An observatory to collect it all

Edgardo Civallero

The Observatory of Libraries and Indigenous Peoples in Latin America (http://www.bibliotecasypueblosoriginarios.org/) is a recently launched, still-under-development project designed by Argentina-born, Spain-based LIS professional Edgardo Civallero. Civallero (Buenos Aires, 1973) has spent most of his career working with indigenous knowledge, oral tradition, intangible heritage and endangered sounds (language and music), and has a special interest in library services for indigenous peoples in Latin America — services that have been irregularly approached and implemented in the continent. He worked himself in the field, in north-eastern Argentina, collecting oral tradition and creating small sound libraries based at local schools in communities of the Qom, the Moqoit and the Pit'laqa peoples (2001-2006). He has also produced a number of papers, conferences, columns, blog posts and digital (hand)books on this topic, mainly in Spanish, but also in English; some of them are included as a final bibliography in this article.

Scattered and missing pieces...

One of the main problems anyone interested in Latin American indigenous societies faces when trying to study some aspects of these human groups is the absence of reliable data.

The information available on topics such as languages and cultural heritage, for example, is in general terms scarce and irregular. Produced by a number of different sources, their scope, quality and trustworthiness is hugely variable. Official censuses and government statistics —not always to be believed— mix with notes signed by NGOs or religious groups, thesis or research papers (their authors being one-time visitors of an indigenous community, staying there long enough to extract the information they needed and leave), and even websites created and maintained by indigenous communities themselves, local radios, cultural activists or socio-political movements.

Some parts of the indigenous reality have not even been covered at all. Libraries is one of them.

A limited handful of poorly-divulgated reports, conferences, digital news and blog posts, as well as personal communications, indicate that there have been and there are a number of experiences carried out in Latin America regarding library services for indigenous peoples. Related to this topic, work is also being done on language recovery, indigenous books and websites, oral archives and a miscellanea of activities whose core subject is traditional, native knowledge.

However, as hinted above, the information on these actions and projects is rare and, when/if available, is poor and disperse. It resembles a puzzle with its pieces scattered everywhere — some of those pieces being lost, others changed, others damaged, and the original picture being blurry, to say the least.

Without a current state-of-the-art providing at least a simple, elementary baseline, a diagnosis of problems, absences, opportunities and caveats related to libraries for indigenous users is almost impossible to carry out. Lack of information leads researchers to suppose a lot, to figure out another lot (not always correctly), and to connect the dots with uncertain lines in order to draft a potential —and most likely unreal— scenario.

And without a solid scenario, new projects can't be implemented. Not, at least, without a high failure risk.

On the other hand, the absence of information means that there is not systematization of experiences — of whatever has been done, its failure or success. The absence of this kind of information means that what has been found, what has been achieved and the problems that have been faced, all of it is mostly unknown: those data are unavailable as valuable inputs for other processes, or simply for evaluation and study. No conclusions can be extracted, no lessons. Nothing —or almost nothing— can be learnt.

Which, in practice, is the equivalent to say that these experiences did not happen at all. Because they are invisible. Unknown. *Terra incognita* for the rest of the world.

...and a possible solution

Given the present situation... what if all the scattered pieces could be, at the very least, gathered on a single place? What if a space is created to compile, complete, update, organize, classify, make public and visible, and eventually analyze, study and use all the missing information?

This idea has been partially tested in Latin America, in a project related to indigenous knowledge: the Brazilian digital library "Kurt Nimuendajú" (http://www.etnolinguistica.org/). The "library" is a virtual platform where books and academic materials related to indigenous languages are digitized, uploaded, classified and made available for public use: from 16th century Jesuit grammars to modern linguistic analyses. The resource is extremely valuable in a field where, traditionally, information moves in small academical circles, and sometimes, due to its rarity, materials are not even accessible.

This project has been an early experience of digital humanities: the union of academic values with the tools and the culture of the Internet. A virtual community of both professionals and amateurs is behind the scene, making the best use of the resources at hand for the common good, empowering those interested in indigenous sounds (including many researchers) and supporting endangered languages — a topic covered by most international declarations on intangible heritage.

Taking those problems, ideas and values, as well as the digital humanities' perspective, to the field of librarianship, the "Observatory of Libraries and Indigenous Peoples in Latin America" has been created last February. The "Observatory" is a site aimed at collecting information related to indigenous knowledge and its management: primarily library services to native peoples, but also books in aboriginal languages and their publishers, oral archives and collective memory initiatives.

In this online archive, experiences and all the available information related to them (including bibliography) will be gathered; creators/managers will be contacted whenever possible, in order to get additional data, testimonies, opinions and results. Hopefully, once the best-known contents are made public, others will follow, adding value to the site and providing clues to find old and ongoing, uncharted projects.

Contacts, surveys, advertisement in professional spaces, activity in social media, etc. are expected to make the project visible, and people to be aware of its work — and to get directly and actively involved. It is assumed that a community of interest and practice will progressively grow around the "Observatory", using its information as fuel, providing feedback and resources to improve the workflow, and allowing the increase of data and additional documentation. And more visibility and support as well.

Networking may bring interaction and collaboration with similar initiatives in other parts of the world. Also, links with organizations, groups and collectives working on

indigenous topics are meant to be formed, as well as alliances with indigenous communities, all types of libraries, LIS associations and schools, and other institutions.

The collected information will be organized in different sections: one related to libraries, other to books, a third to orality; and a number of subsections will present additional resources, such as legislation, bibliography or statistics. As a digital humanities' project, the "Observatory" will combine academic research methods and values with the best digital tools and techniques to collect and present its contents.

The combination of a good corpus of experiences and a strong community working with it or around it may allow, in time, to perform data analysis, to extract ideas and lessons, and to produce guidelines, recommendations, compilations of good practices and even handbooks with useful "how-to" instructions. Also, the community built around the project may be able to directly support experiences in the field, including both academic researchers and indigenous communities.

The Observatory is now giving its first steps. Considering the current state of indigenous knowledge all around the world in general, and in Latin America in particular, all hands are needed on deck. Collaboration will be more than welcome.

A basic bibliography

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