool for young artists and craftsmen in Kamchatka.

Conclusion

There have been justified warnings about the risks of a potential divide of global winners and local losers because of extreme disparities of access to a new culture of 'information literacy' (Quéau (2003, 3)). Although, we believe that electronic publications and websites, as those presented above, can probably help more to bridge the possibly increasing divide in information society between those in the centre and those at the periphery, than to reinforce it. My experience in Kamchatka shows, that even in economically difficult times the Internet seems to be the more realistic option to link remote communities to information society. Because of extremely high transportation costs and for other reasons, print media is getting less available in these communities, and very often local libraries does not have the financial means to stock up their holdings. However, even if computers in private households are still a rarity, and some villages still have to struggle for maintaining reliable power supply, almost each local community has access to the Internet, and there is usually a computer at least in the library, the school, or at the office of a native organisation.

In sum, it seems that there is good potential that sharing digitised cultural heritage can stimulate creative dialogues and productive cultural dynamics in increasingly globalised knowledge society. ■

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