Introduction to the special issue Cultural Considerations for Communication Design: Integrating Ideas of Culture, Communication, and Context into User Experience Design

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Culture and the Context of Communication Design

Culture can be difficult to define, yet it is central to almost everything humans do. Culture shapes how individuals view the world – what they consider right and wrong or appropriate and inappropriate – and often provides the lens through which they perceive communication and create messages (Sardi & Flammia, 2011; Varner & Beamer, 2015). As such, culture can be one of the most important aspects communication designers need to consider when developing materials for an audience – any audience. When extended to broader intercultural or international contexts, the need to understand how culture affects expectations and perceptions becomes even more acute. For this reason, the more communication designers know about researching, considering, and addressing cultural communication expectations, the more effectively they can develop materials that meet the information seeking and usage needs of a greater global audience.

But where to begin?

For starters, none of us is born with a culture. Rather, we start our lives as a blank slate, and our culture is something we acquire over time via living as a part of it, observing actions that take place in it, and learning from these observations (Berry, Poortinga,

Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011). This process of learning our own culture is known as *enculturation*, and it is based on exposure over time. That is, the more we see a particular behavior that the members of our culture reward, the more likely we are to adopt the perspective that behavior is correct and seek to emulate it. The more often we see the members of our culture being chastised for a given behavior, the more likely we are to view it as negative and to avoid that behavior. This connection between exposure and patterns of emulation or avoidance undergirds everything from how individuals dress to how they move to how they design to how they communicate.

So why is all of this important to communication designers? Because it means we cannot assume what is an acceptable way to communicate (e.g., to draft texts, craft visuals, or design interfaces) in one culture is universal and works with all others. Superficially, this idea—that no cultural universal exists for communication—seems self obvious. At a deeper level, however, it has important implications. And it is these deeper-seated concepts that affects how communication designers need to approach the process of developing informational and instructional materials for audiences from other cultures.

The Complex Dynamics of Culture and Communication

When it comes to creating messages or materials for individuals from other cultures, communication designers need to consider a range of factors. Some of these factors can appear self evident. Others can be more nuanced. In many cases, they are interconnected, and a failure to address one or more of them effectively can affect how the members of a given culture respond to and use a particular item – be it a document or an interface. For these reasons, it is important for communication designers to familiarize themselves with the various elements they need to consider when crafting different informational or instructional items for individuals from another culture.

Language and Rhetoric

To begin, culture and language are often interconnected. This connection, however, involves more than just language itself. Rather, it is often a matter of how the members of a given culture use a language in particular ways to convey information. In essence, just because individuals can say something a given way in a particular language does not mean they should say it that way or that the members of the related culture consider it expected or appropriate to convey ideas in that manner. The notion of *rhetoric* – or how one structures or presents ideas in given language – is therefore often as important as the vocabulary and syntax of the language itself (see, for example, Campbell, 1998 and St.Amant, 2006).

These rhetorical expectations – or how to say something appropriately, effectively, or credibly (i.e., worthy of attention and consideration) – can affect everything from how to construct a sentence to what kind(s) of information should appear in certain types of documents to if a particular genre for conveying information is used at all (Driskill, 1996; Tebeaux, 1999; Woolever, 2001). What makes these cultural rhetorical expectations particularly challenging is they are a construction of the culture using a given language and not necessarily an aspect of the language itself. This factor means cultural groups that speak the same language can have different expectations of what are considered expected, acceptable, or credible approaches to convey ideas (Driskill, 1996; St.Amant, 1999). Moreover, individuals often use the rhetorical expectations of their native language and culture to assess the credibility and the effectiveness of messages in other language and constructed by the members of different cultures (Ulijn, 1996).

Image Use and Visual Design

Further complicating this situation is the fact that such communication expectations generally transcend language. Different cultures, for example, also often have different expectations relating to visual communication. In some cases, these differences can involve what an item or object should look like in order for it to be recognizable (Atchison, 1994; Kostelnick, 1995;

Gillette, 1999). (What, for example, should a mailbox look like so potential users correctly identify a "send mail" icon?) In other cases, these differences can involve expectations of what constitutes an "appropriate" or a "credible" visual depiction of an object or a person (St.Amant, 2005). These ideas of recognizeability and credibility, moreover, are both related to the notion of exposure over time (Atchison, 1994). That is, the more one sees a particular item and is told, "This item is X." (e.g., this item is a "mailbox"), the more the individual will expect the related item to appear that way. Variations from these exposure-based norms can, in turn, affect if individuals from other cultures can recognize the items depicted in a visual. Similarly, they can affect if individuals from other cultures consider a particular visual a credible or an appropriate one that merits consideration (or if the overall document or interface in which that visual appears is also a credible one that merits consideration or use).

Closely related is the practice of using visuals to convey abstract ideas. If, for example, one wishes to use an image as a metaphor to represent a particular concept, what should that visual be? (To convey a particular product is associated with education and learning, what should the related product logo depict?) In making this selection, communication designers need to be aware that the same item can represent different qualities or traits (i.e. have different metaphoric connotations) depending on the culture of the related audience (Horton, 1993 & 1994). Similarly, how should visuals be used to convey ideas more indirectly? When, for example, is it appropriate to have an advertising visual depict two competing products in order to imply that one is better than the other? It depends on the culture (and related cultural preferences) of the given audience (Kamath, 2000).

These variations in visual communication expectations, moreover, extend beyond the use of specific images or the design of certain graphics. Rather, they often also apply to the construction of overall visual elements such as interfaces. Consider the design of an organizational website. Where should the menu bar (or bars) be located to facilitate use? How many links should appear in them? And how many images should one include on such sites (and where should these images be located)? Such factors are not

universal. They instead depend upon the expectations of the user and, in many cases, are connected to the culture of the user and what expectations members of that culture have in relation to the overall design of different communication materials (Yunker, 2003; Sun, 2012).

Usability and the User Experience

Perspectives on what constitutes a usable design add another layer of complexity to intercultural and international communication contexts. In essence, just because a given technology or communication product or device exists in multiple cultures does not mean that item will be used in the same way(s) – or at all – across cultures (Sun, 2012; Getto & St.Amant, 2014). Many social media, for example, can be accessed and are considered acceptable in a range of nations and cultures, but research indicates these media are not always used as often, in the same ways, or at all depending on the culture of the user (St.Amant, 2015, April). Similarly, other research notes that the idea of creating communication materials for one specific culture and then trying to adapt them for others is not always an effective approach. In fact, the design of an item is generally so closely connected to the norms and expectations of the culture that created it, users in other cultural contexts often need to re-configure the item to use it effectively (see, for example, van Reijswoud & de Jager, 2011). For these reasons, a number of individuals have begun to advocate individuals begin the design and development process with different culture in mind from the start and then create materials in a way that best address varying cultural expectations of and conditions of uses (Langmia, 2011; van Reijswoud & de Jager, 2011; Sun, 2012; Getto & St.Amant, 2014).

These ideas of design and use, moreover, are further complicated by the fact that no culture is a monolith. Rather, there are different groups within a given culture, and each group brings with it different expectations and needs that reflect different attitudes, lifestyles, and situations or settings (Yu, Chan, & Ireland, 2007; Getto & St.Amant, 2014). For these reasons, communication designers studying culture and communication have begun to advocate approaches – such as the use of personas – to better understand the different populations that can exist within a greater

cultural group (see, for example, Getto & St.Amant, 2014). While such a degree of granularity can seem daunting, the rewards for these investments can be quite high. (This situation is particularly the case in relation to online media and interface design as international Internet access continues to expand to more nations and cultures.)

Understanding and addressing such cultural communication factors, however, are only part of the overall puzzle communication designers need to understand in order to engage in effective design for other cultures. The other major factor to address is the context in which the related materials will be used. The central issue here is that different contexts require the communication designer to account for and address different factors in order to create materials a given cultural audience will find usable. While these contexts are often manifold, one way to approach this overall situation is in terms of three meta-categories that examine the settings in which information is shared with different groups.

The Contexts in Which Cross-Cultural Communication Occurs

One of the greatest challenges in addressing aspects of culture and communication has to do with the context in which information will be used or will be exchanged. To address this factor from a communication design perspective, let's think of three different contexts for interaction. The idea is that by better understanding such contexts, communication designers can make more informed and more effective choices about how to approach a particular situation that involves designing materials for users from other cultures.

Context 1: Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication

For the purposes of discussing these contexts, let's define culture as a world view. That is, culture is a framework the members of a group use to identify what is important to the group and how to assign value based on that common notion of importance. In this way, our culture identifies what the members of our group/our culture communicate about (i.e., what the group values) and how

they communicate it (i.e., what the members of the group consider a credible way to interact in relation to that which is valued).

When groups with two different world views, or different frameworks for considering and valuing the world around them, interact, information moves from one culture to another and thus from one value system—and system for communicating and assessing the conveying ideas—to another. This context for interaction where information moves from one value system/world view/set of expectations for conveying ideas to another could be considered *cross-cultural communication* (i.e., ideas move across cultures). The process of conveying ideas and information back and forth across cultures – and different systems for conveying and evaluating the presentation of ideas and information – would thus be *intercultural communication*, for it is a context in which the members of two different cultural groups interact.

The central idea in this situation is the factors affecting communication practices are connected to identifying, understanding, and addressing cultural expectations vs. other items or aspects (e.g., different legal systems) that affect communication practices. This perspective also means that such cross-cultural or intercultural exchanges are not connected to geopolitical boundaries, but can take place within the boarders of the same nation (e.g., Canada has large Anglo-Canadian and French Canadian cultures, both of which exist in the same country and communicate within the contexts of that same nation). Thus, when communication designers study intercultural communication contexts, the focus of their research would be on identifying the different world views of the cultures interacting and then identifying how those differences affect communication patterns and expectations. The idea is by identifying, understanding, and addressing such cultural factors (i.e., differences), one can design more effective – and, ideally, more usable – communication products for users from that cultural group.

Context 2: International Communication

In other cases, communicating across cultures involves interacting across different nations. In these cases, communication is not only intercultural (i.e., involving more than one cultural group), it is also

international. This distinction has to do with geopolitics and economics. When different cultures interact in the same nation, they are often doing so under a common political and legal system (e.g., a set of national laws) that governs exchanges. As a result, the communication designer only needs to be familiar with and account for one set of national laws when creating information for these different cultural groups. Moreover, as the legal system under which the parties interact also generally stipulates the nature of a range of behaviors (e.g., how to settle a business dispute, what constitutes legitimate business practices, how to file a grievance or challenge a decision), the communication designer only needs to be familiar with and consider the nuances of this one system when creating materials for the different cultural groups interacting within it.

When communication becomes international, or involves more than one nation state, the legalities one needs to consider becomes more complex. In such cases, what might be permissible or legal behavior in one nation might be actionable or illegal in another (St.Amant, 2008). For example, the laws that govern what information can or must be shared with others, how, where, and when can also vary markedly from nation to nation (Markel, 2006). (Consider how the different national approaches to personal information and data disclosure affect how US companies can interact with individuals in EU member nations.) Similarly, privacy laws that regulate if and when the government can monitor communications (and hold individuals responsible for what they say) can vary from one nation to another – and such factors can affect how individuals in different nations use the same medium to communicate (e.g., uses of social media in the US vs. in the People's Republic of China) (see St.Amant, 2008, 2015 March, & 20105 April). These different national laws can also affect how much control organizations in one nation might have over their information or materials once those items have been shared with individuals in another nation (Herrington, 2013). (Consider, for example, how different national statutes on copyright have influenced the ways in which organizations in one nation share proprietary information with partners in another country.)

In a similar way, the various political and economic systems within a nation can affect communication – and other – practices in a range of ways. The economic system of a nation, and the related political system that governs the nation, can affect what resources/funds are available and how they are used. Consider, for example, infrastructure. The amount of funds available to a particular national government and how that government decides to allocate those funds can affect how developed, widespread, and reliable different kinds of infrastructure are in a given nation or a particular region of that nation (Tawileh, 2011; van Reijswoud & de Jager, 2011; St.Amant, 2015, March). When two cultures are interacting under one governmental system, aspects such as these can be easier to identify and account for. When they expand to include different nations and political and economic systems, then assumptions about what is "expected" in terms of telecommunications or transportation infrastructure – as well as the mean income of prospective clients or consumers – needs to be re-thought, researched, and accounted for to make sure individuals in other systems can access and use materials (ideally, as intended) (Tawileh, 2011; van Reijswoud & de Jager, 2011; St.Amant, 2015, March). Accordingly, the more nations involved in an international interaction, the more varying national/geopolitical factors need to be identified and accounted for in relation to design and developing materials that can work in different national contexts.

Context 3: Global Communication

Within this framework, the idea of *global communication* represents the highest level of complexity. In such cases, an organization is attempting to release a product to or share information with as many markets in as many nations as possible (or feasible). Thus, the complexities of attempting to address not only cultural differences and national differences expands exponentially as communication designers try to develop materials that will work with a wide range of cultural groups distributed across an array of nations. In such cases, the question often becomes what exactly does a global market or a global audience mean? Is an organization truly attempting to share information with all cultures and nations everywhere, or is the idea to connect to only a select group of individuals across a broad range of nations (e.g., the middle

class/individuals who can afford a particular kind of product). And even when the desire is to connect to a narrow group within a greater global context, the number of cultural and national issues that need to be considered creates high levels of complexity that the communication designer must address.

While this range of contexts, when combined with cultural communication factors, can seem daunting, the situation is not impossible. The key to communicating effectively in or designing effectively for these different contexts involves one central factor: knowledge. The more the communication designer knows about the cultures for which he or she is creating materials and the contexts in which those items will be used, the more effectively he or she can develop products that meet user expectations and needs.

Considerations in Culture and Communication Design

Addressing these various and complex factors often comes down to two central concepts: information and approaches. *Information* has to do with what one knows about the culture for which she or he is designing materials and the context in which the related audience will use those materials or engage in interactions involving or relating to them. The more one knows about the cultural expectations and preferences of the related audience, the environment in which the audience will make use of that item, and how, when, and where the item will be used, the better the communication designer can create materials that meet those needs and address the dynamics of the related context. (In essence, knowledge of audience is power to design effectively for it.)

Gaining such knowledge, however, can be difficult, for cultures can change in rapid and unexpected ways over time. As a result, the *approaches* communication designers use to learn about the expectations and needs of users from different national and cultures and the contexts in which they interact need to be multifaceted and extend beyond a simple literature search for prior work published on cultural communication patterns. Rather, the approaches communication designers use must involve observing the members of a given culture in order to learn about perceptions

and patterns of use. Similarly, communication designers need to consider ways to test different designs with the members of a given cultural audience to assess the usability of those designs and revise and adapt them to better meet audience needs and expectations when possible. Thus, resources that provide models of such approaches for acquiring this information and discuss the uses of different resources that contain certain kids of information can help communication designers better navigate the various contexts in which culture can affect communication and design expectations. The entries in this special issue represent initial examples of the approaches communication designers can employ and the resources they can use to enhance the information they have on factors of culture, context, and communication.

The Objective of This Issue

The purpose of this special issue is not to provide communication designers with a wide range of strategies and solutions for engaging in effective cross-cultural communication in different contexts. Nor should it be seen as a definitive resource on such topics. (Those objectives would require a series of texts – if not an entire library – to address effectively.) Rather, the objective of this special issue is to provide communication designers with an overview of ideas to consider, approaches to try, and resources to use when developing materials for users from other cultures. To this end, the entries in this issue should be viewed as the start of a discussion related to investigating how individuals think about communication practices in different intercultural, international, and global contexts. The editor of this issue therefore encourages readers to consider how the ideas, information, and approaches examined in these articles might be applied, modified, or built upon to extend our understanding of designing for and engaging with users from other cultures.

As noted, communication technologies often reflect the expectations and practices of the cultures in which they emerged. They can also shift the ways in which individuals interact via such technologies and lead to changes in cultural communication patterns. These ideas are central to the first entry in this issue – Xiaobo Wang and Baotong Gu's "The Communication Design of

WeChat: Ideological as Well as Technical Aspects of Social Media." In this article, the authors examine how WeChat – a social media technology developed in the People's Republic of China (PRC) – both reflects and is changing communication practices in that nation. To do so, Wang and Gu analyze how different features of WeChat allows citizens of the PRC to communicate in ways that circumvent certain governmental restrictions and engage in more open dialogue around sensitive political issues. By analyzing two cases where individuals employed WeChat to criticize and discuss different government actions, Wang and Gu reveal how the technologies cultures use to communicate can challenge conventional aspects of cultural discourse and of political control in national and international contexts. In so doing, the authors also present an approach for studying uses of communication technologies within the contexts of other cultures.

It is one thing to study the technologies created by and used by the members of a different cultural group. It is another to design materials, such as interfaces, for different cultural audiences. In such cases, success involves more than understanding audience expectations related to language and culture. Rather, communication designers also need to account for the various economic, political, and technological factors that can affect if, when, and how the members of another culture use certain materials. The idea of understanding such cultural contexts is the focus of Uttaran Dutta and Swayang Das' article "The Digital Divide at the Margins: Co-designing Information Solutions to Address the Needs of Indigenous Populations of Rural India." In the article, the authors present the results of a case study in which a research team developed interfaces for sharing information with individuals living in rural India. Early on in the process, it became apparent that new approaches were needed to better understand the intended users – individuals who had to overcome a range of challenges involving language, literacy, and familiarity with computers. By overviewing the approaches used to gather information on this population, Dutta and Das provide examples of the research communication designers can and should do to learn more about different cultural groups and contexts of use. In so doing, the authors also reveal how integrating users into the

design, testing, and research processes can result in materials that better reflect specific international contexts of technology use.

It is one thing to design materials for the members of a different culture; it is another to collaborate with individuals from other cultures on international design projects. In such cases, both parties need to understand the other's culture to facilitate communication and collaboration to benefit all involved. Developing such understanding involves studying the ongoing relationship between collaborators and identifying areas in which miscommunication might occur and relationships might break down. Rudy McDaniel and Lanlan Kuang's article "Cross-cultural Cinematic Communication: Learning from the Information Design Process for a Sino-American Film Competition" examines the complexities of such cross-cultural collaborations. In their entry, McDaniel and Kuang review a case in which a team comprised of individuals in the US and the PRC collaborated to co-host an international film festival spanning two nations. During the planning process, a number of cultural and political factors emerged that could have created problems between the collaborating groups. By examining the steps taken to address such issues and to open channels of communication, McDaniel and Kuang provide an effective example of approaches for learning about cultural dynamics while engaging in collaborations. Through this examination, the authors offer strategies for researching cultural practices and preferences while working with the members of another culture. In this way, McDaniel and Kuang build upon Dutta and Das' prior entry by expanding how one can partner cross culturally to engage in more effective international design practices.

As discussed, a first step in studying cultural communication practices involves identifying the contextual factors that can affect interactions. These factors can be cultural and linguistic, or they can be legal, political, and economic in nature. In either case, access to effective informational resources on such topics can facilitate effective designs or collaborations across cultures. The idea of resources is central the issue's final entry: Hilary Sarat-St. Peter's "Designing with *HDR* Data: What the *Human Development Report* Can Tell Us about International Users." In this concluding article,

Sarat-St. Peter discusses the *Human Development Report* (*HDR*), an annual publication of the United Nations Development Program. The report – which is a collection of data on different political, economic, and other factors for specific nations – provides relatively current information on a range of factors that could affect communication and design practices in different nations. As such, the *HDR* can serve as a valuable resource communication designers can consult to learn more about factors affecting individuals in different nations and regions. Using this resource effectively, however, requires an understanding of the data it contains as well as approaches to applying such information in different design contexts. Sarat-St. Peter, in turn, provides suggestions for using *HDR* data to guide communication design practices. She also notes how resources like the *HDR* can be used in classroom contexts to familiarize the next generation of communication designers with approaches for creating materials for other cultural groups.

By themselves, each entry in this issue provides important concepts and insights that can guide a range of activities related to developing materials for and sharing information with individuals from other cultures. When read as a volume, the combined ideas and approaches covered in this issue represent an important introduction to the resources, methods, and strategies communication designers can use to work effectively in different global contexts. In this way, the overall issue can serve as a foundation upon which communication designers can build and expand the ideas and approaches described here to a wider range of practices across different settings. Doing can help further our understanding of culture and communication design. It can also enhance our understanding of design, communication, and usability approaches and practices across a range of contexts associated with culture and communication.

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