Maori Culture? Who cares?
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There is an acceptance that it is worth checking that your new product's name is not offensive in your potential customers' culture, and increasingly being realised that incautious use of colours on your website, for example, can offend your users. Not a good idea. Cases when companies get it wrong even get used as "funnies" on TV and radio these days. For example, on a recent edition of the quiz show QI one question was: "Why did the French laugh when Toyota introduced the new Toyota MR2 car?" Answer (in French) at the end. Culture can matter in deeper ways too, especially with the increasing use of computing metaphors (windows, mailboxes, etc) that link virtual entities with familiar real world ones to help usability. Culture is central to the working of a metaphor. Consider the digital library metaphor. What should "digital library" conjure up to help me understand how I use one? Something with no visible librarians? No taking things back? Does it matter that the phrase suggests the opposite to me? More worryingly, does the metaphor actually raise barriers? Elke Duncker (2002) investigated this with respect to Maori culture.

What aspects of Maori culture might be an issue? Maori knowledge is traditionally passed on orally. Certain kinds of information are sacred and treated with great respect. Individuals' genealogies are both sacred and central to their identity. Community is very important. Because Maoris tend to be naturally shy around westerners, their welcomes are profuse. Information is organised in a different way to western cultures, around genealogy, for example.

At first sight digital libraries ought to be great for Maoris. They have a keen interest in rebuilding lost genealogies from information available in libraries but find physical libraries intimidating. They are silent places when Maoris want community and communication. Unlike many westerners' views of librarians as a major asset of libraries, to Maoris they can seem abrupt in comparison to the expected Maori welcome. The silent "non-welcome" I personally would hope for would be alien to traditional Maoris. Library collections are also organised in a way that is counter-intuitive giving the impression that works are randomly scattered. Digital Libraries would appear to overcome most of these problems allowing non-intimidating access to information. However, despite these advantages the study found that the library metaphor builds in many of the libraries' problems for the Maori making them seem equally alien.

Major problems of Digital Libraries were found to be the need to understand western classification systems, the need to understand western publication formats (journals, proceedings, etc) and the open access to sacred Maori material. How could knowledge of these cultural differences help in the design of digital libraries? Ideally the system should bridge the cultural usability gap rather than forcing the Maori to do so themselves. Digital library designs could use localised classification schemes, refined search tools could remove the need for knowledge of publication formats and access to sacred material could be restricted, reinforcing Maori cultural values rather than ignoring them. Do issues such as this matter beyond the Maori? Similar considerations both for libraries and other computerised systems could help both other indigenous peoples and underprivileged groups within western cultures. I am a privileged westerner but if I had not spent half a lifetime in and out of western university libraries, perhaps the metaphor would be a barrier to my use of them too. The village library I used as a child was an empowering, community enhancing place for the village. Digital libraries can be too.

Oh, and if this is not an impolite way to finish, MR2 in French becomes M R deux and is pronounced merde!

Further Reading: Elke Duncker (2002) Cross-cultural usability of the library metaphor, Proc. of the 2nd ACM/IEEE-CS Joint Conf. on Digital Libraries. Edited by G. Marchionini and W. Hersh. pp223-230 ACM Press.