Global Culture and its Implications for Global Communications

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an introduction to cross-cultural communication issues over the internet. It discusses various cultural issues that a web developer should be aware of and introduces the Cultral Dimensions first discussed by Geert Hofstede and relates them to web design.

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Introduction

Culture is important in the context of building and maintaining global communication systems, because culture forms such a large part of who we are. Not having an understanding of how culture works can lead to people leaving a website quickly or not returning. It can also cause other detrimental effects on the business, costing money or the value of the company name.

In this paper I will be discussing some of the issues surrounding global communication and culture and I will be highlighting some concepts to keep in mind to help make websites more globally accessible.

In the context of building and working with global communication systems, the concept of *global culture* deals with the diversity of the many cultures on earth and businesses and organisations working to ensure their intended communications system is capable of functioning as desired on a global scale, with people from all over the world being able to access it.

Global Culture

Global culture affects mass communication (particularly on the internet) because there is potential for anyone to see what you are communicating, even those from a different culture than your intended target audience. This can be a problem because the other cultures may interpret your message or even your communication medium differently than those in your intended market and not understand it properly, become offended, or create other undesired feelings or consequences toward your company or message, simply due to a misunderstanding.

Because global communication by its very nature, encompasses all the world, most of the challenges that people working in this field face, will be cross-cultural communication issues. We commonly think of culture as being the language, customs, religion of a particular region or group; i.e. what we can see easily about the group in question. There are also other aspects of culture that a group can exhibit. Cultures differ in the way they understand time and space, thought patterns, life values, behaviour values, and social relationships. On top of these are of course language differences, eating and food differences, religion and holidays which also play a large part in making up a culture *(Stephan Dahl 2001)*. Starting with language, I will be discussing in more detail some of the main differences between cultures, the major challenges facing people working with multiple cultures and provide some examples of where the cross-culture communication could "go wrong".

Language Issues

In language there are a few differences that one has to consider when communicating between people who either don't speak your language or who speak a distinct variant. One of the challenges of communicating to an audience in a different language is ensuring that any translations are accurate. In *The Cultural Dimension of International Business (pp 43)*, Gary P. Ferraro tells us of a few examples where the translators knew both languages fairly well, but mis-interpreted the meanings of some words and phrases. One example he gave was of "A sign in the window of a Paris dress shop [stating], 'Come inside and have a fit'" (Gary Ferraro, 1998). It is unclear whether this mistake turned away any business, although it most probably would have had a slight negative impact on the businesses reputation. One also has to be careful when communicating between two different versions of the same language. As Ferraro writes, "...It is equally true that there are a number of significant differences between British and U.S. English that can lead to confusion and misunderstandings." (1998). Ferraro also briefly discusses slang. As it relates to the context of global communications, slang can pose a problem as it can increase the number and meaning of expressions in a language. Also, many colloquialisms are only used for a short time, and then either change meaning or simply fade out.

One can gather that, slang would be difficult to translate, and it could even cause problems within the same language as your audience may interpret a slang term for a different meaning in their local variant. Even non "slang" expressions could cause difficulties in understanding. For example, in the United States, what we call "chips" (the long, thin, potato based snack), they refer to as "fries". If you used "chips" on a website, for example, an American person may not necessarily think of what you had intended. Obviously this may cause problems, if you were trying to sell the product and you didn't make sure that your audience understands your intention.

Dianne Cyr and Haizley Trevor-Smith mention in *Localization of Web Design: An Empirical Comparison of German, Japanese, and U.S. Website Characteristics* the importance of language presentation ("such as: headlines, point form, paragraphs, and presentation of characters (i.e. right to left versus left to right). ") especially when building a site for a certain culture.

This implies that different languages and cultures may have different ways of structuring text on a page, to do with how their native language is read or written.

Another point to bear in mind is sort order. Languages that are not based on the Western alphabet may have a different sort order. For example in Swedish, words beginning with extended characters (eg. å) are sorted after Z. Many Asian languages sort characters by stroke order. Sort

order is important because list order may change after text translation (Jesús Maroto & Mario de Bortoli, 2001).

Behavioural and Associational Issues

Stephan Dahl (2001) describes cultures as having behavioural values. Behavioural values such as rules and manners and norms of a society are ones that we see in everyday life. These can include taboos and other socially unacceptable interactions. An example is that in Germany the use of the term 'hangman' is avoided so other ways of describing it are found.

Cultures can also differ in their value of symbols. Symbols can be colours, pictures, icons, or even sounds and smells. Symbols carry special meaning in the cultural group (Hofstede, 2001).

People's association with colour can vary quite dramatically between cultural groups. Some colours have an opposite psychological meaning in one culture than in another. For example, yellow is often attributed to cowardice in the United States, while the Japanese attribute yellow to mean noble and graceful (Michael L Bernard, 2003).   Because people of different cultures will interpret colours differently, care must be taken to ensure that colours on websites are not used in a manner that's contradictory to the emotion of the content. For instance, in China red means happiness compared to danger [and sometimes anger] in the U.S. (Michael L Bernard, 2003) It would then be inappropriate to use red colours on the site if the content was of an angry nature and your target audience were Chinese. Numbers may also carry symbolism in a particular culture, which may be different from your own. In most Western countries, the number '13' symbolises bad luck, while in Shanghai '13' symbolises a foolish person. Also the numbers, '4' and '5' are considered bad to Japanese people because the words for 'bitterness' and 'death' have a similar pronunciation in Japanese (Peterson B. Zhou, 2003).   While the different symbolism of numbers may not be as much of a problem on some sites, it would still be a consideration, especially for a logo, or a description of something.

A less common but still fairly important cultural difference is people's perception of and feeling of time.   A culture's thoughts on time can usually be broken into two basic types. Monochronic and polychronous. Monochronous time is usually found is Western cultures and treats time in a linear fashion. Here, time is generally regarded as fixed and is centred on accuracy of schedules, clocks and the like. That is, a particular thing will usually have to be done in a certain time frame that also fits into the clock, calender etc. Also, because people in these cultures tend to work with set frames of time, they generally focus on one major task or interaction at a time. Overall, most Eastern

cultures see time as polychronous. Polychronous time is usually thought as fluid and continuous. Time is considered to be 'flexible'. People in these cultures tend to do multiple things at the same time. To these cultures, working to a fixed time frame isn't quite as important (Michelle LeBaron, 2003 and Stephan Dahl, 2001 and Cecil G. Helman, 2005).

From this, one could infer that monochronic cultures would very quickly become impatient at a slow loading website, as they would have other things to do. By contrast, people from polychronous cultures may be slightly more tolerant of slower loading times since they regard time as flexible and may be doing something else at the same time anyway.

The Cultural Dimensions

To design websites that effectively capture your intended international market, one must ensure that the content and overall site layout is marketed toward that culture or at least relatively culturally sensitive.   Over time there has been a great deal of research into world cultures and how they differ on various issues.

One researcher who has made a great impact to this field is Geert Hofstede. From 1978 through 1983 Hofstede conducted interviews with IBM employees from around the world. From analysis of the data he attained through his interviews, he discovered patterns of similarities and differences in the respondent's replies. From these patterns, he theorised that world cultures vary according to logical dimensions. His cultural dimensions are Power Distance (the relationship between people in power and subordinates), Individualism vs. Collectivism (the importance placed on self versus the group), and Masculinity vs. Femininity (comparison of gender roles), Uncertainty Avoidance (attitudes toward unknown threats) *(Marcus and Gould, 2001)*.

Later on Aaron Marcus described these dimensions and related them to website development. I will provide a short summary of each dimension and give an example of how it could be used in website design. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the Dimensions with respect to specific countries. See *Marcus and Gould, 2001*) Power Distance (PD) would affect how the website treats people in control relative to the users. A low PD country tends to treat everyone as equal, whereas high PD cultures tend to separate much more the powerful from the 'ordinary'.   Take a country like New Zealand for example with a low PD index of 22 *(Marcus and Gould, 2001)*. As the people there tend to see each other, generally as equals, you can infer that they may be encouraged to visit a site if it contains imagery or a style that treats them also as equals.

Individualism vs. Collectivism deals with how much importance is placed on the society as a whole

or just the individual. High IC cultures place more emphasis on what helps one person, while low IC cultures place the emphasis on what benefits the society *(Marcus and Gould, 2001)*. If you were building a site geared toward a high IC culture you would want to include content that tells the user how *they personally* would benefit from your product or whatever.   A site about a place of historical significance may have content describing the site and its history in a low IC culture, whereas in a high IC culture the content would be more focused on what the visitor will gain from the experience.

A culture's Masculinity index refers to the culture's gender roles. High MAS cultures have a large distinction between the gender roles whereas low MAS cultures tend to blur the gender roles *(Marcus and Gould, 2001)*. From this we can see that you probably wouldn't want to use imagery that implies male only jobs (or staff) if you are targeting countries with a low masculinity index because those countries will favour equality in genders.

Uncertainty Avoidance is the measure of how people feel about situations unknown to them. People from high UA cultures would tend to behave in ways that would steer them away from situations that they are unfamiliar with. People from low UA cultures would generally be more likely to try new things *(Marcus and Gould, 2001)*. When designing for high UA cultures it would be a good idea to warn the user of possible actions before they click them. By contrast, you would be more free to let the user find things out for themselves if your target market is a low UA culture.

Localisation Issues

When localising or internationalising websites, there are a number of factors to be noted, other than the ones already mentioned. Shirley Ann Becker describes some of these factors to keep in mind when building and localising websites for the international market. When using names for personalisation, for example it is important to remember that different cultures have various methods of naming. The Western standard of first name, middle name, and family name, being used in that order does not apply to other cultures. *"In Southern India, the father's last name is used as a first initial in the child's name as follows: Raghunath Vemuri (US format) would be V. Raghunath (India format)."* (Shirley Ann Becker, 2002). When there are multiple localisations of a site available there should be visual methods of accessing the various localisations. For example when a user wants the Italian version of a site there could be picture of the Italian flag linking to the corresponding site. Another important consideration is the computing requirements of a site compared to computer technology around the world. The computer systems located in some parts of the world maybe less able to display site content for various reasons. The user's screen size,

Internet connection speed, and processing power may all have an effect on how they see your website, if at all. For example highly animated websites might be next to useless to users on systems which maybe some years old. It would also be worth considering the speed of the Internet access of the audience you are targeting. Most users of broadband Internet access are located in three main groups. Asia-Pacific, North America, and parts of Europe (Shirley Ann Becker, 2002). This implies that South America, Africa, the Middle East, etc. would only have access to much slower speed Internet.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced concepts that are important to the successful localisation or internationalisation of websites. As well as the obvious cultural issues that affect global communication I have also mentioned the less-obvious points like, sort order, download speed, and perception of time. It is important for web developers to have an understanding of cultures around the world because websites are accessible from anywhere. It is then possible to do far more damage to your company's name because something was said on a website that shouldn't have been then if a similar thing were said in local advertising, for instance. It would also be beneficial for the client to have at least some knowledge of this field so that they don't demand things from the website designers that could prove a problem, culturally later on. This paper has shown just how extensive culture is and how many different ways there are for it to affect the localisation or internationalisation of a website. To illustrate, language and symbolism just by themselves are large enough topics to warrant their own paper. While these cultural issues won't be going away anytime soon; hopefully as people become more aware of cultural differences (through the Internet and media) they will gain more of an appreciation for culturally sound communication. Then, as a result it will then become easier to develop for other cultures.

References – With Annotated Bibliography

Becker S. A, 2002, 'An Exploratory Study On Web Usability And The Internationalization Of US e-Businesses', *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, VOL. 3, NO. 4, pp. 269-270. Web copy accessed: 24/08/2005, Web copy found at
http://www.csulb.edu/web/journals/jecr/issues/20024/paper6.pdf

   Talks about the localization of US businesses websites. Gives examples of how to localise effectively. Also give the results in tabular form of their studies conducted on US businesses websites. Compares and Contrasts some US culture with other cultures. Though not as detailed as other resources found.

Bernard M. L., 08/02/2003, 'Criteria for optimal web design (designing for usability)', Software Usability Research Lab, [html], accessed: 24/08/2005,
http://psychology.wichita.edu/optimalweb/international.htm

   Talks about colour usage on websites, how they can be a problem, some symbolism, talks about Marcus's work with Hofstede's dimensions. This is part of a series on how to design websites that are accessible for as many people as possible. The series has sections on effective navigation, text, images, layout and other technical issues.

Cyr D. and H. Trevor-Smith, [nd], 'Localization of Web Design: An Empirical Comparison of German, Japanese, and U.S. Website Characteristics', *Self Published,* [pdf], accessed: 24/08/2005,
http://www.eloyalty.ca/docs/Localization_of_Web_Design.pdf

   This text is based on studies conducted on 90 websites from Germany, Japan, and The U.S. Gives some examples of German, Japanese, and US websites and culture statistics. Develops hypothesis about cross-cultural website design from the results. Topics discussed include: website usability, symbolism, Hofstede's dimensions, multimedia, colour and others as they related to their studies.

Dahl S. 2001, 'Communication and Culture Transformation', *Self Published,* [pdf], accessed: 18/08/2005, http://stephweb.com/capstone

   Steven Dahl is a lecturer at the Middlesex University Business School. This paper talks about what culture is, different concepts in culture, trends in culture. Media trends, political trends, the Internet, the transformation of culture. He has axioms covered per section at the end of each chapter to act as a summary. He has tables on culture statistical data, the top largest media conglomerates, and Internet access to name a few. He has also included some figures on world and American media outlets.

Ferraro G. P. 1998, *The Cultural Dimension of International Business*, Third Edition, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, p. 43.

   Talks about how to conduct international business with other cultures effectively. It's more geared toward actual business people, but it's still useful as it provides many good examples of cultural differences. Describes language, non-verbal communication, cultural values, cross-culture negotiation, dealing with culture shock, and global management. At the end of each chapter it has scenarios for the reader to answer to help them understand the content.

LeBaron M., 2003, 'Cross-Cultural Communication', Beyond Intractability, [html], accessed: 24/08/2005, http://www.beyondintractability.org/m/cross-cultural_communication.jsp

Talks about Time and Space, Fate and Personal Responsibility, Face and Face-Saving, Nonverbal Communication. Elaborates on these, giving examples from countries and cultures. It appears to be more geared towards traditional forms of communication.

Helman C. G, 2005, 'Cultural aspects of time and ageing', *European Molecular Biology Organization*, volume 6, 2005, pp S55, Web copy accessed: 18/09/2005, Web copy found at: http://www.nature.com/embor/journal/v6/n1s/pdf/7400402.pdf

This article talks about time and how different cultural groups treat it. It discusses monochronic time, polychronic time, calender time, and others. It also describes the origins of some of the different types of time perceptions.

Marcus A. and Gould E.W., 2001, 'Cultural Dimensions and Global Web Design: What? So What? Now What?', Aaron Marcus and Associates, Inc. [pdf], accessed: 24/08/2005 http://www.amanda.com/resources/hfweb2000/AMA_CultDim.pdf

Relates Hofstede's dimensions to global user interface design. Basic issues for web design and cultural values. Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture, indexed stats on varying cultural behaviour. Goes through the 5 indexes of cultural differences, describes how it affects web design, then gives examples with both high and low scoring countries' web sites. Power-distance, Collectivism vs. individualism, Femininity vs. masculinity, Uncertainty avoidance, Long- vs. short-term orientation. Compare and contrast websites with pictorial examples. Includes table of the cultural dimensions.

Maroto J. & M de Bortoli, 2001, 'Web Site Localization', *Self Published,* [pdf], accessed: 18/09/2005, http://www.eurorscg.co.uk/localisation/files/weblocal.pdf

Talks about why localise, localised site structuring, translation and cultural aspects, and points to consider when localising a site. Also talks about some technological problems one may encounter when localising.

Zhou P. B, 2003, 'Cultural Differences and Cross Cultural Communication', Superdirector.Com [html], accessed: 26/08/2005, http://superdirector.com/culture3.html

Deals with: Cultural differences in verbal communication; 2. Cultural differences in nonverbal communication;(or body language); 3. The differences in cultural taboo. It mainly compares Western nations to China, but still a valuable resource as it provides quite good, clear examples of the cultural differences. Superdirector.com is a company that specialises in translation and other cross-cultural services.