Relocating a Sense of Place Using the Participatory Geoweb: The Historical Document Database of the Métis Nation of British Columbia

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ABSTRACT

The interactive capability and ease of use of Geoweb technologies suggest great potential for Aboriginal communities to store, manage, and communicate place-related knowledge. For the Métis, who have a long history of dispossession and dispersion in Canada, the Geoweb offers an opportunity in realizing the desire to articulate a coherent sense of place for their people. This paper reports on a community-based research project involving the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the Métis Nation of British Columbia (MNBC) – the political body representing the Métis people in BC. The project includes the creation of a Geoweb tool specifically designed to facilitate the (self) articulation of a Métis community in contemporary BC. It examines how Geoweb technologies have been used to create a participatory, crowd-sourced Historical Document Database (HDD) that takes meaning through the interface of a map. The paper further explores how the data contributed by members of the Métis community have been used to capture, communicate, and represent community memories in the dispersed membership. It concludes by examining challenges that have emerged related to platform stability and institutional relations related to the ongoing sustainability of the HDD.

Keywords: Canada, Community Based Research, Historical Document Database, Memory, Métis Nation, Métis Nation British Columbia, Participatory Geoweb, Place

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INTRODUCTION

Geographic Information Technologies (GITs) are increasingly important in aboriginal communities for documenting land use and occupancy knowledge (Chapin, Lamb, & Threlkeld, 2005; Poole, 1995; Tobias, 2010). Many communities use GITs for a range of purposes, including land-use planning, cultural documentation and territorial claims (Wainwright & Bryan 2009). The Geoweb is the GIT platform for Web 2.0 social networking applications (Crampton, 2009; Scharl & Tochtermann, 2007; Sui, Goodchild, & Elwood, 2012). In its current state, the Geoweb is more a tool for spatial representation than a platform for spatial analysis, as is more common with traditional GIS (Haklay, Singleton, & Parker, 2008). Because of the interactive capability and ease of use of Geoweb technologies, they offer great potential for storing, managing and communicating place-related knowledge. The Geoweb’s ability to compile and mash-up photographs, audio and video through a map interface gives it great potential for presenting place-based memories and knowledge, including the toponyms, oral histories and land-based narratives of such central importance to Aboriginal communities (Corbett, 2012).

Certainly maps and mapping have long been sites of conflict and contestation between Aboriginal communities and the colonial state (Brody, 1981; Cooke & Fitzhugh, 1977; Harley, 1988; Palmer & Rundstrom, 2013, Rundstrom, 1995), and the Geoweb retains a role in this arena. But the social networking capacity of Geoweb tools has a much broader potential for storing, managing and communicating place-related knowledge. The Geoweb’s ability to compile and mash-up photographs, audio and video through a map interface gives it great potential for presenting place-based memories and knowledge, including the toponyms, oral histories and land-based narratives of such central importance to Aboriginal communities (Corbett, 2012).

Among the three Aboriginal Peoples acknowledged in the Canadian Constitution\(^1\), the Métis are the most highly urbanized, in part because of a long history of dispossession from their lands that included two wars (1869-70 and 1885), subsequent economic and political marginalization, and a series of legal actions by the Canadian State.

History, memory, and community are complex and interwoven phenomena generally, and for the Métis, the history of dispossession and dispersion has been particularly intense. But the absence of land and recognized land rights does not in and of itself mean an absence of community (see Evans et al., 2012). Communities can be dispersed and still coherent, networked and connected in a variety of ways. Displacement and placelessness can be counterbalanced by memory, especially when a sense of place exists in the recollections of members of dispersed communities. Collective memories deployed to restore, reestablish, repatriate territory and reconnect a people with their homeland and with each other reveal the significance embedded within place. Not coincidentally, in the context of Aboriginal-colonial State relations, there is value in documenting collective memory as a strategy of resistance and as a viable political tool. The challenge is to find ways that enable aboriginal communities to record, share and reflect on their place-based memories and knowledge, and in doing so (re)present and (re)establish identity, culture and language, which in turn can be instrumental in facilitating the re-appropriation of contested places.

In this paper we report on a community-based research project involving the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the Métis Nation of British Columbia (MNBC), which included the creation of a Geoweb tool specifically designed to facilitate the (self) articulation of a Métis community in contemporary BC. It examines how Geoweb technologies have been used to create a participatory, crowd-sourced Historical Document Database (HDD) that takes meaning through the interface of a map. The paper will further explore how the data contributed by members of the Métis community...
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