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Libraries for a Global Networked World: Toward New Educational and Design Strategies

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Abstract

The growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web means that users expect access to information and the world's knowledge regardless of geographic or political boundaries. Some approaches think of geographic distances as the primary barriers and use information and computer technologies (ICTs) to enable knowledge transfer across these distances (MacCormack 2002). The concept of a digital global library is a natural extension of these ideas, and the technology to accomplish this would seem to be available. However, as others have pointed out (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; von Krogh, Ichijo et al. 2000), the technologies used to manage knowledge have a decidedly western, if not North American, perspective. Culture is rarely taken into account in the design of systems intended to help organizations manage knowledge (Mason 2003).

This paper posits that developments in Internet technologies can have a profound effect on the concept of a global library. These technical developments enable new ways for people to interact and for communities to form, and the combined technical and social changes challenge the conventional notion of a library as primarily a means for providing access to information. Future library design and the education of library professionals will benefit from conceiving of a global library as a space and infrastructure that enables different ethnic communities and national value systems to create and maintain "third cultures" (Packman and Casmir 1999) in which knowledge from the distinct communities can be shared and new knowledge developed. Such a conceptualization of the future library suggests that we should reassess the skills and systems that will need to emerge if library professionals are to continue to provide leadership for global knowledge sharing.

Introduction

The growth of the Internet, in terms of the numbers of networks, connectivity, and the number of users, has been exponential for almost two decades. Table 1 shows recent statistics on the availability of the Internet to different regions. What is remarkable is how the

predominance of usage is now arising in Asia rather than in Europe or North America, even though a lower percentage of the population in Asia has access. This situation means that even though the usage in North America and Europe may have led the digital revolution, the biggest changes in the future may come from Asia, which has the largest population.

The greater connectivity and the increasing scope of information available on the web have raised expectations for information and knowledge accessibility. The achievable ideal, many might argue, is that the information from anywhere in the world would be available from any location. Some libraries are approaching this by saying that the information in their collection is available "any time, any place" (Wilson 2001). In this ideal world for library access, geographic boundaries would no longer matter; a global digital library would enable the world's knowledge to be accessed from any place on the globe.

Global organizations have attempted to realize this vision of global accessibility of organizational knowledge, enabling access within their organization by those who need the knowledge, when they need it. To achieve this vision, many organizations have designed and implemented knowledge management systems (KMSs). For a knowledge-centric organization—an organization in which knowledge is the primary asset for creating and adding value—an investment in a KMS is seen as a basis for competitive advantage or a competitive necessity (Voelpel, Dous et al. 2005). The goal of a KMS is to support the creation, storage, transfer, and application of knowledge. The expectation is that by using computer-based KMSs, an organization can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge storage and transfer, two key steps in the process.

WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS

World Regions	Population (2007 Est.)	Population % of World	Internet Usage, Latest Data	% Population (Penetration)	Usage % of World	Usage Growth 2000-2007
Africa	933,448,292	14.2 %	**33,334,800**	3.6 %	3.0 %	638.4 %
Asia	3,712,527,624	56.5 %	**398,709,065**	10.7 %	35.8 %	248.8 %
Europe	809,624,686	12.3 %	**314,792,225**	38.9 %	28.3%	199.5 %
Middle East	193,452,727	2.9 %	**19,424,700**	10.0 %	1.7 %	491.4 %
North America	334,538,018	5.1 %	**233,188,086**	69.7 %	20.9%	115.7 %
Latin America/Caribbean	556,606,627	8.5 %	**96,386,009**	17.3 %	8.7 %	433.4 %
Oceania / Australia	34,468,443	0.5 %	**18,439,541**	53.5 %	1.7 %	142.0 %
WORLD TOTAL	6,574,666,417	100.0 %	**1,114,274,426**	16.9 %	100.0 %	208.7 %

NOTES: (1) Internet Usage and World Population Statistics were updated on Mar. 10, 2007. (2) CLICK on each world region for detailed regional information. (3) Demographic (Population) numbers are based on data contained in the world-gazetteer website. (4) Internet usage information comes from data published by Nielsen//NetRatings, by the International Telecommunications Union, by local NICs, and other other reliable sources. (5) For definitions, disclaimer, and navigation help, see the Site Surfing Guide. (6) Information from this site may be cited, giving due credit and establishing an active link back to www.internetworldstats.com. Copyright © 2007, Miniwatts Marketing Group. All rights reserved worldwide.

Table 1. Internet Usage and Population Statistics,
from http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed 2 May 2007)

Although a global digital library is not the same as a KMS for a global or multi-national organization, it is not a far stretch to imagine a network of "any time any place" libraries (Wilson

2001) that would enable access to the collective digital knowledge stored in this network by anyone, anywhere. The technical capabilities are available for a global framework of a considerable subset of the libraries in the world. And, as shown in Table 1, such a network would make information accessible for many of the world's population.

However, the difficulties of realizing such a global digital library are not simply technical. There would be issues both of ownership and access rights and cultural distinctions in how knowledge is organized and presented. Culture, taken as the dominating attitudes and behavior that characterize the functioning of a group or community (e.g., a nation), would play a role.

The practical issue of ownership and electronic access has been handled by publishers with individual libraries or groups of libraries as subscriptions and even on a pay-per-view basis. The pricing and business models for such access to journals are still evolving (Cox 2002). This paper will not address this aspect of access and pricing. Instead, the focus is on cultural and related gaps that can inhibit the realization of a truly global digital library.

Recent studies have acknowledged the value of taking into consideration culture (the patterns of behavior and routines that arise from a community's set of shared values, language, and routines) as a way to be more effective in both the diffusion of new technology and the transfer of knowledge (Pauleen and Murphy 2005; Weir and Hutchings 2005; Hong, Easterby-Smith et al. 2006), and the need to take culture into account when thinking about libraries in a global context (Mason 2005). In these studies, the authors typically call for designs that take into account cultural differences or have the librarian serve as a boundary spanner (Mason 2005).

In the following sections, this paper argues that past views of a global digital library may be too limited. (Not wrong, but a vision that is too constraining for what is possible and likely.) Particularly, the paper suggests that the secondary effects from the rapid technical developments are an important input into our concepts of what a global digital library can become. These effects also challenge us to think anew about the roles of libraries and how we can accommodate cultural differences. Finally, with different roles and different approaches, professionals who seek to create and operate components of a global digital library may need skills, backgrounds, and preparation distinct from what has been mostly monoculture training and preparation.

The Issues: What is different today?

Global Network

As shown by Table 1, the reach of the Internet is global. Although it began in the US and is unquestionably a western technology, its presence and growth is no longer limited to western cultures. Indeed, the majority of users now are outside the US, and the growth rates of other regions exceed that of North America.

The ubiquity of the Internet has accelerated the potential interaction of cultural values and practices. Two recent events involving kisses illustrate the potential for how conflict and misunderstanding can be magnified by the global network by which events become known and discussed.

In one event, Richard Gere repeatedly kissed the neck of a startled Shilpa Shetty, a well-known Indian actress, on stage in New Delhi during a charity event to raise AIDS awareness.

The event was televised, and both Gere and Shetty were charged by a local magistrate for an act of public indecency. In the aftermath, Gere apologized, Shetty called for people to focus on the charity event itself, and the judge who issued the warrants for Gere's and Shetty's arrests has been transferred[1]. The incident and its subsequent replaying on YouTube prompted world-wide discussion of how cultural values can clash. What is viewed as an innocent playful smooch by most western observers was seen by conservative Hindus as a vulgar and pornographic violation of local moral standards.

The second incident also involved a kiss—this one by Mr. Mamoud Ahmadinejad, the highly visible ultraconservative president of Iran. At a public ceremony honoring teachers, Mr. Ahmadinejad kissed the gloved hand of an elderly woman who had been one of his teachers. In the west, such an action would be seen as a respectful gesture honoring a former teacher, but in Iran, Mr. Ahmadinejad's kiss prompted in a strong reaction from local Islamic leaders, who accused him of indecency.

While both the Iranian president's action and the Gere-Shetty encounter illustrate violations of local customs (Vitello 2007), the significance of the events became magnified because of the high visibility of the incidents around the world. Not only were the text versions of the reports available in both electronic and print version, the rapid accessibility of videos of the Gere-Shetty kiss quickly created high interest among those who had ready access to the Internet. While the examples demonstrate the interconnectedness of the world and how quickly events in one geographic region can become known elsewhere, they also illustrate the difficulty of isolating cultural conflicts.

How Technology is Used: the Web 2.0 Concept

The impact of this growth may not be in the connectivity itself (which is significant, as illustrated above) but in the secondary changes in behavior and values that such connectively seems to stimulate. The notion of Web 2.0 is both an emerging technical model and a social model.

The emerging technical model means that the evolutionary development of web technology enables new capabilities for users. Higher bandwidths mean that images and videos are more readily available, thus increasing the richness of the media accessible on the web. Additionally, users can label, or "tag," pages and information units. Consequently, the web becomes increasingly dense in terms of primary content (the text web pages, the images, and the video), the metadata of tags, and the linkages among sites and pages. Collectively, all three (primary content, metadata, and linkages) create a set of extraordinarily rich sources of information, so that becoming aware of the combination of the three dimensions presents opportunities for learning and for innovative connections among previously unassociated assemblages of facts and relationships.

The emerging social model is enabled by how people choose to use the evolving technical capabilities. The technical capabilities permit—even encourage—the formation of new social networks focused on particular interests or other shared characteristics, ranging from such simple concepts as attending the same school to more complex associations such as a shared interest in particular types of books or hobbies.

[1] http://www.examiner.com/a-708862~Report__Judge_in_Gere_Case_Transferred.html

The creation of open source software is becoming more popular and challenges the traditional idea of ownership of intellectual property. Networks of highly capable programmers devote hours of time to developing and maintaining software that is widely used and not "owned" in the traditional sense. For example, the operating system Linux was developed by Linus Torvalds in the early 1990s and made available without cost. Since then, software developers worldwide have been constantly improving it, and a few years ago it was reported to be the most widely used operating system for supercomputers[2]. The notion of "ownership" in such software systems as Linux is based on a shared ownership and pride in a collective authorship. Such a social approach to intellectual property is a relatively new phenomenon, and its execution in the technical arena is both made possible and stimulated by what can be done through collaborative action through the Internet.

The new technical capabilities have spawned new forms of services that aggregate people with shared interests and characteristics. Social network sites and services, among them Facebook, MySpace, and others, provide a means by which individuals can maintain contact with others electronically. The virtual communities provide an alternative social outlet to face-to-face activities, and there is anecdotal evidence that it replaces email for the younger generation. One reporter describes her increasing use of Facebook as follows (Guzman 2007):

> "I needed it constantly. I started to check the site as much as my e-mail. I shared my cell phone, address, gory details about my incompetence in the kitchen and every photo in which I don't look supremely unattractive (my friends' appearances notwithstanding). Browsing my friends' profiles became a habit. [Now] Facebook is my drug. My hub. My swirling vortex of social chaos. It lets me stay in touch on my own time, on my own terms. I sail its pristine blue and white pages with the wind at my back and a clear view of my social landscape. What was life before Facebook? Did I ever actually keep a real live photo album? Call friends at home -- on land lines? Send letters?
>
> Forget e-mail and the Internet. Without Facebook, I'd feel ... shipwrecked."

The significance of these examples of social networking—one oriented toward software development, one purely social—suggests that what we are seeing is a new approach to using the Internet. It has become the meeting space—a virtual "third space" for gathering, beyond the physical workplace and the home—that goes beyond simply searching for and accessing information. The Internet is changing how we interact with each other, both for work and for recreation.

Nature of the Issue for Global Libraries

The above examples suggest that we may want to rethink the potential role of a global digital library. While performing in a role similar to the roles of past libraries, the global digital library will be facing a constituency comprised of a different generation. Certainly the role of the library as access to information, as a bridge to opportunities that otherwise might not be open to those who are "underserved" by other societal institutions, will continue. But if there is to be a true global digital library, it will have to confront the challenges of making accessible information and knowledge that may be viewed locally as being in conflict with prevailing cultural practice or violating local moral standards. In short, local libraries that would participate in a global network of libraries—and thus provide their constituents with the benefits of access to global sources—

[2] http://www.forbes.com/home/enterprisetech/2005/03/15/cz_dl_0315linux.html

will have to accommodate multiple cultures and different moral standards. How they manage this accommodation is a major challenge.

The second issue—the meaning of Web 2.0 for a global library—is more complex. In the new Internet environment, libraries may want to offer opportunities that go beyond the provision of access to information. Some observers believe that this is already happening, particularly at the local level, where user-responsive services are continually evaluated and changed to meet expectations (Miller 2005; Hastings 2007).

This raises the question of the role of the library, particularly the public library and the academic library, and how these may be evolving. (And we would argue that the global digital library would include public and academic libraries as essential components.)

The public library in western cultures has always been more than simply a repository of books available for loan: it has served as a community center, as a gathering place, and—at least in democratic societies—as a symbol or icon of upward mobility and opportunity for advancement. The academic library in most western cultures is seen as a source for scientific, cultural, and technical knowledge. However, there is not a universally accepted desired role for libraries. Much of the developed world tacitly assumes that sharing information generally is a positive, collectively beneficial process. Some cultures value information and knowledge differently, however. An ethnographic study of the use of library by native Maori determined that new Maori library users had difficulty accepting the fundamental purpose of a library. According to Duncker, the Maori felt that it was a violation of their core values for libraries to store and make accessible to many people their most valued knowledge, including Maori genealogical information. Such knowledge, considered tapu, or sacred, should be disseminated only in circumstances that respect the tapu nature of the knowledge (Duncker 2002). In some cultures, knowledge is valued only if it is shared sparingly; it loses value if it is readily accessible (Harrison 1995), much as many Western cultures view intellectual property.

Such perspectives present barriers to realizing the concept of a network of digital libraries that would enable the storage and transfer of knowledge electronically. Not only is there the barrier of converting the tacit aspects of cultural knowledge to more explicit expressions, there is the added barrier of the potential incompatibility of cultural values. If we are to have a global digital library, we must think in terms of structures and processes that enable these barriers to be overcome while simultaneously honoring cultural traditions.

Meeting the Challenge of Cultural Differences

Past conceptual approaches have included boundary spanning, using a three level semiotic model proposed by Carlile (Carlile 2002; Carlile and Rebentisch 2003). In proposing such an approach to a global digital library, it has been argued that digital technologies can help with two levels of exchange between cultures. At the syntactic level, the library uses a shared language and vocabulary to bridge two cultures. At the semantic level, the digital library uses shared databases and thesauri to bridge the communication barriers between cultures. However, at the pragmatic level, machines are unable to bridge differences in power or to accommodate the differences in cultural values, and it is suggested that librarians become the essential boundary spanners (Mason 2005).

Reflection will show a dimensional problem with this approach. If we have N cultures, then we have N^2 boundaries (one between each pair of cultures), thus a rapidly expanding number of

"boundary spanners" required. Conceptually, this approach is one of accommodation, working bilaterally to bridge two cultures.

Instead of simply accommodating cultural differences, it may be more productive to exploit these differences to create new knowledge (Gadman and Cooper 2005; Pauleen and Murphy 2005). Accomplishing this would require a substantially different approach to designing the "interface" between cultures. Instead of trying to have professional librarians serve as boundary spanners, it may be more efficient and effective to establish systems, in the form of environments, that enable the creation of a "third culture" (Packman and Casmir 1999).

From the perspective of the semiotic model (Carlile 2002), this might be understood as a pragmatic level of boundary spanning. However, in this new third culture model, the approach is not one of accommodation. One culture is not transferred ethnocentrically from one context to the other, and one culture is not assimilated by another. Instead, the approach is to enable a situation in which a new culture is created from knowledge that is new to all the participants. The resulting amalgam is a culture that is shared by those who have worked together to build it from the combined exchanges and interactions they have shared.

Examples from International Business

The hybridization of cultures is a phenomenon that has been gaining attention by scholars interested in international communication and by those studying management of international organizations and globalization. Cultural hybridization is the combining of different cultural elements to form a new entity. One significant aspect of hybridization is that it is a more democratic—less hierarchical—than simply one culture adapting to another. All the parties take an active role in creating the new culture, and this lessens (if not negates) the traditional assumptions of assimilation or accommodation and the mostly dichotomous relationships of powerful-powerless/imperialistic-subjugated relationships (Pieterse 1995). The concept of hybridity is described as "a space of oblique signification where power relations are dialogically reinscribed," and "glocalization" is suggested as a more inclusive alternative to the more popular "globalization" (Kraidy 1999). The resulting culture is new, an original creation of the involved parties.

Packman and Casmir (1999) call the communication approach towards creating these new cultural products *third culture building*, and explain it as a process by which two different cultural groups form a third culture between them as their common ground, rather than completely imposing or adopting the original cultures in question. The result is something that incorporates elements of both cultures and yet remains separate and distinct from the originals. In terms of power, the democratic advantage of consciously taking a third culture building approach is clear as it "involves mutual learning, a cooperative dialogue and building experience rather than a one-sided attempt to be politically correct, or to simply assimilate" (Packman and Casmir 1999, p. 485). Through this communicative process, everyone must "[adjust or even forfeit] extant cultural norms and values [so that a new culture can be developed] where dialogue can freely exist and which is seen as beneficial to all of those involved" (p. 486). Though organizations can and should be true to their original values and products, they must at the same time be flexible and open enough to make changes that meet the culturally-rooted needs of their target markets.

Although such an approach can be a tremendous challenge, business ventures such as multi-national corporations (MNCs) have shown that it works and is preferred to other approaches (Hurt and Hurt 2005; Voelpel, Dous et al. 2005). The Hurt and Hurt study

documented the failure of an “ethnocentric” (37) approach to transferring of organizational knowledge and practices (the “original” model) from one cultural context to another (“local” model). In this case, “ethnocentric” signified the transfer of the company’s knowledge and ways of doing things completely intact, assuming that the original model was the best or preferable way, and that what worked well in the original cultural context would, or should, work equally well in another. Both models were viewed as “sets of attitudes [and] responses… formed by different histories, national cultures, and administrative heritages." Rather than attempting to replace one with the other such that the process became "a confrontation of models" (38) that “created barriers to learning for both parties and block[ed], or slow[ed], knowledge transfer" (39), the managers representing the parent company attempted to revise their approach, taking a more collaborative tack, “the objective [of which] was not to make a qualitative difference between the two cultures, but create a company spirit in which what was essential to both French and Polish personnel was respected…" (43) The result of this was what the authors called a new “common space” or “common ground” (44) that incorporated practices and cultural identities of both groups. Not only did this space unify the workers, who had once been at odds with one another, but it also provided "a new frame of reference… through which the actors could make sense of their experience, as opposed to using their old frameworks to interpret events. In this common space, a platform of common knowledge was developed and a culture that was both tacit and explicit had been forged that could be transferred to new recruits." (44) [Note: After this success, however, the parent company abandoned this third-culture-building approach and returned to their ethnocentric model, the success of which was undetermined at the time of publication of the study. The authors observe that "MNCs are unrelenting in their attempt to maintain their tested business models" and are "impatient with diversity that seems to call into question the core of their operational effectiveness and will drive towards integration." (47) (Hurt and Hurt 2005)].

Another study examined the development of a global knowledge management system (KMS) for Siemens ICN, a division of the German-based electrical and telecommunications company (Voelpel, Dous et al. 2005). Although not labeled as a third culture building approach, the company’s decision makers opted not to take the ethnocentric approach of creating their KMS in Germany and transferring it to their subsidiaries abroad. Instead, they developed the system called ShareNet through a process of repeated testing and feedback from Siemens employees across the world, “ensur[ing] that the system would benefit from the integration of a rich source of cross-cultural competencies at an early stage, which would serve as a cornerstone of the subsequent global rollout." (12) Highly satisfied with the approach, the authors determined that "the accumulated profit the knowledge-sharing system had generated for ICN accrued to approximately Euro 5 million." (Voelpel, Dous et al. 2005, p. 17)

In the ShareNet example, the authors termed the approach “glocal” (12). It can also be seen as a good example of third culture building in that ShareNet successfully incorporated elements of user needs, norms, and expectations from all user cultures, while simultaneously fostering mutuality and cooperation. Rather that forcing a German-centered KMS onto its subsidiaries and partner organizations, Siemens created one from the ground up that met everyone’s needs and allowed for multiple approaches to knowledge creation and sharing.

Implications for a Future Global Library Network

The business and commercial examples provide confidence that “third culture building” can be effective for organizations that share a goal. These examples demonstrate the concept, but they are several years old. The companies did not have the benefit of the emerging capabilities of today’s Internet. Moreover, the talented young people that are creating their own

social networks are paving the way for what can be accomplished. The design is not based on a traditional information system, however, but more the development of an infrastructure in which virtual spaces facilitate the connection of users in a plurality of values, styles, and knowledge sharing approaches.

Conclusion: Significance to Profession

The realization of a global digital library is closer than ever. However, it will not happen with a complex interconnection of technologies, and it is unlikely that an ethnocentric transfer of "best" practices or knowledge will enable the realization of a single or even a network of libraries that meet this vision. However, by exploring how to exploit the second order capabilities of the Internet (Web 2.0), the global digital library can emerge. Collaboration by cultural institutions can provide virtual spaces for communities of professionals and users to build third cultures. As these third cultures emerge, the participants develop new cultural practices than transcend the individual ethnic and national cultural barriers. The new global digital library will not simply be a collection of resources that can be accessed seamlessly "any time, any where," it will become a place in which new knowledge is continually created and reformed for local users.

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