

From Digital Himalaya to the World Oral Literature Project

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In this talk I discuss two projects, Digital Himalaya and the World Oral Literature Project, both based at Cambridge.

Eight years ago, Digital Himalaya began as a strategy for salvaging, archiving and disseminating the products of historical ethnographic collections on the Himalayas—both for posterity and for heritage communities. The project has now become a collaborative digital publishing environment which brings a new collection online every month. The website has grown from being a static homepage with occasional updates to a responsive content delivery platform for over 40GB of archived data. Similarly, our website has moved from being almost exclusively used by members of Western universities to providing a range of services to a global public, with a particularly strong user base in Asia. Digitisation has been ‘off-shored’ to Nepal, dramatically reducing operational costs and increasingly productivity. And most of all, our modest funding no longer comes from national funding bodies in Europe or America, but through Web referrals, loyal users and individual donations from around the world.

Growing out of the surprising success of Digital Himalaya, the World Oral Literature Project was established in January 2009 as a new initiative to supporting the documentation and dissemination of work on endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record. For many communities around the world, the transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next lies at the heart of cultural practice. Performances of these creative works—which include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, legends, word games, life histories or historical narratives—are increasingly endangered. Globalisation and rapid socio-economic change exert complex pressures on smaller communities, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life.

In today’s talk, I address the lessons learned from the first project and how these have informed the conception of the second. I also discuss the joys, challenges and surprises of being involved in digital humanities research initiatives which rely on collaborations with archivists, librarian, scholars and perhaps most importantly, source communities, as partners in the process.

www.digitalhimalaya.org

www.oralliterature.org