

Chapter 15

Issues for Australian Indigenous Culture Online

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ABSTRACT

Information Technology is the most versatile technology yet developed. By enabling the components to be altered using a language emulating the spoken tongue, we have a technology that can readily be adapted to new situations. This flexibility is exemplified by the resources provided by the open source community which covers a wide range of applications including communication protocols, file conversions and web services. However the designers of this technology are still located in a cultural milieu which may not accommodate the needs of all users. This chapter looks at how innovative technology and software can meet the needs of some of the most dispossessed people through supporting Indigenous knowledge sharing. In designing Appropriate Technology, engineers consider the technical, environmental, social and economic aspects affecting uptake, as well as cultural suitability. Using this approach, the author considers IT uptake in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

INTRODUCTION

With the growth of IT resources as a foundation of world economic growth, plus the significant influence gained by those sharing information over the internet, there is a need to include Indigenous groups and their knowledge in the IT agenda. Many Indigenous communities are seeking support from IT developers to assist in this process (Verran &

Christie, 2008; TKRP, 2006). In particular this means focusing on the safeguarding and transmission of Indigenous cultures, acknowledging the ongoing mutations, as well as bringing those often isolated cultures into contact with others around the world (UNESCO, 2001). This chapter will deal with the specific issues facing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are indigenous to Australia and offer ways of expanding some recent solutions to improve computer access and acceptance within the community. This study

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is in the field of Computer Mediated Human Interaction which combines Human Computer Interaction with Ubiquitous Computing. The computer is treated as a medium, albeit culturally based, that supports human to human interaction. The research is to improve mediation and reduce interference in this process by the computer and related technologies.

This study is important for the Indigenous community in Australia has until the 1970's existed largely without a voice in the country where they claim ongoing custodianship and ownership (Beckett, 1994). This is partly due to the mainstream marginalisation of this culture as the "other", as well as the desire of the Indigenous people to retain their distinctive culture in the face of threats to their cultural identity, including dispossession, massacres and displacement from their land and their families (Biddle, 2009, Langton, 1997; Schwab, 1995). Since IT not only allows communities to share their knowledge, but also to educate the public in this knowledge, it is important that Indigenous groups are part of ongoing development in IT. As discussed below, the cultural differences with which Indigenous people may approach technology occur not only in remote, but also rural and urban areas of Australia.

This research will use various sources to analyse the factors which are limiting or enabling Indigenous Australians' use of and involvement in IT development. Then, using the perspective of cultural management of knowledge, we will consider what sort of IT could be appropriate for Indigenous people to use for the benefit of their culture and explore ways to achieve this. The first three sections give the context for developing IT as an Appropriate Technology in communities, looking at the technical and environmental, social and economic aspects affecting IT uptake. This is analysed using available statistics and case studies of usage and involvement with IT resources. The second part of the chapter looks in detail at a final aspect of appropriateness, that of cultural suitability, how the Indigenous culture relates to IT and how this may change with future support.

BACKGROUND

Indigenous people in Australia are unified by not just their cultural heredity, but also by a strong identity with and ongoing maintenance of that culture even in urban areas,¹ including the importance of reciprocity and caring and sharing with their people, which provides connectedness within the community (Martin, 2000). In Australia, Indigenous people have mostly avoided colonisation and retained their culture within the mainstream (eg Schwab, 1995).

One of the most prominent features of working in Aboriginal infrastructure projects in Australia is the dual organisation within communities which results from segregation (Biddle, 2009) and which has only been tackled since the start of the Reconciliation process in 1990's. While government funded services manage the finances and services delivery to the community, within the community many of the cultural training and activities are managed by customary or community corporations (Langton, 1997). For IT to be successful in communities, it must provide the resources to accommodate cultural differences and enable control by the community (Kutay, 2007).

Therefore, it is important to research the interrelation between new technology, such as IT, and the Indigenous community, when uptake differs from the mainstream. There have been different methodologies used in cultural studies of technology in Australia, some focused on the idea of "Small is Beautiful" (Schumacher, 1989) and designing Appropriate Technology for the community (see Healthabitat <http://www.healthabitat.com> and the Centre for Appropriate Technology <http://www.icat.org.au>). From this tradition, research has now moved into highly technical areas, such as a monitoring interface for solar power in small remote communities (see Bushlight <http://www.bushlight.org.au>) and IT, with the aim of ensuring that these developments progress in a manner appropriate to the culture. The differences between the mainstream culture and that preserved by Aboriginal or Torres Strait

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