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Ardis Hanson
University of South Florida, hanson@usf.edu

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Impact of Globalisation on Information Seeking: The Role of Cultural Lenses and Indigenous Knowledge

Ardis Hanson
The Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida
Tampa, Florida, United States of America

ABSTRACT

How can understanding cultural lenses help us rethink constructs that have been taken for granted and assist in identifying new problems of significance in the delivery of information and the establishment of discrete, culturally based cyber-communities? With the increased access of global information, a critical question is how does an individual (or political entity) acquire information that is bias-free as possible that can be reviewed and interpreted in the appropriate context (indigenous knowledge). This paper attempts to provide a discussion of cultural lenses and indigenous knowledge in the development of information seeking behaviours and the design of information systems.

Keywords: Information-seeking Behaviours, Cultural Lenses, Social Capital, Globalisation, Community

OVERVIEW

Globalisation is not a new concept. Aart Scholte [1] has argued that there are at least five broad definitions of the term. First, globalization is viewed as an adjective to describe cross-border relations between countries which encourage international exchange, and interdependence. This is often an economic context, where international processes and transactions affect distinct national economies. Second, globalisation is a loosening (or removal) of government-imposed restrictions on movements between countries in order to create an open or borderless world economy. Third, globalisation is synonymous with universalization, such as the spread of the internet. Fourth, globalisation is considered westernization or modernization. Either an actual social/political structure or an awareness of these structures as alternatives enters into an existing nation or culture , then these external ideas or processes are blamed for the destruction of pre-existent cultures or local self-determination. Fifth, globalization is 'deterritorialization' (or supraterritoriality). Here the term 'globalization' requires reconfiguration of geography, i.e., territorial places, distances, or national borders no longer map social space. The notion of supraterritoriality (or trans-world or trans-border relations), according to Scholte, allows one to appreciate what is "global" about globalization.

The literature also establishes or claims that most, if not all, globalisation processes manifest themselves in local contexts. A central characteristic is its impact on the mediating role space plays in human relations [2]. Further, globalisation also transforms and transcends social, economic, cultural, and low cost and ease of creating poor-quality information on the Web means that the poor-quality information may eventually swamp high-quality resources.

demographic processes within national and local boundaries [3]. If these assertions are true, then the growth of the internet as both social space and an information commodity has significant, and possibly still unknown, affect on the pursuit of knowledge from an academic and public perspective.

Therefore, Aart Scholte's contention that *how* we understand is a key question. Further, the *how* we understand is structured by underlying frameworks of knowledge, which shift by social and historical context. These become critical components in the discussion of the effects of globalisation on information seeking.

How can understanding cultural lenses help us rethink constructs that have been taken for granted and assist in identifying new problems of significance in the delivery of information and the establishment of discrete, culturally based cyber-communities? How does an individual (or political entity) identify biases in information, then acquire information that provides the most complete picture on that topic, which can that be reviewed and interpreted in the appropriate context (indigenous knowledge)? Should this be a question? This paper attempts to place these questions within the context of globalisation.

Growth Of The Internet

Since control over physical space, and the people and things located in that space, is a defining attribute of sovereignty and statehood, global communications technologies have affected not only countries but also financial markets, environmental issues, governance agencies, professional non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mass media, consumer capitalism, academia, and think tanks [4]. However, the growth of the internet is more than a technological phenomenon, it is also a cultural phenomenon. As the internet evolved, it grew from a cluster of esoteric networks within a circumscribed scientific community into a public information infrastructure. Government and educational institutions no longer have a monopoly on the Internet as numerous Internet service providers continue to enter the market.

Emerging Knowledge Industry

The advent of an international virtual community (the "internet") has changed dramatically the ability of a local individual to access information globally. This has grave implications for seeking and acquiring information. Millions of individuals with varied backgrounds, knowledge, objectives, and cultures authour web-based information. Furthermore, the

In addition, global information systems built upon emerging political, social, economic, cultural, and educational infrastructures are creating a new knowledge industry, which sees information as a "raw" resource waiting to be processed. Cruise O'Brien and Helleiner [5] drew attention to the role of

information in the functioning of markets and how the inequality of access to information affects the political economy. They postulated that information (e.g., transborder data flow –markets, technology, and credit assessments) is "both a key intermediate input and an important factor of power in international bargaining" (p. 447). They also discuss how "information space" (i.e., the nature of information networks) plays "an important role in the directional flows of both domestic and international goods and services" (p. 451).

Although much of the discussion of information communications technologies (ICTs) focuses on the "digital divide," Gurstein [6] states that digital divide programs "may be little more than disguised marketing subsidies for global infrastructure and service providers rather than efforts to more widely distribute the very real benefits and opportunities which can be derived from ICTs" (p. 1). He further emphasises that ICT access must be made "usable and useful" by disenfranchised or excluded communities, by enabling local control of information production and distribution to "ensure the survival and continuing vitality of indigenous cultures" (p.1). The focus on the 'digital divide' access issues obscures community-based efforts towards more effective use of ICTs, such as the rise of locally sustainable telecentres. Onyango [7] urges that policy makers "open up space for ideas and put in place long-term 'invisible'/virtual structures for organic exchange of ideas that will give meaning to 'indigenous knowledge and capacity building'".

Two questions that emerge in this discussion are 1) what is the value of indigenous knowledge, and 2), will indigenous knowledge become proprietary and hard to access in the new global economics of information? In 2001, after discussion on the impact of globalization and the new ICTs, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity [8]. Articles 1 and 3 emphasise the importance of cultural diversity in development and quality of life. "*Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations."* Further, *"Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence."*

A new issue for information providers and seekers is inherent bias in the search for information. It is no longer a fact, but the context for which the fact may be used that is important. Information seekers must now also address the perspectives of the information providers, i.e., the "cultural lenses" upon which the content is filtered, to ensure the accuracy of interpretation of that information. There are increased emphases on both information seekers and resources, which compound the problems of information literacy and effective management of the disparate forms of information in multiple formats and multiple languages. As these newest online communities of practice continue to evolve, what is the librarian's role related to collaboration, learning, and knowledge sharing? Moreover, how can the librarian best understand the impact of globalisation on knowledge creation and knowledge needs? He or she needs first to examine how notions of space, time, and community have changed our perceptions of our 'information world'.

NOTION OF SPACE, TIME, AND COMMUNITY

Globalisation has dramatically changed our perception of space (i.e., geographical place). Robertson [9] defined globalisation as a growth in "the scope and depth of consciousness of the world as a single place." In addition, our perception of time has also altered. Individuals living a more globalized life no longer correlate time with distance but with speed. It is no longer from how far a place an answer or a product may come; it is how fast can one respond. Cyberspace also undermines the relationship between legally significant (online) phenomena and physical location. Johnson & Post [4] postulate that the "rise of the global computer network is destroying the link between geographical location and: (1) the power of local governments to assert control over online behavior; (2) the effects of online behavior on individuals or things; (3) the legitimacy of the efforts of a local sovereign to enforce rules applicable to global phenomena; and (4) the ability of physical location to give notice of which sets of rules apply." Therefore, cyberspace abrogates rules grounded within the notion of territory.

Since cyberspace has no territorially based boundaries, the cost and speed of message transmission is almost entirely independent of physical location. Although the concept of 'location' still remains important, it is only the location within a virtual space that truly matters (machine 'addresses' = location). In many respects, the internet is evolving into the 'world brain' that H.G. Wells wrote of in 1938: "an efficient index to all human knowledge, ideas, and achievements…a complete planetary memory" [10].

The internet has been seen as a type of communal social space from its inception, which is integral to communications and work behaviour. With the establishment of cyber-communities, upon what type of "place" are these virtual communities constructed? Any such community and its resources (including a "virtual library") would include the social relationships, discourses, and physical sites in which the technologies are embedded. By defining the social space in which the internet sites are to be constructed, additional issues related to a specific community will become more apparent. For example, will the information in the cyber-community be used as a tool for development, as commodity, as property, as types of literature, or just as objects of attention? Individuals interpret and use information differently based upon the perspective of their questions, such as the differences inherent in a county or a city perspective, from a rural environment as opposed to an urban environment, or from that of a policy maker to that of a citizen. In addition, as our notions of evolution of space, time, and community evolve, so do our concepts of indigenous or "national" knowledge.

THE CONCEPT OF "NATION"

Communication technology has radically changed the concept of "nation" as "place" to one of "nation" as "space," much as uniquely constructed national cultures replaced pre-national culture with the new technology of printing [11]. The ubiquitousness of online access has provided the impetus to relocate formerly "grounded" diaspora communities into

cyberspace, with the advent of online newspapers, chats, and forums. ICT is clearly integrated with traditional and emerging concepts of national identity, the role of migration, and changes in the concept of diasporic identities. However, there are positive and negative components to access, e.g., for those individuals trying to preserve their cultural identity, the amount of material available in other countries and the openness of the web can be troubling. There is also the issue of who is creating what information, and for whom.

Although many individuals view online information as free from economic bias, the online information marketplace for expatriate communities appears to focus on those expatriates with a high financial and social status. Boczkowski [12] reports a personal communication with Madanmohan Rao, Vice-President for International Information Services of *IndiaWorld*, who states that *"eighty-five percent of unique hosts accessing the site do it from outside of India, and that new sources of revenue – in comparison to those of print newspapers – have been developed to target that audience."*

The concept of "community"

Historically, social movements have developed in parallel with some public activity or policy within specific physical and/or cultural spaces, e.g., national boundaries, social, economic, and political infrastructures, or common cultural traits. Treating social movements as networks makes the relationship between movements and their spatial location more explicit. For example, USENET political groups form distinct political communities with a large quantity of political discussion taking place across the Internet. However, there can be a negative side to these cyber-communities. Anderson [13] has aptly called 'email nationalism' or 'long distance nationalism' of non-resident communities malign since those émigrés live in the developed (first) world and patronize causes for which they are unaccountable. As Ghose [14] says *"When you don't actually live in the country to which you profess to belong, then you naturally begin to create an imagined homeland which is designed only to suit your own needs rather than be true to the country which you left behind."* By extension, information created by these individuals or groups may lack authoritativeness, credibility, or reliability.

The issue of trust or mutual bonding in virtual communities and social movements is very real. Two factors for successful virtual communities and movements are the disclosure of personal (real) identities and a group of core individuals that engages in some form of real as well as virtual interaction. Most relationships formed in cyberspace that continue in physical space lead to new forms of community characterized by a mixture of online and off-line interactions.

This is a technologically supported continuation of a long-term shift to communities organized by shared interests (subcultures) rather than by shared neighborhoods or kinship groups. In urban settings, for example, there are more specialised subcultures, which are more culturally heterogenous. When their shared interests are important to them, those who are involved in the same virtual community may have more in common than those who live in the same building or block. There is a danger, however, that virtual communities, by developing homogeneous interests, would also develop cultural homogeneity, which many individuals view as a threat to their own unique cultures.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Putnam [15] refers to a 'virtuous circle' of trust, group membership, and informal social ties that has become known as social capital. He also defines social capital very narrowly as a set of horizontal associations among people who have an effect on the productivity of the community. Focusing on that horitzontal relationship of social capital, participatory capital and community commitment create joint accomplishments, articulate their demands and desires, and consist of more than going through the motions of interpersonal interaction and organizational involvement. When people have a strong attitude toward community, they use their social capital more willingly and effectively, especially when community members have a motivated, responsible sense of belonging. Nederveen Pieterse [16] examines the cultural dimensions between *bonding* social capital (strong ties among close relations), *bridging* social capital (weak ties among people from different backgrounds but similar socioeconomic status) and *linking* social capital (`friends in high places' syndrome). He believes that the question of cultural difference and social capital arises in three very different contexts: immigration and migration, transnational enterprise, and ethnically diverse societies. Therefore, not only does human and social capital lead to new knowledge and ideas, they increase the speed with which new knowledge and ideas are absorbed, disseminated, and used in a country.

Cultural Lenses

By 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn [17] had identified 164 definitions of culture and claimed that over 300 existed. However, for this discussion, the focus is on the complex cultural identities. Others postulate that globalisation, in particular migration, has created complex transnational identities. However, different cultures, in whatever location, permeate one another to varying degrees to create dynamic identities. It is because of these complex transnational, international identities, and local identities that librarians need to understand the use of multiple cultural lenses to accurately review and perceive information. Thus, one's national identity becomes the 'set of meanings' owned by a given culture which sets it apart from other cultures.

CULTURAL MARKERS AND USABILITY

In 2003, there will be over 200 million sites on the Web. International and global firms will use the Web as a medium for international communication and transactions. The research suggests that indigenous national portals cater to the needs of distinct national and cultural groups. These portals reflect the characteristics of their cultures and countries both in their appearance and in their list of services. Different cultures and nations have a variety of characteristics which may make them unique, but a catalog listing of these traits provides little usable information as there is likely to be only a few "core" traits which the culture recognizes as setting it apart from others; that is its "national identity"

Barber and Badre [18] performed a systematic usability inspection of websites in different countries and languages to identify localization elements and generalize them to 'cultural markers' specific to a given culture and/or genre. They postulate that these cultural markers (i.e., elements that are most prevalent, and possibly preferred within a particular cultural group) may directly influence user performance, hence the

merging of culture and usability. Finally, they define sites as culturally deep or shallow. A culturally deep web-site occurs in the native language of its country of origin and links to other native-language sites; a culturally shallow site is one that occurs in a secondary language and links to other secondary language sites.

LITERACY ISSUES

With the rise of English as a global lingua franca, 1.7 billion people across the world read or speak English, including those individuals who have never set foot in a country where English is the native language. However, the average poor person lives in a country where at least half of the population (including the poor) does not speak the official or most popular language. In the great majority of cases, the languages that the poor speak instead are not global languages, such as English, French or Spanish, but minority languages.

In addition, much of the literature on the linguistic issues in maintaining culture or on the digital divide focus on the technical infrastructure and skills required to access what is essentially a written form of communication. One searches for information on the internet, one types a query, then reads the search results. If one requests mediated reference assistance, again, one types and reads a written interchange or a "pushed" page to the user. For example, a recent study of Capacity Building for Electronic Communication in Africa found that 87 percent of Zimbabwean and 98 percent of Ethiopian Internet users had a university degree (in Ethiopia, 64 percent of the population is illiterate) [19]. It is not just an issue of the economic status of those on either side of the digital divide; it is also an issue of education and literacy.

However, those who do not read or write any language are at a distinct disadvantage in this 'written' information communication technology. Although the internet has many affordability and usability questions when it comes to access, there are reasons to suggest that the voice technologies may be a way to provide access for and information to more individuals. Radio programming, for example, is often cheap enough to be produced locally, in a number of languages, and is not dependent upon the user's literacy levels. For example, Quechua is a language almost totally absent from the internet. However, in Peru, an estimated 180 radio stations offer programs in Quechua, a language spoken by only 10 million people in the entire Latin American region. Telephone and radio signals can also provide information access to the illiterate and those with no training in ICT use. Rural radio programming, using an announcer and a panel of resource persons who browse the Internet at the requests of listeners, has proven to be capable of overcoming linguistic barriers in using the Internet by non-English speakers. The radio station adds value to the information by interpreting it into a local context, by broadcasting it in vernacular languages, and by providing a platform for feedback through local discussion and networks of local correspondents. The Internet can also act as a distribution network among independent broadcasters providing relevant content and information to minority language speakers or those without written communications skills.

INFORMATION SEEKING AND GLOBALISATION

Users have naive expectations about the quality and extent of information on the internet. Digital information is affected by many intricate and often antithetical factors, such as technical factors, political factors, and human resource factors. It is also affected by the added factor of currency, i.e., the life span of digital information. Jevecs [20] postulates "as *more sophisticated means of tracking and measuring Internet site usage are emerging every day, electronic information content providers are in a position of better knowing who users are and what their information needs and habits are. Yet, this data isn't enough to manage a site effectively. These tools cannot determine user expectations and needs. They cannot reveal* how *electronic information is used."*

Globalisation is also transforming academia, with continued emphases on multidisciplinary (multiple), inter-disciplinary (integrated), and post-disciplinary methods (new methodologies that do not rely upon separate fields of study) [21]. Students now learn from trans-national textbooks in trans-border franchises of coursework or through virtual universities that are trans-continental [22].

Determining the lack of authoritativeness, credibility or reliability of cyber information becomes more difficult. Information from political and social movements, particularly of diasporic communities, must be verified by other sources know to be authoritative. Otherwise, librarians run the risk of providing incomplete views of an information topic.

CONCLUSION

From a behavioural perspective, acculturation is a specific socialization process that occurs because of cultural encounters, which tries to establish causalities between changing context and individual behaviour. However, enculturation, (a general form of learning how to behave) may be a more appropriate activity in this ever-global world [23].

Since different cultures and nations possess a wide variety of similarities and differences, the focus of information providers and users should shift to the relevant similarities and differences, particularly those singular cultural elements that are important enough to give a culture its own sense of distinctiveness. Such an approach can provide a deeper understanding of the culture, or cultures, under study, and avoid the misinterpretations that are often the result of misinformed stereotypes.

Although Ostrom [24] believes that social capital is an essential complement to physical and human capital, she emphasises that while all forms of capital are essential for development, none of them are sufficient in and of themselves. Framed within this perspective, the importance of culture and indigenous knowledge in an increasingly online, intertwined global environment is clear. Further, researchers should study social capital in the contribution it makes to sustainable development. In marginal and rural areas of the world, local government plays a critical role in enabling the participation of the poor. Whether poor and underserved groups are able to progress toward maturity seems to be related to the availability of social capital and appropriate support from government and voluntary agencies.

What role do librarians and other information mediators play in the globalisation of information process? Historically, librarians have provided 'added value' to their patrons by enhancing access to the intrinsic value of a resource. By the identification, selection, classification, acquisition, interpretation, and processing of relevant information, librarians improve the quality of information available to their users. It is clear from this discussion that the skills of librarians as information mediators and the skills of information seekers have become more complex, when viewed within cultural, national, and informational contexts. Redefined reference services in a networked environment include personal assistance, help/support, subject guides, and instruction. Services are now ranked by the importance of supporting the users in *their use of information* instead of *their seeking of information*, i.e., what the user intends to do with the information once found (report, chart, graph), rather than simply looking for items with keywords that might be useful. As the range of patrons expands globally to include persons working in government and policy areas who are searching for information to assist in development (economic, sustainable, human & social capital), academics, or other non-governmental organisations, the goals of librarians should be to become conversant with global information sources, to focus on the use of information, and to become enculturated.

The following papers of this session will address issues surrounding social capital, information's role in sustainable development, and tools to aid in globalisation research.

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