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The future is in the past: Creating an Indigenous Information Theory

Research-in-progress

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between Indigenous information and knowledge on the Information disciplines in three parts. Part one, describes the impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples. Part two discusses the value of Indigenous knowledge and why it should be included in the curricula of the Information disciplines (Information Studies, Information Management & Information Systems). Finally, in part three, the author presents Indigenous Information theory to demonstrate how Indigenous information contributes to our understanding of ways of knowing. The paper uses examples that are reflective of Māori perspectives, and the terms information and knowledge are used interchangeably as in Indigenous knowledge systems they are not always distinguished from each other.

Keywords. Indigenous information, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous Information theory, Māori,
1 Introduction -

This paper discusses the relationship between Indigenous information and knowledge on the Information disciplines in three parts. Part one, describes the impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples. Part two discusses the value of Indigenous knowledge and why it should be included in the curricula of the Information disciplines (Information Studies, Information Management & Information Systems). Finally, in part three, the author presents Indigenous Information theory to demonstrate how Indigenous information contributes to our understanding of ways of knowing. The paper uses examples that are reflective of Māori perspectives, and the terms information and knowledge are used interchangeably as in Indigenous knowledge systems they are not always distinguished from each other.

Impact of Colonisation on Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples are identified as the original inhabitants of a country. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that there are more than 476 million Indigenous peoples worldwide, spread across 90 countries and represent 6.2% of the world’s total population (UNDP, n.d.). It is estimated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have occupied the country now known as Australia for more than 40,000 years. The 2016 Australian census statistics revealed that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was 798,365 or 3.3% of Australia’s total population. In New Zealand, archaeological and traditional knowledge sources place first Māori settlement at between 800-1000 years ago. New Zealand’s 2018 census (Stats NZ, n.d.) revealed that Māori population figures numbered 775,856 or 16.7% of New Zealand’s total population. While there are vast differences between the occupation periods of the two countries, the Indigenous peoples of both have had similar experiences since colonisation and settlement by the British in the 18th (Australia) and 19th (New Zealand) centuries.

Although the major goal of the British was to establish new colonies in both countries including all the social, economic and bureaucratic structures required to sustain and develop them for the needs of the new settlers and the good of the British Empire, this failed to recognize the rights of the Indigenous peoples. In contrast to their colonisers, the Indigenous peoples of both countries had knowledge systems that were oral by nature, but also inclusive of art forms, naming devices and ceremonial activities (music, dance, incantations). The desire to civilise and assimilate Indigenous peoples led to policies and practices that suppressed traditional beliefs, values, customs, languages, and knowledge systems. This paper is too brief in nature to outline in detail how this was managed in the respective countries, but in short it involved the use of religion, education, deception, law and violence (mainly military in nature) in varying degrees to secure the dominance of the new settlers over the Indigenous peoples.

A fascination with Indigenous lifestyles, customs and beliefs, led to the collection of stories, histories and observation of Indigenous peoples by ethnologists and historians, which were then subjected to analysis and interpretation based on their own ideologies and worldviews. In New Zealand these ‘scholars’ (Smith, 1898, Tregear, 1885, Macmillan Brown, 1907) theories and interpretations led to misrepresentation, inaccuracies and generalizations about Māori becoming part of the accepted historical narrative.

Furthermore, as an act of ‘generosity’ to ensure that these ‘dying’ populations would be remembered they collected artefacts, manuscripts and other culturally important items and entombed them in museums, libraries, galleries and other places. Indigenous knowledge was seen as only being of historic interest, and not worthy of inclusion in furthering the development of the world.

Beyond all expectations Indigenous peoples despite having undergone severe trauma through the colonisation and assimilation processes have continued to survive and grow. However, in the process of doing so, Indigenous knowledge and content continued to be excluded from the academy. Repeated demands for inclusion in academic programmes and research has been classified as the indigenous problem (Smith, 2021). Smith contends that prior to contact with the Western world, there was no ‘Indigenous Problem’, and that the ‘problem’ was an invention and overhang of colonisation and assimilationist policies that believed that Indigenous peoples required changing, so they could actively participate in civilised society. These intentions assumed that Western forms of knowledge were superior to those of Indigenous peoples, which were described as primitive.

The notion of Western superiority is a theme that has continued to have a dominant impact on academic research, teaching and scholarship, where Indigenous knowledge has been dismissed as irrelevant to understanding of the theoretical basis of disciplines. This was most recently debated in New Zealand where seven senior academics from the University of Auckland penned a letter questioning what mātauranga Māori could contribute to the research and teaching of science at schools and universities.
Responses to this letter were swift and mostly dismissive of the views of the letter writers, but it did demonstrate the tension that still exists in academia about the incorporation of worldviews other than those from a Western perspective. Stewart (2021) believes that the seven professors were highly qualified and experienced in their own disciplines but were making judgemental claims about Māori knowledge that were well outside their level of understanding of the complexity of its composition as a knowledge system.

Within academia, over the last 25 years there has been a move by Indigenous scholars and their allies to decolonise or indigenise the disciplines within the academy. Articles, chapters and entire books (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004, Armstrong, 2013, Boxer, 2008, Phillips, 2011, Sinha, 1997 Kim, Yang & Hwang, 2006, Battiste, 2013, Lonetree, 2012, Gray, Coates, Yellowbird & Hetherington, 2013, Hiddleston, 2014, Land, 2015, McLaren, 2017, Linklater, 2014) have advocated for curricula to be reviewed by either incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems or giving them equal status with their Western equivalents. Currently, most of the disciplines that contribute to our knowledge of the structure of information and the influence it has on other disciplines and our understanding of the world have not yet undergone similar processes of reflection on the contribution of Indigenous information. The exception to this is information studies, where Indigenous scholars have explored these issues (Lilley, 2021, Thorpe, 2019, Roy, 2015). I believe that Indigenous information has not been deliberately excluded from the information disciplines, I think it is more of a case that it has not been considered by those who have crafted previous theoretical approaches.

2 The value of Indigenous knowledge

This paper has so far looked at how Indigenous knowledge systems have been transformed and suppressed through colonisation and assimilation. Before going on to define and describe the concept of an Indigenous information theory, it is necessary to look at the benefits and the contribution that an increased Indigenous presence in the Information disciplines would make. This will be addressed in a Mātauranga Māori context.

In an age where there is an increased interest in diversifying the workforce and leadership teams, we are reminded for the need to be more inclusive of genders, sexual orientation, ethnicities and those with a disability. However, the drive for diversity often overshadows and further marginalises Indigenous peoples, particularly in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America where Indigenous populations are significantly outnumbered by other ethnic groups. Even in New Zealand where Māori are just under 17% of New Zealand’s population of 5 Million, unofficial figures place their number in the Information systems area at approximately 5.6% of the workforce (Te Puni Kokiri, 2019).

In addition to the technical abilities and experiences expected of the workforce, Indigenous peoples can contribute through using their cultural skills, linguistic abilities, values and beliefs to assist in transforming institutions, organisations and systems to be more cognisant of the needs of Indigenous people. These needs are particularly important as the social, cultural and economic bases of Indigenous communities are growing significantly in the wake of reconciliation activities in previously colonised countries. In New Zealand, this is represented by the fast growth of the ‘Māori economy’, which is now valued at $68.6 billion (Reserve Bank of New Zealand, 2021). To meet the demand from this sector for information systems and other associated information products, there will be an increasing need for focused services and solutions that incorporate Indigenous approaches. Having staff with expertise in this area will assist in designing solutions that meet these needs. These solutions could include systems designed to be inclusive of cultural values, linguistically appropriate (using Indigenous languages) and respective of any restrictions that exist within belief systems. Having Indigenous peoples represented in leadership teams would help to facilitate strong relationships between the organisation and Indigenous clients. However, the incorporation of Indigenous elements and the cultural expectations associated with these could not solely rest on the shoulders of Indigenous employees and leaders, it would also require a strong commitment from other members of the organisation. This commitment would involve staff at all levels of the organisation being upskilled and educated about the value of Indigenous information/knowledge, culture, beliefs and values. This would not require these individuals to divest themselves of their own values and beliefs, but to instead know how these might interact with their Indigenous equivalents and to know how to act appropriately when engaging with Indigenous peoples. This would enable them to work with Indigenous colleagues to identify appropriate solutions for their Indigenous clients.
2.1.1 Information Science curriculum requirements

Greater awareness and specific academic content should also be incorporated into qualifications in the information disciplines. This content should be designed to be inclusive of values, beliefs and other cultural characteristics and Indigenous examples should be included amongst case studies used and opportunities provided to complete assessment tasks on Indigenous topics. Including Indigenous issues in the broader information sciences curricula would better equip graduates to work effectively with Indigenous colleagues and on Indigenous focused projects.

Critical to developing this understanding is the need to focus on the complexity of Indigenous information and to comprehend that these knowledge systems they belong to are not new or imagined. For example, Mātauranga Māori has evolved over many centuries, as iwi and hapū adapted to the environment in which they lived in. Although Māori are the original inhabitants of New Zealand, they migrated from Eastern Polynesia approximately 1000 years ago (Howe, 2003). Those who are familiar with the traditional migratory patterns of Polynesians will be aware of their gradual migration across the Pacific. Movement from one place to the next required the migrants to draw on their existing knowledge to establish themselves and to use information seeking abilities to identify specific adjustments required to successfully live in this new environment (Anderson, Binney & Harris, 2015). Thus, traditional knowledge was an important factor in the adjustments required and formed the foundation of the new information that enabled the alteration to be made.

In the modern age Indigenous communities continue to evolve, with their information environment consisting of traditional and contemporary applications of knowledge. This can be illustrated through the example of whakapapa (genealogy). Whakapapa is more than just articulating descent lines like in Western genealogical charts, although it is important to understand descent lines in Māori society, the complexity comes through knowing how the relationships between one iwi and another are constructed and how this is represented within a wider knowledge context (Mead, 2006) Within Māori culture, whakapapa is treated as being highly personal and is often considered tapū (sacred), as it is essence of an individual’s identity. In traditional times knowledge of these relationships and access to this information was restricted to the rangatira (chiefs) and tohunga (spiritual experts) (Walker, 2004). In a contemporary sense, whakapapa serves an important role as a qualifier for membership of hapū and iwi, but more importantly it forms a quintessential part of an individual’s identity as Māori. The knowledge of relationships is still critical to understanding the connections between individuals, but this now lies in the hands of the individual and is considered the property of those that it identifies. The information that lies within the whakapapa places it at the heart of mātauranga Māori due to its ability to define the relationships between all living things and the environment that surrounds them (Barlow, 1991, Marsden, 2003). As such it provides an Indigenous ontological device to measure time, order knowledge and to explain how the many layers of knowledge define each other. Trying to make sense of the complexity of this in a context that does not use a Māori lens will often mean that the intricacies of this knowledge will not be fully realised. This is why Indigenous (Māori) information perspectives and theory is required.

3 Indigenous Information Theory

This paper will now focus on the development of an Indigenous Information theory informed by Indigenous worldviews and culture.

Specific theories related to the inter-relationship between Indigenous peoples and information are currently lacking. The proposed theory outlined here is therefore formative in nature. Its development is influenced by critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School which demands that it explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2021). Other scholarship that has influenced this has been Indigenous standpoint theory (Foley, 2006, Nakata, 2007) and the literature on decolonising research methodologies (Smith, 2021, Kovach, 2009, Archibald, Lee-Morgan and De Santolo, 2019). There are obvious overlaps between the work of these authors and the theory that is presented here, as all of the authors are Indigenous and have identified Indigenous approaches to advance Indigenous outcomes.

Indigenous information theory recognises that Indigenous knowledge systems are living and evolving and that when traditional knowledge is being referred to, it is an acknowledgement that the past is just as important as contemporary Indigenous discoveries. Therefore, the terms information and knowledge are used interchangeably, recognising that information becomes knowledge, and knowledge is drawn on for information.
Indigenous Information theory recognises that all Indigenous peoples have undergone a form of colonisation and other major social, economic and political changes, which have impacted adversely on knowledge of traditional information and cultural practices and aims to restore the legitimacy of these. Indigenous Information theory requires a re-think of Indigenous information that already exists to ensure that it is authentic.

Indigenous information theory recognises that all Indigenous peoples have their own information knowledge systems that are unique to their people. Rather than being generalised through a collective label (e.g. Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Māori), Indigenous peoples are identified by the clan, kin, mob, hapū (subtribe), or Iwi (tribe) that are affiliated with. Each of these groups has their own ways of knowing, information practices and histories that are a cornerstone of their identity. Recognition of these differences are critical for non-Indigenous scholars and individuals to comprehend. Any overlaps in these practices between one Indigenous group to the next should not be misinterpreted as a trend or a generalisation that can be applied to all. Critical to understanding this is to view Indigenous information and knowledge through a lens that is steeped in the values, beliefs and protocols of the Indigenous peoples it belongs to. Awareness of this is central to recognising that Indigenous information analysed through a non-Indigenous lens will typically result in misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the information. Therefore, Indigenous information theory recognises that the processing, interpretation and application of information should be by ‘Indigenous with Indigenous for Indigenous’. This requires the primary benefit of Indigenous information to be the Indigenous community it belongs to before it is applied in other contexts. Who has access to Indigenous information should be determined by the community and is in keeping with maintaining the integrity and sanctity of information as defined by protocols that are critical to the identity and structure of social and intellectual boundaries within their group. This prevents information being misused, misappropriated or exploited by those who are not entitled to access this information. This is particularly important when an Indigenous community collaborates with ‘outsiders’. Although the outsiders might make a significant contribution to any project this should be on the understanding that they might not have any ‘rights’ to the information generated by the collaboration.

Indigenous information theory understands that Indigenous information is context specific to the Indigenous group it belongs to. This means that one form of Indigenous information does not denote all others. This acknowledges the uniqueness of each Indigenous group and the validation of the information to that group at that particular time.

Indigenous information theory recognises that an Indigenous group needs to identify a process of revisiting Information/knowledge that is associated with it to assess its authenticity and to deconstruct items that have been misconstrued or identified as misinformation. This includes a strategy to disseminate appropriate information to correct how they have been misrepresented in wider society.

The final component of the theory is the recognition that creation of new information is not dependent on the use of traditional indigenous methods. This is an acknowledgement of the impact that colonisation and new technologies have had on Indigenous peoples. Using modern tools in a manner that empowers Indigenous peoples to strengthen and further develop their Information structures is not at odds with Indigenous beliefs or values.

4 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Indigenous Information (knowledge) issues are an area that need more attention in the wider Information disciplines and the scholarship associated with it. It has proven that Indigenous information differs to Western forms of information (knowledge) and that in order to understand its complexities, there is a need to position it a theoretical model that is Indigenous centred and able to be adapted for the needs of any Indigenous community that wishes to apply it to their Information or knowledge system. The theory that has been presented should be considered as a work in progress and is likely to evolve from its first iteration in this paper.
5 References


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