

Chapter IX

Web Site Analysis Across Cultures: An Inquiry into Intercultural Values and Web Site Design

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ABSTRACT

The countries and cultures of the world are becoming much more interdependent. At the same time, the development and use of the World Wide Web has dramatically increased cross-cultural contact in many areas. This growth in cross-cultural contact must be influencing the rhetorical and cultural patterns at the local, national, and international level. Researchers, however, simply do not know how and what is happening in such exchanges. This chapter presents a theoretical approach to Web site design, cultural values, and rhetorical traditions. The chapter then describes the methods of researchers who examined the Web site designs in nine cultures, and finally discusses the results of comparing Web site designs to local cultural and rhetorical traditions.

INTRODUCTION

It seems apparent that the countries and cultures of the world are becoming much more interdependent, due in large measure to global economics, politics, environment, and immigration. In addition, the development and use of the World Wide Web has dramatically increased cross-cultural contact in many areas, including academia, industry, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and many others (e.g., Collis, 1999). This dramatic increase in cross-cultural contact 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.

As a long established line of research has documented, cultural assimilation and change due to communication technologies is never straightforward (Grossberg, 1992; Kauffer & Carley, 1993; Bolter & Grusin, 1999). In other words, just because there is cross-cultural contact does not mean that the cultures in contact are simply blending or assimilate the influences. As Stuart Hall (1980) argued long ago, cultures adopt, resist, appropriate, refract, and refashion 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, 1991). However, are the rules of this game (Bourdieu, 1992) changing because of the greater global interdependence and the World Wide Web? In other words, how, if at all, is the World Wide Web influencing local, regional, and even national cultural and rhetorical values, and does this influence follow similar patterns of other communication media such as television and film (Grossberg, 1992). And if the Web is influencing cultural change, what kinds of changes are occurring and why?

These questions are critical for intercultural researchers working on rhetoric and technology

because the rapid move towards global interdependence requires effective cross-cultural communications and cooperation, much of which is mediated by the World Wide Web. These questions about the Web and culture, however, are broad and comprehensive, and researchers are only beginning to address them. Thus, this chapter seeks to lay a foundation for exploring the Web and culture by examining Web site designs across cultures. The hypothesis to be tested is the following: *If the World Wide Web (and global interdependence) is indeed influencing cultural and rhetorical patterns at the local, regional, and national level, this influence should be reflected in Web site designs. That is, local Web site designs should reflect a mixture of their local culture as well as global or other cultures. However, if local Web site designs show less mixture and more local patterns, then the Web and global interdependence is perhaps not influencing as much as expected.*

This chapter first lays out the theoretical approach to Web site design, cultural values, and rhetorical traditions. Next, it describes the methods of researchers who examined the Web site designs in nine cultures. Finally, it explores the results of comparing Web site designs to local cultural and rhetorical traditions.

CONNECTING INTERCULTURAL VALUES TO WEB SITE DESIGNS

The scholarly debate about the relations of cultural patterns and communication technologies has been a long and fruitful one. Plato originally argued that writing—the newest and most significant communication technology—would have damaging cultural and rhetorical effects because of its inherent weaknesses as compared to orality. According to Plato (1956), writing would deteriorate memory, wreak havoc on logical constructions, and create an artificial reality. As a result, argues Plato, cultures that embrace writing would become inferior mentally, socially,

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