

Chapter 13

Studying Online Communication Features on International and Cross–Cultural Web Pages Using Websphere Analysis Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Some websites, and the specific Web pages within them, are designed specifically to facilitate online communication across countries and cultures. For this reason, these sites often contain a variety of features for international interaction. Such features include language choices, instant messaging, or use of a translation tool. The purpose of this chapter is to identify current practices and opportunities for online communication between people from different countries or speakers of different languages. To examine this topic, the authors used the Websphere analysis methodology (Schneider & Foot, 2004) to conduct an analysis of 160 archived international and cross-cultural Web pages in order to identify their communication features.

INTRODUCTION

Communication across cultures and languages is essential for certain kinds of international work, commerce, and education, as well as other reasons. Examples of this work include Web page

design, the development of Web pages for study abroad programs, creating online travel sites, and developing international online dating services. Web pages designed specifically for these purposes can facilitate online communication or hinder it due, in large part, to the features a Web designer

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includes on such pages. Some of these features for communication or further interaction might include contacting the owner of the Web page, signing up for a newsletter, becoming a member, using a translation tool, or following hyperlinks to related resources.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify and evaluate current practices and opportunities for online communication between people from different countries and languages as identified within a set of archived Web pages. For the purpose of this study, the terms “international” and “cross-cultural” are used interchangeably to refer to Websites designed to help people from different nations and cultural groups access or share information online. The main goal of this research project was to identify a large number of possible features that corresponded to particular actions a user might be able to locate or to perform on a given page. The main collection of Web pages examines sites that were hosted in a variety of countries but that also targeted audiences from a variety of cultures or nations (i.e., sites designed for international vs. domestic audiences).

The approach the authors/researchers used to collect and review data for this study involved Schneider and Foot’s (2004) Websphere analysis methodology. The authors/researchers selected this approach because they felt it was an appropriate mechanism based upon its focus on defining a topic of interest, creating a collection of relevant Web pages, and saving these pages as a “Websphere” for closer study and analysis later. In the study discussed in this chapter, the authors identified and archived 160 Websites of interest, and these sites were selected based on their anticipated international audience vs. a specific domestic/national one. The researchers then used Zotero (a powerful online research tool) to archive Web pages of interest. The authors wish to note that this study focused on the features and contents of the archived Web pages identified for review and not on the particulars of the cultures of any of the countries in which these Websites were created or located.

BACKGROUND

The context of the work presented here is situated within current research on the relationship between culture and the design and the use of Web pages. In this section, the authors present a small selection of related materials that served as a foundation that guided the research they did on this topic area.

To begin, it is important to note that the role of communication styles and other cultural features on the Internet has long been accepted as important by researchers from a range of fields. For example, Hermeking’s (2004) work found that customers from “Uncertainty Avoidance” cultures, where predictability is important overall, also tended to be less innovative in their Internet use. Similar work (de Mooij, 2004) focuses on the role of individualism as a cultural characteristic, as well as high-context vs. low-context communication styles online (Wurtz, 2004). According to this concept, people from high-context cultures (e.g., individuals from Japan or Latin America) are considered as tending to have close and familiar communication with each other and were comfortable with informal and indirect styles of conveying information. By contrast, individuals from low-context cultures (e.g., individuals from the German-speaking part of Switzerland or from Germany) tend to focus on detailed and explicit methods for conveying information.

Other studies further reflect the idea that research subjects in experiments usually prefer Web content that reflects information related to their particular cultural group (Baack & Singh, 2007). This factor relates to the study presented here because there is much to be learned about how different cultures attempt to facilitate cultural communication online. The challenge then becomes determining what role and how great a role cultural factors play in online interactions. The analysis presented in this chapter aims to reveal the current state of Web designers’ efforts to bridge cultural gaps in creating online materials

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