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Jackie Mahi-Erickson, left, Kalei Napuelua and Joanne Hao work on laptop computers for a project to transcribe archived Hawaiian-language newspapers for inclusion on the Internet.

New technology used to transcribe old pages

Hawaiian-language newspapers are typed for the Internet

By Sarah Zoellick
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Centuries ago, monks and scribes gathered in stone buildings to hand-write copies of books by candlelight. On Monday a group of volunteers dedicated to preserving written Hawaiian history began a similar task — this time using wireless Internet and laptop computers set up on the grounds of Iolani Palace.

The 'Ike Ku'oko'a Initiative began at the palace Monday afternoon, when volunteers were invited to register to help transcribe 60,000 pages of Hawaiian-language newspapers printed pre-statehood to be archived on the Internet.

The pages of the newspapers — some from as far back as 1834 — have been scanned in, but “you can't search a digital image,” said Puakea Nogelmeier, a Hawaiian-language profes-

sor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and the executive director of Awaiaulu, the nonprofit group that spearheaded the initiative. “This (transcribing) makes it searchable.”

Nogelmeier said about 100 Hawaiian-language newspapers were published between 1834 and 1948, creating 125,000 to 150,000 newspaper pages that chronicle island life.

What remains of those documents are the 60,000 pages being typed by volunteers. When they are finished, Nogelmeier estimated, the output will amount to 1.5 million typed pages.

“It's like a treasure trove,” said Toni Bissen, executive director of the Pu'a Foundation, a sponsor of the initiative. “It's in their own words. ... It brings to life our people.”

Nogelmeier said transcribing the pages will shed light on what Hawaiians were thinking and reporting on during the kingdom, constitutional monarchy, republic and territorial periods.

“This is what the Hawaiians were saying to them-

HOW TO HELP

To become a volunteer transcriber for the 'Ike Ku'oko'a Initiative, register at www.awaiaulu.org.

selves,” he said. “It's for Hawaiians but it's for everybody.”

About 2 percent of the archives has been transcribed and translated for use by researchers, Nogelmeier said.

“The rest has been dormant; 98 percent of this is just laying there because it's just too hard to get to.”

Using volunteer typists is necessary because funding for a Bishop Museum project ran out, and no computer software program is precise enough to handle the Hawaiian language, said Kai Sai-Dudoit, outreach program manager. The Hawaiian alphabet has eight consonants, five vowels and diacritical marks like the okina.

“One letter off and it's a totally different word,” Sai-Dudoit said.

Sai-Dudoit said it would

take about \$2.1 million to transcribe the pages without volunteers.

In the 1970s, Nogelmeier said, predictions were that the Hawaiian language would be dead in 10 years.

“Now, 40 years later, it's been pulled back from the brink,” he said.

“This (project) links the revitalization of today to the language of before,” he said. “Otherwise it's really easy to make a new language.”

The initiative hopes to draw 3,000 volunteers to complete the job by July 31, but Sai-Dudoit said there has been so much interest already — at least 300 people signed up Monday in the first hour of the launch event — that it might be done sooner.

“It's safe to say this has gone viral,” Sai-Dudoit said.

People interested in transcribing do not need to speak Hawaiian because they won't be translating. They will be sent digital images of pages and will transcribe them in text documents.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.