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Researching Cross-Cultural Online Communication Features for a Book Chapter

I participated in the research and writing of a chapter for the book Computer-Mediated Communication Across Cultures: International Interactions in Online Environments. The chapter titled “Studying Online Communication Features on International and Cross-Cultural Web Pages Using Websphere Analysis Methodology” looked at the current use of online communication features on websites intended for international audiences and those that crossed cultural boundaries. The other researchers on the project were Dr. Kathryn Stam, her writing partner Dr. Indira Guzman, and Todd Eklund. The intent of this research was to record what communication features were being used at the time of our study. It was not our intention to explain why they were used or to make recommendations of what features should be used. Our interests were to find out if similar features were used on websites in the same industry, if similar features were used on websites from the same parts of the world, and what communication features tended to be most commonly used. Communication features are necessary for commercial websites such as those in the banking and air travel industries. They are also important for education and customer service in large markets that transcend cultural regions or countries.

The Research Process

Information was collected from one hundred sixty websites intended for both domestic and international use. One hundred twenty were U.S. or global websites and forty were specific to Thailand and Brazil. Dr. Stam established a rule at the beginning that we were only to look for

features that were on the home page or one c"lick from the home page of the websites. This rule was established to keep us focused on features that most users would find quickly. There was no specific method used to determine which websites we chose. Each person on the team chose websites they were familiar with or that they deemed appropriate. At the beginning these were global or international websites. Later they were websites specific to Thailand and Brazil.

We chose Schneider and Foot's Websphere Analysis as our method for research. Schneider and Foot's approach is to define the topic of study and create a "websphere" or collection of websites related to that topic that can be studied later. We chose Zotero to store our "websphere." Zotero is a Firefox extension that allows you to store a snapshot of a website as it appears on the day you view it. This is important for this type of study due to the ever-changing nature of the web. Keeping links to live web pages would not be helpful if the web page content changes or if the web page disappears altogether. Fortunately, Zotero 2.0 was released as we were starting our research. The new version added the ability to create groups and easily sync our local collections with the group.

Our observations from the websites were compiled in an Excel spreadsheet. A list of communication features was constructed as we looked at the websites. Each website was listed in the spreadsheet with its features noted in the list. Any additional notes explaining our observations were placed in a Word document. The notes in the Word document and the corresponding website in the excel file were numbered to keep track of them.

Once the "websphere" was completed, the number of communication features per website and the number of websites containing each feature were tallied. Next, the websites were categorized and tallied in several different ways. They were separated into country specific and

non-country specific groups. The Brazilian and Thai sites were then separated to compare those two countries. The country specific and non-country specific groups were then broken into groups based on the type industry each website belonged to. Finally the top ten communication features were determined for all the websites, the country specific websites, and the non-country specific websites so that we could see how the top ten lists differed and look at the frequency of the top ten features in each of those groups. The result was twenty five worksheets in the spreadsheet representing the different breakdowns and summarizations of data.

Observations Made From the Data

We identified thirty three communication features used on the websites. Some such as contact options, search compatibility, language options, and options to become a member were quite common. Other options that seemed like they might be common features such as currency converters and time converters were not so frequently available. Some of the features had a higher frequency within a certain category. For example: museums tended to use cultural descriptions, banking and global commerce websites tended to use country options, and humanitarian websites frequently had donation and sponsorship options.

In the Brazilian and Thai websites we found an almost equal number of communication features in each set. The Brazilian websites had eighty six features and the Thai websites had 91. Features such as language options and money converters were found in similar quantities in both groups while some features were more prevalent in one country than the other. Search options were more common in Brazil(17) than Thailand(9). Downloadable fact sheets were found in nine Brazilian websites but none were found in the Thai websites we looked at. Information maps

were more common in Thailand(8) than Brazil(2). Picture galleries were found in five Thai websites, but none were found in the Brazilian websites.

I looked at the top ten communication features in three categories: all websites, non-country specific websites, and country specific websites. Eighty to eighty three percent of websites in each category had contact options. This was the number one feature in all three categories. Search capabilities and language options were number two and three respectively in the all and non-country specific categories. They were reversed for the country specific websites. There were five communication features that appeared in all three categories: contact options, search capabilities, join or become a member, Twitter, and language options.

Related Research in This Area

Communication styles and cultural features of websites have been studied frequently. Hermeking's (2004) work found that predictability is the most important feature to website users in some areas. He labeled these as "Uncertainty Avoidance" cultures while de Mooij (2004) focused on the role of individualism as a cultural characteristic. Baack & Singh (2006) found in their research that participants preferred Web content related to their cultural group. This relates to our work because we studied websites that reach more than one cultural audience and what features are used to appeal to different groups.

Some research suggests that sites tend to be designed according to the cultural preferences of their country of origin. Studies of cross-cultural aspects of corporate websites noted that Chinese websites studied seemed to emphasize consumer-consumer interactions while U.S. websites focused on online marketing and social responsibility (Cho & Hongsik, 2005; Pan & Xu, 2009). Kang & Mastin (2008) performed similar research with websites in the

international tourism industry. They observed that website content tended to reflect the culture of the designer. Faiola & Matei (2005) observed that users have an easier time finding information when the user and the website designer are from the same culture.

It has been suggested that sites designed to appear more local to an audience rather than appearing to have a more global design will be more successful (World Trade, 2000). Cultural attractors (Smith et al., 2004) are one area that can have an impact on this success rate. Cultural attractors are the color combinations, language cues, formats for elements such as dates and currency, and other visual and navigation elements that users from a specific culture might expect to find on the average website they use (Stam, Guzman, & Thoryk, 2010). It has been recommended by Al-Badi and Naqvi (2009) that designers understand the cultural differences of their users and the cultural attractors that they are accustomed to so that they can design features that will accommodate those differences.

My Contributions to the Project

My first task on this project was to research websites to include in our “webspere.” I looked at forty five of the one hundred sixty websites included in the study. I probably looked at closer to seventy or eighty websites trying to find the ones I felt fit our needs. I noted the websites and their communication features I found in the spreadsheet and added new communication features to our list as I found them. I also took notes on my observations and started the Word document they were compiled in.

As others in the group started sharing their findings with me, I took on the task of compiling the results into a master spreadsheet and Word document for the group. I maintained the master list throughout the project and as we moved from data collection to analysis of the

data I determined the breakdown of the data into country specific and non-country specific groups and further broke it down into the industry groupings. I placed each of these specific breakdowns onto their own worksheet within the spreadsheet and performed all the summary calculations. When I was done, the other members of the group and I could easily look at a specific segment of our data on one of the twenty five worksheets and analyze it.

We had planned to use Zotero from the beginning, but when Zotero 2.0 was released I was the one that researched the new features and determined that the upgrade would be beneficial to the project. After reading about the new features, I installed the upgrade and created our Zotero group. Once I understood how to connect to the group and upload and sync my data with the group I wrote directions for the other members to do the same. I maintained ownership and administration duties of the group during the project and turned ownership of it over to Dr. Stam as we neared completion.

As we started writing the chapter, I read several articles for our literature review and wrote summaries of the information that I felt was relevant to our study. I helped with the proofreading and editing of the summaries written by the others in the group. I also worked on the formatting of the references for the literature review.

I contributed to the writing and rewriting of many sections of the paper as we worked closer to the final draft. I spent a lot of my time during the many rounds of editing focusing on consistency within the document. I appreciated the time I spent in Dr. Kahn's Technical Editing class at this stage of the project. I was looking to see if sections were consistently in the past or present tense. Did we spell website the same way everywhere we used it? And of course were there any other errors in sentence structure and spelling?

The authors of the book required a small glossary of terms for the chapter. We were restricted in both the number of terms and the length of the definitions. I helped to determine the terms to be included and wrote brief definitions for them.

What I Learned From This Experience

There are many communication features in use on cross-cultural websites, but they do not appear to be used consistently or to their full potential. It would be impossible to develop a formulaic approach to apply communication features to a website that would satisfy everyone. However, further research could help website designers to understand what communication features are the most helpful for a particular type of website to reach a global audience.

Social media features were used as communication features on some of the websites we looked at, but they tended to be limited in their value to communicate across cultures. For example, sites that used YouTube tended to have videos in the language of the website's country of origin. While the videos might provide visual cues to someone from another culture, the lack of verbal translation or subtitles limits their effectiveness.

Websites tend to be more successful when they can provide users a familiar experience as dictated by their cultural expectations. Use of cultural attractors such as colors and date and time formats the user is accustomed to make for a more pleasant user experience and make the user more likely to return to the website.

How Could This Work Be Expanded?

This research covered 160 websites in a span of about 2 weeks. This is a rather limited scope in comparison to the number of websites that exist. This prevents us from making broad

statements on how communication features are used on the entire web or even in a particular industry or culture.

Only 20 websites were observed from Thailand and another 20 from Brazil. In order to make an accurate assessment of how communication features are used in either culture many more websites would need to be studied. By focusing on one culture over an extended period of time, a more accurate assessment of the communication features provided and their effectiveness could be determined.

Another approach would be to study a particular type of website across many cultures to have a better understanding of what communication features are most common and what works on that type of website. A study of this type would have to include web developers to understand why the communication features on the website were chosen and others were not. Website users should be included to determine if the features are of value to the consumers of the website content.

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