INTERNET AND E-BUSINESS CULTURAL DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

In many of the literature, the effect of Internet on the global culture is generally an argument for contention. Little research is done on the definition of the Internet or E-commerce as a culture. The paper presents an exposition on the dynamics of culture in the world of the Internet or E-Commerce.

INTRODUCTION

The issue chosen for discussion relates to the culture dynamics in the Internet. The explosive growth of Internet utilization in essentially every aspect of human endeavors has spurred a considerable degree of research in cultural, ethical, legal and tax issues pertaining to the Internet. The work presented in this paper is motivated by the article entitled "Cultural Dynamics and Issues in Higher Education" jointly authored by Pope and Thomas [9]. In this article, the authors described many aspects of culture relating to the different facets of institutions of higher education. They defined culture in relation to higher education and examined cultural dynamics in terms of the roles the institution serves in its environment and the role of each participant in the organizational structure of the institution. While arguing favorably for diversity in institutions of higher education, they provided expository analyses of cultural dynamics in the administrative structure and curriculum and carefully delineated strategies for addressing cultural issues in higher education. The line of argument in this paper would be similar to the approach used the article by Pope and Thomas [9], however, the focus would be on culture in the Internet. The thesis by North [7] and entitled "The Internet and Usenet Global Computer Networks" shared light on the definitions of culture and society as they relate to the Internet. Other articles that will be relevant in our discussions on the cultural dynamics are the ones written by Collis [2], Cooper [3], Kshetri [5], Little [6], Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klien and Colby [8], Sullivan [13], and Thompson and Lynch [14].

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON E-COMMERCE AND INTERNET

The Internet grew out of the work of computer scientists and engineers working for DARPA – the United States government's Defense Advance Research Projects Agency – in the late 1960s. It was not until the 1980s that the Internet and Usenet began to flourish, and even they were largely found only within research establishments and academe and, most commonly, within computer science and engineering departments [7].

The motivation for E-Commerce stems from the application of the supposedly massively under-utilized computing infrastructure to businesses with the primary purpose of developing an effective and efficient resource for commercial sectors and their consumers [4]. E-Commerce has been defined in many ways. In the book by Shelly, Cashman and Vermaat [12], E-Commerce was defined as a financial business transaction that occurs over an electronic network. Kalakota and Robinson [4] in the Encyclopedia of Computer Science defined E-Commerce as an execution of transactions between two or more parties using interconnected networks. This definition was expanded by a detailed explanation of the term "transaction" to mean exchanges that occur when one economic entity sells product (or service) to

another entity. More importantly, a transaction links consumer (client) to the producer (server). The Technology Forecast produced by the Price Waterhouse [10] defined E-Commerce as a way to conduct, manage, and execute business transactions using computer and telecommunications networks. The literature is filled with many variants of these three definitions. Apparently, the first definition only focuses on financial institutions. Perhaps, the reason for this application-specific definition was that the term E-Commerce was prevalent in financial institutions in its early applications. The electronic funds transfer (EFT) between banks over secure private networks introduced in the 1970s was one of the first applications popularizing E-Commerce [4]. This was made possible by the electronic messaging technologies such as the electronic data interchange (EDI) and the electronic mail. It is safe to define E-Commerce/E-Business to encompass doing business transactions over computer interconnected networks. The term commerce involves buying and selling of products and services [10]. While E-Commerce may be suitable for describing electronic-based operations at higher educational institutions, the E-Business is more appropriate, because E-Business is used in a broader sense [10].

Over the years, different types of the E-Business have evolved. They are 1) business-to-business electronic business; 2) business-to-consumer electronic business; 3) business-to-government electronic business; and 4) consumer-to-consumer electronic business. The business-to-business electronic business involves one business transacting business operations with another business on the Internet. The business-to-consumer electronic business model occurs when consumers shop for products and services offered by business organizations on the Internet [10]. Electronic model 3 is similar to model 1, except that in this case, businesses transact business operations with government agencies on the Internet. Electronic models 2 and 4 are similar if considering, consumers selling products and services on the Internet as operating business organizations.

BACKGROUND ON CULTURE

According to the Oxford Dictionary [15], culture is defined as the customs and beliefs and attitudes about something that people in a particular group or organization share, art, way of life, rules of behavior, language, rituals, technology, style of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion and political and economic systems.

The thesis by North [7] listed numerous and diverse definitions of the term "culture" taken form literature in anthropology. The list is a follows:
- The shared behavior learned by members if a society, the way of life of a group of people,
- The way of life of a group of people, the complex of shared concepts and patterns of learned behavior that are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation.
- The set of learned behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and ideals that is characteristic of a particular society or population.
- Complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.
- The customary manner in which human groups learn to organize their behavior in relation to their environment.
- The learned and shared kinds of behavior that make up the major instrument of human adaptation. The way of life characteristic of a particular human society.

CULTURE AND INTERNET

The definition given by Pope and Thomas [9] within higher educational context is pertinent to our discussions on cultural dynamics in E-commerce and Internet. In their definition, they emphasized culture to consist of the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions which guide the behavior of individuals and groups on the Internet and which provide frames of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and outside of the Internet. We have replaced the institution of higher education with the Internet in this definition.

In many of the literature, the effect of Internet on the global culture is generally an argument for contention. Little research is done on the definition of the Internet or E-commerce as a culture. The thesis by North [6] posits that the Internet is short of being regarded as a society, since it cannot be viewed as an independent society. The term "superstructural" society is used to describe the Internet, since it spans many societies. The Internet fails to provide a number of properties that can reasonably be expected of any society. The Internet offers the hope of a more democratic society and in order for it to become a tool for social progress, concerned citizens must understand the different ways in which the Internet can become embedded in larger social processes [1].

Agre [1] offered ten conclusions that might guide a country's development of a culturally appropriate Internet policy:
- Resists the standard sales pitch of new technology.
- Do not spend vast sums of money to buy machinery that you are going to set down on top of existing dysfunctional institutions.
- Focus on developing people, not machinery.
- Build Internet civil society.
- Electronic mail is more important than technologies such as the World Wide Web that employ sophisticated graphics.
- Conduct extensive, structured analysis of the technical and cultural environment.
- Identify existing practices for sharing information and building social networks and experiments using the Internet and allied technologies to amplify them.
- Do not distribute the technology randomly.
- For children, practical experience in organizing complicated social events, for example theater productions, is more important than computer skills.
- Machinery does not reform society, repair institutions, build social networks, or produce a democratic culture.

According to North [7], when moving from one culture to another, certain elements of the new culture will appear as hurdles to be overcome, or barriers preventing one from becoming acculturated. Other aspects of a new culture may offer support and aid enculturation. For example the need for and assumption of, computer literacy throughout the Net culture acts as a barrier to those with a non-technical background. Conversely the maintenance of FAQs (lists of frequently asked questions and their answers) in many Usenet newsgroups is a cultural convention that can make entry into the culture easier for new members. What elements of this culture (if any) have an empowering or supportive effect on new users of the networks? The study finds that the major supportive aspects of the Net culture are as enumerated below.   The conventions of the culture are freely discussed.

1.   The culture is not closed to outsiders and welcomes new members.
2.   There is a strong sense of community within the Net culture.
3.   It's what you say, not who you are.

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