

PanamaTipico.com: a Born Digital Initiative for Researching and Preserving Panama's Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. This paper reflects on the experience of PanamaTipico.com, an independent website specialized in the research and preservation of the cultural heritage of the Republic of Panama, a developing country located in Central America. Basic information about the project is described. Also discussed, are some of the challenges confronted by the project and the results achieved. The goal of this paper is to encourage a discussion on whether or not the experience of PanamaTipico.com is comparable to the experiences of similar projects in developing countries in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Keywords: cultural heritage, Panama, born digital, grassroots project, crowdsourcing.

1 Introduction

The Republic of Panama is a small country located in Central America. Its strategic position as a narrow isthmus between North and South America, and between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, has determined a transit role for the country through all of its history.

From being a contact zone between the Mesoamerican and Andean cultures, before the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th Century, what is now Panama became a colony of the Spanish Empire, serving as a route for trade between the Spanish mainland and its colonies.

In 1821, Panama became independent from Spain and joined other former Spanish colonies in a state named Gran Colombia. Soon, this political entity dissolved into three states: Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. Panama, however, remained under Colombian control. During the middle of the 19th Century, the first transcontinental railroad was built in Panama, and the country reinforced, once again, its role as a transit point.

In 1903, Panama separated from Colombia with the help of the United States of America, an emerging power at the time, who was interested in building a canal through Panama. This goal was achieved in 1914. However, it resulted in the occupation, by the USA, of a narrow strip of land in the middle of Panama, needed for the operation and defense of the canal. It was not until late 1999 when the USA returned control of this area, formerly known as Canal Zone, to Panama.

This colorful history has made Panama a multiracial and multicultural country. In an area of only 75420 square kilometers and among a population of only 3.6 million [1], Panama has a majority of people of mixed Amerindian, Spanish and African descents with predominantly Latin American cultural traits such as the Spanish language and the Catholic religion. In addition to this mainstream population, there are seven surviving indigenous groups: The Kuna, Ngabe, Bugle, Embera, Wounan, Naso and Bri-bri. Also, there are two distinct Black groups: The Afro-colonials, who are descendants of the Africans slaves brought in during colonial times, and the Afro-antilleans, who arrived from the British and French Antilles for the building of the Panama Canal [2]. The ethnic mix of Panama is completed by sizable populations of Chinese, USA expatriates, recent Spanish immigrants, Italians, Greeks, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, Indians, Arabs, Eastern Europeans and other Latin Americans.

All the mentioned groups have contributed to the richness of Panamanian cultural heritage, which is the research focus of PanamaTipico.com.

2 What's PanamaTipico.com?

PanamaTipico.com [3] is a grassroots, web-based, independent initiative that pursues objectives such as researching, digitally preserving, publishing and teaching about Panama's rich cultural heritage. The website is a private project that aims to be profitable as a cultural enterprise, while filling the need for credible information in the web about Panamanian culture. A distinctive characteristic of PanamaTipico.com is that the website is not affiliated with any preexisting organization or any traditional media outfit. It was created on the web in 2001 and thus, is a born digital project, which makes it an innovative development in Panama.



Fig. 1. A screenshot of PanamaTipico.com

2.1 Resources Offered

The core resources offered by PanamaTipico.com are its three subdomains. These are frequently updated sections featuring articles and pictures. The first one, titled “Folklore”, deals with topics such as handicrafts, cuisine and traditional attire. The second subdomain, “Turismo”, offers content related to towns, museums, national parks and other cultural tourism attractions. The third subdomain, named “Fiestas”, publishes notes about traditional celebrations such as folk festivals, fairs and patron saint’s festivities held all over Panama. Content is written in Spanish, the official language of Panama, and in English, in order to attract a broader, more international audience.

Extra resources include special sections such as an online store and a discussion forum, in addition to external resources such as a radio show, a Facebook page and a Twitter account.

2.2 Technology and People behind the Website

The technology basis for PanamaTipico.com is a typical open-source LAMP platform, where Linux is the operating system running in the server provided by a hosting company. The webserver used is Apache. The database used for storing all information in the site is MySQL. The scripting language used in the page is PHP. The website design uses HTML, CSS and Javascript.

The website’s team is made up of volunteers who can only dedicate a few hours weekly to the operation of the site. There is a webmaster and director who takes care of all technical aspects and determines the content to be published. Also, at any given month, there is an average of three contributors who provide content for the website.

3 Challenges Confronted by the Project

3.1 Initial Internet Access Issues

The first challenge confronted by PanamaTipico.com was the novelty of the web in Panama. The site was created in early 2001, barely four years after commercial internet access became available in the country. At that time, a very small percentage of the population owned a personal computer with internet access. This meant the growth of the website’s audience was very slow.

In this challenging environment, tactics employed for increasing the audience included the distribution of flyers advertising the site at traditional festivals. Agreements were made with several internet cafes to have the website be the starting page at their computer browsers. After a few months online, the site attracted the interest of several folk music groups who, in exchange of being featured in the site, announced the portal’s URL in their live events and radio shows. All these tactics helped create awareness of PanamaTipico.com in the early years of its existence. However, their impact was limited because a great percentage of Panamanians still did not have frequent access to the internet. Ultimately, the passing of the years solved this problem.

3.2 Cultural Factors Working against Panamanian Heritage

One of the consequences of Panama being a transit zone is that it is prone to cultural globalization. Generally speaking, many Panamanians belonging to the US Americanized upper and middle urban classes do not have a strong appreciation for Panamanian heritage. They tend to adopt foreign cultural patterns easily and, since they have a disproportioned influence in national media, businesses and politics, their views and preferences strongly influence the rest of the population. This results in a weak cultural identity for many Panamanians.

Against this discouraging background, one of the actions taken by the website included the creation of a discussion board where older visitors could share their memories and anecdotes with the rest of the audience. This resulted in the formation of a strong virtual community. Eventually, this forum became a place where students could ask members for help with their folklore-related homework. This helped fuel the growth of the website's audience, especially with younger visitors who could acquire a new appreciation for Panamanian cultural heritage.

3.3 Lack of Personnel, Especially with Formal Cultural Heritage Training

During the early stages of PanamaTipico.com, neither the founder nor any of the people involved in the project, had any formal training in cultural heritage. Also, despite Panama being a small country, its cultural diversity required people with enough knowledge of different regions in order to publish credible and balanced content. Since there were no funds to recruit personnel, this became a significant problem.

The way this challenge was addressed was through a supervised crowdsourcing. Since it was impossible for the founder to write credible articles about cultural features from all regions of Panama, the website was opened for all visitors to contribute material related to their hometowns and cultural backgrounds. However, since PanamaTipico.com was intended as an educational resource that required quality content, all contributions needed to pass a factual verification process before being published. This was achieved, again, with the help of the community members who were more than happy to debate all content before, and even after, publication.

Eventually, seasoned heritage researchers and professionals, who did not have the technical know-how for publishing online, were attracted to PanamaTipico.com and became frequent contributors, augmenting the reputation of the website.

3.4 Scarcity of Funds and Sponsors

The biggest challenge confronted by PanamaTipico.com is the lack of funds to undertake a more intensive research activity. Due to the perception of cultural heritage as something that is not interesting to masses of consumers, Panamanian cultural initiatives have always operated in a sponsor-deprived environment. An exception in this respect is provided by the alcoholic beverages industry, which traditionally has been the main sponsor for heritage related activities in Panama such as country fairs and folk festivals. However, due to the profile of PanamaTipico.com as a website friendly

to younger audiences, the contacting of prospective sponsors in the alcoholic beverage industry presents an ethical dilemma.

In addition to the bleak prospects of securing private sponsors, cultural heritage projects such as PanamaTipico.com face a lack of interest by government institutions and universities. Usually, fund allocation for cultural projects are assigned a very low priority by the government, resulting in the limitation of funds available for sponsoring cultural activities. Even universities, despite their educational mission, have been unwilling or unable to pledge any funding to conduct collaborative research projects with PanamaTipico.com.

One of the measures taken to acquire the necessary research funding has been the recruitment of micro sponsors. These are usually community groups who organize folk festivals, handicraft makers, traditional music and dance groups, restaurants and hotels. Affordable advertising packages have been prepared for these micro sponsors so they are able to contribute to the sustainability of the website while getting valuable exposure in their target market.

Another way of getting funds has been the operation of PanamaTipico.com's online store. This section of the website sells traditional music CDs, books on folklore, and handicraft. Most of the customers of this online store are Panamanian exiles and foreigners interested in Panama's culture.

The most important funding mechanism for PanamaTipico.com has been the consultant services offered by the staff in activities such as cultural research, folklore-related courses, speaking appearances, event organization, e-commerce and e-marketing. The offering of these services was not initially planned. It was a result of the visibility of the website, the respect it has earned among relevant institutions in Panama and the frequent requests by visitors.

4 Results and Impact

Despite the lack of resources and the initial amateur character of PanamaTipico.com, the project has had a significant impact in Panama and beyond. A few examples include:

An ever-growing and engaged audience averaging 1500 daily visitors. Some of these visitors are also content contributors or micro providers of funds for the operation of the website. A significant portion of this audience is comprised of Panamanian citizens living overseas. They use the website as a tool to keep in touch with their heritage.

Professional appreciation for the cultural and scientific contributions of the project has been evidenced by many communications, citations and invitations to speak at conferences received from institutions such as University of Panama, National Center for Folklore Studies, National Institute for the Study of Ethnic Traditions, and others. In 2010, the website received a particularly important invitation to participate in an intangible cultural heritage workshop organized by UNESCO.

PanamaTipico.com has participated in several international research projects. One of them was the recording of songs belonging to many subgenres of Panamanian mu-

sic by Michael Hornstein, from Germany, in behalf of Sonoton music library [4]. Also, assistance was provided to Columbia University Ph.D. candidate Melissa Gonzalez, who conducted fieldwork on the traditional music scene in Panama [5].

Since 2011, the website has been the subject of several presentations at international conferences such as Digital Strategies for Heritage (Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2011) [6], High-Tech Heritage (Amherst, MA, USA, 2012) [7], and Museums and the Web (Portland, OR, USA, 2013) [8].

5 Conclusions

In the absence of a conducive environment for cultural initiatives, a motivated group of individuals has been able to offer an important online space for the discussion of Panamanian cultural heritage. Despite the lack of funding and initial formal experience in cultural heritage, the survival and growth of PanamaTipico.com up to this point has been possible due to the openness of the project to external contributions and the ability to take advantages of the opportunities as they presented themselves.

However, for the website to truly expand beyond its current role into a formal research and preservation institution, a sustainable solution to the funding issues needs to be found. Some options being considered at the moment are the creation of online applications such as educational games for increasing the audience of the website, in order to make it more valuable as an advertising channel. Another option is the creation of a premium section offering exclusive content for a monthly subscription fee.

In any case, it will be crucial for PanamaTipico.com to find a solution to the funding issues if the website is to remain an innovative force in preserving Panama's cultural heritage.

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