

Preface

In his book *The Wired Neighborhood*, Stephen Doheny-Farina (1996) examines how online media are changing the ways in which we think about communities. That is, our ability to interact and form networks of interpersonal connections is no longer limited by traditional barriers of geographic distance. Rather, online media now allow individuals from across the world to come together in online spaces in order to discuss their mutual interests. Or, as Doheny-Farina puts it, virtual communities “offer us the opportunity to construct utopian collectives—communities of interest, education, tastes, beliefs, and skills. In cyberspace, we can remake the world out of an unsettled landscape” (p. 16). Online media are thus global media that permit us to participate in a growing international community where we interact based on interest of mind rather than convenience of proximity. And with each passing day, online communities are becoming more international and intercultural in nature.

THE GLOBAL GROWTH OF ONLINE ACCESS

As of this writing, roughly one billion persons worldwide have ready access to the Internet (Internet Usage Statistics, 2006). While this number is but one-sixth of the world’s current population, international online access continues to grow with amazing speed. For example, the number of global Internet users increased by almost 2.8 million between June and July of 2004 alone (ClickZ, 2004b). Moreover, certain trends indicate much of this growth will occur in areas outside of the United States.

The number of Australian Internet users increased by some 400,000 individuals between June and August of 2004 (ClickZ, 2004a), while Canadian spending on IT infrastructure is expected to grow by US\$4 billion between 2004 and 2008 (Insurance-Canada, 2004). Western Europe has experienced similar kinds of growth in the areas of wireless local area networks (WLANs) and subscriptions increasing markedly—particularly in the Scandinavian countries (eMarketer, 2004c). In Japan, over 50% of the adult population is online (AsiaBiz Tech, 2003), while in South Korea, 76% of all citizens now have a broadband connection (up to 20 megabits per second in some cases) that are relatively inexpensive (Forsberg, 2005; Borland & Kanellos, 2004).

The most astounding growth, however, is taking place in developing nations. Thanks to a series of government and industry programs, Internet use is booming in India and China. As a result, India has become a leading location for software programming and information technology (IT) production (The Economist, 2000a; Kripalani & Engardio, 2003), and the number of Internet connections in India has increased by over 50% between 2004 and the end of 2005 with some 38.5 million individuals now online (Burns, 2006). China, likewise, has seen impressive increases as Internet access grew from 2.1 million users in 1999 to almost 100 million by the end of 2004 (The Economist, 2000b; eMarketer, 2004d), and some experts expect this number to balloon to some 200 million users by 2007 (eMarketer, 2004d). This rapid expansion has also allowed Chinese to become the second most common language in online interactions (Internet World Stats, 2006a).

Other developing regions are also seeing impressive growth. In Africa, public- and private-sector organizations have undertaken initiatives to increase online access across the continent (The Economist, 2000c; Kalia, 2001). These factors perhaps explain why Africa’s number of Internet users has grown by almost 430% between

2000 and 2005, and they could also account for why sales of laptop computers remain strong across the continent (Internet World Stats, 2005; eMarketer, 2004b). In Latin America, the number of Internet users in Brazil has increased by 430,000 in recent months, and Global Crossings Ltd. has created a high-speed communication network that interlinks most major cities in the region (ClickZ, 2004b; NYSE, 2001). Additionally, Latin American has the world's lowest Wi-Fi costs and a fast-growing market for mobile handsets—factors that could result in rapid growth in online access in the region (eMarketer, 2004a; Buddle.com, 2006). Similarly, in Eastern Europe, the number of individuals going online has grown almost exponentially in the last five years. Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Russia have all experienced 300+% growth in online access since 2000 (Burns, 2005), and some expect online access in the region to climb from 17 to 27% by 2006 (NUA, 2003).

As a result of these trends, the prospects for online media to create truly global communities increases every day. Yet the ability to make contact with others does not necessarily mean international online interactions (IOIs) will be effective. Nor does it mean truly global communities will arise in online environments. Rather, access is only one part of forming international online communities. The other part is communication, and this component is far more complex.

CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND CYBERSPACE

The first and perhaps greatest obstacle to international online discourse is language. While roughly 30% of individuals who interact online communicate in English, more speakers of other languages are creating their own discourse areas in cyberspace (Internet World Stats, 2006a). According to Internet World Stats (2006a), roughly 14% of Internet users are Chinese speakers, 7.5% are Spanish speakers, and 2.3% are Russian speakers. These statistics, however, reflect only a small percentage of the actual number of speakers of each language—11%, 18%, and 17% respectively (Internet World Stats, 2006a). Thus, as online access increases in more developing nations, these percentages will surely grow to reflect a “less-Anglo” Internet. Moreover, as more non-English speakers populate cyberspace and find increasing options to interact in languages other than English, then language could become a barrier to international online discourse. Language differences, however, are only one obstacle to effective international exchanges in online environments.

Cultural communication expectations can also affect the nature and success of IOIs. That is, cultures can have differing expectations of what is an acceptable way to discuss a topic. They can also vary on what topics are acceptable for discussion (Barnum & Li, 2006; Yunker, 2003; Keegan & Green, 2003). Areas of communication difference between cultures can include everything from the structure of overall messages to the use of individual words. As Kaplan (1966, 2001), Campbell (1998a), and Barnum and Li (2006) note, members of Western cultures tend to prefer a more direct, linear structure of presentation, with each point connecting to the next (Barnum & Li, 2006; Campbell, 1998a, 1998b; Hall 1981a, 1981b). Many Asian cultures, however, often use a “spiral” approach in which the speaker or poster circles around key issues without ever addressing them directly (Barnum & Li, 2006; Ulijn & St.Amant, 2001; Campbell, 1998a, 1998b; Hall, 1981a, 1981b). Such structures often reflect deep-seated cultural values that, while unknown to the observer, influence a great deal of external actions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Varner & Beamer, 2004; Hu & Grove, 1999). As a result, behavior by members of one culture can often be misunderstood or misinterpreted by individuals from another culture (Ulijn & St.Amant, 2001; Campbell, 1998b; Hu & Grove, 1999).

Similarly, Hall (1981a, 1981b, 1983) notes that cultural groups can have markedly different perspectives on how much information needs to be explicitly vs. implicitly conveyed in the same setting—a perspective re-enforced by Ulijn and St.Amant's (2001) findings related to differences in perception of events by individuals from five different cultural groups (French, Dutch, German, Italian, and Chinese). Moreover, as both Weiss (1998) and Grundy (1998) note, persons from different cultures can have varying expectations of both what subjects to address in the same genre of communication (e.g., a letter vs. an e-mail) and how those subjects should be addressed in that genre. Li's (1999) and Li and Koole's (1998) research takes this idea of culture and

communication differences one step further by examining how such variations can even occur at the individual word level. In such cases, each culture might associate a different connotative meaning with the use of particular words within certain contexts. Such assumptions lead to each party acting in a way that the other considers inappropriate or disrespectful.

Research in cross-cultural online discourse indicates such differences can affect the perceptions cultures can have of the same online exchange (Callahan, 2005; Hewling, 2005; Wurtz, 2005; Ma, 1996). These differences also have implications for how members of different cultures evaluate and react to both online communiqués and the design/visual aspects of online media (Yunker, 2003; Honold, 1999; Forslund, 1996). Moreover, research in translation reveals that individuals use their native culture's communication expectations to evaluate the acceptability and the effectiveness of a message—even if that message is presented in another language (Ulijn, 1996; Campbell, 1998). As a result, effective IOIs will involve more than just a common language. They will also require a deeper understanding of how cultures use language and visuals to convey information.

Cultural values can also give rise to different legal systems with varying perspectives on the same topic (Swire & Litan, 1998). Such differences, moreover, can affect IOIs in unexpected ways. While online media allows individuals to exchange information across national borders, such exchanges involve actual persons who reside in nations with existing laws. These laws can place real or perceived restrictions—in the form of legal penalties—on what individuals say and do online (Rosenthal, 2005; Doyle, 2004). They can also affect what kinds of information individuals in different nations can legally exchange or receive via online media (Swire & Litan, 1998). As a result, the development of international online communities can involve an intricate legal dance of who can say what, and when information can and cannot be exchanged.

At the same time, various factors are expanding the international spread of online access in a way that focuses on increasing IOIs. More companies, for example, are adopting international outsourcing as a core part of their business plans (Baily & Farrell, 2004; Rosenthal, 2004). In many cases, such outsourcing practices require effective online access to be successful, and the result is a variety of corporate and government programs designed to get workers in more nations—particularly developing nations—online (Warschauer, 2003; Kalia, 2001; *The Economist*, 2004). Simultaneously, the recent deregulation of international education via the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has prompted various public and private educational institutions to develop online courses and curricula targeted at an international student base (eMarketer, 2005; *The Economist*, 2002). The success of such online educational ventures has even prompted certain national governments to develop online curricula targeted at a global student body (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005; Daniel, 2005).

Within this complicated framework of culture, communication, and cyberspace, two central questions emerge:

1. How will factors of culture (and related aspects of law) affect international online interactions?
2. What steps can individuals and organizations take to address such cultural factors effectively in order to interact successfully in international cyberspace?

The essays in this collection provide readers with a foundation for answering these questions. Readers should not, however, consider this text as a comprehensive guide or a handbook to understanding IOIs. Rather, they should view this book as a resource for understanding how cultural factors can affect communication in cyberspace. Through the information provided in the various chapters, readers should gain the knowledge base and the insights needed to make more informed choices when interacting in global cyberspace. These entries also provide readers with the initial perspectives needed to investigate factors of culture and cyberspace further, and in a way that meets the needs of particular individuals or organizations.

ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

This book examines the complex nature of international online interactions from five primary perspectives:

1. Language and culture
2. Virtual communities and online collaboration
3. Culture and online design
4. Governance and legal factors
5. Online education

The chapters in each section, in turn, provide readers with a range of perspectives on a particular subject related to culture and online exchanges.

The chapters in the book's first section, "Language, Culture, and Cyberspace," examine how factors of language and culture affect online discourse and present methods for addressing these factors effectively. The initial essay by Shaoyi He examines the proliferation of different languages online and presents recommendations for overcoming barriers created by linguistic and cultural differences. Next, Rosanna Tarsiero expands upon He's ideas by exploring how using different metaphors when discussing online communication can lead to better ways of understanding international online exchanges. Nicole St. Germaine-Madison, in turn, offers a perspective on the uses of computer programs to help users overcome language barriers in global exchanges, while Wei-Na Lee and Sejung Marina Choi present a typology for classifying and understanding Web users according to culture. The section then concludes with Yun Xia's presentation of a study involving the effects of online media on interactions between U.S. and Chinese students.

The book's second section, "Global Virtual Communities and International Online Collaboration," examines how cultural factors affect interaction in online groups. In this section, Bolanle A. Olaniran examines how shifts to virtual workgroups and online teams make the nature of work increasingly global in nature. Simeon J. Simoff and Fay Sudweeks take the examination of virtual teams one step further and present a framework for identifying potential leaders from within such teams. Pamela Estes Brewer then completes this section by discussing the importance of studying exchanges in such online environments and presenting a method for performing such studies.

The book's third section, "Aspects of Online Design in International Environments," provides various perspectives and approaches related to examining visual aspects of international online exchanges. The section begins with Barry Thatcher et al.'s study of how cultural factors seem to affect Web site design and how design factors seem to reflect cultural rhetorical traditions. Next, Anthony Faiola and Sorin Adam Matei use the psychological concept of cognitive styles to examine how culture affects the ways in which individuals use and assess visual media such as Web sites. In the section's concluding essay, Marc Hermeking ties together ideas from the previous two chapters by examining how cultural expectations related to visual design can affect responses to online marketing materials.

The book's fourth section, "Governance and Legal Factors in Global Cyberspace," begins with Yasmin Ibrahim's discussion of how the global nature of online media affects the ways in which different governments try to regulate its use. Kendall Kelly and Jennifer Jones take a more focused approach to online governance by discussing the legal and cultural issues that affect the successes of online media in international contexts. Vinita Agarwal and Charles J. Stewart conclude this section by exploring one particular legal aspect—privacy—and how different national regulations related to privacy can affect IOIs.

The book's final section, "International Aspects of Online Education," contains four chapters that review the prospects of using online media to develop global educational environments. In this section, Chun-Min Wang and Thomas C. Reeves examine the prospects of using online media to create international online classrooms and how such classrooms involve balancing existing national cultures with cybercultures created in such contexts. Tatjana Chorney moves the discussion from meeting spaces to information transmission in an essay that

overviews how aspects of culture need to be considered when addressing the learning styles of different online students. Karim A. Remtulla then expands this discussion by exploring how online media have implications for training globally dispersed workforces. Finally, Angela T. Ragusa shifts the discussion to a more macro level by presenting an overview of how to view overall curricula and program administration in a manner that addresses online education in international environments.

As cyberspace becomes increasingly international, users will need to understand how factors of culture can affect online exchanges. By presenting various perspectives of five areas related to such exchanges, the essays in this collection provide a foundational understanding of what these factors are and how such factors can be addressed in cross-cultural interactions. Readers can then use this information to make more informed decisions and to create online communities that are increasingly international in nature.

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