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Pantanî Blog: Using ICT for Safeguarding and Sharing Indigenous Social Memory

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Abstract

Oral storytelling has traditionally been the main vehicle for the transmission of social memory in the indigenous communities of the North Rupununi, Guyana. It allows them to maintain their worldview and reinforce their sense of community, but it also makes it particularly fragile to the test of time. Thanks to recent developments and the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT), new opportunities for capturing, broadcasting and safeguarding indigenous social memory have emerged. Yet, there are fears that these technologies can also accelerate cultural loss. The Pantanî Blog experiment aimed at interrogating the role of ICT in safeguarding and sharing indigenous social memory in a fast-changing environment.

1. Introduction

If you happen to visit the Rupununi region of Guyana, and go on a hike with a local guide, it is likely you will hear plenty of fascinating stories and legends on the natural environment, as it happened to me. At the end of January 2014, I travelled to the deep south of Guyana with a team of local and foreign researchers and had an opportunity to visit a place called *Skull Mountain*, located in the Kanuku mountain range, not far from the Brazilian border. During the hike, our guide, an elder Makushi man, shared traditional tales with us, depicting every mountain, every river and every valley we crossed. It was like being walked through an old town, with its church, its streets and its main square. The places we saw were buzzing with memories and legends, evidencing the strength of the mutual relationship between Amerindian culture and their environment. Of course, this is a subtle relationship, one that does not im-mediately spring to the eye of the foreign observer. It is without material evidence, marks or scars, because it is not based on the presence of human settlements or the extraction of natural resources. Instead, it is deeply spiritual and embraces a cosmo-centric worldview. What ap-

pears as thousands of hectares of wild savannah, forests and mountains is in fact the result of an inter-dependency, where human beings shape their environment and their environment shapes who they are.
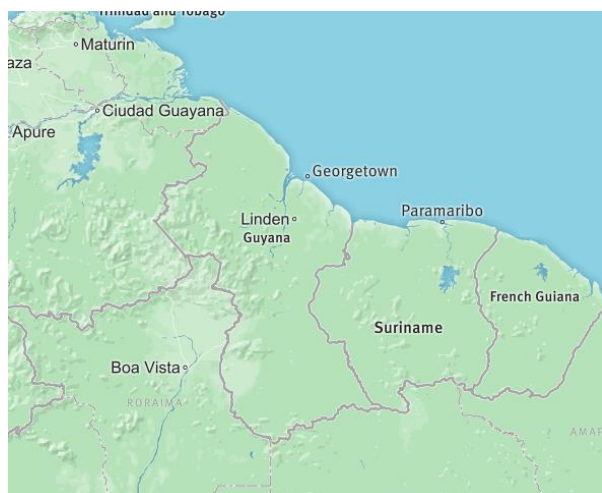

Figure 1. Map of Guyana.
Source: Mapbox.

2. Social memory, culture and ICT

Social memory plays a central role in the formation of indigenous people's worldview. For Walsh, it evokes a "system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature, and on the spatial-temporal harmonious totality of existence" (Walsh, 2010, p. 18). In the North Rupununi region of Guyana, where a majority of Makushi communities live, the main vehicle of this social memory has traditionally been dialogue and oral storytelling. It helps them maintain their relational and multi-faceted worldview, reinforcing their sense of community and cooperative spirit (Mistry et al., 2014). But the oral transmission also makes social memory particularly fragile to the test of time.

Technological developments, and the increasing exposure of indigenous peoples to information and communication technologies (ICT) are sometimes described as an accelerator of change akin to weakening indigenous social memory. ICT are said to threaten the loss of cultural identity, as they contribute to diverting the attention of users towards a system of belief alien to them (Diaz Andrade and Urquhart, 2012). This argument is even advanced by some indigenous peoples themselves, when they say that the traditional ways are changing under the influence of technology:

"*Now, the youngest child would know what is happening across the world, through technology, so their minds are more open and it is not limited to down here anymore. They have dreams, they have bigger dreams now than just growing up and becoming a father, having a family and stay in the village. It is about seeing this place here, that place there and becoming someone important, going somewhere, working, making a lot of money. So it gives them more options and takes away from them their origin, history*" (Interview, March 2014).

Although ICT might have a real impact on behaviours and aspirations, Briggs argues that a group's knowledge and identity are not definite characteristics but the product of complex sets of relationships which have in most cases grown from changes and influences over time and generations (Briggs, 2005). Technological change and novel ideas percolate within and among indigenous communities as part of an adaptation process, and are not solely the result of a hegemonic trend towards modernity, globalisation and loss of cultural identity (Belton, 2010; Diamond, 1999). For instance, looking at Mayan peasants, Indian farmers or the Amazonian Kayapo, Dyer-Witheford (1999) has shown how indigenous peoples have succes-sfully interfaced advanced com-munication networks with traditional forms of mobilisation. This suggests that the appropriation of ICTs may result from strategies to safeguard indigenous traditions and resisting hegemony, rather lead to co-optation and loss of social memory (Assies, 2000; Fischer, 1996; Garfield, 2001).

Figure 2. Capturing traditional knowledge.
Source: Claudia Nuzzo.

Due to their particularities, ICT offer new possibilities for capturing, broadcasting and safeguarding indigenous social memory. Scholars argue that the visual culture that has (re)emerged with Internet is one of its main strengths for the appropriation of ICTs by traditional societies. Online communication, they argue, would not be far removed from more traditional forms of communication (Smith et al., 2000; Zimmerman et al., 2000). Furthermore, the falling costs of digital devices and online storage capacities have created favourable conditions for the digitalisation and archiving of social memory. Hence this question: How can ICT be used to resist change and culture loss in indigenous communities?

3. The Pantanî Blog Experiment

The Pantanî Blog experiment was led as part of a PhD research looking at how ICT affect the well-being of indigenous communities in the North Rupununi. Using principles from Participatory Action Research, i.e. the ideas that research should be collaborative and lead to a change that will directly benefit the participants (Pain et al., 2011), this experiment aimed specifically at interrogating the role of ICT in safeguarding and sharing indigenous social memory in a fast-changing environment.

Four indigenous participants, two men and two women, with prior experience in using ICT, were recruited in May 2014 to take part to the experiment. Each participant was handed a Samsung digital tablet and trained on the principles of digital storytelling. For a year, from June 2014 to May 2015, the participants were encouraged to record and publicise stories of their choosing in a variety of formats, e.g. text, images, video and sound. As UK-based Editor, my role was to encourage, proofread, upload and share the stories on an online Wordpress platform named *Pantanî* – or "Stories" in Makushi (www.pantaniblog.org).
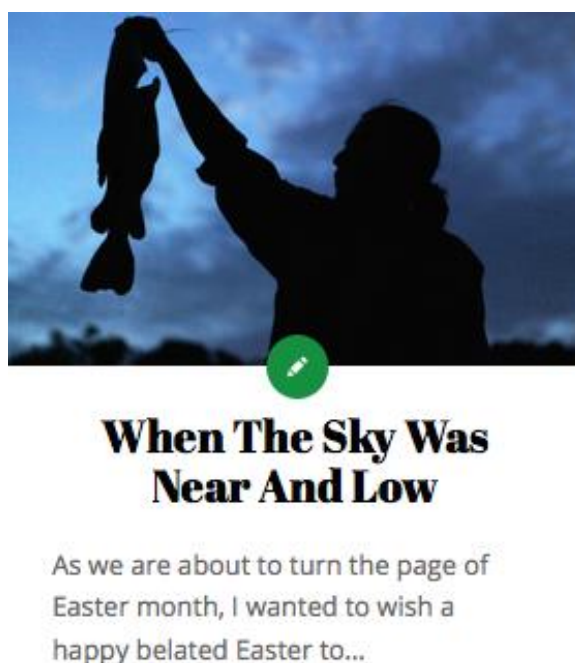

Figure 3. Screenshot of Pantanî Blog story.
Source: www.pantaniblog.org.

Over the project's duration, approximately 35 stories were uploaded on the Pantanî Blog. These stories were also uploaded on a dedicated Facebook page and shared on various indigenous group pages to maximise exposure. In addition to being the platform on which stories were published, the Internet was also instrumental in the organisation of the project. It allowed me to keep an open line of communication with the participants throughout the project despite the geographical separation, by using email exchange, as well as chatting applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Skype.

Two Skype evaluations were organised during the experiment, one in November 2014 and one in January 2015, to discuss the issues encountered by the participants and adjust the

objectives accordingly. Early on, the limited Internet connectivity constrained the team to review certain deliverables. For instance, the initial plan of four stories per person per month was reviewed to only one story per person per month, and the project's duration was extended from six months to one year. Each time, the participants were encouraged to step in and decisions were taken as a team. A final evaluation took place in the North Rupununi, in May 2015, during a one-day team meeting followed by public presentations in one community and in the local high school.

Figure 4. Presentation of the project in the Annai secondary school, North Rupununi, Guyana.
Source: Géraud de Ville.

4. Results and Findings

Central to the experiment, the use of ICT was recognised as one of the strengths of the project. This optimism towards technology could be expected given the relatively young age of the participants, ranging from 21 to 32 years old, and the fact that they all had previous personal and professional experience as ICT users. Despite seeming to agree that ICT were having an impact on their society, they also suggested that this impact could be positive. They recognised change – including technological change - as being inherent to their lives, arguing that they could not live the same way their parents did 30 years ago. But that did not prevent them from keeping a strong identity:

"*Change is going to happen as people are increasingly accessing the Internet, have smartphones etc. Thanks to that, people can have a trail of where they come from and remember who they are*" (Final evaluation, May 2015).

"*Your ways might change, but you can't change who you are*" (Final evaluation, May 2015).

Instead of feeling victimised, observing the impact of ICT on their lives as something uncontrollable, they insisted that it was people who decided when and how to use it, thereby rejecting the idea of a technology-driven determinism. For instance, one of the participants suggested that the project allowed her to talk to a variety of people and advise them on addiction to technology, as well as raise some of the security aspects of it.

Figure 5. Pantanî Blog project team evaluation.
Source: Géraud de Ville.

The participants felt that uploading the stories online added value to the initiative. They discussed several other projects that had focused on the documentation of traditional stories. Contrary to Pantanî Blog, the stories collected via these projects had either been saved on computers or printed and distributed in the communities, but most of them had been lost after the end of the project. Instead, by uploading the stories online, it was felt that we were giving these stories a longer lifespan and sharing them with more people than in any other prior project.

Asked to reflect on the role of ICT for sharing and promoting indigenous social memory with the outside world, both the participants and the wider community agreed that it was necessary, on the basis of a principle of reciprocity. People felt that if it was possible for them to learn about someone else's culture

on the Internet, that person should also be able to learn about the Amerindian culture.

"*People can learn from our culture across the world*" (Final evaluation, May 2015).

"*We should not hide it, we should share what we know*" (Community evaluation, May 2015).

Notwithstanding the advantages of using ICT for safeguarding and sharing Amerindian social memory, the community evaluation revealed a key difference with the process of traditional storytelling. In the past, it was the shaman who was the key figure in communication. He would, for instance, use his mystical power to establish communication links with people who were gone, read dreams etc. These stories were then told by parents to their children for generations and generations and through this, interpretations would change. These stories evolved dynamically with time and existed in as many versions as there were storytellers. Instead, the Pantanî process of transcription and digitalisation was a way to fix one version of the story, which led to a long debate during the community evaluation. Some interveners suggested that we needed to ask several people to find the stories' missing parts. Other wished we had set up a communal process where people would sit together and debate on a story to get it right.

Importantly, the community members also insisted that the project should give more attention to the local impact, notably by playing a role in preserving the language and the tradition of storytelling in the communities. They felt that initiatives like Pantanî Blog could act as a stepping stone, a foundation on which to build to involve youngsters in the preservation of culture for future generations, and praised the participant's plan to have the stories broadcasted on the local radio as well as to organise a storytelling competition in the local high school:

"*because our culture is our identity*" (Community evaluation, May 2015).

Figure 6. Children reading a print-out of stories from Pantanî Blog.
Source: Géraud de Ville.

5. Conclusions

Several limitations were highlighted in the process of collecting stories, such as the absence of communal involvement in their transcription and a feeling that the project could have a more direct impact at the community level. This was largely due to the fact that Internet access is still fairly limited in the communities, and that issues with bandwidth also prevented the participants from using their tablets to their full potential, e.g. by uploading short films of people telling stories, and were mostly constrained to using text.

Yet, the Pantanî Blog experiment has shown that ICT have a role to play in the documentation, preservation and sharing of indigenous social memory. It is a way of engaging young people with their traditional culture and it provides a mean for preserving these stories for future generations, sharing them beyond the community, and promoting the indigenous voice (Cunsolo Willox et al. 2012). Importantly, it also reinforces their sense of empowerment. As one participant said:

"*in the past people have come here and recorded Amerindian ways and we would not see it. Nowadays we produce this information ourselves!*" (Final evaluation, May 2015).

However, the experiment also revealed a deeper question about the nature of social memory and whether its value lies primarily in its (oral) mode of transmission rather than its content, or the other way around? This question would be an interesting starting point for further research.

Acknowledgements

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