

Critical Design Sensibility in Postcolonial Conditions

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Abstract

For the past decade, social media technologies have acclaimed global successes and altered local cultures. Various uses across the globe not only present peculiar patterns characterized by local cultural and sociotechnical conditions, but also are complicated by the issues of value, identity, power, and hegemony in the postcolonial conditions. Unfortunately postcolonial scholarship had been absent in technology and computing design discourse until lately, and this partially explains why culture is often interpreted narrowly and statically, and structure and its structuring process is mostly ignored in cross-cultural design practices. To address these issues, I argue that cross-cultural design community should foster a critical design sensibility to understand the postcolonial conditions where we are living through so that we could come up with culturally sensitive designs that are not only driven by market revenues but by mindful listening, ethical standards, social justice, and the conscience of “design for social good” as well.

Keywords

social media; cross-cultural design; postcolonial; culture; HCI4D

Global Diffusion of Social Media Technologies

For the past decade, social media technologies have acclaimed global successes and altered local cultures. However, the overt instrumentality of a social media technology is often lauded over its implicit values and sociocultural meanings during local uses, and people tend to apply an overly techno-utopian view to interpret the changes it has caused, such as in the case of the “Twitter Revolution” occurred in Arab Spring two years ago. This type of naïve responses often contests and exemplifies the common problem in cross-cultural technology design, the disconnect of action and meaning (Sun, 2012). Technology is considered as value free with its implied politics and ideology being ignored (Friedman 1996, 1997; Nissenbaum, 2005; Winner, 1980), and the meanings solidified and manifested in design features are transferred from one context to another simplistically. As a result, the designed technology is usable, but local users do not relate to it or even resist it.

Cross-cultural studies indicate that these social media use practices usually develop different communication patterns while responding to local cultural and rhetorical traditions and then take on different use trajectories in various locales (Donner, 2007; Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2006; Sun, 2009, 2012). As Ito (2006) suggests, we should regard those local uses “as a heterogeneous set of pathways through diverse sociotechnical ecologies” rather than “a single trajectory toward a universal good” (p. 6). However, those studies tend to focus on comparing and contrasting local differences without linking them to the impact of globalization and its accompanying power relationships. Indeed various local uses of social media technologies are profoundly complicated by the issues of value, identity, power, and hegemony in the postcolonial conditions.

The Case of Facebook Japan

Take the recent development of the Facebook Japan website as an example. As the U.S.-based Facebook has rapidly risen as the world’s largest social networking website with a billion users (Zuckerberg, 2012), many local SNS websites were kicked out of the game (Cosenza, 2012). However, Facebook had a difficult battle to win Japanese users due to its distinctive feature that requires its users to use real names for profiles. This feature, which made Facebook a huge success in American culture

where it originated, conflicts with Japanese Internet culture, where users like to use pseudonyms to interact with each other either for bonding with old friends or for bridging for new connections with a different conceptualization of privacy. Over 75% of Japanese social media users chose to use pseudonyms around the time of 2009 (Orita & Hada, 2009), as supported by the top Japanese SNS website Mixi at that time. Consequently Facebook's penetration rate had been stagnating at 3% for a long time until fall 2011, long after a Japanese version was released in 2008 and after a Facebook office was opened in Tokyo in September 2010. Facing such strong resistance from local users, the global IT giant determined to conquer this strategically important online market with bold localization initiatives while sticking to their real-name policy. It eventually acclaimed victory in September 2012 after morphing into a professional networking site for Japanese users, similar to LinkedIn, where local users are more comfortable to use their real names for professional networking.

This case shows how static meanings out of context, influenced by a transmission model of communication (Slack, 1996), are often transferred in cross-cultural design, neglecting local cultural preferences and use habits (Sun, 2012). Meanwhile, the simplistic transmission process and the static meanings transferred are intensified in the postcolonial conditions as both the cultural hybridity and the accompanying power relationships are "unavoidable" (Merritt & Stolterman, 2012). Clearly even though researchers and practitioners already began to celebrate the agency of local users in this increasingly globalized world and describe this stage as *glocalization*—a new stage after *cultural imperialism* and *globalization*, which recognizes the tension between the global and the local, encourages the interaction of both, and thus theoretically captures "receding center-periphery international arrangements and emerging decentralized, fragmented, and multifaceted patterns" (Kraidy, 2001)—cultural imperialism is still pervasive everywhere, including in an affluent country with self-sufficient Internet culture such as Japan. The singularity promoted in the Facebook Japan case—only one social networking mode is honored in this global village—is more alarming and disturbing than similar cases occurring in other developing countries: A local social network service is doomed before this global juggernaut no matter how hard local users fight. It also conflicts with the design goal of "pluralism" we would like to advocate in research and design practices (Bardzell, 2010; Bødker, 2006; Harrison, Tatar, & Sengers, 2007). As Bardzell (2010) warns, this type of singularity often "quietly and usually unintentionally imposes—without transparent or rational justification—Western technological norms and practices" (p. 1305).

Critical Design Sensibility in Postcolonial Conditions

A lens of postcolonial theory will illuminate "a layer of embedded cultural power relationships (or culturally negotiated positions of power and subordination) atop already pervasive power structures in society, organizations, and designer-user relationships" (Merritt & Stolterman, 2012, p. 75). It will help interweave structure and culture in design practices and research by regarding a local site as "a heterogeneous space, one with uneven development, always under construction, and never complete," therefore, it will "open up critical space for new narratives of becoming and emancipation" (McMillin, 2007). Unfortunately postcolonial scholarship had been absent in technology and computing design discourse until lately, not to mention in cross-cultural design practices and research, and this partially explains why culture is often interpreted narrowly and statically, and structure and its structuring process (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 2000) is mostly ignored in cross-cultural design practices. Clearly, the disconnect of action and meaning and its associated asymmetrical power relationships performs more profoundly in the cases of HCI For Development (HCI4D).

To address these issues, I argue that cross-cultural design community should foster a critical design sensibility to understand the postcolonial conditions where we are living through so that we could come up with culturally sensitive designs that are not only driven by market revenues but by mindful listening, ethical standards, social justice, and the conscience of "design for social good" as well. The critical design sensibility aims to negotiate the design opportunities and constraints social media technology brings as it integrates a) agency and structure, b) identity and culture with a focus on power for cross-cultural social media technology design. Here, the Facebook Japan will be used as an example to illustrate the framework.

The value of postcolonial scholarship for cross-cultural design is not a focus “on the negative critique of constructions of cultural difference, but *on the productive possibilities of ‘difference’ itself*. The seams among differences are not simply a source of undesirable unevenness and aberration, but also sites of creativity and possibility” (Philip, Irani, & Dourish, 2012, p. 7, emphasis added). Therefore, a design methodology informed by postcolonial theory is more than a reflexivity tool, and it will have enormous potential to influence design practices, helping us to come up with new design directions and new approaches to ultimately “design for social good.”

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