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Electronic Group Communication for Cultural Support: Maori Electronic Networking in New Zealand

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Electronic group communication systems are of potential use in supporting group communication in contexts where cultural norms and traditions have defined clear protocols for face to face communication. Group communication protocols of the Maori people in New Zealand are introduced briefly, and a project using Lotus Notes is described which will support electronic group communication within and among Maori groups.

1. Traditional Maori Group Communication

The Maori people in New Zealand have a well developed set of protocols for face-to-face group meetings, usually referred to as a hui. These meetings typically last for a day (although can be shorter or longer), and permit anyone attending to contribute. However, for topics which have urgency or tight time schedules, the time constraints and cost of organising and conducting hui to gather opinion from iwi may not allow the level of consultation and discussion that would be desirable.

Maori are a tribal society with descendants dispersed nation-wide, and traditional communication patterns continue to operate with regular hui held on Marae¹. "Kanohi ki te kanohi" or face to face meetings are an integral part of communication and decision-making within the Maori society where the intricacies of body language at such hui can be seen.

In many tribal areas, formal ceremonial speech-making on the Marae incorporating strict cultural protocol and procedures permits only selected male representatives from their respective tribe or sub-tribe to stand and speak. However in informal situations, group communication is forthcoming from both genders and all ages depending on where the meeting will take place and the local protocol of the tribal area.

Electronic communication enables any physical barriers to be overcome without compromising the traditional values of Maori society. The passive and neutral environment of a computer screen as the physical setting for a hui enables anyone to stay or leave such meetings. Normally at a hui, protocols do not allow the freedom to leave such meetings despite how long or incorrect speakers may be. Interrupting a speaker who has the floor shows great disrespect.

Within the Waikato tribe, traditional gatherings called Poukai are held annually on numerous Marae in the region.

As a traditional communication process unique to this tribe, it is also used for discussing tribal issues, consulting with Iwi and making decisions. The medium of communication is in the Maori language and those of the younger generation who do not possess the same level of fluency may not understand the issues being discussed or the confidence to respond and participate in the discussion.

Marae based electronic communication with the option of communication either in Maori or English gives the participant a choice and their issues and concerns can then be discussed traditionally on the Marae by the elders when the Poukai is scheduled to be held there.

2. Electronic Group Communication Case Example: The E-Hui project

A research project is underway at the University of Waikato to introduce electronic group communication to a number of Maori organisations in the area. Although it is not intended to replace face-to-face communication in Maori society, access to electronic group communication technology and its acceptance by the younger and future generations may modify traditional group communication protocols in the future.

When proposing the project, we were conscious of the criticism of some previous comparative research studies with Maori participants, that such studies were done *on* these participants, rather than *with* them, and for their benefit. Arohia Durie [1992] suggests that projects involving the Maori people should "be able to make a positive contribution to the participants in the area of study" The E-Hui "electronic kumara vine" project is investigating the use of a prototype computer supported group communication system in the context of the Maori cultural setting.

The project has four phases:

- * Specification of the computer based system's functional capabilities and user interface, with respect to the necessary cultural requirements.
- * Development of a prototype conferencing application, under an existing commercial groupware product (Lotus Notes).
- * Installation and field testing of the system in an environment where the functionality and acceptance of the prototype can be measured.
- * Evaluation of the results of the field test, with recommendations for future developments in this

¹A Marae is the main meeting place of a tribe

area.

E-Hui is a system that allows groups of people to electronically communicate amongst themselves using microcomputers. Messages are read through Lotus Notes software running on microcomputers located in a number of Maori organisations. New messages can be typed in by any individual at that organisation, and read by others at that organisation. Through an automatic replication process, that message will be passed by modem to the "clearing house" server computer located at the University of

Waikato server, and then distributed electronically to other readers in other locations.

In traditional face to face meetings which observe Maori speaking protocols, a "welcome" is given by a respected senior member of the group which covers the reason for the meeting and other protocol matters. The first message on the E-Hui discussion was an electronic version of this welcome., and the first few paragraphs of that message, in Maori, are given in the figure.

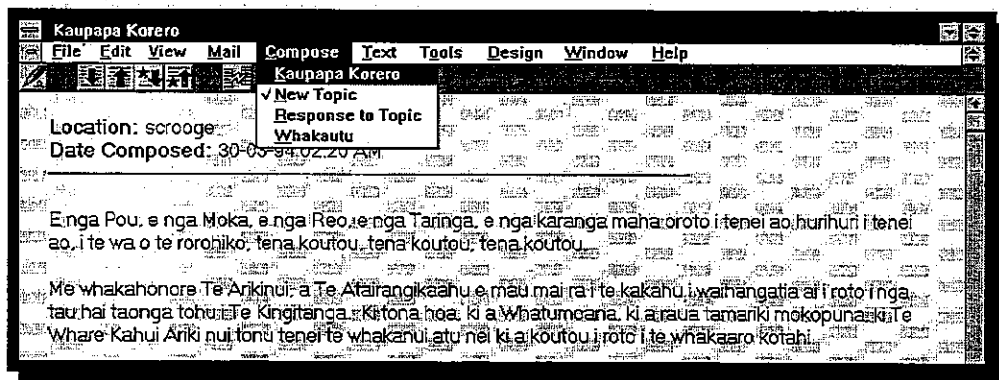


Figure 1 Partial text of welcome message contributed to E-Hui discussion

The growing experience with electronic group communication systems in New Zealand [McQueen, 1993] and elsewhere [Galegher et al, 1990] suggest that there is potential for success in this project's environment. However, there are also some downsides to electronic group communication systems that must be anticipated. There is usually a much lower rate of interaction; in a face to face meeting, a few "turns" at contributing and responding to others may take several minutes, but in electronic group communication, the same number of turns might take several days. If there is a crucial issue that must be decided by tomorrow, then a face-to-face meeting would probably be best, if there is time to arrange one. An electronic group discussion might take several weeks before everyone had a chance to respond, and respond on responses, and so on. However, if there is a need to gather preliminary position statements and opinions from a variety of people before a face-to-face meeting, or provide a forum for tying up the loose ends after a major decision has been taken, then the lower rate of interaction of electronic group communication may be acceptable.

Another downside to electronic group communication is that there are higher barriers to participate. Everyone has the experience and skills to listen and speak at a face to face meeting; for electronic group communication, contributors and listeners need to have access to a computer, connect it

to a network, and type rather than talk. This "front-end" effort to sit down at the computer, turn it on, and start the software may take several minutes, and in the end, may not be rewarded by access to worthwhile new messages.

Electronic group communication is very much in contrast to face-to-face group meetings, particularly in the lack of social presence and feedback that flows from listeners to speakers which often helps to regulate the discussion.

E-Hui is not intended to replace face-to-face communication, but rather act as a supporting communication channel, like the telephone, fax and post. People will use one or more of these channels to reach the people they wish to contact. One of the advantages of electronic communication is that people can communicate in a "group-like" way, even though they are in different locations, and connecting at different times of the day or night. It can cut down travel time, and reduce wasted time at meetings.

It is hoped that up to 30 to 40 Maori organisations in the Waikato will eventually be connected, with perhaps five to ten or more users at each site participating. We anticipate that organisations such as trust boards, primary and secondary schools, Maori departments at polytechs and university, training institutes, maraes, health organisations, liaison contacts in government departments and others will

all be connected.

The topics of discussion will be determined by the participants, but it is expected that topics such as Maori language, immersion education, employment and training, health and education will develop. Special private discussions can be created among sub-sets of the overall user base as required.

3. Interim Results

Beginning in January, 1994, a number of Maori organisations were asked if they wished to participate in the project. At that stage, they were required to have their own Windows based computer with enough memory and disk space to allow Lotus Notes to be loaded. About 20 groups expressed interest, but due to unsuitable, or unavailable computers, only six were able to be installed and made operational.

After an "official" launch, a number of messages were entered by the participants over the following 12 months. In January, 1995, additional funds allowed the purchase and installation of six computers in Maori organisations which desired to participate. An additional seven were installed in April.

Observation of the discussions so far would indicate that a regular habit of contribution has not yet been established, although there appears to be regular checking of messages. Incentive to contribute messages beyond just social interaction may depend on the perceived benefits to disclose information to others in the wider group. Structured interviews with participants which are planned over the coming months may reveal further data in this area.

4. Conclusion

Electronic group communication systems are an important new technology that will have an increasing impact on the way members of groups communicate with each other. However, they are not systems that can be casually thrown at a group of potential users without a considerable amount of planning and foresight.

Awareness of the existence, and potential of electronic group communication systems products and experience with how they might be used in particular cultural domains are necessary first steps in assisting with intelligent and thoughtful evaluation of the potential evaluation of these kinds of new communication technologies.

5. Acknowledgments

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