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Project Report



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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Research team	5
Background.....	5
Objectives	6
Methodology.....	6
Findings.....	7
Conclusions.....	8
Products.....	9

Executive Summary

The memory sector has been digitising archival material for over 20 years, increasing the availability of information and thereby enhancing access for communities who are unable to make contact with the physical archives. In recent years, with online accessibility now viewed as the default position by the wider community, and with information being used in various ways across digital platforms, the debates within the memory sector have started shifting from questions about what is digitised and therefore made accessible, to questions about how those digitised archives are being used.

At the same time, a tight global fiscal environment has meant that memory institutions increasingly have to demonstrate their impact on, and the value they deliver to, the communities they serve. In order to do this, there has to be a shift in thinking beyond merely providing access, to assessing impacts. Accordingly, the focus of this study has been to uncover narratives on how and why digitised collections are being used, using te reo Māori collections as a case study.

An online survey was developed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to build up a picture of the use of digitised te reo collections by primary users, including how they share the collections with others. Additionally, while previous studies have focused on the institution, we desired a user-focus, therefore it was important for us to gather user narratives in order to reflect the concerns of users rather than institutions.

The project found that relationships between users and archival institutions is influenced by the quality, accessibility and usability of collections. Because they are able to be shared easily with whānau, hapū, iwi and other networks, digitised te reo collections have contributed to the dissemination and sustenance of mātauranga Māori. Narratives supplied by survey respondents emphasised the importance of sharing knowledge with others and indicated a level of trust in both digitised reproductions and in the institutions who act as guardians of those collections.

The Impact of Access to Trusted Digitised Archives of Indigenous Languages: Case Study of Te Reo Maori

Research team

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Background

Use and reuse of online archival collections is a contested issue. There are a range of cultural, social and legislative frameworks which often bring conflicting expectations to debates on what libraries, archives, museums should or should not allow to happen to the archival collections they manage. In recent years, the debates and tensions have shifted from questioning what is digitized and accessible via the online archive, to questions of who is doing what to online digitized archives, what impact is it having, and the responsibilities of the institution in mediating and protecting its role as trusted guardian of documentary heritage. This tension is heightened and more complex when applied to online access to and use of digital indigenous knowledge collections.

In New Zealand, the National Library of New Zealand has led developments to digitize and provide access to taonga Maori¹ and matauranga Maori (Maori knowledge) for some time. In recent years, the tension between the Library being seen as a trusted guardian and protector of taonga works and matauranga Maori, an enabler of free and open access and use of cultural heritage, and the promoter of the benefits and impacts of open digital archives, has created challenges for selling the value proposition of the Library as a trusted repository for indigenous knowledge.

Few things represent matauranga Maori more than the language itself - Te Reo Maori. New Zealand institutions have had key Te Reo Maori archives (including 19th century newspapers and letters in Maori) available online for a number of years. This provides an excellent opportunity for research to understand the impact that these online resources have in sustaining, supporting and strengthening Maori culture and identity.

Data and narrative about the impact of digitized Te Reo Maori archives will enable the National Library of New Zealand to better understand and promote its place as a trusted repository of indigenous knowledge in the digital age, and establish a methodology for more broadly understanding trust issues relating to digital matauranga Maori. Research findings will contribute to understanding trust issues in other indigenous knowledge paradigms.

Objectives

The objective of this research project was to understand the impacts of digitised Te Reo Māori archival collections and to explore issues relating to trust of digitised information from the perspective of indigenous communities

Methodology

An online survey was developed using Qualtrics and data collected from 26 April through to 6 May 2016. The survey comprised 35 questions, covering seven main areas:

1. The demography of respondents
2. Types of digitised te reo collections used by respondents
3. Specific collections and providers
4. Use outcomes of digitised te reo collections
5. Sharing collections
6. Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge)
7. Digitised versus original collections.

Questions were workshoped by the project team to strike a balance between introducing respondents to impacts and gaining understanding of user priorities and their opinions of digitised te reo archival collections. While simple multiple choice questions were used to introduce topics and bridge gaps in the survey flow, our survey design prioritised the seeking of narrative responses. Thus, open-ended questions were used throughout the survey.

As a study that concerns te reo and mātauranga Māori, we incorporated questions on particular to te reo and Māori concepts. This included questions about the effects of digitisation on wairua and how influential digitisation is on the dissemination of mātauranga Māori.

Respondents were sourced through research, academic and iwi networks. We also asked our initial group of contacts to extend the invitation to those they thought would be interested in the survey.

Once the survey closed, results and data from multiple choice or selection questions were automatically collated by the Qualtrics platform into reports, graphs and tables. Additional to these set questions conducive to automated tabling, the survey drew narratives from respondents that required manual collation. Therefore, a number of results were collated and constructed into our own criteria and groupings, derived from respondent answers. Furthermore, because of the narrative nature of the survey, many questions were optional for respondents to answer, so rather than respondent numbers remaining the same throughout the survey, numbers varied and were generally less toward its conclusion.

For indigenous communities, the stigma of being ‘the other’ in research presents an obstacle to researchers looking to involve themselves in indigenous knowledge acquisition. Yet, through respectful means, and genuine collaboration, more dynamic and trusted research can eventuate.

We received a number of emails from respondents while the survey was live to let us know they had invited others within their networks to participate in the survey, to inform us of any problems they had accessing the survey, and also words of encouragement. This type of unprompted dialogue shows a level of interest not often experienced through online surveys.

A number of respondents answered in te reo as is expected for a study concerning te reo resources. These responses were translated by a team member.

Findings

A total of 83 responses were received. There was strong evidence that digitisation of te reo Māori archives provides a significant societal impact by supporting a sharing and relationship system among communities and whanau (family). There were indications that a significant proportion of the sharing of digital te reo Māori archives happens offline, rather than through online channels like email and social networks. These relationships exist well beyond the bounds of the access interactions between the memory institution and their customer, and therefore beyond the traditional mechanisms of measuring and reporting on digitisation.

- Ninety-five percent of respondents shared the digital archives they found
- Sixty percent of those shared archives were shared again by the recipient
- Sixty-seven percent liked being able to share the collection with friends & whanau
- Twenty-two of respondents sourced their digital archives from a friend
- Seventy-six percent have used digital collections received offline
- Twenty-five percent of respondents stated they had added digital archives to an iwi repository
- Throughout the survey, respondents cited a sense of obligation to whanau and community members to share information.

Survey questions asked about the extent to which the digitisation process, and digital access and use activities affects the wairua (spirit or life force) and mana (power and prestige) of information and te reo. Generally, accessibility and ease of sharing outweighed concerns over adverse effects on wairua, with many respondents supporting open sharable, usable digital archives, while still providing caveats on that position.

- Ninety-three percent of respondents felt that the digital medium is appropriate for transferring te reo and mātauranga Māori
- Ninety-three percent of respondents thought digitisation could help improve engagement with mātauranga Māori in New Zealand
- Over 80% of respondents felt more collections should be digitised, or that those collections partially digitised should be digitised in their entirety.
- Forty-four percent of respondents thought digitisation did not affect wairua, with 37% stating it did affect the wairua (though many respondents felt greater access outweighed this), while 11% thought effects on wairua depended on the information being conveyed.
- There are a complicated set of obligations and drivers to both share, use, and protect archives at the same time. Non-Western views of the use of cultural heritage are increasingly discussed within the memory sector, but it is not a well researched topic. This research only contributes a small amount to the understanding. More work is required to understand the role the wairua plays with the management and use of te reo Māori digital archives.

There was evidence that use of digitised te reo Māori archives supports the intended outcomes of several key government strategies. The emphasis on understanding the impact of digitised archives to people and communities enables public institutions to draw on evidence and narrative to better tell their value proposition to their customers, stakeholders, senior leaders, and funders.

- Sixty-five percent of respondents used digital te reo Māori collections for language revitalisation initiatives
- Sixty-seven percent of respondents liked being able to share the collection with friends & whanau, which supports the Māori Language Strategy's result area of increasing the use of Maori language among whanau Maori & other New Zealanders, especially in the home
- Twenty-two percent of respondents experienced an outcome of being able to contribute to a Treaty of Waitangi settlement process

Conclusions

Responses were largely positive about digitised te reo collections, even after weighing up cultural impacts such as the effects on wairua of digitisation and after comparisons with other information formats including original documents. This was indicated by desires for more te reo collections to be digitised and current digitised collections to be reproduced in their entirety.

This survey has helped us to both understand impacts of digital te reo collections and also improved our grasp on impact assessment methodology. Using narrative-style questioning, having a commitment to understanding impact through long-term projects, and focusing on users rather than institutions has been important to our impact assessment. Narrative enables participants to drive answers and provides truer user impacts.

Whakawhanaungatanga is a term that encompasses relationships which we have used to signal a major impact of the survey. Greater access via digitisation fosters relationships and connections via acts of sharing collections within whānau, hapū, iwi and other networks. Collections are easily disseminated to others through web links, USB sticks, or within a wānanga context. Being able to share and preserve information for future generations was important to respondents and prompts collection providers to be aware of this implication of digitisation.

We asked respondents about relationships with providers and their use of collections, and gained information about levels of trust in providers and digitised collections. Many respondents found their relationship with providers was enhanced due to interactions with digitised te reo collections, as well as becoming more aware of what information providers housed.

As a mechanism for understanding impact, this research found connections between the digitisation activities of the memory sector with three macro outcomes government – The Māori Language Strategy, The treaty of Waitangi Settlement process, and the social cohesion pillar of the Higher Living Standards Framework. These connections provide a line of sight from the digitisation activities of the memory sector and the macro strategies of the New Zealand government, and provide an opportunity for the sector to change how it articulates the value of digitisation in New Zealand.

Further research should include interviews and focus groups. Having a number of data sets and a long-term trajectory cements a commitment to understanding impacts, particularly as impacts change or are validated over time. This project has synergies with other studies currently underway internationally investigating digitised collections and information management in indigenous contexts. Locally, the focus on Māori language strategies of government departments and iwi organisations signals that this project is a timely one. Not only can this project feed important information into te reo strategies, but it can also inform impact assessment throughout academia and the information management sector.

Products

The complete report of findings, together with a literature review, is available online at https://interparestrust.org/assets/public/dissemination/Korerokiteareport_final.pdf