

Trust and technology

Providing access to oral memory for Indigenous communities

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Prior to European settlement, Aboriginal Australia was predominately an oral culture. Memories, and the story-telling associated with them, played an important role in the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. To this day, many Aboriginal people value their oral traditions over and above those recorded by European historians, anthropologists and other observers, or the documentary evidence created by governments, churches and private organisations. The importance of oral traditions continues to underwrite much of contemporary Aboriginal culture. The term *oral memory* refers to historical knowledge that has been transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Aboriginal people have often been reluctant (and sometimes unable) to access historical records residing in official institutions such as libraries, public record offices, churches, and other archives. They also have a lack of trust in these records, as they are usually text-based and were written from a non-Indigenous perspective, sometimes being produced as a result of reservation and mission processes. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has identified the development and delivery of services driven by local Indigenous communities as a key strategy for achieving reconciliation [*Road map for reconciliation, national strategy to overcome disadvantage*. <http://austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/2000/10>]. It is crucial to gain an understanding of the perspectives of Indigenous people with regard to storage of, and access to, oral memory before archival services embark on new access models.

A new research project based at Monash University, aims to do just that, through an extensive exploration of the needs of Indigenous communities in relation to accessing oral memory. This project, entitled *Trust and technology: building archival systems for indigenous oral memory*, is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant, plus a grant from the Public Record Office of Victoria, and involves a coalition of researchers: Dr Kirsty Williamson, Professor Sue McKemmish, and Professor Don Schauder, from the School of Information Management and Systems (SIMS) at Monash University; Professor Lynette Russell from the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, also at Monash; and



Back: Ms Carol Jackway (School of Information Management and Systems, Monash University [SIMS]), Ms Emma Toon (Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce), Professor Sue McKemmish (SIMS), Dr Graeme Johanson (SIMS).

Front: Ms Justine Heazlewood (Public Records Office of Victoria), Professor Lynette Russell (Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University), Ms Diana Singh (Cultural and Ethics Attache for the project), Dr Kirsty Williamson (SIMS)

Ms Justine Heazlewood from the Public Record Office of Victoria, the key industry partner. Other industry partners are the Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce, the Koorie Heritage Trust and the Australian Society of Archivists Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group.

The project will involve three phases over a three-year period. In the first phase, the researchers will undertake an extensive analysis of needs using individual interviews and focus groups, which will include Indigenous participants from communities across Victoria. Participants will be chosen to reflect a range of characteristics such as age, level of experience with accessing records, and place of residence (rural or metropolitan areas). The aim of this first phase is to understand how Indigenous people want to record and access their oral memory. Key issues will include authenticity, intellectual property, and access to archives, and how trust can be engendered in Indigenous communities in relation to these issues.

The second phase of the project involves modelling Indigenous community-oriented archival services. It will investigate how well government and other archival services presently meet the needs of Indigenous groups. The modelling process will address issues which have arisen during the needs analysis and are likely to include ownership, custody, control, access rights, and authenticity. The resulting model will generate functional requirements for building a prototype archival system to capture and provide access to representations of oral memory.

The third phase will involve using information technology to actually build a prototype preservation and access system. This system will demonstrate how the needs of Indigenous communities might be met by applying archival techniques and technology, which will include culturally sensitive metadata schema, and customised access through user-friendly interfaces.

Enabling access to oral memory, not currently available, will be a step forward in the process of recovery for Indigenous people affected by past government policies. Indigenous people very often do not have links to their traditional lives and are in need of assistance to discover their past. This project will promote the healing of family and community ties and subsequently encourage the regeneration of community life and culture. Consultation, co-operation and collaboration with Indigenous communities will help them to feel part of the decisions made about how their oral memory should be handled, and will help to build trust, both in the authenticity of records, and with the organisations managing them. This will make an important contribution to national efforts of reconciliation, and will also provide a precedent for archives around the world to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Indigenous stakeholders.

For more information on the project, contact the lead investigator, Dr Kirsty Williamson, kirsty.williamson@sims.monash.edu.au, or see the project website, which will be launched shortly at: <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/eirg/>. ■