

Abstract for a Paper for the third International m-libraries Conference: Mobile technologies: information on the move, Brisbane, Australia, 11-13 May 2011:

The Number in my Pocket: the Power of Mobile Technology for the Exchange of Indigenous Knowledge

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The last decade has seen the development of online databases becoming an established norm throughout the world for the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge. However, in the absence of desktop computers and ubiquitous Internet access, Africa is limping behind in this quest for global information, with the digital divide ever widening and the wealth of Indigenous Knowledge fast disappearing for the people of this continent.

In a bid to address the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Africa is recognizing the potential of the cell phone to enable them to catch up with the global information society. Since 2000 some 316 million new cell phone subscribers have joined the information race on the African continent. A recent, promising development has been the introduction of browsers on most new generation mobile phones. This, combined with the 3G network all cellular providers have migrated to, means that ordinary Africans are accessing the internet from their phones in ever-increasing numbers. The success of a number of internet-based mobile applications, such as Mxit, means that the average cell phone user now associates his phone with more than just the calls they make and text messages they send. It is now a tool for accessing so much more.

This paper describes a model for the development of user-generated content compiled in an online Indigenous Knowledge database, making use of current mobile technologies. It describes the different technologies that are used and highlights the interaction between the library, the community and the technologies. The participating role of local communities leads to enrichment of the website while the library plays an anchor role as custodian of the knowledge resource. Technical functionality enables the social interaction that results from knowledge sharing. The preservation of context-related local knowledge creates a digital library of relevance to local communities. Short and long term benefits that the community stands to gain from the model are discussed and the limitations of the model highlighted.