

Chapter 5

Website Designs as an Indicator of Globalization

ABSTRACT

As the first application chapter, this chapter compares the cultural and rhetorical elements of websites around the world, showing strong correlation between website designs and the larger cultural values of the host culture. In this application, the chapter defines and operationalizes the units of analysis for website design, connecting websites to the common human thresholds of interaction.

INTRODUCTION: WEBSITE DESIGNS ACROSS CULTURES

For the last eleven years, I have had the privilege of living on the U.S.-Mexico border, witnessing, among many things, the blending, flux, and dynamics of two nations interacting. I also routinely return to Ecuador to visit friends and carry out research. But the border is a more interesting experience. I live only 45 minutes from three Mexican Universities and over 500 outsourced manufacturing plants or maquilas. Thus, I can be teaching or researching in Mexico in the morning and return to Las Cruces, New Mexico in the afternoon and do the same thing, but in a different language, culture, and educational, economic, social, and legal context. As explained in Chapter Two, the U.S.-Mexico border is a fantastic analogy and site of intercultural research, but the border area is

much more complex than simply the merging of U.S. and Mexican culture. The border is significant and mediates complexly these two nations. Thus, the U.S. Mexico border is a great way to ground theories of globalization.

Globalization has many definitions (Grewel, 2008), but for me, the best is a growing interdependence among groups of people caused by a larger variety of factors, including international trade and manufacturing; global issues such as energy, environment health, and immigration; politics; education; information and communication technologies such as the internet; and a greater facility for world travel. Thus, it seems apparent that countries and cultures are becoming much more inter-dependent, due in large measure to these globalization forces. Not surprisingly, many current theories would have us believe that globalization means a significant amount of cultural

blending, hybridization, glocalization, and cross-border flow of rhetorical and cultural patterns with geopolitical borders relatively meaningless, and as such, an out-dated mode of inquiry. However, as I explain in Chapter Two, these theories may be off. As mentioned, in 2010, El Paso, Texas was the safest city in the United States (for cities over 500,000 inhabitants) with a murder rate of three or four a year. Right across the border, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico (1.5 million) was the most dangerous city in the world, with an average of 12 murders a day. This large difference calls into questions many simplistic theories of globalization. Ghemawat similarly argues that “more than 90 percent of all phone calls, Web traffic, and investment is local. What’s more, even this small level of globalization could still slip away” (2007). In Chapter Two, I call for a more complex view of globalization, arguing that perhaps some cultural values (such as entertainment) might cross border rather easily, but others may not.

Consequently, the theories of globalization and communications technologies might be well served in light of culture and communication research, which maintains that enculturation and cultural change due to communication technologies are never straightforward (Grossberg, 1992). In other words, just because there is cross-cultural contact does not mean that the cultures in contact are simply blending or assimilating the influences. As Stuart Hall (1997) and Lawrence Grossberg (1992) have been arguing for decades, cultures adopt, resist, appropriate, refract, and reconstitute cultural and rhetorical patterns for a variety of social, economic, political, personal, and aesthetic reasons. Further, local cultures often not only reject assimilation, but re-trench themselves in their local values against cross-cultural influences (Adler, 2008).

As Chapter Four lays out, however, the new communication technologies might be encouraging cultural change because of their explicit global reach, perhaps both at the local and global level. It also seems obvious that the Worldwide Web

has dramatically increased cross-cultural contact. This increase must be influencing the rhetorical and cultural patterns at the local, national, and international level, but researchers simply do not know how and what is happening. Consequently, this Chapter asks some simple but important questions: how much do website designs reflect local culture, or does there seem to be a more global approach to websites? Further, how is the web changing the rules of this intercultural dynamic of culture and communication technology? And if the web is influencing cultural change, what kinds of changes are occurring and why?

As explained in Chapter Four, website designs are a very rich medium, allowing for almost every kind of communication, including graphics, pictures, sound, movement, verbal, page layout, overarching web architecture, search features, input capacity, and so on. Thus, this richness seems well adapted to almost all of the cultural values. Further, websites are usually developed locally by the sponsoring organization but are available live around the world, so the website are a wonderful source of information about intercultural rhetorical and cultural values, and the results of intercultural web inquiry could point to some interesting qualifications of globalization.

To carry out this inquiry, this Chapter compares the website design and features around the world using three methods. First, I ground the connection between website design and cultural rhetorically analyzing the features of four public university websites, two on the U.S.-Mexico border and two outside border areas. After explaining the intercultural content of these four websites, I discuss a simple website analysis of eBay ads in five countries. I then integrate these two studies with research I previously carried out (Thatcher, 2010; Thatcher, et, al, 2007) that compares 27 public university websites around the world. With the results, I hypothesize not only about the connections between website designs and intercultural values, but also about globalization.

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