Thinking Big in the Global Village

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Internet technologies inspires us to think beyond national borders. The ability to collaborate, communicate, and do business online offers the potential for a truly global village. Yet communication in cyberspace is by no means seamless. Issues of gender, copyright, free speech, privacy, and electronic commerce must be considered in terms of global, not local, standards. This paper presents thoughts and considerations on each of these individual issues, connecting to other research and noting that despite the abundance of utopian claims about online communication, there are still many challenges before we can truly utilize the Internet at its full potential.

Introduction

From its inception, the Internet has been a technology that has inspired us to think beyond national borders. Even in pre-Web days, when cyberspace was navigated by command line operating systems and utilized primarily by military and academic researchers, Internet technologies allowed people to communicate with individuals from around the globe. Early researchers of computer-mediated communication (e.g. Hiltz and Turoff, 1993; Sproull and Kielser, 1991) recognized the power of reach and speed in these technologies — today, the Internet and its wide-reaching abilities are practically ubiquitous, especially in the communication workplace environment.

Yet, while cyberspace helps us envision McLuhan's predicted "global village," the communication in this village is by no means seamless. Issues of gender, copyright, free speech, privacy, and electronic commerce, to name but a few, must be considered in terms of global, not local, standards. This paper presents thoughts and considerations based on the author's research of online communication, connecting these ideas to other recent research and highlighting key concepts and issues. If we are to truly live up to the potentials of the Internet as a global medium, we need to "think big" about the social, legal, and ethical issues that involve not only U.S. interests but interests of citizens from around the world.

Gender in Cyberspace

Many promoters of the Internet argue that this technology has the potential to break down barriers and challenge traditional hierarchies or social factors. For example, some have claimed

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that gender is made less apparent in an online forum, because people can post messages using pseudonyms or are judged more on the basis of their thoughts than on who they are. Yet research and observation challenge this claim, supporting instead the idea that cyberspace reflects and perhaps even intensifies the inequities and biases already existing in the world. My research on the Lotus MarketPlace and Clipper chip online protests illustrate a gender bias in terms of access and dominance, misogynist attitudes, language use, and content (Gurak, 1997. pp. 104-113). Other studies suggest similar gender biases (e.g. Herring, 1993). This research indicates that gender, race, and other social and cultural factors may not disappear online but may in fact be heightened.

Yet despite these findings, proponents of the Internet continue to take a utopian view of an online world where, as one MCI commercial suggests, "there is no race, there is no gender." If online communication is ever to become a truly global medium, open to all people and all points of view, developers and researchers alike need to move away from this utopian view toward a view that takes into account the cultural, gender, economic, and social differences of online citizens. Online spaces should be accessible to all but should also encourage difference, debate, and deliberative discourse.

Copyright in an Electronic Forum

Internet technologies have created a confusing time for communicators who are trying to understand copyright policy. The reposting of email messages, the blending of visual, textual, and sound on Web pages, and the standard habit of copying and pasting material from a variety of sources are among the many practices common in cyberspace yet often in clear violation of current copyright law. Although some lawyers believe that existing copyright law "seems to hold up rather well in this new digital world" (Cavazos and Morin, 1994. p. 156), online practices defy traditional copyright, leading others to ask how much the law can protect against what has become common practice online. For example, email systems make it simple to forward material to others; Web browsers allow easy downloading of sound, images, and html code. In other words, "[e]lectronic media is a technology that does not support boundaries, either physical or conceptual" (Katsh, 1995. p. 233).

International boundaries present a particular challenge to the issue of electronic copyright. What is copyrightable in one country may not be in another. Some cultures consider the entire notion of "intellectual property" to be at odds with a more collective way of living. For online communication to truly become a global medium, countries will need to work together to create copyright laws and standards applicable to a new age of communication. The World Intellectual Property Organization's efforts represent one such attempt; however, many countries, including the U.S., often resist WIPO's efforts to create intellectual property standards that may run counter to their own national laws.

Free Speech on the Web

The issue of censorship and free speech is another topic that has international implications. As with copyright issues, censorship and free speech are socially constructed concepts, dictated by law and cultural opinion. In the U.S., free speech is supported in all but the most extreme circumstances, while in other countries, concerns for the impact of particular types of information is a greater priority than is a completely open system of communication. Before the Internet, countries could for the most part make these decisions within their own physical

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boundaries. But today, with the ubiquitous reach of the Internet, many countries are concerned about how to uphold their standards for communication. For example, countries that have tight control over mass media outlets often have little or no control over the information that flows in and out of their borders via the Internet.

Even within the U.S., where free speech is well protected, concerns about the Internet and censorship are being raised. When an anti-abortion Web site promoted the killing of physicians who perform this legally protected procedure, courts determined that this site had crossed the line and was no longer protected speech. Other "hate" sites, or sites that promote bomb-building, violence, or pornography, are being contested as well. Yet some would argue that even with the best use of filtering software and the most well-conceived laws, the global reach and lack of gatekeeping on the Internet challenges these attempts.

Privacy and Electronic Communication

Over half of the Web sites surveyed in a recent study were collecting both personal identifying information and demographic information on users who connected to that site (Culnan, 1999). And even though more than 60 % of these sites did post privacy information, disclosing how and what they were collecting, one can assume that most people do not take time to read these pages any more than they take time to read the lengthy licensing statements that accompany new software products. So, in essence, users are giving away much of their personal information each time they connect to many Web sites, whether they know it or not.

As Kirk St.Amant in these Proceedings notes, the U.S. approach to privacy is not the only possible model. The European Union's Directive on Data Privacy is based on a model that places the burden on companies and organizations, not individuals. Under this model, individuals must give permission for the use of any personal information. The EU Directive states that specific personal information can not leave the European Union unless the recipient country of this information complies with the laws stated in the European Union's directive. In response, U.S. companies have attempted various self-regulatory approaches, but these two approaches (self-regulatory versus government stipulated) are at odds with one another. Issues of who has control over personal data and how this data is used must be decided at a global level if in fact the Internet's full potential as a worldwide medium will be realized.

Electronic Commerce and the Global Marketplace

Electronic commerce, or e-commerce, as it has been dubbed, is a phenomenon that no one could have predicted in the early days of the Internet. Yet the tremendous potential of the Internet, with its global reach and ability to target specific products and services, has not escaped Wall Street investors. Companies such as amazon.com, which have yet to make a profit, are attracting much attention and raising important questions. Some of these questions focus on items already discussed, such as privacy. Other questions deal with new business models or ways of reaching potential buyers.

Yet e-commerce reflects an U.S. cultural bias in many ways. Current e-commerce models are not regulated and rely on a laissez-faire model of development. Most e-commerce sites require the use of credit cards, a feature that will make these sites inaccessible to people who do not have credit cards or in cultures where the use of credit is shunned. In addition, most e-commerce sites are based in the U.S., and these sites necessarily contain images, sounds, uses of

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language, and other rhetorical features that are embedded with U.S. biases. E-commerce has the potential to create a global marketplace, but current developments are still a long measure away from this goal.

Summary

Although the Internet and related online technologies provide great potential for communication across international boundaries, there are many issues that need to be addressed before we can truly experience the global village. Gender and culture should not be masked but should be explored. Copyright law should be considered from a global, not national, perspective. Issues of free speech and censorship also need to be discussed on a world stage, and electronic commerce should consider the customs of all countries, not just the U.S. By "thinking big" in the global village, the exciting technologies of cyberspace can be used to their full potential.

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