

Chapter 7

Localisation of Indigenous Content: Libraries and Knowledge Centres and the Our Story Database in the Northern Territory

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ABSTRACT

The Northern Territory Library's (NTL) Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) program is one of a number of programs across Australia designed to bring ICTs and Indigenous people together within an appropriate technology / community-networking framework. A center-piece is the use of the Our Story database to hold and display both repatriated and contemporary, including born-digital, cultural material relevant to local communities. The LKC model is distinctive in that it is fully implemented, uses proven technology, has a consistent framework of program delivery, and a clear business case. However there continue to be fundamental questions on striking a balance between technical innovation and sustainability; the capacity of the program to expand while maintaining support in geographically remote areas; and the challenge of maintaining a relationship of trust with local communities. Reviewing the challenges of the Our Story / LKC program sheds light on key reasons why ICT-based community-networking projects succeed or fail.

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability in ICT projects relies on a combination of ‘doing enough’ while not ‘doing too much’: giving the project something to live for, to communicate and share with its stakeholders, without over-extending the supply-lines and capacities. For ICT projects, there are inherent questions over the possibility of extending the project in a technical sense while protecting both sustainability and usability. It is generally accepted within the technical community that progressive technical development is necessary to maintain currency, but too much emphasis can lead to a loss of focus on other key aspects of program health. The ability of the program to support its installations, to frame its service in such a way that it meets and responds to local demand, is no less important, and achieving a balance essential. This chapter’s description of the *Our Story* database, and the Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) program, of which it is a key component, across 16 remote Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory, demonstrates that this is so. We believe that the implementation of *Our Story* / LKC model, as form of ‘elaborated library’ that spans the digital and physical domains, has significant implications for other projects operating in similar territory.

It is now four years since the first *Our Story* / LKC installation. The program’s owner, Northern Territory Library (NTL), is currently engaged in planning and development for a second generation of software for *Our Story*. Taking stock of progress to date, and given the findings of an evaluation of the program conducted by researchers from the University of Technology of Sydney (Nakata et al, 2006), we characterize *Our Story* / LKC as a successful program. We argue that it does indeed fulfill its objectives and that this is confirmed by consistent patterns of use by its intended user-base, and by signs of growth and development in the ways it is being used¹. However, we also

acknowledge that it must be considered successful in the qualified sense that any continuing program must be. There are risks and challenges ahead that are inherent in the area of operation of the *Our Story* / LKC program. These are inherent in the innovative scope of the program. In identifying them we also identify areas of future growth and development, through which the project can continue to fulfill its promise.

THE PROGRAM

Our Story is a File Maker Pro software application originally developed in the mid-1990s for use in the Aboriginal communities of northern South Australia. Originally named *Ara Irititja* by its creators, the Pitjantjatjara Council, the system allowed for local access to historical and cultural documents taken by non-indigenous researchers or people who had worked in their remote communities in the past. The software went through gradual and incremental change over a fifteen-year period and has since become a popular tool for community-based archiving projects in a remote Aboriginal context. Receiving similar requests for local access to information and knowledge resources from Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, the Northern Territory Library began to implement the system across many of its remote community libraries. As is described in detail later on in this chapter, the *Ara Irititja* software was rebranded the ‘*Our Story*’ database and quickly became the focal point of the Northern Territory Libraries Indigenous library program, known as ‘Libraries and Knowledge Centres’.

Background

The *Our Story* / LKC model is one expression of a broader enterprise on the development of culturally-attuned knowledge and information services in areas of disadvantage. This is now

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