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The Problems of Global Cultural Homogenisation in a Technologically Dependant World

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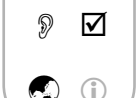
Global cultural homogenisation has significant consequences for our responsibility for others in distant parts of the globe. ICT gives a powerful impetus to this cultural homogenisation. There are a number of distinct elements that contribute to this.

COVERAGE



SOFTWARE

A very large part of the cost of software is the cost of development and testing. The largest remaining element is support costs (if those can be passed on to others, or software achieves prominence in a mass-market without the software house providing significant non-automated support, the point is magnified). Thus the marginal cost for each additional sale of mass-market software is very low. Given this, within each market there will be a natural tendency towards monopoly for each application. This does not, however, mean that there is a similar natural monopoly *across* software sectors (Microsoft's ability to move from dominance in PC operating systems to dominance in application software has rested on other factors that have been, and will be, debated by others).

Why does the trend towards monopoly in each market propel us towards cultural homogenisation? After all, the Chinese market is very different from the Brazilian market. The crucial factor here is that the costs of 'localisation' of mass-market software for different national and language markets is often small compared to the overall cost of development and testing, meaning that the mass software market is usually essentially global. Some may ask at this point why of the three most spoken languages in the world: Spanish, Chinese and English, there is vastly more software in English. There are a number of factors at work. Of these three, the English language software market has always (hitherto) been the largest, meaning that software has tended to be developed for that market first. Secondly, 'localisation' of some software originally written for English language markets takes a sufficient market share in the Chinese language and Spanish language markets to inhibit the growth of native language software industries. Thirdly, the costs of localisation are sufficiently high to mean that much software released in English is not localised.

A further impetus towards cultural homogenisation through the software market comes from imperfect localisation, through which (usually) United States usage is still evident in some aspects of the software (for example, whether the date has the month first or not), but where there has been enough localisation to mean that the imperfectly localised software still takes a highly significant portion of the market in a country where differences from US usage have hitherto been stable.

KEYWORDS

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Social Responsibility

ADVERTISING

Advertising tied to globally distributed software, on websites[1] and at events (such as sporting events) that are globally broadcast (whether by more-or-less traditional television, or by webcasts) similarly propels us towards global homogenisation. The advertising itself constitutes global homogenisation: the same message is received by people throughout the globe, using the same script (i.e. roman script)[2]. But the homogenising effects of global advertising go beyond this. By having global advertising open to them, global brands can have an advantage over local brands. Moreover, if expenditure has been made on global advertising, the owners of the globally advertised brand have an incentive to maximise their benefit from that advertising by having their product distributed globally, and if the product is distributed globally, they have an incentive to ensure that their adverts at global sporting events are actually broadcast globally.

GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

The development of the Internet has probably been the most influential application of ICT. Over a decade or so it has been transformed from a communications medium for specialists and experts to a commercialised sphere open to the public, and used by the majority of the population of some countries. Oppressive regimes that have feared the Internet have been forced to find a way of allowing access to it while trying to control that access, and hacker activists have been developing tools to subvert those controls. Increasingly, thus, ICT enables global communication. With the Internet, the costs of communicating with someone in the next street can be the same as the costs of communicating with someone in a time zone with twelve hours difference.

With increasingly global brands, global products such as software, and global service industries (including advertising), business are increasingly global, giving business reasons to communicate with people far distant. Global business in turn leads to global travel and global friendships, leading to non-business communication among those involved in those businesses and their families.

But global communication is not limited to production: consumption both of products and of entertainment gives people on opposite sides of the globe more issues around which a mutually interesting dialogue can take place than ever before (while the Internet means that when it comes to romantic and sexual relationships, people in different continents with what was previously often a mutual interest without a practical outlet have a new opportunity for interaction).

Whatever the reason for the communication, global communication has a de facto standard of the English language. In part this is because English is so widely spoken, but it is also partly because a higher proportion of native speakers of English are not fluent in another language than native speakers of many other languages. This is compounded by the disproportionately high use of ICT among English speakers. Against this background, even now the web has reached some degree of maturity (and its governance has moved away from the United States government), English is the overwhelmingly dominant language of the web. To some extent this is mitigated by automatic translation, but the cost of initial investment for each language severely restricts the number of languages for which automatic translation can be a realistic prospect in the near future.

Intense global communication by definition cuts across traditional boundaries. While there is a homogenisation of culture, individuals still come from distinctive cultures. The expectations of individual participants in the information society thus can differ significantly. Nance and Strohmaier (1994) theorise that this variability can be analysed in terms of two key dimensions. One dimension is about the relationship of the message to its context. In 'high context' cultures, such as Japan, much of the information can be implicitly gleaned from the context of communica-

1. Some web advertising attempts to tailor the advert to the indicated language preference and location of the accessing web browser, but much does not, and even when attempts at tailoring are made, it is far from precise for all users.
2. Except, of course, in the case of some web advertising.

tion. In 'low context' communication (as is common in the USA) most of the information is explicit in the message itself. The other dimension follows a continuum from collectivism to individualism. With collectivism, membership of groups, and the pursuit of common interests, is the key. The demands on group members are different to those on outsiders. People belong to a hierarchical array of groups where, for example, the neighbourhood group might take precedence over the workplace group. Under individualism, realisation of personal potential and talents is promoted, and self-interest emphasised. So while there is cultural homogenisation, the variability that remains makes it very difficult to provide information or conduct a debate in a way that is acceptable to all. This is especially problematic because to a significant extent the processes of globalisation are now unstoppable. Some of the effects of globalisation are for good (the ending of foot binding in China, or the more widespread appreciation of African music, for example) and some less benign (such as rapid intercontinental spread of diseases), but whatever attitude we have to them overall, we cannot ignore them.

MORAL GUIDANCE

Among the effects of globalisation is an increasing ability to affect, intentionally or recklessly, the lives of people in distant parts of the globe. Johnson (1997) notes antisocial behaviour on the Internet including unauthorised access, launching of viruses, racism and harassment. While our overall ability to affect the lives of others still tends to decrease with distance, as it has throughout time, the rate of this decrease-with-distance has declined. Given the dictum that 'ought implies can'[3], a widening ability to affect the lives of others gives a widened field of consideration about whether we have responsibility. Where previously we could simply say, 'it cannot be my responsibility because I have no influence', now we have some small influence, at least, and so need to consider whether we have responsibilities. While 'can' does not necessarily imply 'ought', it is our belief that the widened field of moral consideration *has* resulted in some obligations over greater distances than was previously possible.

Where once very few people had substantial enough impacts on the lives of distant people to have significant moral obligations to people tens of miles (or kilometres) away, now for many of us they are routine. As increasingly we interact on a global basis, we find that we do have responsibility for each other regardless of location, yet the moral standards to be upheld are often unclear. For those involved in, or commenting on, a global industry that did not even exist fifty years ago, such as the ICT industry, in which standards of responsibility have never managed to catch up with developments, this is a serious problem.

National (and sub-national) laws are for many people the primary source of guidance about what is wrong and right, but national laws can (rightly) normally be expected to remain silent about some immoralities and often restrict things that are not considered wrong by a significant number of people even within that state. Thus there is an imperfect mapping between national laws and even the morality that they are trying to uphold. Further, because of legislative delays (including the need to identify a problem before legislating against it) national laws inevitably lag behind technical developments, allowing 'policy vacuums' (Moor, 1985, p266). The greatest problem, though, is that the laws in different legislatures often do not agree with each other. In a world of increasing trans-border interactions, of global markets, and increasing global homogeneity, this problem alone means that national laws alone cannot be sufficient.

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Full-scale international law is sparse, giving little guidance on many issues that

3. This dictum requires that determinism is false. See, for example, Saka (2000). While the dictum has Kantian heritage, its acceptance does not require acceptance of Kantian moral theory.

might be of interest. When it does, the voting arrangements of intergovernmental bodies owe far more to realpolitik than any principle of 'democracy' or equality, meaning that the results lack moral legitimacy, and thus authority. Similarly attempts to reconcile laws across legislatures through less formal means have proven to be more open to self-interested business lobbying than democratic influence.

Against this background, non-governmental sources of moral guidance come into prominence. Individuals can have an important role, developing and putting forward ideas that may, initially, be too novel or radical for wider acceptance. To a significant extent the power of the idea and the argument will be a key factor in determining the prominence that it gains. But there is a danger that the ideas that gain prominence through this route will be those of the establishment, the relatively wealthy and relatively powerful in global terms. Those in a position to expound their views in influential ways will tend to be those who have had postgraduate education, and are in jobs that allow them time to research and write scholarly papers: to reach such a position we have to be exceptionally lucky in global terms.

Some may say that the Internet allows freer entry to the debate, after all "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993). While it is true that in theory it is possible for the most unlikely people to take part in intellectual debate, the unwritten rules of debate on 'open' forums on scholarly themes tend to make them almost as restrictive as traditional published methods of airing ideas. As for setting up websites and using less scholarly forums, the problem is that the ideas are unlikely to even come to the attention of those who debate ideas for a living unless they have a validating mark such as coming from a .edu domain (or equivalent). Even if those hurdles are not insuperable, for the majority of the world's population, the entry charges for participation in the debate – the various costs of Internet access – are pretty close to insuperable barriers.

So what are the alternatives to individuals taking part in a 'battle of ideas'?

What sort of process could be used to arrive at a collectively agreed source of moral guidance for an increasingly integrated world?

In theory it might be possible to arrive at a globally agreed source of moral guidance by (non-governmental) national associations developing appropriate guidance, and then attempting to reconcile the differences. The problem with this is that incompatibilities are likely to be unnecessarily irresolvable, while the results are likely to be over-influenced by negotiating skill, relative power, and national associations from less industrialised countries are likely to be weak. When it comes to questions of how to be socially responsible in an increasingly fast-moving global society, such a highly time-consuming process is unlikely to offer anything significant that cannot be achieved by other means.

DEVELOPING GUIDANCE

International associations, such as the International Society for Ethics and Information Technology, may be part of the solution, but they have limitations. Membership fees are often set at a single rate that does not take account of global inequalities of wealth, and in the case of other, less enlightened, associations at levels so high that very few outside the industrialised world could hope to pay them. Effective participation often involves intercontinental air travel, further biasing the international associations towards those who are rich in global terms (or whose employers are willing to pay which is much the same thing) and who have employment and personal circumstances that allow such travel. The challenge to international associations is to mitigate these limitations and rise above them where mitigation is impractical, by attempting to find ways of including and encouraging active participation by those who otherwise would be marginalised.

Opinion polling may have a role in arriving at global standards for increasingly global interactions. A model can be found in "The Millennium Poll on Corporate Social Responsibility" (Environics International, 1999) involving representative samples of 1000 citizens in each of 23 countries on 6 continents. Virtually no other process has a hope of fairly representing the views of the world's population as a whole so well as such a global opinion poll. Given this background it is worth noting

the conclusions of the poll. The public expect the following of organisations:

- Demonstrate their commitment to society's values and their contribution to society's social, environmental and economic goals through actions.
- Fully insulate society from the negative impacts of company operations and its products and services.
- Share the benefits of company activities with key stakeholders as well as with shareholders.
- Demonstrate that the company can make more money by doing the right thing, in some cases by reinventing its business strategy.
  (Environics International, 1999, executive briefing, p5)

These expectations set an intensely challenging agenda for those involved in the planning, development and implementation of the information society, which should not be ignored.

Opinion polling has its limitations, however. Contradictory results may arise if different people constitute the majority on different questions (even without any individual having contradictory views), without any means of resolving the contradiction. By its nature, opinion polling cannot explore complex issues in the sort of depth that gives meaningful conclusions (so it is quite possible that individuals will give answers that contradict in ways of which they have no awareness). To compound these problems, asking people questions about which they have not previously thought gives statistics that tell us nothing of significance. So while opinion polling has a role in helping us understand the balance of opinions in the world, it should not be taken as sufficient. Other processes are needed to make up for its limitations.

One possibility is to attempt to formulate guides to action that coherently take account of social responsibility using processes that (in so far as is possible) are open, participative, and global. To be both practical and take the moral issues seriously, they need to be informed both by practitioners and those affected (whether directly or indirectly). As such, they provide some scope for input by people who otherwise would not be influential, who do not have the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the 'battle of ideas'. They do not have positions in a pre-existing power structure. The Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice (1998) (see Gotterbarn, 1999) came from a process that aimed to meet those standards. That is all very well, it may be said, but experience has shown that words on paper rarely influence action on their own. Large numbers of worthy codes of ethics have been written, and then ignored by those whose conduct was intended to be subject to the code. Against this background, it is noteworthy that the Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice is accompanied by measures to bring the code to the attention of practitioners and provide ongoing education.

Inevitably the actual application of the process of participation that resulted in the Software Engineering Code can be criticised. Participation by many of those affected (and especially indirectly) is inhibited by lack of time (and inclination – survival issues inevitably are more urgent when survival is threatened), by lack of access to capital resources (computers and telecommunications), and by language issues (that could, in principle, be solved with sufficient resources to pay translators). Meaningful communication, even if these difficulties are overcome, may still be difficult if participants come from very different positions on the dimensions that Nance and Strohmaier (1994) identified. It seems likely that the only practical way to get sufficient resources for a process that could not be criticised on these grounds is probably the involvement of governmental and intergovernmental bodies, but that is liable to lead us back to the problems that a non-governmental process was intended to avoid. So in this world of limited resources it is more appropriate to celebrate the Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice, while recognising its limitations, than to reject it in pursuit of an illusory ideal process.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the perfect process to arrive at authoritative guidance on the full range of issues of social responsibility, including those in fast moving fields such as ICT, is not available. Given that we have this lim-

ited moral guidance, what do we do? The world will not wait for us to develop it. In the mean time we must make, and act on, interim proposals. Moral criticism of practices and proposals may be appropriate in its own right and also as a part of the broader debate. Without authoritative moral guidance, these critiques may, in turn, be open to debate. The Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society aims to help in this process, but is aware of its limitations. But ICES is not just about empty intellectual debate, it is also about bringing those interim proposals to a wider audience, and in that spirit, we would like to close with a proposal for socially responsibility in one of the many fields of interest, the field of information technology management.

Erbschloe (2002) advances ten principles of socially responsible information technology management. They are:

- Appropriately staff IT departments
- Fairly compensate IT workers
- Adequately train computer users
- Provide ergonomic user environments
- Maintain secure and virus free computer systems
- Safeguard the privacy of information
- Ethically manage intellectual property
- Utilise energy efficient technology
- Properly recycle used computer equipment
- Support efforts to reduce the digital divide

There may be other considerations equally important (see Fairweather, 2003), or detailed exceptions and points of interpretation needed to accompany these ten principles, but taken alongside the four key expectations the global public have of organisations, a tough, but achievable agenda for consideration and action is available.

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