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Indigenous Heritage and the Internet

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Not everybody is aware of the difference between a mobile phone and a smartphone with internet access. During a recent Swinburne research project in Kedaya Telang Usan, this description, provided by a participant, was useful to make the distinction clear. “What is a smartphone? It’s the phone where you swipe with your finger... like putting lime on a *sirih* leaf when you want to chew betel nut.”

Researchers from Swinburne Melbourne and Swinburne Sarawak visited this area to collect data for a new research project about digital technologies in remote communities in Sarawak. Our collaborative project explores whether mobile media technologies can help in the maintenance of indigenous knowledge.

Many people may think of wild forests, wide rivers with hornbills soaring overhead

when they think of the upper Baram, but digital technologies and mobile access have become an important feature in people’s lives here. After all, the more remote a village is, the more important it is for people there to be connected to their families in the city or overseas via mobile phone, messenger apps and social media. Social networking sites such as Facebook and apps like WhatsApp and WeChat are very popular for this reason, even though people sometimes struggle with lack of internet access. In this region you sometimes have to climb a mountain, drive to the next village, or take a boat ride to check your email, make a phone call or receive an SMS.

“One phone? I have two, one for each service provider in the area,” explained a young man who participated in the recent fieldwork we carried out in this remote region. At age 77, our oldest participant Dora said that she uses her Nokia to make

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personal phone calls to her family. Another man, showing us his smart phone, explained; “I use Facebook to sell the *parangs* made in a village nearby. I send them out by mail from Miri.” Information can be disseminated immediately and in ways that did not seem possible in the past. People can exchange knowledge and information easily through these platforms.

Our project aims to empower the local communities to share their histories, songs, traditions, beliefs, objects, stories, folklore and individual perspectives to the rest of the world through digital media. It explores how communities reframe their experience and understanding of heritage through social media and participatory practices. Heritage today is seen as far more than museum artefacts and historical buildings. It is about making sense of our memories and developing a sense of identity through shared and repeated interactions of a shared past.

In the first phase of the project we identify the opportunities and obstacles people face when using digital media, and people’s experiences and practices. Among other topics, the research focuses on connectivity and lack of access, skills acquisition and device ownership.

In December last year, the team visited five communities in the Baram region including Long San, Long Silat, Long Jeeh, Long Mekaba, and Tanjong Tepalit for a preliminary site visit. In March 2016, the team covered areas around Bekenu-Sibuti, Sepupok-Niah, and along the Tinjar river, a tributary of the Baram river. The team will set out on further trips to the Baram region again later this year for in-depth investigation.

Data gathered from the baseline study will be used to plan a series of digital media workshops. These workshops will train people in rural communities in the skills used for digital storytelling, enabling them to record and document their cultural heritage, language, and traditions.





Long Subeng, Tinjar

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Long Luyang, Tinjar

After all, people already use Facebook and Instagram, and many may be interested in learning additional skills to promote their communities online. Future training could also include how to use Internet tools to attract tourists to visit the region. In this way, the project may contribute to a budding ecotourism industry in a region currently off the beaten track.



Long Luyang, Tinjar