Building virtual language communities through social media – because we don't live the village life anymore

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of social media in creating, developing, and sustaining virtual language communities to aid in the revitalisation efforts of Indigenous language groups who are struggling to sustain physical language communities. The Māori language faces a major challenge in the form of globalisation, which has been likened to colonisation in terms of the resulting homogenisation and language dominance (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2012). The majority of Māori live outside of their tribal regions residing in urban centres across New Zealand. Furthermore, there is a growing Māori diaspora overseas, particularly in Australia. To survive, a language must survive in the home (Fishman, 1991). However, traditional bastions of the Māori language, such as small rural Māori communities, now have unprecedented English language content present as a direct result of digital technology. Whilst major steps have been taken to save the language, like many Indigenous languages the Māori language, remains endangered (Moseley, 2010). In order to survive, endangered languages must begin to inhabit traditionally English dominated spaces, particularly digital spaces, thereby increasing the number of opportunities for speakers of the language to hear, use and 'see' the language. That is, normalising the Māori language in digital spaces.

Introduction

What does it mean to build a virtual language community? Using the Māori language as an example, this paper will attempt to answer this question by showing examples of social media being used to build, maintain, and strengthen Māori speaking communities. For many years now, the focus of the language revitalisation movement has been to teach the Māori language to as many people as possible in order to give birth to a new critical mass of speakers of te reo Māori. However, in the last few years what we have started to see is that, when it comes time for students of te reo Māori to step out of the classroom, they find they have no one to talk to. Eventually, this leads to a weakening of their language development. The question then becomes, when the birds are ready to leave the nest, 'Where do they go to find other birds who sing the same song?' This highlights the important role social media is playing in building virtual language communities.

As my title suggests, 'We don't live the village life anymore', and I make this statement on purpose. The Māori language faces a major challenge in the form of globalisation, which has been likened to colonisation in terms of the resulting homogenisation and language dominance (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2012). The majority of Māori live outside of their tribal regions residing in urban centres across New Zealand. Furthermore, there is a growing Māori diaspora overseas, particularly in Australia (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2012).

As Fishman (1991) said, for a language to survive it must survive in the home,

which is a fact that many stalwarts, and champions of Māori language revitalisation, have supported over the years. However, traditional bastions of the Māori language, such as the marae, the homestead, or even, small rural Māori communities, now have unprecedented English language content present as a direct result of digital technology. Furthermore, those families who strive to create a home where Māori is the primary language, are also in a constant battle with digital technology as it continues to undermine their efforts. Here is where we see the true power of digital technology, irrespective of the quality or quantity of the Māori language used in 'your' home, wherever technology is found, so too is the English language.

As such, social media platforms have drilled their way into our homes, bringing with it an unprecedented level of English language content. However, in recent years, we have seen the emergence of virtual communities whose main goal is to infiltrate the mighty interwebs, carving out a te reo Māori space in a predominantly English language domain. These are the devoted, the enthusiastic, the zealots of the Māori language who understand that these social media domains must be penetrated.

In the past five years, the internet has seen an increase in the establishment of virtual Māori language communities. At the forefront of this increase are platforms like Facebook (Pukamata), Twitter (Pae Tīhau), Instagram (Paeāhua), and YouTube (TiriAta). These digital powerhouses dominate this modern age, and I believe, similar forms of digital media will be long into the near future. Therefore, if te reo Māori is to survive it needs to be a part of this new world. As Sorrell (2013, p. 166) states, the role of social media is "… to facilitate intercultural connections among friends and intimate partners to meet, develop friendships, and maintain contact particularly at great geographical distances."

It is worth adding here that, of all the communities on social media the ones that survive, really making a difference, are those groups at the grass roots where participants have a vested interest in the success of the community, and have a true passion for the language. I liken it to the establishment of Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori. Both kaupapa were initiatives that came about because our Aunties and Uncles saw the decline of our language. Furthermore, they were witness to, and products of the language dominance of the education system of that time. They re-purposed that tool of colonisation, education, to bring the language back to the people.

The greatest challenge to speakers of te reo Māori, is the fact that the Māori speaking community is fragmented. The majority of Māori live outside their tribal areas, and despite all obstacles, it is the nature of Māori people to make connections with others; it is part of our very being. We need to be part of a collective in order to feel whole. The context of te reo Māori is no different. Therefore, the best role that social media can play is that of a builder, with the ability to build a digital house where all speakers of the Māori language can come together. Gajjala (2012), comments on the increased use of social media by Indigenous communities, saying that it continues to grow exponentially.

Social media example: Facebook

There are four main groups I wish to draw your attention to, the first being Te Mana o Te Reo Māori. This is a public group, which has been going for the past five years. Only the Māori language is allowed to be used, and it is a domain for discussion mostly related, but not limited to, the Māori language. The group's administration also encourage debate on topical issues of the time, which, in most cases, are political. It is also worth noting, that the use of the Māori language is not the only positive, it is also a place that reinforces cultural principles based on respect and understanding. In a heated online debate you can sometimes forgive people for perhaps taking some comments too far. Comments, such as these, are quickly reined in by reminder members. Even though the discussion is being held in a virtual space, it does not mean that our cultural principles are left aside, and should reflect for example, when we Māori meet on the marae ātea.[1]

He Tamariki Kōrero Māori and Māori 4 Grown Ups, are public groups dedicated to supporting parents who are raising their children in te reo Māori, sharing resources, and organising days out where families can meet and hang out in te reo. Māori 4 Grown Ups in particular is a group established almost nine years ago, and has grown into a community that spans the entire country.

Finally, there is Kapa Kōrero, a language student led initiative where any learners of te reo Māori, no matter the level, can meet over a few drinks at a local pub or restaurant using te reo Māori. This particular group was established as a support network for early learners of the Māori language. The founder set this group up in order to find others with which to converse in Māori as she was a wife, and mother of three, and had no one at home to help her practice. Kapa Kōrero is based in Auckland City, meets regularly every month, and provides a safe space for language learners to come and talk with each other.

Social media example: Instagram and Twitter

Instagram and Twitter, the homebase of the hashtag, has become popular over the past five years with common hashtags like #tereo and #kōreromāori. However, within the last two years, as more and more attention is given to Māori, we have tags like #TeWikiOTeReoMāori, #arohatiatereo, and #MahuruMāori.

Māori instagram accounts in particular have become more active recently in using the Māori language. Te Huia Kaimanawa, for example, posts images combined with kīwaha or Māori idiom to express an idea, in a similar style to those seen when creating memes.

Social media example: YouTube

Then we have the example of YouTube. When I first looked at the use of YouTube about four years ago, I found that it was a hugely untapped digital space for te reo Māori. The only real channels that used Māori language were connected to production studios or tv shows. However, general user channels were few and far between. There were only two active channels at the time (from what I could find). One belonged to a university student vlogging her everyday life, and my own channel known as Te Māwhai, which mainly covers

video game reviews, tv show reviews, and movie reviews. Recently, more channels have started appear as more users begin to add to this space. For example, Tamariki Tākaro is a channel that focuses on creating content for children, primarily around a popular YouTube genre known as unboxing videos. These videos of course would display the unboxing of different children's toys, followed by a short review.

Conclusion

To reiterate, it is important that Māori start inhabiting these digital spaces in order for te reo Māori to infiltrate, what we know as, an English dominated area. Social media in particular is a tool that enables Māori, and other Indigenous peoples, to stretch our cultural muscles and connect with each other across greater distances in order to come together as a community. Māori do not need to give up their traditional spaces, but they do need to inhabit the new spaces that are being created. Furthermore, it is important to stay connected, and in that sense, it is not as though 'we don't live the village life anymore'. It is more like our village has become a different one, a virtual one.

Endnotes

[1.] Marae ātea is a public forum in the courtyard in front of the ancestral meeting house of the marae complex. It is a formal space where oratory is used, usually to discuss and debate issues pertaining to Māori.

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