WHO ARE "USERS"? REPRESENTATIONS OF DIFFERENCE IN USABILITY AND USER EXPERIENCE BLOGS

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis reports the results of an empirical study that classifies the rhetorical moves used to talk about diverse users in industry facing usability/user experience blogs. It argues that the metaphors used to talk about difference construct a normalized user that systematically excludes diverse users from the design process and results in technologies that contribute to oppressive systems of power and privilege. The thesis presents an alternative rhetorical construction of diverse users and offers suggestions to promote inclusivity in usability/user experience research, teaching, and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

This project began in late summer 2014 as an attempt to systematically understand and respond to a trend I was noticing in the industry-facing professional communication about usability and user experience (UUX). As an early-career usability/user experience professional, I saw various articles that all seemed to be making the same argument: difference[1] does not matter in usability/user experience research.

This argument raised red flags for me. It felt like a contradiction to what I was learning about context and culture in my technical communication and interaction design graduate courses. It seemed antithetical to the scholarship I had been reading about critical cultural theory, cross-cultural technology design, and localization. And it scraped against my personal experiences of working with technology in multicultural communities.

But it also made me think more reflectively on how well I was applying the values of inclusion, representation, and democracy to my work as a usability researcher and user experience designer. I began to wonder how truly inclusive user research and usability evaluation was of differences in race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender,

[1] I use the term "difference" here to refer to variations in race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability.

age, and ability. In other words: Who are the users in the center of user-centered design and what are the implications of this centering for the user experience?

To answer that question, I looked at how difference users[2] were being talked about in industry-facing usability/user experience blogs. I pulled all blog posts that dealt with difference in a substantive way from a representative sample of usability/user experience blogs and then coded each post on the sentence level to see what mentality about difference was being supported in the text.

I followed this process because I wanted to see what theories of culture and inclusivity were being carried out in the day-to-day practices of usability/user experience professionals. This is an important question to consider as the work of technical communicators— perhaps especially those technical communicators working as usability/user experience professionals — is increasingly multicultural. Diverse groups of users are interacting with the technologies this field helps create and support. The question is, how well (and by whom and at what time) are those users being represented in the design process?

[2] I use the term "difference users" here instead of the more common term "diverse users" for a couple of reasons. First, the word "diversity" has typically been used to refer to racial and ethnic variation, whereas the scope of what I talk about in "difference" includes race but is also much broader, including variation in gender, sexuality, age, language, and ability. Second, the word "diversity" is typically assumed to mean non-White. The assumption that White is the norm by which all others are marked "diverse" has problematic centralizing tendencies for this research and, therefore, I prefer the term "difference."

Answering this inquiry is not only a question of best practice, it is also a question of a social justice. Two facets of oppression are powerlessness and cultural imperialism, or the conditions in which oppressed peoples are not given opportunities to participate in processes that affect the conditions of their lives and/or have their perspectives made invisible or made Other in favor of a dominant group (Young, 2004). Usability/user experience work that does not purposefully include difference users in the design of the products that affect their daily lives and/or usability/user experience work that silences difference users in favor of a dominant user group run the risk of oppressing their users— often those individuals who are already marginalized by larger systems of institutional oppression. User-centered design has been marketed as a methodology that acknowledges and values the perspective of users in the design process. Ironically, a user-centered design process that is not representative of all users, may actually work to further disenfranchise users by silencing their perspectives and asking them to interact with technologies in which their practices are not supported.

As I demonstrate below, the field of technical communication has been talking for a long time about how technical communicators need to think reflexively about the ways their work participates in and contributes to systems of power and privilege. This study applies that reflective lens to usability/user experience in order to identify the prevailing theories of difference that are being expressed (implicitly and explicitly) in everyday practices of usability/user experience. This work is critical if

our field is to participate ethically in technology design and to advocate effectively and democratically for users in an era of global design.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Before looking at that question in more detail, I think it's important to contextualize how I'm framing this question within technical communication and to give credit to the various strands of scholarly literature that prompted this study. First, I review the conversation about critical cultural theory and the cultural turn in technical communication research, as I have found this to be a useful foundation from which to ground my analysis. Second, I review the literature on usability within technical communication as a way to demonstrate how I see the content of the usability/user experience literature as relevant to technical communication conversations. While reviewing these conversations, I pay particular attention to the places where I see overlaps between the two conversations and how those intersections have nurtured and shaped my own analytical work.

This literature review is useful for seeing how technical communicators have simultaneously been 1) critically thinking about their work as ideologically situated and 2) expanding the scope of traditional technical communication work to include technology design and evaluation, especially via the fields of usability/user experience. By gathering those two conversations into one place, technical communication has the potential to have a rich conversation about the ethics of working as user advocates in cross-cultural technology design. This conversation is particularly important as technical communication classrooms prepare students to work as cross-cultural usability/user experience professionals and as the work of seasoned technical communicators is increasingly multicultural.

I've organized this review of the literature chronologically under three major groupings. This grouping allows readers to see the evolution of various conversations in technical communication and draws attention to three significant ideas emerging from technical communication research that I believe are particularly informative to usability/user experience teaching and practice in a global society.

Mid 1990s - Late 1990s: Technical communication is an ideological practice.

My review of the literature starts in 1994 with Selfe and Selfe's publication of *The Politics of the Interface* because it marks an early convergence point for two conversations within technical communication that I see as often, but perhaps unknowingly, overlapping each other. The first conversation argues that creating technological interfaces— especially places where humans and technologies interact —is a technical communication concern. I trace this conversation throughout this section by looking at how technical communication scholars have talked about their work in relation to technology design and evaluation, particularly through usability and user experience. The second conversation makes the argument that the actions and products of technical communication are not politically or ideologically neutral. Rather technical communication exists in, responds to, and helps create cultural and ideological legacies (Selfe and Selfe, 484). I follow this conversation through the "cultural turn" (Scott and Longo, 2006) in technical communication and the ways technical communicators have been framing

their work within and against societal power structures. While I review these two conversations, I will note places of convergence, as I see the overlap of these two conversations as particularly relevant to understanding inclusivity in usability/user experience.

In the years immediately proceeding Selfe and Selfe's article, usability was beginning to be recognized as a distinct field of professional practice and inquiry, with the publication of Donald Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988), Jakob Nielson and Rolf Molich's "Heuristic Evaluation of User Interfaces" (1990), and the founding of the Usability Professionals Association (1991). Since the beginning, the fields of technical communication, usability, and user experience have been closely aligned (Redish and Barnum, 2011). Technical communicators, including Ginny Redish and Janice James (among *many* others), played key roles in the founding of usability professional organizations and the special interest group on usability within the Society of Technical Communicators. In 1998, Robert Johnson completed his influential work *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and Other Mundane Artifacts* (a word that was influenced by previous work on defining cultural studies [Johnson, 1987]). I see this work as a second convergence point because of the way Johnson couples a user-centered approach to technology with the concepts of knowledge (de)legitimation in technology design (later expanded on by Bernadette Longo in 2006) and the culturally/historically situated user as an important consideration for design practice (later expanded on by Huatong Sun in 2012).

Early 2000s - Mid 2000s: Technical communication is about more than pragmatic outcomes.

After Johnson, a number of technical communication scholars in the early 2000s published pieces about usability, specifically it related to technical and professional writing pedagogy (Spinnuzi, 1993; Breuch, Zachry, and Spinnuzi, 2001; Scheider, 2005). At the same time, technical communicators published a number of industry-facing books on the topics of usability research and methods (Hackos and Redish, 1998; Dumas and Redish, 1999; Krug, 2000; and Barnum, 2001). These works were instrumental in defining technical communication's relationship to usability and demonstrating the overlaps in methods, orientations, and skill sets between the two fields.

At the same time that technical communication and usability were beginning to understand and inform each other, technical communicators began making explicit a long-standing dissatisfaction with a hyperpragmatic orientation to technical communication. In the late 1990s, technical communication practice and teaching was dominated by the values of efficiency and effectiveness. Longo's 1998 piece on applying cultural studies theory to technical communication— with the goal of understanding how technical communication participates in practices of knowledge legitimation that are tied to cultural and social forces beyond those of a single organization (Longo, 55) — was a first step towards introducing additional values

for consideration (including ethics and power) by the technical communication community.

In the mid-2000s Longo's ideas were taken up by a range of scholars and practitioners in technical communication. In 2004, Carl Herndl edited a special edition of the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* that focused on "critical practice" or the ways that technical and professional communication can "dissect social relations" with "interventionist" motivations "committed to constructive political change." The next year, Jennifer Slack and J. MacGregor Wise published *Culture + Technology: A Primer* which applied a cultural studies approach to understanding technological culture.

In 2006, a collection of book chapters— edited by J. Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Katherine Wills — entitled *Critical Power Tools: Technical Communication and Cultural Studies* "respond[ed] to [technical communication's] need for more research and teaching approaches that historicize technical communication's roles in hegemonic power relations (Scott, Longo, and Wills, 1)." Also in 2006, Scott and Longo edited a special issue of Technical Communication Quarterly that traced what they termed "the cultural turn" in technical communication. The articles included in this special issue "critique[d] technical communication's sociopolitical functions and effects, including how they help[ed] shape people's subjectivities and material experiences, and they strategize[d] ways to intervene in and transform hegemonic forms of power (Scott and Longo, 3).

What is interesting is the number of convergence points between the cultural turn and the conversation on usability/user experience[3] within technical communication. I will highlight three below that I see as exemplary of this overlapping conversation.

Bradley Dilger's 2006 book chapter on extreme usability uses a cultural studies perspective to look at how the ideology of ease in usability (i.e., extreme usability) "consistently undermin[es] user-centered approaches to usability (Dilger, 48)." He warns technical communicators about the adoption of extreme usability and focuses on the value of a cultural studies approach to "prevent the task orientation of usability from myopic exclusion of discursive, historical, and cultural contexts (Dilger, 65)."

[3] My inclusion of the term "user experience" here (and not before here) in the literature review is intentional. In 1995, Donald Norman introduced the phrase "user experience" to talk about the design and evaluation work his team was performing that fell beyond the scope of traditional usability studies. The term quickly gained momentum in the usability community, mostly as "a countermovement to the dominant, task- and work-related 'usability' paradigm (Hassenzahl and Tractinsky, 2006)." Researchers and practitioners seemed to embrace the term as a way to account for a long-standing dissatisfaction with a pragmatic usability and as a way to account for the additional factors— including hedonism, identification, stimulation, and evocation — they considered essential to the design process (Hassenzahl and Tractinsky, 2006). It is interesting to note that the move away from pragmatism-only in usability occurred at roughly the same time that technical communication was also moving away towards pragmatism. Although the reason(s) for this correlation are outside the scope of this project, it causes speculation on whether or not the shift away from pragmatism in usability was spearheaded by those technical communicators working as usability practitioners.

Jason Palermi's article in the 2006 special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* looks at the ways disability studies can offer critical insight into technical communication practices. Palermi's work converges both conversations by using cultural studies methods to highlight the social construction of disability and normalcy in usability. Palermi's work demonstrates how rhetorics of disability accessibility within usability conversations in technical communication inadvertently reinforce problematic representations of users with disabilities and demonstrates how these texts interacted with larger patterns of normalization and knowledge legitimation.

Sharing the same edition of *Technical Communication Quarterly* with Palmeri's piece is Huatong Sun's article on "The Triumph of the User." In this piece, Sun investigates how technical communicators' narrow understandings of culture result in usability problems for information technologies. Focusing her study on mobile text messaging, Sun echoed the call to "think of issues of culture, usability, and localization and their dynamic interactions in a broader context (Sun, 458)." To do so, Sun creates her own framework for cultural usability, which includes elements traditional to usability (i.e., "how a technology is used as a tool in context") with a cultural studies (particularly British cultural studies) lens.

Therefore, by the mid-2000s, individuals who saw themselves as principally (or partially) usability researchers and practitioners *and* individuals who saw themselves as principally (or partially) interested in the intersections of technical

communication and culture found themselves looking past the pragmatic goals of efficiency and effectiveness and engaging more carefully with the values of representation, identity, power, and satisfaction. Authors writing in technical communication journals were applying cultural studies theory to study usability/user experience, with important implications for technical communication research, practice, and pedagogy. And usability professionals were thinking more broadly about what counted as usability and began labelling themselves as "user experience" to reflect a focus that included values similar to those supported by technical communication's cultural turn (e.g., identity, representation, and evocation).

Late 2000s - Early 2010s: Technical communication is culturally situated and culturally implicated.

During the late 2000s-early 2010s (i.e., 2007-2011), however, the two threads of conversation seem to diverge again. J. Blake Scott's 2008 article in *Technical Communication Quarterly* focused on pedagogical strategies for teaching usability, but makes very few connections with his earlier work on bringing cultural studies theory into the conversation of technical communication. Carolyn Rude's 2009 mapping of research questions in technical communication mentions usability (labelled as "practice"), but does not relate it to cultural studies work (labeled as "social change"). Redish and Barnum's 2011 article in the *Journal of Usability Studies* offers a history of technical communication's relationship to usability/user experience but does not mention any of the contributions highlighted in this article

that attempted to circumscribe technical communication in socio-historical context (even though many of these articles had direct implications for usability/user experience practice).

I start to see convergence again, however, in the last three years (i.e., 2012-present). Angela Haas' *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology* (2012) traces work at the intersection of race and technology, focusing on what those connection mean for technical communication research and practice. Sun's 2012 publication of *Cross-Cultural Technology Design* expanded upon her 2006 work and made pointed connections between contextualizing technical communication in cultural practices and user experience design. Agboka's 2013 piece on participatory localization overlaps both threads by talking about the colonial power structures built into developer-centered localization and calls for democratic and empowering design practices for intercultural usability/user experience work.

These convergences (both present and past) suggest that technical communication is conceptually poised to offer critical insights for cross-cultural usability/user experience work. Through this research, I wanted to understand how the critical cultural theory strand of technical communication is shaping practice in usability/user experience for the purpose of identifying possible points of intervention. Technical communication's cultural turn has offered rich perspectives on the role of culture and the ethics of cultural work in technology design. Now it is

time to see how that perspective can be applied to create an ethical, inclusive, and democratic space in usability/user experience.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

From mid-August to late-September 2014, I pulled all posts that talked about difference (i.e., variations in race, ethnicity, culture, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ability) from a snowball sample of 12 usability/user experience practitioner blogs. The list of twelve usability/user experience blogs were selected using the following criteria:

- The blog was recommended by other usability/user experience bloggers as being influential and/or useful to follow.
- The blog was included in curated lists of influential or recommended usability/user experience blogs.
- The blog had postings that were syndicated by usability/user experience content aggregators.

These criteria were important because I wanted to select a sample of usability/user experience blogs that had the largest reach in the usability/user experience community. Although the list of websites sampled originally included 17 blogs, five were removed from the list because of discontinued use (2), lack of functional search capability (2), and having a post length that was significantly larger than other blogs (1). This final blog was excluded because the length of posts (over five times as long as other posts) could have skewed the overall results of code frequency. For example, if one code happened to be prevalent in posts from this site (and the long posts required more of these codes to be used), than that code would

be over-represented in the total code count, leading to a skewed picture of the larger usability/user experience discourse on difference.

Individual blog posts were selected by pulling relevant entries from keyword search results, keywords that included: race, ethnicity, culture, demographics, gender, age, class, and income. Relevant sections of each post were then coded using the coding scheme included as Table 1 below.

Development of a coding tool

This coding scheme evolved from a combination of Leticia Nieto's *White Folks' Stages of Cultural Awareness,* Milton J. Bennett's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity,* and Beverly D. Datum's *White Racial Identity Development.* These sources share intellectual space with cultural studies, a field that had tremendous influence on the technical communication scholars whose work informed my theoretical approach to this project (e.g., Longo, Scott, Wills, Slack, Wise, etc). Furthermore, I had been exposed to these classification schemes as an undergraduate student and had seen their usefulness in making tangible the often invisible process of realizing, acknowledging, and responding to racial identity[4]. Because my research was an attempt to make tangible the intangible mental models of difference being operationalized in usability/user experience, these frameworks

[4] Although representations of race in usability/user experience were an important area of interest in this research, race was not the *only* category of difference I was interested in investigating. My tendency to draw from critical race theory and schemas for understanding racial development stemmed more from my familiarity with these conversations rather than an intentional favoritism or bias.

seemed like a reasonable starting place to develop a tool by which I could read the blog data critically and analytically.

In my first pass of coding, I used a series of codes derived exclusively from Nieto's framework. Nieto's framework is aimed at White racial development and segments racial identity development into seven stages beginning with Denial (where a person has no sense of racial identity) to Autonomy/Allyship/Integration (where a person owns privilege and uses it for social change). While this framework was a useful starting point, the coding scheme was not comprehensive enough to cover the patterns I was seeing in the data. Nieto's descriptions of the seven stages of racial identity development did not provide sufficient operational statements (i.e., descriptions about what each stage looked like in practice) for me to accurately assign the blog segments I was reading to a particular stage of Nieto's framework.

Therefore, in the second round of coding, there was a need to make Nieto's coding scheme more expansive— especially by adding additional operational statements by which blog data could be classified. To do this, I included Bennett's and Datum's analytical tools (both of which were predecessors of Nieto's framework) to the coding scheme. This addition provided ample operational statements by which to assign classifications, but was still not an entirely comprehensive fit for the blog data. Because I was investigating isolated instances— as opposed an arc of development over time — I found the sequential stage divisions of these developmental models to be a difficult match for the non-sequential data. Further,

all three models were primarily interested in racial identity development. However, the data I was looking at included many additional aspects of difference that were not always accounted for in the race-based models.

Therefore, in the final round of coding, I supplemented these codes with my own set of codes to more accurately capture the patterns I was seeing in the data. While this coding scheme was inspired by the operational statements taken from Nieto's, Bennett's, and Datum's model it also included operational statements of my own. The coding scheme I created was based the six primary rhetorical moves that were being used in conversations of difference, namely:

- *Denying* that difference exists in a relevant way
- *Minimizing* the types and/or scope of difference
- *Comparing* difference users with a "standard" group of users
- *Calculating* decisions about whether or not to include difference based on potential economic gains/losses
- *Acknowledging* the complexity of difference and *accommodating* difference users in design
- *Valuing* the perspectives of difference users as an asset to usability/user experience

In order to demonstrate how I saw those rhetorical moves being enacted in the data, I labeled each operational statement with a metaphor that captured the essence of the argument about difference being made in the blog excerpt. I based the names of

these operational statements on a dual understanding of texts as simultaneously reflecting and creating cultural ideology (Hall, 1980). In other words, I believe that texts serve as both indicators of mentalities (i.e., revealing classification schemes) and producers of mentalities (i.e., providing sample classification schemes for future use). Metaphors, as "figure(s) of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance" seemed particularly well-suited to capture this dual functionality of the analyzed texts. Metaphors account for the ways a text indicates ideology by looking for similarities between the mentality behind a certain text and similar mentalities as they have been applied elsewhere. Metaphors also account for the ways a text creates ideologies by providing word pictures by which further data can be categorized.

Table 1 lists the series of metaphors I created to understand and classify the blog data. The code metaphors are listed in the center column, with an example of this code in the right column and the primary rhetorical action this code represents in the left column.

Table 1: Metaphor-Based Coding Scheme

Primary rhetorical action	*Implied mentality (Difference is a(n)....)*	*Example of this code*
Denying Difference doesn't have any significant relevance to usability/user experience. `	Red Herring Difference distracts from more important considerations in usability/user experience.	"When it comes to usability testing, we've consistently found that the biggest differentiator in usability metrics is not demographics differences, but whether users have prior experience or are more knowledgeable about a domain or industry."
	PC Move Difference in usability/user experience is an obligation (usually to marketing), but is not truly meaningful or important.	"Demographic profile, such as age, gender, family size, income, occupation, education, etc., information that's available from the marketing team. It's frequently less useful for understanding the behavioral aspects of your persona, but can useful in rounding out a persona's character. Politically, it's a good way to get Marketing to buy in."
	Loch Ness Monster Although a lot of people think it's real, true difference does not really exist in usability/user experience (i.e., users are users).	"People may be different, but their reactions are often more similar than we'd think."
	Rick Roll True difference among users exists, but is completely irrelevant to usability/user experience.	"If you are creating a survey, don't bore people with the survey – nobody cares about demographic information, so don't get it, it doesn't matter about age, race or gender."

Table 1 (cont'd)

Minimizing Difference only has minimal impact for usability/user experience.	Life, Death, and Taxes Everyone has problems with technology; difference is really just another name for traditional usability concerns.	"But my favorite embodiment of this principle is Robin Christopherson's declaration that we're all 'temporarily disabled' because we're busy, distracted, tired, or using our hands or eyes for something else."
	Black Shoes with Brown Pants Difference-driven usability errors are the result of an unfortunate combination of user and design, not the fault of the design itself. The problem isn't the design; the problem is the way the design was used.	"What do I love about the web? Anybody can have a voice."
	Quirks Difference is just someone's personality. Everyone responds to technology differently—regardless of difference.	"Given people's different preferences for humor, it is important for a Web writer to know the audience, before including humor in a site."
	Lipstick and Bows Difference only impacts surface-level issues of design and can be accommodated with minor tweaks, like color and iconography.	"A demographic not being reached because a product or service lacks something to appeal to them may be easily targeted with a parallel version of the product/service with minor adjustments to reach them."
	Your Mama's Problem Because globalization and digital literacy, diverse users respond in more similar ways. Difference is not as important of a design factor as it was [X] years ago.	"As modern Western society has embraced multiculturalism, elements of each culture have been absorbed, recombined, or discarded to varying extents in different societies."

Table 1 (cont'd)

Comparing Difference is defined by comparing one group of users with another group.	Yardstick Difference is all the ways one group of users is difference from another group of users.	"Keep in mind that rats and primates are clearly not humans, yet they are often used to determine what will happen to us. Sometimes there are close proxies for users. For example, I've found employees of enterprise software companies tend to have similar domain knowledge and attitudes about icons, terms and designs as the hard to recruit HR managers."
	The Country of Africa Difference can be sorted into two or three big buckets; the details don't really matter.	"Finally, discuss your personas with the translator: Maybe Harriet should be renamed María and relocated to Valparaiso. And what about adding Hugo, the typical backpacker from the Netherlands?"
	Those People Over There Difference is everyone who is not like one user group.	"Companies face the same problem when they develop a mobile version of their site afterward. Good thing many now adopt a 'mobile first' process. Perhaps they should consider 'foreign first,' too."
	Disaster Waiting to Happen Difference is asking for trouble; difference users just mess things up and cause additional usability headaches	"Text expansion can wreak havoc with the menu; translating a single word from one language into another, while maintaining a strict character length, can be extremely challenging."

Table 1 (cont'd)

	Little Brother Difference means that usability/user experience professionals will have to dumb-down design.	"Technology is becoming the lingua franca of the modern elite, but it's a language the world doesn't yet fully understand. "
Calculating Difference is an economic wildcard: designing for difference can be costly (and, therefore not worth considering) or it can result in new economic opportunities (and, therefore, should be incorporated in design)	New Market Difference presents new opportunities for economic expansion.	"Because they know a cultural misfit can stall a game's chances of success—and they know for every dollar invested in localization, there's a $25 return."
	Pandora's Box Difference is dangerous because once you start designing for one difference group, you may become responsible for maintaining more work and/or designing for other difference groups.	"I won't lie to you. Once you've translated your website, you're in for good. People don't care that they're using a translated version. For them this is the only version. So you'll have to keep translating."
	Obstacle Course Difference is something to be accommodated as quickly, as cheaply, and with as little effort as possible.	"We help global companies find themselves around the maze of cultural knowledge when marketing for the web."
	Pipe Dream Difference in all its forms can never be perfectly accommodated or accounted for in design; just acknowledge where you fall short	"Giving perfect service to all disabled users would require an even wider set of distinct user interfaces, each optimized for a broad variety of disabilities. The cost is mind-boggling and the profits would be fairly small, because each class of disability contains a fairly small number of users."

Table 1 (cont'd)

Acknowledging and Accommodating Difference is complex and impacts core design features; intentional action is needed to account for difference in design	The Hero's Cape Difference is a problem that users need to be rescued from by good design (and good designers).	"Therefore, those of us in the privileged position of affecting the course of technology have a duty to inform others of our intentions and listen to their feedback."
	Grape Kool-Aid Spilled on White Shag Carpet Difference is hard-wired into core design features (i.e., design is not ideologically neutral).	"Research shows that there are generational differences in the expectations and mental models that people have about technology."
	Rocket Science Difference is highly complicated, is comprised of nuanced categories, and/or impacts high-level design considerations.	"It will be critical that I use the regionalisms, terms, and cultural references specific to the Tucson area, which are going to be different than those of other U.S. cities close to the Mexican border, such as El Paso, which has its own regional and economic influences."
Valuing Difference is a valuable asset to usability/user experience.	Prescription Eyeglasses Difference is an unique worldview that cannot be completely shared with someone not from that group.	"Unless I have significant exposure to the unique aspects of Mexican-American life in Tucson, I most certainly need member representatives from that demographic to help me better understand the sociological significance of the imagery, colors, and other non-technical aspects of the outreach program's website."
	Apples and Oranges Difference exists, but is not graded or judged based on a set of standards.	"I remembered that different cultures view time in this same way: in some cultures, time is represented mentally as a

Table 1 (cont'd)

		kind stretching out ahead of the person and the person moves forward along the timeline. In other cultures, there is the same representation, except now it is the person who is fixed and it is time that moves: an event in the future moves backwards toward the person."
	Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Book Difference is a series of subjective choices that lead to difference in outcomes that are neither better nor worse that other sets of choices/outcomes.	"I discovered that as I asked this question around the world that some people firmly believe that it is the top button and some, just as firmly, believe it is the bottom button. Each is surprised to learn that someone might think differently. Who is correct? Both are."

These six rhetorical moves (i.e., denying, minimizing, comparing, calculating, acknowledging/adapting, and valuing)— as well as the 24 operational metaphors used to identify them —proved robust enough to adequately classify the statements about difference taken from the blog data. Focusing on the six primary rhetorical moves listed above is a useful heuristic and reflective tool by which usability/user experience professionals can evaluate responses to difference. Analytically, this tool enables professionals to evaluate their own and/or their organizations' discourse on diversity to see what mentalities of difference are being operationalized within their sphere of influence and to tie those potentially small statements into larger patterns of inclusion/exclusion and democracy/oppression.

This coding tool thus serves as a starting heuristic for technical communicators working as usability/user experience professionals to engage in critical reflective practice. It also serves as one way to practically apply technical communication's theoretical work in representation, power, and culture to the everyday conversation and activity of usability/user experience. In the sections below, I walk through the implications of what my research showed to be the most prevalent mentalities of difference in usability/user experience. I present this analytical work as an example of the types of critical reflection enabled by this rhetorical tool and as further evidence for the importance of this type of reflection for socially just work in usability/user experience.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

After coding the selected blog posts on difference, I ran a quantitative analysis to see which codes appeared most frequently. Three metaphors appeared most frequently across the research data:

1. The red herring metaphor, where difference is seen as distracting from more relevant concerns in usability/user experience (10.2%). The red herring metaphor is an example of a *denying* move.
2. The little brother metaphor, where difference is seen as requiring a dumbing-down or simplifying of design (7.29%). The little brother metaphor is an example of a *minimizing* move.
3. The hero's cape metaphor, where difference is seen as a problem or challenge that users need to be rescued from by good design (8.56%). The hero's cape metaphor is an example of an *acknowledging and accommodating* move.

In the sections below, I discuss in detail what is meant by these three codes and how the concept of a normalized user group operate within each group. This conversation is intended to call critical awareness to how the usability/user experience community thinks about and talks about difference users. By making explicit the often implicit mental models of difference that exist in usability/user experience writing, the following results demonstrate key ways the field conceptualizes difference users and highlights the assumptions built in to these conceptualizations.

Denying: Difference distracts from more relevant concerns in usability/user experience.

The red herring mentality was the most frequent code visible in the blog data and is an indicator of a denying move, or where difference is seen non-existent and/or irrelevant to usability/user experience work. Denying moves accounted for 14% of all coded moves, with a red herring mentality accounting for 53 of the 71 denying codes. A red herring claims that although factors like race, ethnicity, age, gender, class, culture, ability, etc. may be marginally important, they most often distract usability/user experience professionals from what really matters in design: user behavior. Here are some examples of excerpts coded as "red herring" in the blog data:

> "Demographic clustering is helpful when creating advertising or marketing communications that seek to reach a specific target audience, with a specific target message. Recruiting usability participants however has little to do with age, or profession, or even geographic location. Instead, usability testing participants should be recruited based on matching the behaviors…"

> "[D]emographic data does not describe how much domain expertise the typical users have, and doesn't provide any insight into the typical performance associated with the persona."

These excerpts talk about difference (which is reduced to "demographics") as being a diversion from more important considerations in the design process. Just like the red herring in a detective novel, difference is a distraction to more important and more relevant user data. I argue that denying moves

(including those articulated via the red herring mentality) construct a normalized user in two ways, both of which I will elaborate on in subsequent sections:

1. Denying moves normalize users by assuming intrinsic sameness.
2. Denying moves normalize users by creating artificial boundaries between behavior and subjectivity.

Assuming Intrinsic Sameness

Denying moves normalize users by assuming intrinsic sameness. By arguing that difference is only skin-deep, denying moves claim that alleged surface-level indicators of difference are irrelevant to usability/user experience. In particular, the red herring mentality encourages usability/user experience professionals to see past the outward, distracting factors of difference and instead focus on the inward, subtle behavioral characteristics of the people they design for. In other words, it suggests that usability/user experience professionals take a "colorblind" approach to their work. Consider the following example:

> "You could argue, 'But not all users are the same. My projects are for huge sites with wildly varied user demographics.' That may be so, but there is still only one ideal user: The one who completes the task that you want him to complete.
>
> The demographics don't matter. Whether man or woman, of any age, and any race— the people who match the profile of the ideal user are the ones who stayed on your Web site and did what you needed them to do. Figure out who that ideal user is, in the most minute detail possible, then design your site's user experience for that person."

I coded this excerpt as a denying move because it argues for a colorblind (and gender-blind and age-blind) approach to user experience design. It encourages usability/user experience professionals to focus their attention on the users who complete the behaviors they desire, regardless of who those users are. While this may seem democratic, researchers writing about colorblind approaches in other fields have posited that the lack of intentional inclusion of marginalized people groups (i.e., people who face systems of disadvantage based on race, gender, ability, class, etc.) results the in (un)intentional exclusion of these same marginalized groups. For example, when the Internet was being lauded as a place where race/ethnicity/gender/etc. would no longer matter (i.e., a colorblind space), theorist Adam Banks (2006) challenged that argument, saying: "I have long suspected that the much vaunted 'freedom' to shed the 'limiting' markers of race and gender of the Internet is illusory, and that in fact it masks a more disturbing phenomenon— the whitinizing (sic) of cyberspace."

In fact, the example above begins to show some of these normalizing patterns. Users are assumed to have a male personality ("completes the task that you want *him* to complete). The product is assumed to have one ideal user ("there is still *only one* ideal user") and design is assumed to need to meet the needs of one— and only one — user group ("design your site's user experience for *that person*) instead of recognizing the possibility of a plurality of users.

With the red herring mentality, there is no emphasis on understanding how a design can accommodate and respect behavior patterns associated with difference. Rather, users who do not fit the profile of the ideal user (i.e., the normalized user) are excluded. Because difference can be the cause of these behavioral patterns, a red herring mentality results in the exclusion of groups of difference users. A colorblind, behavior-only mentality literally erases user subjectivity from usability/user experience. And when diverse users are not intentionally included in design, it is likely that they are being excluded in favor of a normalized user— even though, in critical ways, this normalized user does not represent them accurately. Not recognizing difference in usability/user experience does not afford for a diverse, democratic user experience. Rather, it tends to ignore important factors that influence user behavior and reinforces existing systems of power and privilege that work to create a non-representative, normalized user experience.

Separating Behavior and Subjectivity

Red herring statements operate on the idea that what matters about users is their behavior, not their "demographics" (or, in the terminology of this article, difference). As seen in the example above, a red herring mentality of difference makes the argument that what should be considered in the design process is how users behave with a system. Questions of the user's race, ethnicity, culture, gender, age, class, and ability are irrelevant (or, at best, secondary) considerations. In addition to intrinsic sameness, the second

assumption the red herring mentality makes is that usability/user experience professionals can cleanly compartmentalize a user's behavior—defined as the actions users take with a product —from a user's subjectivity— defined as the dynamic identities a user either chooses for herself and/or is assigned by others. It claims that usability/user experience professionals can consider a user on a behavioral level (i.e., what people do) without having to consider that same user on a subjective level (i.e., who people are). The problem with this assumption is that it does not account for the possibility that a user's subjectivity may *impact* their behavior with technology.

The scholarship surveyed earlier in this article, however, would challenge that assumption. Sun's (2006, 2012) work surveying mobile text message practices in the U.S. and China demonstrated how cultural identity directly influenced patterns of use. Abgoka's (2013) investigation of sexuopharmaceutical localization in Ghana revealed the importance of culture and subjectivity in technology adoption. And Angela Haas' (2012) discussion of race, rhetoric, technology and technical communication made arguments for how "race and place" matter for technical communication and cultural usability.

Recommending that a user's behavior (i.e., what a user does) be separated from that user's subjectivity (i.e., who a user is) suggests that people can be

understood apart from issues of difference. In so doing, denying moves compartmentalize users into components and propose that usability/user experience professionals only consider one of those components in design. Denying moves are dangerous because they give usability/user experience professionals permission to ignore aspects of users' identity that 1) make those users fully human and 2) provide critical insight into how and why their behaviors matter.

Minimizing: Difference requires simplified/dumbed-down design.

As I was analyzing blog post segments, I saw a recurring tendency for posts to couple discussions of difference with discussions of simplification. These minimizing moves either 1) reduce difference to a few, general categories and/or 2) limit the scope of difference's impact on design to surface-level issues, such as color choice and iconography. The most popular metaphor within minimizing was the little brother mentality, which assumes that in order for a design to be useful to a diverse group of users, it needs to be "dumbed-down" or simplified. These articles make the argument that designing for diverse users is about accommodating people less advanced, knowledgeable, or talented than the standard (usually white, male, straight, English speaking) user.

Here are some examples of statements that I coded as demonstrating a little brother mentality:

> "Technology is becoming the lingua franca of the modern elite, but it's a language the world doesn't yet fully understand."
>
> "If you're like me, you've enjoyed the convenience of having a home internet connection for almost twenty years. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that for many people, access to the internet is a luxury. Thirty-five percent of Americans have no internet access at home. More than a third of Americans don't have easy access to personal medical information, tools for financial planning, and animated GIFs of surprised cats."
>
> "Because of this, a keen understanding of your targeted market and potential website patrons will allow you to adjust the overall sophistication of your written content to match the experience level of your preferred group."

In the excerpts above, difference users are defined by all the ways that are not like (and deficient from) an alternate user group. In the first example, the difference users (i.e., "the world") are defined by all the knowledge they lack from the ideal user group (i.e., "the modern elite"). In the second users marked by a low income are discussed by all the disadvantages and setbacks they face from the typical user group (i.e., people "like me"). In the third, users are primarily classified by their intelligence, with usability/user experience professionals responsible for scaling up/scaling down the complexity of content based on how much intelligence their "preferred group" lacks.

Statements made with the little brother mentality normalize users by using one group of users as the standard by which all other groups of users are compared. Subsequent user groups are defined by what they lack in comparison to the standardized group (i.e., comparing users to an idealized norm). In the section

below I talk about the dangers of this normalization and how the rhetoric of the little brother mentality devalues and others diverse users.

Comparing Users to an Idealized Norm

Before talking about the problems I see with the little brother mentality (and with minimizing moves as a whole), I think it's important to acknowledge what is good and smart about this perspective on diverse users. First, it acknowledges that there are significant differences between users and that these differences have serious implications for design. Recognizing that the digital divide is real and can prevent a significant number of users is an important ethical consideration for the UX design process. Second, this mentality recognizes that differences among users should result in differences in design in order to make products best fit users' lives. Admitting that not all of your users read at a post-college level will help with the creation of different and/or alternative content that can be understood by a broader range of users. And adjusting your product to meet the needs of multiple audiences is good business.

What is problematic about the little brother mentality, however, is the way it creates artificial dichotomies between normal/standard users and "other" users— users who are defined by all the ways they are deficient from the normalized/standard users. To highlight where these assumptions live, consider the following statement pulled from the blog data:

> "Users from a technologically emerging nation, for instance, may be at a particular disadvantage because they do not understand the benefits of social networking or how to effectively contribute."

The context of this comment was a blog post in which the author was talking about how designing for multiple cultures is difficult because you need to consider multiple mental models for how users understand and classify content. The article points out important considerations for global design and gives good feedback on how a contextualized understanding of users needs to drive information architecture decisions. But what the quote above demonstrates is that, throughout the argument, the little brother mentality results in two moves that normalize users:

1. Centralizing North American culture through the selection of examples
2. Defining non-North American cultures by how they deviate (and, specifically, what they lack) from North American culture

Centralizing North American Culture

First, the little brother mentality assumes that the primary audience is users from technologically advanced nations (other comments made in the article indicate that they specifically assume a North American user). Placing one group of users in the center of design necessarily displaces other groups of users. By centralizing North American users, the needs and considerations of users from other regions gets de-centered and distanced from the design process.

It's important to note here that I am *not* arguing against designing for a specific user group. In fact, best practices in user-centered design show that designers have to

design for a selective user group(s) if their designs are going to be truly useful and contextualized to meet real needs. What I am pointing out is that there is a tendency to automatically imply that users from the North American culture should be the central group, and that when there are discussions of "global users" it is often assumed that "global" is synonymous with "non-American."

Going back to our example, this argument was situated in a conversation about the importance of responding to different culture-based use patterns for social media. However, the only examples that are referenced have to do with social media use in technologically emerging nations (e.g., Kenya). The social media use patterns tied to North American culture are not discussed. I propose that the reason North American cultural patterns are not discussed as examples of culturally-sensitive design are because 1) North American culture is not recognized as a culture and 2) it is assumed that North American patterns of social media usage have already been known and designed for.

By talking about the ways that designing for user groups outside of North America will require consideration to culture, little brother statements imply that designing for a North American user is culturally neutral. That is, as long as design is based in a North American worldview, culture is not important to design: it is only when usability/user experience goes outside this boundary that design becomes culturally situated and contextualized. Scholars in the field of critical white studies have been talking about the impact this assumed cultural neutrality has on perpetuating

colonial and imperialistic mentalities, resulting in an "othering" of non-Western people groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997).

Furthermore, assuming North American culture as the default starting point for design masks the subjectivity that's explicit in this design process. In other words, by assuming that North American users are the common-sense base user group around which all designs should be built (which is subjective) makes this choice seem less like a choice and more like an objective part of the design process[5]. Thus, one danger of minimizing moves is that they subliminally reinforce the centralizing of one user group (in these examples, the users from a North American culture) to the exclusion of other user groups.

Using North American Culture as the Yardstick for Comparison

The second way in which a little brother mentality normalizes users is through using North American culture, behavior, and resources as the standard by which all other cultures are defined. Consider this statement:

> "The same is true for people without a college education. We can't force them all to go back to school for four years simply in order to participate in society. There is only one answer: computers and the Internet have to be made substantially easier to use than they are now."

The way this quote is phrased places college-educated users at the center by operating on the assumption that people with a college education are already being

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considered in design. It then goes on to use college-educated understandings of technology as the standard by which all other user groups are defined. Other user groups (specifically users without a college education) are defined by the ways in which they differ from the centralized user group, which results in the portrayal of these users as less intelligent and less adept than a college-educated user counterparts.

Because diverse user groups (e.g., users with a broad spectrum of educational backgrounds) are seen as deficit-based, the process of designing for difference becomes equivalent with a process of dumbing-down design. Since diverse users are seen as lacking either ability, resources, or both, accounting for these users in a design requires simplification, accommodation, and patronization. This results in an attitude of condescension that can be highly offensive and can obscure the value diverse users bring to design.

For example, in another blog post, there was a conversation about the status of web design in a developing nation. The blog post was a mixture of design showcases and interviews with web designers who worked in this developing nation. The work being displayed was beautiful and creative and, in many ways, the blog post was highly complimentary to the work being done by these entrepreneurial designers. However, in some of the questions that were asked of these designers hints of the little brother mentality began to surface. Designers were asked how they dealt with a "backwards script" (the country had a script that reads right to left), reflecting the

assumed centrality of English (left to right) scripts in web design. They were asked to talk about how they overcame the barriers of the digital divide, slower connection times, unstable electricity, etc., which again uses Western standards for technology access as the standard and defines these designers by what they lack, not by what they've accomplished. Finally, the article itself seemed have almost a surprised tone, as if it was pleasantly inconceivable that smart design work could come from a developing country with a "backwards" script and limited Internet.

I think the intentions of this article were good, and it did a wonderful job of highlighting work that often goes unnoticed. But when the little brother mentality enters a conversation, it strips diverse users (i.e., users who don't fit the assumed normalize user) of any potential assets or strengths. Instead of asking usability/user experience professionals to see them as different— yet viable —users it asks usability/user experience professionals to view them with condescension and pity. It asks them to change their design— not to build off of the strengths of an alternate way of viewing the world — but to accommodate and placate users who do not quite live up to the standard.

Acknowledging and Accommodating: Difference is as a problem or challenge that users need to be rescued from by good design (and good designers).

The final code I wish to talk about in this paper is actually the logical extension of the condescending, deficit-driven attitude of the little brother mentality. It is labeled "the hero's cape" and it argues that users characterized by difference (i.e., not

represented by the normalized user group) have problems that must be fixed by intelligent, creative usability and user experience professionals. The hero's cape metaphor is an acknowledging and accommodating move because it is one strategy by which usability/user experience professionals recognize difference and decide to make changes to design based on that difference. What separates an acknowledging and accommodating move from a valuing move, however, is that in the acknowledging and accommodating phase, difference users are still defined by lack. Difference users are positioned as people in need of help by usability/user experience professionals— professionals who are usually positioned as modern-day heroes responsible for the rescue of difference users (hence, the name "the hero's cape").

As I was reading the industry-facing professional literature on usability/user experience, I heard echoes of the hero's cape:

> "In all cases, social media begs for democratic responsibility from those who are given power to influence that technological environment. As a solution, Chris Wilson suggests we move from 'wisdom of the crowds' to 'wisdom of the chaperones.' This means practicing stewardship and offering principles to guide those contributing to social media...In fact, it may be up to us to recommend that a social media setting is not appropriate."
>
> "Approximately 20% of all people worldwide have some sort of disability. Excluding them from using our services and buying our products does not make business sense. Nor would it allow us to fulfill our responsibility to society."
>
> "Designers and engineers must work together to develop intuitive and flexible UX models, appropriate visual treatments and layout

> decisions in order to not only change behavior and interactions, but also to improve the lives of millions of people."

In all of these excerpts, there are both acknowledging moves— or statements that recognize the ways difference impacts the user experience — and accommodating moves— or statements where usability/user experience professionals are positioned as rescuers for difference users. For instance, in the first excerpt usability/user experience professionals are given responsibility for guiding conversations in social media. Difference users are talked about like children who are in need of "chaperones" to determine what is and what is not "appropriate."

Statements made under a hero's cape mentality disempower difference users by assuming helplessness. This mentality strips diverse users of agency and presumes that usability/user experience professionals are a) required and b) sufficient to design for diverse audiences. Contrary to fundamental principles of usability/user experience, the experiential knowledge of difference users is given minimal or no space in the design process. The knowledge of the usability/user experience professional (not the knowledges of the user) are placed at the center.

Devaluing the Knowledge and Agency of Difference Users

Before beginning my critique of the hero's cape mentality, I want to point out the positives I see in these statements. First, they recognize that usability/user experience professionals have tremendous power and that their decisions have significant impacts for users, including (and, perhaps, especially for) users from

outside the normalized user group. The hero's cape reminds usability/user experience professionals that with great power comes great responsibility and encourages them to think about how their work improves/degrades the quality of life for certain user groups. Second, they call for increased attention for users who typically live at the margins of consideration in design. By asking usability/user experience professionals to "think globally" from the beginning, the hero's cape mentality reminds usability/user experience professionals that they live in a diverse world and that purposeful inclusion of diversity is both good business and an ethical responsibility.

In fact, I'm convinced that the hero's cape mentality stems from praiseworthy motivations and a sincere desire to improve quality of life. However, I see two (perhaps unintended) side effects of a hero's cape mentality that actually harm and disenfranchise the very users that these arguments purport to help. Namely:

1. The hero's cape mentality strips difference users of any agency in the creation or adaptation of technology.
2. The hero's cape mentality assumes the necessity and sufficiency of the usability/user experience professional to adapt design to cultures in which they are not a member. Representative users from the target cultures are given minimal or no voice in the design process.

To articulate these concerns within the context of the study data, I would like to explain my critique by using the following example. I believe it is worth quoting the

post at length in order to properly contextualize the hero's cape segments and to faithfully represent the overall argument of the post.

> "Today, a tiny clique has disproportionate influence on global culture. This group is largely young, male, white, and concentrated around wealthy urban regions, particularly the San Francisco Bay Area. Doubtless many readers identify with this group, as do I. But we must admit it's not a group that's terribly well versed in the ways of the world. Therefore, those of us the privileged position of affecting the course of technology have a duty to inform others of our intentions and listen to their feedback...
>
> [T]he tech community should educate itself about global issues. Our tiny elite needs to understand the world in order to affect it positively. Efforts to travel, to learn about other cultures and contexts, and to consider use cases beyond those of our nearest neighbors will help reduce the risk of technological imperialism. It would be a mistake to assume that a solution that works for a Western techie will work for a North African trader. These are complex times for the tech industry, and the consequences of taking a wrong step could be severe. Let's dedicate thoughtful time to ensure the effect we're having on the world is positive. The results will also be good for our own industry: an informed public means a greater trust of and appetite for our work."

No agency for difference users

In this quote, there are many articulations of the ways the "tiny elite" of usability/user experience professionals (which are assumed to be primarily young, white, male, and San Franciscan) influence the world through their design choices. What is missing, however, is any recognition of the ways non-young, non-white, non-male, and non-San Franciscan users create or modify technologies to meet their unique contextual needs. The hero's cape mentality— as it is expressed here — does not take into account the

possibility that difference users can a) recognize the problems a product poses within their context and b) create alternative technologies that solve this problem and/or c) modify the technology in contextually-appropriate ways.

Scott, Longo, and Wills (2006) talk about how a cultural studies lens helps reframe disenfranchised users as active agents— instead of passive recipients — in transforming culture (Scott, Longo and Wills, 15). Cultural studies' critique of the passive user is built primarily on de Certeau's argument that everyday practices (specifically those undertaken by culturally dominated groups) are neither "passive nor docile," but rather "users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules (de Certeau, xiii-xiv)."

Whereas difference users in a hero's cape mentality as portrayed as modern "damsels in distress" who are patiently waiting for a usability/user experience professional to rescue them from bad design, a cultural studies lens positions these users as active agents with capacity to remediate technology for their own purposes. The danger of a hero's cape mentality is that difference users are portrayed as passive victims of technology whose only possible source of assistance is kind-hearted, culturally-sensitive North American usability/user experience professionals. This dependence

reinforces colonizing, imperialistic rhetorics of Western superiority and makes usability/user experience design the 21st century's "white man's burden."

Palmeri (2006) talks about the dangers of this mentality, especially as it refers to users labeled as "disabled." Palmeri focuses on how the rhetoric of accessibility for users with disabilities "implicitly conceives of technical communication as a kind of rehabilitative profession of experts who assist those with disabilities in accessing information (Palmeri, 56)" thereby ignoring the "enabling insights" of persons with a wide range of abilities. Sun (2006) looked at how the popularity of text messaging, as a fairly unusable technology, became popular through user manipulation and subversion. This was in contrast to how "we [technical communicators] tend to glorify ourselves...as heroes. That is, we sometimes see technical communicators as potential heroes able to rescue poor users out of their miserable situations…" Sun's argument is that users are active agents in the cultural localization process, and that technical communicators (including usability/user experience professionals) do not have exclusive control over how users interact with technologies. The hero's cape mentality, however, does not account for these actions and casts users as passive consumers, instead of active producers/manipulators, of technology.

Necessity and sufficiency of the usability/user experience professional

The example passage above also supports the assumption that, in addition to being necessary to rescue diverse users from bad design, usability/user experience professionals are sufficiently capable of designing products for users who are significantly different from them— without any assistance. For example, the usability/user experience profession is encouraged to "educate itself about global issues," "learn about other cultures and context," and "dedicate thoughtful time" to understanding difference users and theorizing on how their choices might impact various user groups. No where in this statement are actual users from these cultures referenced, consulted, or brought into the design process.

What this assumes, however, is that the usability/user experience professional— based on their technical skills and expertise — is capable of understanding and designing for difference groups of which they are not a part. The hero's cape mentality makes the argument that with research (and, typically, only minimal research), usability/user experience professionals can garner all the knowledge necessary to contextualize a design for a particular difference group. What is not included is a recognition of the complexity of other cultures and/or a reliance on user data. Nowhere in the quote above is there a sincere recognition of the limitations of a usability/user experience professional's expertise and a valuing of the lived knowledges and experiential ways-of-knowing of difference users.

Although user-centered design focuses on basing design decisions on the user's voice, in the hero's cape mentality, difference users are not given a voice. Rather, the usability/user experience professional speaks for them based on their research into— as opposed to the user's experience of —a difference group. This approach further excludes difference users from the design process and increases the likelihood that designs will still not be completely contextualized according to user needs and worldviews. Agboka (2013) raised a similar concern, specifically as applied it to technical communicators working in international localization. His warning was that localization practices in which users are not placed "on par with the developer" in the design process will participate in colonial exploitation and objectification of users (Agboka, 31). Agboka's study focused on localization practices for documentation in Ghana and demonstrated the crucial roles that the tacit knowledge of the target group played (or should have played) into the localization process. The hero's cape mentality does not account for these knowledges and, therefore, runs the dual risk of (1) designing a poor user experience for cross-cultural users and (2) participating in the colonization of diverse users.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Based on this analysis, I have identified three problematic representations of difference (i.e., denying, minimizing, and acknowledging/accommodating) in usability/user experience blogs and discussed ways these representations of difference impact the inclusion/exclusion of certain user groups from usability/user experience. I would now like to offer some brief suggestions for how the usability/user experience community (including those who teach usability/user experience) can shift mentalities and discussion of difference users to better encourage democratic and inclusive representation in usability/user experience.

First, this research suggests that conversations about difference and the way that difference impacts user behavior and understanding should happen early and often— both in our classes and in our design meetings. Technical communication educators should give writing and design assignments that have diverse, multicultural audiences to help raise students' awareness of a) the global nature of most technical communication work, b) the unique needs and insights of non-standardized uses, and c) the cultural and political implications of assumedly "neutral" communication and design decisions. Technical communicators working in usability/user experience should represent and advocate for difference users during the ideation stage of a project and should use their influence within organizations to advocate for the inclusion of user research data, personas, and use cases that articulate the viewpoint of non-standardized users. The intentional inclusion of non-standardized users will not only create a more democratic user

experience, but it may help spark design innovations as the unique perspectives of difference users prompt a rethinking of traditional, "commonsense" design decisions.

Second, when difference is discussed in usability/user experience workplaces and classrooms, difference users should be defined by their assets (i.e., what they bring to the metaphorical design table) and not their deficits (i.e., all the resources they do not share with the standardized user group). Making the shift to appreciating difference users in usability/user experience classrooms and workplaces weakens the centrality of normalized users and reverses the spirit of condescension that is prevalent in contemporary discussions of difference.

Finally, this research calls for more intentional conversations between discussions of culture and discussions of usability/user experience in technical communication. Although the number of convergence points listed early demonstrates that these conversations are (and have been) happening, this analysis of usability/user experience blog data shows that technical communication's critical discussions of power, privilege, and representation are not being fully taken up in daily usability/user experience practice. Perhaps future adaptations of the coding scheme laid out in this article (or other, similar heuristic tools) that operationalize technical communication's critical studies work will help strengthen the connections between these two conversations and will help support democratic inclusivity in usability/user experience research, teaching, and practice.

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