Chapter 10
Creating Digital Heritage Content: Bridging Communities and Mediating Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of modern technologies has clearly revolutionized the way we do things, how we relate to one another, and the methods we use to preserve cultural heritage for future generations. Under this need to preserve culture, and make it readily available for present and future generations, UNESCO defines cultural heritage as “our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations” (UNESCO). Cultural preservation, in this context, is seen as an endowment for future generations. Even though everyone might agree that saving cultural vestiges using digital media is a positive step toward preserving a legacy for future genera-

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors focus their attention on an often overlooked aspect of digital heritage content, namely by whom how, and with what purpose such content is created. The authors evaluate digital materials that are anthropological and archaeological in nature, both digitized archives and newly created materials. In their work and efforts to understand and represent different cultural perspectives, they have encountered differences in cultural knowledge systems that have shown the need for cross-cultural consultation and communication as an essential first step in the creation of digital content for new systems of representation and knowledge transfer. Their efforts focus on developing a new educa-
tions; not everyone agrees on who really benefits from cultural heritage preservation or how to go about preserving culture.

In the design of digital cultural heritage applications, the goal is often to provide content to a broad-based public. Because of this fact, content is often generalized and not focused on, or sensitive to, specific user groups; in other words, the creators of cultural content assume that the meanings are universal. Content is often tailored to a ‘public’ that is well aware of the importance of heritage preservation, protection, and outreach within a specific dominant paradigm. However, such a worldview is not always in concordance with the worldviews of specific cultural groups (Schmidt and Patterson 1995); that is, cross-cultural differences exist in the beliefs about the ways cultural material should be protected, represented, and communicated.

Cultural histories of distinct groups are often incorporated into a larger universal heritage,(Cameron 2008; Srinivasan, Enoto, Becvar, and Boast 2009; UNESCO), whereby specific knowledge systems and cultural ideas are often overlooked in favor of dominant views or representations. Digital technologies offer many opportunities to manage cultural heritage; however, in doing so they have also brought issues of differential access to the forefront. Even though more and more people have access to digital information, through personal computers, handheld devices, etc., the digital divide, originally defined as the difference between the have’s and have not’s, has not disappeared. Moreover, it is now clear that the issue of access is not merely a matter of who can acquire digital technologies, but it is also a matter of who creates digital content and who has access to such content. If digital heritage content serves primarily the needs of an affluent audience then based on a measure of ‘content relevance’, the gap may become wider instead of narrower.

However, when appropriately used digital technologies can provide many communities with essential tools for cultural continuation, communication and survival, and a number of innovative projects and research programs have been initiated over the last decade to bridge the information gap (Cristen). All of these projects involve community collaboration and seek to address specific community needs. We have broadly classified them into three categories (Figure 1). They include: 1) projects that are based on community involvement, this category provides community and its members tools to interact and/or comment on already existing content; 2) projects based on community co-creation, these type of projects create alternative systems of cultural context and content exchange based primarily on community characteristics; 3) community-based participatory projects, these projects are often initiated based on a specific community need, cultural, and/or socio-political. Within the background section of this paper we discuss these recent developments and identify a number of issues and problems related to current approaches of community collaboration, which will be used to frame the discussion of our proposed educational model.

Our efforts are focused on how, by whom, and for what purpose digital heritage content is created (and maintained). Our goal is also to propose ways by which education and training can be used to reduce the digital divide. Along these lines, we propose an educational model that is multifaceted; focusing not only on information exchange and communication but also on providing communities with tools and resources that will allow them to create their own digital heritage content and systems. Our educational model brings together traditional university students and community members in order to encourage a change of attitude in the traditional paradigms in which local communities are seen as merely centers from where academics can gather data for research. By