



Chapter VIII

From Computer-Mediated Colonization to Culturally Aware ICT Usage and Design

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Abstract

A number of examples demonstrate that technologies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) embed and foster specific cultural values and communicative preferences. Differences between the values and preferences embedded in CMC and those of a given cultural group thereby lead to communication failures. Hofstede's and Hall's theories partially explain these failures and, by contrast, examples of successful online cross-cultural communication via CMC designed to incorporate important cultural and communicative differences.

Introduction: Cultural Clashes on the Electronic Frontier

As early as 1998, when approximately 84% of the population of the Internet world still hailed from North America (GVU, 1998), Lucienne Rey (2001) (among others) demonstrated that as the Internet diffused in Switzerland, it did so along culturally and linguistically defined lines. In her study of the development of home pages by Swiss towns and cantons, Rey discovered that while the German-speaking towns and cantons of Switzerland enjoyed greater economic and political power in Switzerland (e.g., the German-speaking population outvoted, barely, the Latin-speaking population regarding membership in the vote on whether to join the European Economic Area), along with a better-developed infrastructure, consistent with their comparatively more positive attitudes towards technology in general, the French- and Rhaeto-romansch-speaking areas of Switzerland enjoyed higher Internet presence (in the form of a communal home page) than their German-speaking counterparts (Rey, 2001, p. 158).

What Does Culture Have to Do with It?

Prelude: What Do we Mean by “Culture”?

First of all, we must acknowledge that the very term “culture” is enormously problematic. As Terry Eagleton notes, the term is second only to the term “nature” in English with regard to the range and diversity of definitions offered for it.¹ The term is further loaded, as recent postcolonial scholars have demonstrated with especial force, by its use to sustain notions of cultural superiority and inferiority, and thereby the politics of colonialism and imperialism (see especially Bhabha, 1994; Gajjala, 2006; Spivak, 1999). Obviously, a complete discussion of either of these points is well beyond the limits of this paper. For our purposes, however, it is appropriate to follow Rey’s lead here and, at least initially, operationalize our understanding of culture in terms of a language shared by a group (2001, p. 51). Even this operational definition, however, must be further qualified by at least two observations. First of all, language often defines a national culture, but language and culture are not synonymous with nation states. Secondly, while older notions of culture might have assumed (hoped?) that “culture” might emerge as a Platonic essence complete with a single, unchanging, and unequivocal definition, both language and culture are dynamic entities engaged in processes of change including (for better and for worse) processes of hybridization that result from cross-cultural encounters and engagements (cf. Kampurri & Tukainen, 2004).

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