

Chapter 15

Information Sharing Across Languages

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ABSTRACT

Access to information and knowledge in one's native language is a fundamental human right. It is a right deeply rooted in the legal systems of many Western nations where it is considered to be as important as access to healthcare or to other potentially life-saving services. While individuals often claim these rights for themselves, they do not always afford such rights to others, for there is often a cost involved in the realization of this right. This chapter highlights how denying this service, particularly as it relates to the translation and the localization of online materials, results in human costs including life threatening information poverty. This situation, in turn, requires urgent and coordinated relief efforts by industry, government, and civil societies on a global scale.

INTRODUCTION

Bridging the know-do gap is the foremost challenge and opportunity for public health in the 21st century. -Ariel Pablos Mendez, Rockefeller Foundation

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek. -Barack Obama

Digital content publishers – including the producers of software applications, educational and game developers, and Web publishers – strive to sell their products in new markets in order to increase the return on their investment (ROI) in the development of the original electronic content. In essence, these publishers make a localization decision based upon the promise of almost immediate financial returns in the short-term (e.g., a business quarter). In the process, these digital content publishers are growing and maintaining a translation services industry that will be worth

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almost US\$25 billion by 2013 (Beninatto & Kelly, 2009). This sum represents a considerable amount of money, but it also represents a fraction of the value that the localization industry has created in financial returns for some of the world's largest digital publishers. (Interestingly, many of these publishers now generate more than 60% of their revenues from international markets.)

Localization, in essence, is the linguistic and cultural adaptation of digital (e.g., online) content to the requirements and the *locale* of a foreign market. Localization practices, in turn, include the provision of services and technologies for the management of multilingualism across the digital global information flow. Thus, mainstream localization becomes an instrument of and the prerequisite for economic globalization – the strategic pursuit of successful digital publishers to push their products and services (particularly their online products and services) into new international markets. If there are no viable markets in any given region or country for any given content or language, then mainstream localization services are not made available. As a result, access to information and knowledge via online and other digital media are severely curtailed in the poorer regions of the world. This factor is important, for while mainstream localization can *contribute* to the international sharing of electronic information it can also *prevent* information sharing across languages – particularly via online media.

The objective of this chapter is to highlight the background creating the current unacceptable situation and to describe and analyze some of the more promising attempts to rectify this problem. In the chapter, the author will report on initiatives by both large multinational corporations (e.g., Google and Microsoft) and by social entrepreneurs and charities (e.g., The Rosetta Foundation, the International Development Research Centre, and the World Wide Web Foundation) to bring individuals in poorer nations into the digital world from which they have previously been excluded because they are not consumers with sufficient

spending power. The eradication of information poverty and diffusion of online global information sharing has been described as one of the key challenges of our century. It has potential long term social, political, cultural, and economic effects on a scale that has not been recognized by many of the key stakeholders, and now is the time to examine and address this situation.

A GROWING DIVIDE

The effect of this denial of service in certain languages is the so-called *language barrier*. In reality, there has never been a *language barrier*. Rather, there is an *access barrier* (i.e., access to translation and localization services). This access barrier is lowered for people living in affluent, commercially attractive target markets because companies wish to access such markets in order to sell products and services in them. For this reason, organizations are willing to undertake the cost of localization (which generally includes the associated costs of translation), for such localization provides access to these affluent markets. While Norway, for example, has only 4 million inhabitants, most multinational organizations undertake the cost of localizing for Norwegian audiences. Such costs are considered acceptable, for the related cultural audience has a relatively high income and can purchase a range of products.

For those individuals living in poor or deprived and thus commercially unattractive target markets, however, the language barrier remains high. This situation persists because companies do not think it is worth their efforts to localize content for the relatively small numbers of potential consumers in these regions – and thus make their information accessible to those consumers. Madagascar, for example, has 15 million inhabitants (almost 4 times the population of Norway), but the average citizen has a very low income. For this reason, most multinationals do not see it as cost effective to translate online or other electronic content into

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