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Unpacking the 'Indigenous' Knowledge Centre Concept

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of information technology and library services commonly referred to as 'Knowledge Centres'. Despite being a somewhat ill-defined term the Knowledge Centre concept has found currency across the globe, particularly in many of Australia's Indigenous communities. This paper contends that the Knowledge Centre concept is both a response to the changing nature of information, media and communications technologies and the growing appreciation of Indigenous Knowledge as distinct and valid episteme (system or structure of knowledge). This paper explores the contexts in which knowledge centres have arisen and their meaning and significance in the technologised world in which people are now enmeshed. Given the importance of the convergent communications environment in shaping the knowledge centre concept one should also be mindful of the historical context within which audio-visual and textual literacies have taken form in remote Aboriginal communities over the past few decades. By drawing upon examples from the Northern Territory Library's *Libraries and Knowledge Centres* program this paper considers the development of the Knowledge Centre concept and how it may differ from a traditional library service.

Introduction

Since late 2004, I have been one in a team of Northern Territory Library (NTL) staff charged with the task of implementing the Libraries and Knowledge Centres model across the Northern Territory. I first began conducting research into community readiness for knowledge centres in communities west of Alice Springs, continued as a trainer in database and digital media technology and have more recently been able to concentrate on the knowledge and cultural requirements for remote Indigenous clients in the Northern Territory. During this time, I have witnessed the development of the Knowledge Centre concept as interpreted by the NTL and how it has taken shape in a number of different communities.

The Knowledge Centre concept has found gradual support across Australia, and at the recent Federal Government 2020 Summit the notion of 'a national Indigenous Knowledge Centre network' providing 'support to regional knowledge centres', was listed as a 'Top Idea'. The published summit report went on to say that:

'Regional [knowledge] centres reflect that each Indigenous group is different and has different knowledge to preserve and to develop. These need to be linked to the development of community hubs, and would utilise existing facilities.' (Australian Federal Government 2008:26)

I will begin this paper by outlining some of the International and Australian examples of the Knowledge Centre concept with an extended exploration of how it has been implemented in the Northern Territory. As there is very little published information on this subject I have no doubt that this overview will suffer from notable shortcomings, but it is hoped that the information provided here might assist others in rendering a fuller version of the story in the future. Following on from this we will take a closer look at two of the key influences on the Knowledge Centre concept since its original implementation in the late 1990s – the recognition of Indigenous Knowledge as a distinct knowledge system and the rise of digital culture and the knowledge economy.

Knowledge Centre Models

Because a range of products and services - including the creation of digital archives, physical library spaces, websites, indigenous library services and advanced information catalogues - are all ascribed the term 'Knowledge Centre', the concept can be difficult to define. Regardless of its chosen prefix an, *Indigenous* Knowledge Centre, a *Community* Knowledge Centre, a *Local* Knowledge Centre or a *Library* and Knowledge Centre all feature similar underlying principles that make each service comparable.

Despite this ambiguity the Knowledge Centre concept continues to gain currency all over the world - particularly in the field of library and information services provision to distinct Indigenous communities. It is precisely this phenomenon in the Australian context, along with the discursive and technological context, that is presented below. We should first take the time however to briefly explore some of the International examples of the Knowledge Centre concept and how these may have affected the development of similar initiatives in Australia.

International Examples

Sharing a similar colonial heritage and experience, the Indigenous social and economic policies of Australia and Canada are frequently compared and contrasted (Armitage 1998). In the field of Indigenous broadcasting policy for example Australian and Canadian communications services are often measured against each other; with the Australian sector being described as largely 'unrecognised and unrealised' when compared. (Meadows 2000:C.1). Similarly, a number of Canadian and North American initiatives designed to deliver appropriate information services to Indigenous communities during the late 1990s directly inspired the original Indigenous Knowledge Centres concept in Australia (Webb 2002).

One example of this is the Kitikmeot Heritage Society and Cultural Centre in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut Province, Canada. Cambridge Bay's Cultural Centre, servicing an 80% indigenous population, features a large collection of audio and video interviews, transcripts and other archival materials relating to Inuit culture, language and history. In 2002 the Centre created the 'May Hakongak Community Library and Cultural Centre, as a place where information on local traditional knowledge could be made accessible to the local community and showcased in various public displays (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2008). More recently, 'Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centres' have been 'created to provide a collaborative national forum' to develop solutions to the challenges faced by Métis, First Nations and Inuit learners (Canadian Council of Learning 2008). Canada's International Development Research Centre, a Crown corporation funded by the Canadian Parliament, is now assisting the communities of Embalam and Pondicherry in India to establish their own Knowledge Centres (IDRC 2007). These places provide people in extremely poor villages with access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT), library resources and a community meeting place.

Similar initiatives in the United States of America have also become benchmarks against which Australian library and information services are measured (Webb 2002). Although not given the Knowledge Centre tag internet access programs for Pueblo Indian Communities in New Mexico and other services have been viewed as possible models of community development and service delivery for the Australian context. What each of these services has in common is their emphasis on providing an amalgam of cultural heritage and digital information services to disadvantaged indigenous populations. As we will see, it is precisely this focus that has been retained in the Australian models.

The Knowledge Centre concept also gained considerable interest from a number of majority (developing) world nations during the mid to late 1990s. Although I cannot find any evidence of a Library and Knowledge Centre being established in any of these nations, there were numerous organisations formed at this time to protect and represent Indigenous Knowledge in the arena of agriculture and economics (See UNESCO 1999). Nevertheless, in some quarters the concept came under suspicion because it had only ever been advanced in nations where indigenous knowledge had been neglected, overlooked and exploited. One academic in Papua New Guinea (Digim'Rina 1997) argued that to offset the risk of Knowledge Centres merely extending earlier colonial practice they would have to 'situate the centre with the people' rather than simply accumulating knowledge.

Australian Examples

While those working in this field in Australia can learn a great deal from initiatives spread across the globe, there are unique features of the Australian experience that require closer consideration. The enormously rich cultural and linguistic diversity of Indigenous Australia is worth illustrating in detail here. In Central Australia alone,

where language and culture remain relatively robust, there are approximately five cultural and linguistic regions consisting of approximately 20 languages/dialects (See Table 1).

Tab. 1: Central Australian ‘Knowledge’ Regions

<i>Knowledge Regions</i>	<i>Languages and Dialects</i>
Southern <i>Arandic</i>	• Central, Eastern, Western, Southern and Lower Southern Arrernte and Akarre
Northern <i>Arandic</i>	• Alyawarr, Eastern and Central Anmatyerr and Kaytetye
Tennant Creek	• Warumungu, Warplmanpa, Wakirti Warlpiri, Wakaya
Tanami	• Warlpiri,
Western Desert	• Pintupi, Pintupi Luritja, Southern Luritja, Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara

It is now widely understood that library and information services operating in similar regions across Australia must work with this diversity (Nakata et al 2007). It is not surprising then that the Knowledge Centre concept has been implemented with some of the most linguistically and culturally diverse Indigenous populations in the nation – in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

I will provide only a brief description of the State Library of Queensland’s Indigenous Knowledge Centres here and leave a more thorough description to those closely involved in its implementation. However, it is now widely known that the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) has become the first state library in Australia to create a space specifically designed to celebrate Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. In 2007 SLQ launched the ‘Kuril dhagun Indigenous Knowledge Centre’ as an interactive space where visitors can experience and learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, from the traditional to the contemporary. Outside of the capital city SLQ supports 17 remote Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs) in some of Queensland’s remotest communities and townships, on both the mainland and in the Torres Strait. The IKCs model, underpinned by a partnership between SLQ and community councils, is designed to be flexible enough for local communities to shape the service according to their specific needs.

Libraries and Knowledge Centres

As the first organisation to begin using the Knowledge Centre tag, the experience of the Northern Territory Library is particularly interesting. Nine years ago, after being approached by a number of communities looking to explore alternative library services, the Northern Territory library began devising its Indigenous Knowledge Centre concept. The remote communities of Wadeye (Port Keats), Aleyaw (Ti Tree) and Galiwinku

(Elcho Island) were chosen as sites for a pilot program largely inspired by an idea that the residents of Galiwinku had been developing since the late 1970s. (Personal communication with Pipa Webb, 2008) Initial consultations with the Galiwinku community in the late 1990s revealed that the community had a vision of a physical space that would celebrate and revitalise local culture. (Macroplan 2000) Challenging the well defined boundaries between various cultural institutions, the Knowledge Centre was to be a meeting place for the community and combine a range of services such as an interpretative centre, a keeping place, a museum and a library. The overarching purpose of the Knowledge Centre would be to improve access to collections of relevance to the community, enable the creation of new documents/recordings and give people a measure of ownership and control over these collections. Richard Gandhuwuy Garrawurra (in Taylor 2004:1) described the Knowledge Centres as:

‘breathing places...they keep our culture strong for our children...look after our traditions, songs, language, stories and artwork...bring back the things that guide us today for the future...combining a meeting place for traditional business with modern library services.’

In 2003, a ‘Community Knowledge Centre Road Map’ (see figure: 1) was sketched to help describe the Library’s response to ‘increased demand’ from communities to assist in managing their ‘traditional indigenous knowledge’. Under this proposed model a ‘hub’ community with a functioning library service, would manage a digital collection that could then be distributed (via the web) to other communities within a regional network of linked databases.

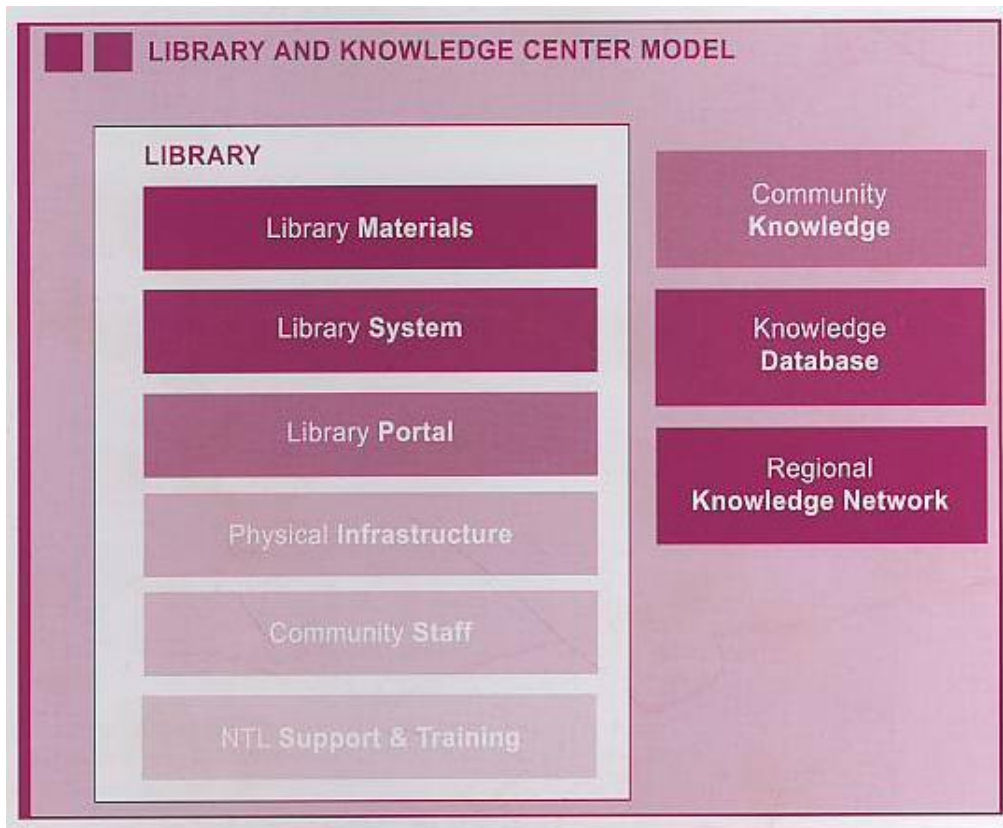


Fig. 1: An early NTL draft of the Knowledge Centre concept featured on Northern Territory Libraries *Libraries and Knowledge Centres – the facts* pamphlet issued in 2005.

After a two-year study involving a number of remote Aboriginal communities in the Top End, Galiwinku (Elcho Island) was chosen as the site for the first Indigenous Knowledge Centre in 2002. (Australian Broadcasting Commission 2003, Northern Land Council 2002) At the locus of the Galiwinku Knowledge Centre was a ‘42 level relational database’ that aimed to preserve local knowledge and represent the way the Yolngu people understand the natural world (Rothwell 2003). This ambitious task was, according researchers at the School of Indigenous Knowledge Systems at Charles Darwin University, ‘impossible to achieve and in fact unnecessary to attempt’ (Christie 2005) and, as far as can be ascertained, has since become idle.

In 2004 the Northern Territory Library began to implement a new service to its remote libraries centred on a computer database system designed to hold digital materials of particular relevance to each local community. After an initial audit of available database systems, the Pitjantjatjara Council’s *Ara Irititja* system was chosen and re-branded the ‘Our Story’ database. The system was developed by the Social History Unit of the Pitjantjatjara Council in response to the desire of senior Anangu (Aboriginal people from the Pitjantjatjara lands) to bring back the records of past anthropologists, missionaries and others that had documented their lives.

A team of researchers, led by Professor Martin Nakata, evaluated the Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) model in 2005 and proposed that programs like this could become key infrastructure elements for building capacity in Indigenous communities into the future. (Nakata 2006) Although far less ambitious than the original strategy, Nakata identified that the LKC model with the 'Our Story' database at its centre, had stimulated a number of 'communities to search for and retrieve documented knowledge from external sources' and required communities to engage with digital media technologies (Nakata 2005:72).

The Anmatyerr Library and Knowledge Centre

Having explained the emergence of the Knowledge Centre concept and some of its challenges it might still be difficult to imagine exactly what a service like this actually looks like. By drawing upon examples from the Anmatyerr LKC in Aleyaw (Ti Tree) we might get closer to a more practical definition. However, not every LKC delivers similar services and all of them have difficulties associated with ICT maintenance, lack of support and an irregularity of training. Acknowledging that a service like this is not easy to maintain, the examples listed below merely point to some of opportunities for Knowledge Centres as they continue to develop.

Opened in 2003, the Anmatyerr LKC has since become a popular place for Anmatyerr and Warlpiri people from nearby communities to access traditional library services and new digital resources. The local Community Library Officer, Sebastian Walker, opens the centre five days a week and assists community members with access to the internet, requests for photos from the database, adds new material to the system and cares for any culturally sensitive material housed at the centre.

The *Our Story* database in Ti Tree has been given the local Anmatyerr name of *Anmatyerr Angkety* (translated roughly as 'Anmatyerr people communicating') and contains over 1000 items specifically relevant to the Anmatyerr region. Over 1000 names of individual people and over 60 place names specific to the region have been entered into the database to date, mainly by local people, in both Anmatyerr and English. The collection includes historical documents, images, sound files and video materials sourced from a range of private and public collections. Private donors who have held on to old cassette recordings, photographs or video are now beginning to make digitised copies of this material available to the community. Once returned the content is entered into the database and made available for community access. The digital materials are then used in a myriad of ways; photographs are printed and laminated, and in Ti Tree it is not uncommon for oral histories to be downloaded onto portable mp3 players and taken to the nearby the 'Creek Camp', a makeshift settlement of humpies, disused cars and tents, where there is no power to run a CD player.

While the database is certainly a major drawcard for the library there are other changes occurring in this space more akin to the holistic definition of the Knowledge Centre concept. On the wall of the library is a painting by local Anmatyerr teacher, April Pengart Campbell, entitled *Merakert Impaty*. This painting represents *Anyenhengheng* - one of the fundamental cultural concepts relating Anmatyerr people to *Mer* (the land/country), to *Altyerr* (the Dreaming) and to each other. Visitors to the library are immediately confronted with Anmatyerr language, Anmatyerr kinship terms and an Anmatyerr view of the landscape. Directly below this painting are two internet enabled computers where Sebastian has been using Google Earth to create a map of the region. The map features satellite images of remote outstations where many people grew up, as well as places with local cultural and spiritual significance. Sebastian says: ‘Many people in our communities have connections all across the Territory. We’ve all grown up and moved around to many different places. Our old people used to live in the bush and this technology lets us see places that are hard to visit by car. This is a new way of learning about country.’

Socio-cultural and Technological Influences

So what have been the main influences on the development of Knowledge Centres? This paper contends that the Knowledge Centre concept has been shaped by two major social-cultural and technological factors - the changing nature of information, media and communications technologies and the growing appreciation of Indigenous Knowledge as distinct and valid episteme. As is illustrated in Figure 2, the Knowledge Centre concept although having its earliest expression some fifty years ago has only in the last decade been implemented as a model of service delivery.

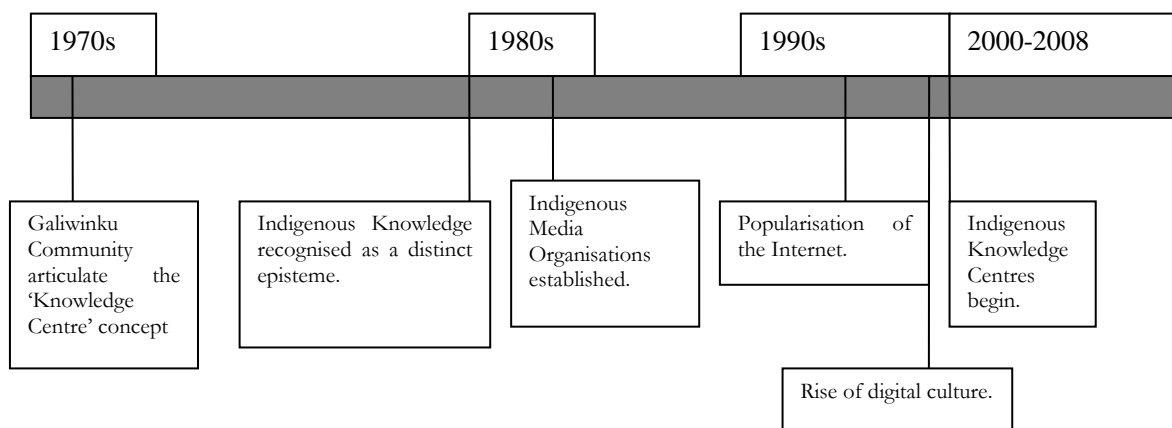


Fig. 2: Timeline (created by the author) showing the development of the Knowledge Centre concept and some of its influences over time.

The QLD and NT initiatives described above demonstrate that the Knowledge Centres model has not only tried to accommodate Indigenous content but also aims to enable the very model of service delivery to be shaped by indigenous community needs. Put

another way, those working in the field of library and information services in Indigenous communities have had to engage with Indigenous Knowledge as a legitimate and radically different episteme in its own right.

Indigenous Knowledge Management

In academic circles, Indigenous Knowledge - meaning people's intimate relationship to the material world and their associated socio-cultural practices - was not adequately acknowledged as a distinct episteme (system or structure of knowledge) until the 1980s (Nakata 2007:182). According to postcolonial theory, Indigenous Knowledge when compared with Western knowledge was often regarded as naïve, lower to the hierarchy or inadequate (Gandhi 1998:43). Social scientists interested in cultural difference and 'the Other' in the late 1970s and early 1980s, (see Said 1978. Spivak 1988) began to explore this assumption much more closely by documenting the resilience of indigenous cultures to a growing cultural homogeneity. As Hendry (2005:4) has shown, the persistence of alternate knowledge systems had already been 'well recognised by indigenous people in widely separate parts of the world' who were finding ways to reconstruct and reinvigorate their own cultural histories in the postcolonial era. They began to reclaim their culture and construct public outlets to celebrate their knowledge. In the natural sciences too, Indigenous Knowledge began to enter the discourse of, biodiversity, natural resource management and agriculture. Today, terms like Aboriginal Ecological Knowledge (IEK) (Horstman & Wightman 2001) or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) (Ramstad *et al* 2007) have become widely accepted, although they remain fairly marginal in these fields.

Since recognising the value of Indigenous Knowledge and acknowledging its vulnerability, social and natural scientists have embarked upon salvage exercises to record and add to the corpus of public knowledge whatever information they can obtain from Indigenous subjects. Efforts to record and assemble this information in research collections, museums or libraries has subsequently been criticised for being 'remarkably similar to former colonial enterprises that co-opted land, resources and labour in the interest of their own prosperity' (Nakata 2007:184, Verran 2005). Moreover, recent 'obsessions with the digitisation' of cultural resources by museums, libraries, universities and governments (Salazar 2005:68) are seen to further alienate and abstract cultural knowledge from its custodians.

Branding every effort to utilise and document Indigenous Knowledge as a misappropriation would however be unmerited. For example, there are more and more examples of scientists working cooperatively with Indigenous peoples and their Knowledge to care for species of cultural and ecological significance (Baker *et al* 1993. Dobson & Nano 2006). There is also an increasing demand from communities that songs, paintings and stories be recorded in modern textual formats (CD-rom, web based archives etc) so that their contemporary relevance is maximised. Moreover, there is considerable interest in gaining access to field notes, photographs, journals, maps, films

or audio recordings made by those that have documented Indigenous social, religious, economic and cultural life over the past 200 years.

The prospect for decolonising the field of indigenous knowledge resides in greater, and more meaningful, collaboration in documentation activities and the creation of repositories. Although many cite the arrival of digital technology as providing the first real opportunity to fulfil these objectives, the history of Australia's Indigenous media organizations shows that much of what seems new to the digital age has its antecedents in the broadcast age.

Broadcast to Digital Culture

The first Indigenous Knowledge Centres were being implemented at a time when the communications and information technology sectors were undergoing a period of transformation known as 'convergence'. Formerly discrete and separate services in publishing, telecommunications, media and computing came together to deliver new services such as email, e-books and music downloads. By blurring the demarcation lines of services the process of convergence led to a fundamental rethink of the information and communications sectors (Barr 2000:24). It is not surprising then that access to new digital technologies featured heavily in the original Knowledge Centre plans being drawn up at this time by the Northern Territory Library. As convergence and the new knowledge economy developed one school of thought claimed that a more 'participatory culture' was forming where technology could make it much easier for people to interact with and create information. Participatory culture, as defined by Jenkins of the Comparative Media Studies Program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is where average citizens 'respond to the explosion of new media technologies' and 'find ways to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content in powerful new ways' (Jenkins *et al* 2006:8). We can see this in the rise of digital storytelling, the proliferation of blogs and the growth of user-generated content online. However, the new technologies of participatory culture are often speedup or compressed imitations of broadcast media – such as film production, audio production, publishing, etc – and people had already developed a whole range of essential media literacies before the digital age came about (Wesch in Buege 2007).

Early examples of Indigenous experimentation with media and communications technologies dates back to the 1970s (Worth & Adair 1972) but it is the work of Eric Michaels that provides one of the most erudite analyses in the Australian context. Michaels' application of an Aboriginal information economy to the evolving issues of introduced technologies – as learnt from Anmatyerr and Warlpiri people in Rntem (Yuendumu) - raises questions that continue to reverberate in the digital age. As an anthropologist and communications scholar, Michaels was assigned the task of assessing the *impact* of the first television broadcasts on remote Aboriginal communities in the mid 1980s. After publishing his findings in *The Aboriginal Invention of Television* (1986) Michaels became a central figure in the ensuing policy debates

regarding the creation of a national satellite broadcasting service and the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS).

Michaels insisted that Aboriginal agency - the capacity to act independently and purposively - had not been adequately recognised by those designing ICT policy and that they had overlooked the importance of local languages, local cultures and local interests. He argued that they needed to look for ways that the new technologies could be harnessed to build a 'cultural future' from the foundation of an intact and dynamic oral culture (Rowse 1990). Michaels emphasised the need for not only the creation of locally produced texts but places where communities could exercise control and ownership over the communicative process. Instead of being passively *impacted* by changes in the communications ecology, Central Australian Aboriginal people when given the chance would instead *invent* their own distribution networks, content and methods of information management.

What makes Michaels interesting to the emergence of digital technology and the Knowledge Centres concept is his vision of participatory media production during the height of the broadcast age. Michaels was frustrated that despite the capacity for satellite broadcasting to reach audiences across the nation, they could not properly support traditional information flows or knowledge management at the local level. This problem, according to Michaels, appeared to be 'a structural one residing in the very 'mass-ness' of the medium' (Michaels 1986:6). The rise of digital culture – being far more decentralised and participatory – opens up the opportunities to address some of these limitations.

The use of digital media devices for the purposes of cultural maintenance and revitalisation amongst Indigenous and other minority groups is now commonplace across the globe. Manggarai weavers of Flores, Indonesia, use digital cameras to document their age-old designs (Threads of Life 2006), the Kalahari of southern Africa use 'cyber-tracker' palm pilots to record information about species on their land (Bazilchuk 2004) and Australian Indigenous people use databases to access and document their social and cultural histories.

Reasons for the popularity of these technologies are not hard to ascertain. Many of the devices are portable, allowing them to be used in remote and hard to get to locations. They are relatively cheap and easy to use in comparison to cumbersome, high-end technology of the broadcast age. Consumer-end devices do not require advanced literacy and utilise audio-visual material which is far more engaging to people with low-literacy. There are now multiple projects across Australia and the globe working on a range of technologies to better accommodate Indigenous cultural information (Christen 2005, Cohen 2005, Hughes & Dallwitz 2007, Hunter *et al* 2003).

Conclusion

A different type of library client, one eager to create or combine content as well as simply access and consume existing published material, has transpired – and there is no difference in Aboriginal communities. The social and cultural changes associated with the rise of digital culture privileges a 'vernacular creativity' where everyday experience is seen as a valid subject of expression (Burgess 2006:202). We can only imagine what Eric Michaels would have made of the maps being created of Anmatyerr country on Google Earth, or the downloading of oral histories onto mp3 players. These kinds of uses of information technology would have fitted neatly into his vision of a more autonomous and localised application of media and communications.

It is the core principles of indigenous knowledge management as originally imagined by the Galiwinku community, and as expressed by Michaels that remain critically important. Meeting community information needs is difficult enough in the mainstream context but made even more complex in remote indigenous libraries. Community control over information resources has persisted as a fundamental principle of the Knowledge Centre concept from its beginnings and through to the present day. In some respects, the Knowledge Centre concept has been shaped by the lessons learnt over this time and gained greater momentum during the rise of digital culture because of its privileging of local voices.

Adoption of the Knowledge Centre concept indicates an important shift in traditional library services and embraces the emergent culture of participatory media in the Indigenous context. When implemented well Knowledge Centres can be places where vernacular – yet venerable - local cultural practice is legitimated as a worthwhile contribution to public culture.

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Jason Gibson is the Southern Region coordinator with the Northern Territory Library's Libraries and Knowledge Centres program. Since completing postgraduate research on the emergence of new media technologies in remote indigenous communities nine years ago, Jason has travelled and worked in over twenty remote Indigenous communities in Australia and overseas. As a researcher, project manager and media trainer he has worked with many Aboriginal communities in the construction of websites, film production and the development of community heritage databases. He has published numerous writings in the field of media and communications.