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Localizing User Experience: Strategies, Practices, and Techniques for Culturally Sensitive Design

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In a world that is rapidly changing due to the political, economic, technological, and cultural turbulences associated with globalization, technical communicators must now contend with new roles as facilitators of not only communication but also cultural fluency and sensitivity. At a time when many aspects of the global economy are in flux, what seems clear is that the increasingly globalized world we're living in is often divided by more drastic cultural differences than we had previously thought, as shown in the recent U.S. presidential election and the UK Brexit vote. However, such turbulences are nothing new for cultural anthropologists and global studies scholars. Almost three decades ago, Appadurai pointed out that the "growing disjunctures" between global cultural flows of people, technologies, economies, media, and ideologies "have become central to the politics of global culture" due to "the sheer speed, scale, and volume" of those flows (1990, p. 11). If anything, the speed, scale, and volume of changes to the way people communicate, use technology, and sustain their local cultures in a global

economy have increased even more dramatically over the past 27 years.

In this special issue, we provide insights and reflections for technical communicators who wish to contend with globalization through local advocacy, with a focus on culturally sensitive design. It is our contention that such practices can help craft user experiences that are sensitive to local cultures while fostering effective communication and sustainable technological development.

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As part of the response to such changes as those described above, inquiries surrounding international, cross-cultural, multicultural issues and topics in multiple disciplines (e.g., global media studies, information systems, and human-computer interaction) have long passed the stage when the concept of nation-state is used as a unit of analysis for research (McMillin, 2007; Myers & Tan, 2002; Irani et al., 2010; Sun, 2012) or followed as "a modern, central, political, and economic authority" for practice (Appadurai, 1996). A more fluid structure of global / national / local

is often used as a point of reference. In this fluid structure, each level is mutually constituted.

In the case of technical communication, first, in order to successfully contend with the increasingly globalized, and simultaneously localized, nature of communication, technical communicators can no longer afford to consider their practices as purely local. The design, implementation, evaluation, distribution, and consumption of information products and services happen more often on a global level. In a globalized economy, the ultimate value of an information product or service often depends on its global success. For example, technology "unicorns," or innovative technologies experiencing explosive economic growth, such as Tinder, Uber, Airbnb, and Pinterest, were localized in 20–30 languages in 2015 (Mayorskaya, 2015). In the case of Airbnb, 65 currencies were used in 2016 (Solomon, 2016). The most successful organizations realize that their information products and services must reach a global audience while still localizing these products and services to specific cultures.

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Second, technical communicators can no longer consider the local and the global as a binary relationship, as both of them are mutually constituted by each other with the national serving as a connecting point in between—sometimes more global in nature, sometimes more local. In fact, both local and the global are “so closely intertwined that the former is actually one part of the latter” due to “an open, back-and-forth dialogue” constantly happening between them (Sun, 2012, p. 25). Every design is fundamentally local and global, carrying the cultural values, interests, and politics of where it originated from, influenced by the speed, scale, and volume of the massive global flows of resources, technologies, and people that surround it.

The local has thus become the main stage for various negotiations: between creators and consumers of information products and services, and between the cultural values each stakeholder brings with them to these experiences. A big part of what we see and feel comes from our concrete day-to-day experiences in local spaces, since the global reality is fundamentally an imagined reality pieced together through our mediated experience from mass media and globally connected digital network or through our own limited travel and life experiences. As a result, the local stage is actually where our overall global experiences are unfolded and where the global, the national, and the local interact with each other. It’s where “various aspects of globalization take

concrete forms” (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008, p. 440). Therefore, the work of articulation and negotiation surrounding the fluid structure of global/national/local must happen on the local level, such as through user advocacy work that ensures the inclusion of underrepresented users.

Culturally Sensitive Design: Strategies, Practices, and Techniques

The discussion of cultural sensitivity started from the human service disciplines, such as nursing, clinical therapy, and social work where professionals work with culturally diverse patients and clients. Later, it became a widely accepted concept to advocate “a multicultural worldview” which treats cultural minorities “as equals despite their being different” (Band-Winterstein & Freund, 2015, p. 969). Informed by critical theory of technology (e.g., Feenberg, 1999, 2002; Suchman, Blomberg, Orr, & Trigg, 1999; Winner, 1980), culturally sensitive design explored in this special issue is an approach which “is fundamentally founded on a philosophy of technology that believes in ‘cultural variety in the reception and appropriation of modernity’ (Feenberg, 1999, p. 183)” (Sun, 2012, p. 23), with a goal to create “a better future for this global village” (xvi). It is part of the growing body of scholarship on social justice-oriented design and civic participatory design that has been steadily growing within the field of Technical Communication (e.g., Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Crabtree & Sapp, 2005; Haas,

2012; Leydens, 2012; Agboka, 2013; Walton & Jones, 2013; Ding, Li, & Haigler, 2015).

Many puzzling local experiences beg for our thoughtful solutions to address the reality of global cultural diversity, such as the tension between cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity. As we are writing this introduction, the Swedish furniture manufacturer IKEA, which introduced a slogan of “Designed for people, not consumers” in its 2017 ad campaign, has been widely criticized for deliberately excluding photos of women in its local catalogs to Israel’s Haredi Orthodox community and thus creating the illusion of all-male families (Chabin, 2017). IKEA later apologized to the public. But this is not the first time the company had made this blunder, and a similar incident happened in Saudi Arabia five years ago.

What could companies like IKEA do differently in the future? How can our design and communication work both embrace the reality of global cultural diversity while demonstrating cultural sensitivity? What advocacy is required to ensure the inclusion of underrepresented and underserved users? What are strategies, practices, and techniques that technical communicators can utilize that help them embrace, support, sustain, and enrich cultural diversity in this increasingly globalized world? Should we remove all the instances of cultural uniqueness from information products and services in favor of a lowest common denominator

that will strip away any possible harm but also ignore local culture? What level of cultural uniqueness should be added and what should be avoided when a global product or service is localized to a specific market?

These are hard questions to answer, but they are the challenges we as technical communicators must confront. As the roles of technical communicator and user experience designer have begun to blur in productive ways (Redish, 2010; Redish & Barnum, 2011), UX is becoming an essential skill set for technical communicators in a variety of industries and communities. Today's technical communicators are playing an increasingly important role in cultivating cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) to transform our workplaces, our communities, our society, and our global world. Indeed, at a time with so much uncertainty about the global future, it is very timely to explore how to localize user experiences in this special issue.

As co-editors, we were excited about the spectacular submissions we received about this topic. Moreover, we are happy to see that this issue is made by a mix of established researchers, emerging scholars, and practitioners. It could not be more exciting to envision the future of our field and our designed world with fresh voices and bold minds.

Conceptual Pathways

The first two pieces of this special issue map the conceptual pathways of negotiating the local

and the global when localizing user experiences.

We begin with a reflection on local negotiations for global diversity and advocacy between a researcher and a practitioner. In “Localizing communities, goals, communication, and inclusion: A collaborative approach,” Ann Shivers-McNair and Clarissa San Diego review and reflect on how they cultivated global cultural diversity through the complicated, and often difficult, process of local negotiation in the US and Poland. They call their approach “community strategy,” which centers on social justice and advocacy against the wide background of global cultural flows, with the goal of opening opportunities for “cross-cultural, socially just engagement” for effective communication across differences. Through their collaborative research and practice, the authors found that “diversity is not a global or definite term; it is local and contextual.” They maintain “[if] we are truly committed to globalizing UX and to localizing user communities, then inclusivity and advocacy—as themselves localized practices—should be woven into every part of the process.” Presenting concrete cases in a practitioner-friendly language, they outline four key dimensions of community strategists’ guidelines that many of us could use to guide our negotiations in spite of our own struggles: localizing communities, localizing goals, localizing communication, and localizing inclusion.

“Of scripts and prototypes: A two-part approach to user experience design for international contexts” by Kirk St. Amant introduces a new framework to study the global flow of technology and media: a script-prototype theory approach that addresses the nature of materiality in global design on how creations should conform to contexts. This approach helps organizations to “develop a new, alternative version of the product for audiences in other cultures” by pinpointing the variables of use at work in a particular context of use. It uses script theory (from cognitive psychology) to explore script-based user behaviors in other cultures and employs prototype theory (from linguistics) to decipher the issue of user representation.

Local Negotiation Work on Multiple Fronts

While new frameworks bring new opportunities for technical communicators to embrace global cultural diversity, technical communication researchers and practitioners are also exploring how technical communication expertise can expand into new venues. This includes user experience design work at various sites and on different fronts: in a non-profit language service department, in a community technology center, and in a state election office.

In their “Converging fields, expanding outcomes: Technical communication, translation, and design at a non-profit organization,” Laura Gonzales and

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Heather Noel Turner explore a converging process of translation, technical communication, and design for multilingual content development—a change driven by the material realities of global flows and based on their two years of fieldwork in an American non-profit language services office. They call on technical communication practitioners to develop a well-rounded skill set connecting technical communication, translation, and design. Their insightful findings will benefit practitioners and researchers working in and around non-profits and small businesses, many of whom are doing essential groundwork in community building. Furthermore, the design of a study of multilingual content development in a small non-profit shows us the urgency of training a new generation of technical communicators who can “prioritize the needs of their clients while negotiating between multiple roles that require highly specialized knowledge, technology, and products.”

Taking a similar research stance, Rachel Tofteland-Trampe studies the local cultural practices of an American urban community technology center in “Crossing the divide: Implications for technical communication user advocates.” She observes that a big part of the access issue for inexperienced technology users is due to lack of appropriate cultural knowledge and asks designers to reconsider visual design cues and design guidelines developed for today’s webpages. Using the local techniques

developed by technology center tutors as examples, she discusses how technical communication user advocates could help underrepresented users to cross the digital divide and “take a user localization approach to develop more empathic, empowering, and culturally meaningful methods of communication.”

In “Designing for a culturally inclusive democracy: A case study of voter registration outreach postcards in Latino communities,” Lindsay Pryor, a veteran Washington state election administrator, reflects on her experiences of designing two versions of bilingual voter registration cards to reach out to heavily Latino counties. Applying design and rhetorical methods in the field, she employed an instrumental approach to emphasize the convenience of online registration in one version of a voter registration card and used a social approach in another by persuading potential voters through community pressure. The field study that followed showed that these bilingual designs significantly increased voter registration rates in the counties in which they were employed, but there was not a significant difference between the two versions of the design. As part of the “Design 4 Democracy” initiative, this case study explores culturally inclusive UX practices in technical communication design.

A Bigger Picture

As some of you might notice, the original title listed in the

CFP for this special issue was “Globalizing User Experience,” but the special issue you see before you is titled “Localizing User Experience.” We feel this title more accurately characterizes what we face, experience, and are often challenged by as technical communicators working in a global world. It emphasizes that the local is the major site for the negotiation work of technical communicators looking to foster global cultural diversity. Meanwhile, it reflects the current stage of this line of research: It still remains primarily local in terms of empirical research and confined within the Western world. The difficult questions raised earlier in this introduction will not be satisfactorily solved until our methods, practices, and experiences represent a bigger picture of the global.

As more technical communicators engage in the user experience work to embrace global cultural diversity through various forms of local advocacy efforts, indeed, we see new opportunities emerging before us. At a time when the global cultural flow has shifted from a diffusion model to a participatory model (Miller & Kraidy, 2016), more companies will take up the sharing-economy as Airbnb to go global. As a result, more relationship-building work (Ackerman, Kaziunas, & Chalmers, 2015; Getto, 2014; Spinuzzi, 2014; Sun, 2015) will be needed to address the increasing demand for community building on the local level that connects the local and the global. While traditional technical communication jobs

could be replaced by outsourcing or by robots (Hart-Davidson, Omizo, & Nguyen, 2017), the ability to facilitate communication experiences that span local and global cultures will require human beings capable of deep empathy, wisdom, and cultural fluency.

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