



Scripturient

Oceans of data: the Pacific preservation challenge

“One of the defaults of the cultural heritage sector is we see ourselves as holders of truth, and then we wrap that truth in a whole bunch of complexity, you know, called things like Dublin Core and any other number of standards. – Tim Kong.



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On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funded a Pacific Virtual Museum pilot project with the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand, designed to provide a single access point for digitised cultural heritage items from the 'blue continent'. The inaugural programme manager for what is now known as digitalpasifik.org was Tim Kong.

TIM KONG, self-described as Fijian-Chinese and Pākehā (European New Zealander), spent his first 18 years in South East

Asia. Once a primary school teacher and a roadie for British bands, he is today Director of Digital Experience for Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, the National Library of New Zealand.

For Tim, the already mammoth task of aggregating cultural heritage content pertaining to Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia held in the catalogues of hundreds of cultural institutions across the world and making it accessible in those island nations was complicated by the varied quality of their information infrastructure, and by travel restrictions that precluded visiting in person for two years.

“A key principle was that we were never a repository... it was about visibility and accessibility. So that meant you leant into speed, and you leant into simplicity.” The online platform had to be designed for people in low bandwidth or high-cost environments, and for mobile first, capped at 800kb per page. It is designed to be a bridge “for people that don't know these cultural institutions exist,” connecting them to collections.

The answer was in limiting site content to six metadata fields and low-resolution thumbnail images ingested from open access feeds such as Trove (Australia), DPLA (United States) and Europeana. Users can get from the site to the original source record within three clicks.

The volume and distribution of content is startling. Drawing from 910 institutions, the site includes records for 300,000 documents, 121,000 images, 24,000 objects, 28,000 videos, 23,000 audio files and 9,379 maps.

Speaking from the National Library of New Zealand, Tim notes that “there are over 4,000 digitised items tagged to a Pacific nation in our collections alone”.

The metadata ingest process does throw up some false positives. “For example, when we started extracting from Europeana, Palau is the [Catalan] word for palace, so we were getting thousands of photos of European palaces... you have to be continuing to shape and craft the metadata.”

The downside of exporting that metadata directly from institutions to communities is in the potential to pass on offensive content. Tim gives the example of an ulu cavu held by a museum of ethnography in Europe with the caption: ‘Fijian wig. Dry, rigid and deformed. Dirty.’

“In Fijian tradition this is someone's hair. These are sacred objects,” Tim says.



For Tim, as well as being a bridge, the site has a role “as a mirror for the institution to look again at the way they're presenting these things.”

Incorporating data and contextual information based on consultation with the relevant communities is key, but of equal importance to Tim is institutional willingness to retain erroneous descriptive data in a way that makes transparent the shifts in understanding over time.

“The bit I'd want to challenge conceptually with this project is that we're not holders of truth. We're holders of reality, and the metadata reflects that reality. You also have to hold the metadata of failure.”

Ultimately, the project has led to a reconsideration of what cultural preservation means for Pacific Nations without the electricity reserves and economic resources for their own digital systems.

“What's the choice? Do I burn more fuel in the face of climate change and the very real impact it has on communities, to maintain my own servers? Or do I have a digital repository that I have to pay a massive subscription to with all my data sovereignty offshore?”

A more sustainable approach is to see preservation as practice, says Tim: using artefacts, passing down methods for crafting, cooking, storytelling.

“In the developed world, we fund for shelves and buildings, but not for practice. For the Pacific of the 21st, 22nd century, given all of the challenges – climate change, economic pressures, pandemics – what are the pieces that endure? What are our roles in imagining Pacific institutions like ours? How does practice get safeguarded? What do repositories look like?” **IP**