AN APPROACH TO GLOBAL NETIQUETTE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The user base of the Internet is today more diverse than ever. People with different cultural backgrounds may have very different views on some crucial Internet-related matters, such as the regulation of the Internet, the responsibility of an individual in the Internet, copyright issues, issues of anonymity, and so forth. Differing opinions on these matters have already roused heated debates. Although there are a number of local codes of conduct for proper behavior on the Internet, and although countries have set laws and regulations concerning the net, there are almost no studies on the set of rules that would be commonly agreed on by all users of the Internet, in all their cultural diversity. In this paper we propose a study that will be based on established qualitative, anthropological methods, and that aims at finding a commonly agreed core set of rules for appropriate use of the Internet.

KEYWORDS

Netiquette; Global Netiquette; Multicultural Web Communities; Cultural Dialogue

1. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing development and diffusion of computing technology is increasingly diversifying the ICT user base. Whereas Internet users 15 years ago were a relatively homogeneous group that consisted of mainly well-educated Western people (*Western*, as defined by Huntington, 1993), it is not so today. The Internet of today can hardly be described as a global village – it is more like a collection of loosely linked communities that differ, for instance, in language, interests, incomes, and occupations. During the last fifteen years, miniaturization, integration, price reductions, and increased interoperability have taken information and communication technologies from desktop to pocket, from cable-bound to wireless, from proximal to ubiquitous, and from common to private. The amount of technology has increased, its forms have diversified, and information and communication technology has gradually become an integral and commonplace part of people's lives. In addition to the intra-cultural diversification of the Internet user base, there is significant inter-cultural diversification, too. The globalization of computer networks is just about to pass the point after which Western people no longer constitute a simple majority of the user base of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Furthermore, even Internet users who share English as their mother tongue, come from a number of different countries with probably diverse cultural backgrounds.

To get along in an unfamiliar society or culture, people are often told, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But what should one do when Rome is scattered all around the world (Shea, 2004)? Whose rules should one follow when the inhabitants of Rome include a Finnish priest, a Korean student, a farmer from Texas, and a Kenyan human rights activist? What should be done when some people can speak the working language as their mother tongue while for others the working language it is their third language? As "official

netiquette" was created by Western early users and made to correspond to what the early users considered good manners, then "official netiquette" may not correspond with what is considered to be good manners in non-Western regions of the world.

Newcomers to the Internet are expected to behave according to the "local customs" of the net (Shea, 2004). However, there are already a plethora of local netiquettes, and new users have often trouble detecting the rules of a particular forum (Lampe, 2005). Certainly, participants of every forum can set their own netiquette that all participants are expected to adhere to, but in most web fora the netiquette is not explicitly stated. When an increasing number of web fora are multicultural, much of the potential of culturally diverse interaction may be lost due to clashes arising from problems in multicultural dialog. Similarly, legal and moral issues such as regulation, security, copyrights, ownership, free flow of information, and anonymity become increasingly contested due to the cultural and spatial distance of the users. The rigidness of the "official netiquette" (see Shea, 2004) on one hand, and the multiplicity of local expectations of ICT on the other hand, have lead us to ask, "*Is it possible to find a core set of rules that would be agreed by all the users of the Internet, in all their cultural diversity?*" In this paper we discuss the problem of having a single netiquette in a multicultural and pluralistic network, and describe a line of research that we propose to carry out that may help lead to the understanding and, ultimately, to the development of global netiquette.

2. STUDIES OF NETIQUETTE

Somewhere around the 1970s early users of the Internet laid the basis for a set of conventions and rules for doing things on the Internet. These rules are nowadays commonly called *netiquette*. The term *netiquette* is used in a number of meanings, so a definition is necessary. In this paper we use the term *netiquette* to mean *a body of conventions and manners for using the Internet as a tool for communication or data exchange, practiced or advocated by a group of people.* In this sense, netiquette includes laws, regulations, as well as good manners and practices.

In this broad definition, *users* include current and future stakeholders of ICT, such as individuals, governmental agencies, institutions, companies, organizations, and so forth. The *uses* of the Internet in this definition include uses such as surfing web pages and creating them, searching, advertising, offering web or ftp services, participating in web fora, reading and writing to newsgroups and mailing lists, chatting, sharing files, trading, and so on. Already the existing conventions of using the Internet differ among countries because of differences in culture, habits, law, society, language, or régime.

There is a significant amount of literature on and discussion about netiquette, but amazingly little has been written about the cultural dimensions of netiquette. There are many studies that concern netiquette *as* culture, but the question of different attitudes towards netiquette *between* cultures has been left largely untouched. In the field of computer science there are studies in computer-human etiquette, computer politeness, computer gestures, educational technology etiquette, and so forth, but in computer scientists' discourse, netiquette has been largely disregarded.

Although netiquette is not a widely studied topic, Preece (2004) notes that there is a diversity of net users, in terms of their culture, age, enthusiasm, income, and so forth. She also notes that different technologies require different forms of etiquette; for example, the etiquette of text messaging is different from the etiquette of email. Furthermore, the netiquettes between web communities differ (Shea, 2004). There is a project called "Global TeachNet News"[1] that promotes students around the world to refine and promote a more humane culture on working and learning together, stimulated by "student ambassadors".

It is also argued that even the basic functions of new technologies may be culturally determined. For instance, Lee (2000) found that in South Korean companies, email is quite often seen as an inappropriate way of communicating with one's superiors. In South Korea, email is not considered as respectful as other forms of communication. We acknowledge that new technologies may challenge previously accepted norms – netiquettes are not rigid (Preece, 2004) and they should not be understood as such. Yet, the flexibility of netiquettes should not be used as an argument for introducing culturally inappropriate conventions.

There are polls about issues concerning netiquette (see, e.g., Preece, 2004), but those polls typically do not collect background variables, such as country of origin, age, gender, education, or even Internet usage patterns, and they are grounded in "official netiquette." Although conducting a poll that answers a question such as "Which netiquette issues aggravate you the most?" in a number of countries might reveal differences

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[1]http://www.rpcv.org/pages/GTNnews/19960607.cfm

in attitudes towards netiquette, the poll would be biased by default. Namely, giving a preordained list of netiquette issues sets a fixed framework for the study. We believe that the question of a culturally fair, global netiquette is an increasingly important one, and that studies of it need to begin with more cultural sensitivity than the studies hitherto.

3. RESEARCHING CULTURE

Hofstede (1997) and Trompenaars (1997) propose a number of *cultural dimensions*, which are sets of value statements that typify differences between cultures. If one considers these dimensions as being correlated with how people feel about the Internet or how people behave on the Internet, a number of possible differences in netiquettes between cultures can be predicted. For instance, differences in *power distance* (Hofstede, 1997) may reflect different opinions on how the Internet should be regulated, on authority on the Internet, or on restricting the usage of the Internet. Differences in the level of *individualism* in cultures (Hofstede, 1997) may reflect different opinions on copyright issues, strong encryption, and anonymity on the Internet. Differences in the level of *masculinity* (Hofstede, 1997) may reflect different opinions on competitiveness and task-orientation versus collaboration and aesthetic issues (Marcus & Gould, 2000).

However, studies in cross-cultural psychology (which include cross-cultural comparisons as well as ecological studies such as those by Trompenaars and Hofstede) are hindered by various methodological problems. In general, researchers of cross-cultural psychology view culture as an independent variable and as a characteristic of an individual, similar to age, gender, or occupation (Ross, 2004). This view presumes that culture can be easily separated from other factors such as education, environment, or income level. In addition, equating a culture with a country is common in cross-cultural studies (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004). Many consider cross-cultural research, erroneously, to be causal-comparative research in which participants from different countries are compared.

In the case of Hofstede's study, for example, it is assumed that there is only one (national) culture in every country. Furthermore, in Hofstede's study it is assumed that the informants (employees of IBM) form comparable samples across different countries and that the results can be generalized to whole nations (instead of only IBM employees in a certain country). When the results of Hofstede's study are applied, for instance, in the cross-cultural design of websites, yet another daring assumption is made – that the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (or of Trompenaars, or of others making similar conclusions) are indeed predictors of the preferences of the users of the Internet in different countries. Studies such as Hofstede's and Trompenaars' are very abstract and cannot easily be applied to different contexts as such.

Cole (1998) has argued that rigorous compliance with the methods of cross-cultural psychology is not sufficient for the study of culture. As there are no culture-free research tools, and the tasks in the experiments are always dependent on the context and the subjects, Cole suggests that researchers should look for other ways to study culture. Cole recommends basing the research on the everyday activities of participants. The researcher creates an *activity frame* in which both the subjects and the researchers can participate in, and then during the course of the study the initial activity frame evolves. In this way, the study will include a temporal (historical) dimension. Instead of relying on ecological studies such as Hofstede's or Trompenaars', our study will utilize an established qualitative, anthropological methodology, introduced by Cole (1998).

Our research approach is a participatory one – instead of creating a framework for a study and conducting the study with participants from a variety of cultures, we start from an empty table: The participants of the study create the classification criteria and taxonomies of the study. That is, web users discuss the netiquette and continuously vote their own lists of the most important aspects of netiquette. From the netiquettes of different cultures, we try to find commonalities, and based on these commonalities form an understanding of interculturally agreed rules, regulations, and manners for the use of the Internet.

In accordance with Cole's (1988) suggestions for culturally sensitive research, the activity frame of our research is naturally the Internet, where the users' activities take place. The research is done in a number of dedicated discussion fora that enable flexible voting activities (`www.globalnetiquette.org`). Once the researchers have implemented the discussion fora in a number of languages, the fora are opened for everyone interested in the topics. In the fora, the users can discuss netiquette topics and regularly vote for a list of the most important issues. Although the concept of national cultures is a debated issue, in the beginning of the study we will limit the research to a number of easily bounded groups – thus far we have initiated research collaboration with Finnish, Korean, and Afrikaans-speaking researchers.

Following Cole's (1988) suggestions, we are interested both in the content of the discussion but also in the form of the discussion in the fora, as the form of the discussion may reveal unspoken values, rules, or habits. In addition to the most common topics, it is important to give attention to topics that arise rarely in the discussion, to topics that are silenced to death, and to topics in which there are agreements and disagreements among and between the cultural groups. Because the participants of the research are in constant interaction with each other, we believe that we can also get an accurate view of the controversial topics within cultural groups.

In order to avoid unnecessary bias in research, a nonreactive and minimally obtrusive approach can be taken (Bernard, 1995). To follow good research ethics, the participants are made aware that the results of their participation may be used later in research. Anonymity enables participants to express controversial views without fear of retribution. In a web-based research continuous monitoring (Bernard, 1995) is possible – all the actions of the participants can be recorded. We are also able to observe how the discussions proceed (or get stuck, or die out) over time. In the contrary, surveys and interviews are mere "snapshots", and cannot record temporal (historical) variation.

One problem with this kind of a study is that even though it may answer the question "what happened?" it may leave "why it happened?" in question. The records of the web site can be accessed as many times as necessary, and the discussions in the fora can be analyzed; however, without an interview the motivations behind the postings and polls may not be fully understood. The participants of the study are active Internet users, which biases the constitution of the groups towards some segments of society. The fact that the participants are more familiar with the Internet than average people can be seen either as a positive or a negative aspect. On one hand, the participants are familiar with the uses and potential of the net and probably hold less presuppositions that are false about the Internet than non-users. On the other hand, possible enthusiasm about the net may result in a netiquette where the net is seen in a more positive light than what the perception of the general population is. In the end, we believe that at least in the beginning of the study, it makes more sense to ask about netiquette from those individuals who actually use the Internet.

4. CONCLUSION

Though the Internet covers an enormous variety of cultures and task domains, the idea of global netiquette is needed in order to establish a common ground so that stakeholders can have pervasive rules that transcend cultural varieties across countries and regions. Our study does not start from the official netiquette, but we take an anthropological approach and let participants in each group construct their rules, regulations, and manners from scratch. Our foremost aim is to find the commonalities and differences among cultural groups in order to create a set of rules that different stakeholders can, in principle, abide by – a *global netiquette*.

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