

Chapter IV

Analysis of the Cross-Cultural Dimensions of National Web Portals

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ABSTRACT

When new technologies become available and cultures adopt them, the result can be convergence or divergence when cultures adopt technology in different ways that maintain or even further accentuate their differences. An analysis of full-service national web portals from different countries, typically offering a search engine, directories of links on a set of selected topics, news items (including weather, sports, entertainment, and stock market results), advertisements and shopping, and free e-mail, shows evidence of both trends. While most national portals closely resemble the basic structure of Yahoo!, the original free full-service portal, there are also differences in appearance and features offered that can be attributed to cultural variations based on Hofstede's framework.

INTRODUCTION

Culture can be defined as the manifestation of “learned behavior consisting of thoughts, feelings and actions” (Hoft, 1996) formed under the influences of social, biological, psychological, economic and ecological environments over an extended period of time. But, as Hoft notes, culture is a complex subject encompassing many diverse concepts. By 1952,

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) had already identified 164 definitions of culture, ranging from “learned behavior” to “ideas in the mind,” “a logical construct,” “a statistical fiction,” and “a psychic defense mechanism” and claimed that over 300 existed (p. 291). Culture is a product of learning (Hoebel, 1971; Murdock, 1965), varying from place to place and changing over time. Such changes are accelerated by various social exchanges, direct and indirect, among peoples. Creative processes or innovations diffuse through cultures, so times of rapid technological innovation are likely to see accelerated cultural change.

When new technologies become available and cultures adopt them, there is a wide range of possible outcomes that can be described along a dimension of convergence to divergence. Sometimes, cultures become more similar as they adopt technology, leading to convergence. Alternatively, cultures may adopt technology in different ways that maintain or even further accentuate their differences. This creates divergence. Convergence theory, well summarized by Coughlin (2000), can be traced back to the 18th century. By the 1960s, convergence theorists suggested that economic development would mean that cultures should begin to become more similar in social organization, class structure, or family characteristics. While research shows that convergence is by no means inevitable, particularly in a simple linear fashion, the concept remains a useful way to view the impact of change on cultures.

Recently, the Internet has brought about a revolution in information and communication technology, affecting many aspects of the personal, professional and social lives of those connected through it. From its roots in the United States, the Internet has spread rapidly in the past decade and is now accessible in most parts of the world (although not to most people in the world). The Internet is changing the way we do business, obtain an education and learn other skills, gather information, bank and invest, pay bills, listen to music, see movies, buy and sell things, exchange greetings and communicate with others, express views, participate in debates and are entertained. These changes are likely to affect cultures. But are all cultures being affected in similar ways, leading to greater cultural homogeneity (i.e., convergence)? Is the Internet a “virtual cultural region,” as Johnston and Johal (1999) suggest? Or are different cultural groups adopting this particular information technology in different ways consistent with their culture (i.e., divergence)?

To address these questions, this study examines national web portals in countries around the world. Portals are “gateways” to the Internet, web sites that provide some basic information and services themselves and, more importantly, provide access to selected sites in the Internet through links and to many other sites through search engines. Initially, there were only a few such sites (notably Yahoo!) suggesting a convergence view. But Yahoo! was quickly followed not only by American competitors, but national portals in many countries. This study was designed to identify both the similarities and/or variations among national portals and attempt to explain these findings. More importantly, the results will establish a foundation for further research of this type. The results at this relatively early stage of Internet usage are mixed. While national portals show considerable similarity, a closer examination reveals some important differences that do reflect local cultures.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As the world becomes more connected through technology, two competing hypotheses have emerged regarding the effect of globalization on culture. These hypotheses are

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