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The Ethnocentric Bias: Why One Size Does Not Fit All in the World of Digital Communication

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Part V

The Future



Chapter 20

THE ETHNOCENTRIC BIAS

Why one size does not fit all in the world
of digital communications

Michael Netzley

In short

- Why Western companies must respond to local needs in Asia if they wish to grow.
- How to best embrace the opportunities in these markets.
- What you have to gain by breaking the mould others are stuck in.

Overview

In this chapter Michael Netzley, PhD at the Singapore Management University, discusses the opportunity to see beyond the traditional markets. Asia is filled with diverse and fragmented markets, more so than what we typically find in the West's more mature markets. The larger social media conversation reflects values and market assumptions of these mature markets, and all too often the needs of Asia's emerging and growing markets go unrepresented. Professional communicators must stop relying on advice crafted within different market conditions and instead lead the way forward by producing solid research as the basis for data-driven communication decisions.

The tsunami is washing across northern Japan and my television screen as I write my thoughts regarding biases in our digital media conversation. The terrible tragedy taking place in a country that I briefly called home appears on a scale I have not seen since the Aceh tsunami in 2004. Images of the destruction flow across my screen, and as commentators worry about the nation's nuclear power plants I am equally taken by the immediate outpouring of sympathy for the people of Japan. The pace of tweets in the #Japan column of Tweetdeck seems to be accelerating with each hour as the world wakes to this tragedy. Like many, I share my thoughts of sympathy via social media.

For the time being, the world's attention is rightly focused on Asia.

But, like all news cycles, with time other stories will press to the forefront of public attention and the efforts at rebuilding in Japan will slowly move to page two, then section b and so on. Such is ethos of global media – mainstream and digital – in a world oversaturated with stories.

While unquestionably a tragedy, what do the events in Japan have to do with digital media in Asia? My answer is “a lot.”

Sitting in the comforts of Singapore, where I have taught a university-level course in digital media since 2007, my personal assessment is that the pattern of attention I attribute to Japan is little different than the global pattern of our social media conversation (as we like to call it). When significant events attract enough attention, such as Google threatening to leave China or Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg taking a trip to China, the digital community turns its attention east. But with time, discussion and speculation give way to other news stories and Asia disappears from the social media centre stage.

The bulk of what we crowdsource, curate and speculate about digital media comes from outside Asia. Yet, Asia currently makes up the world's largest segment (in terms of total numbers) of the world's internet population and includes some of its fastest growing markets at the start of 2011. But for a complex suite of reasons, the centre of gravity regarding our discussion of everything digital seems to be found in the West. What we know about digital media and communications is, in my assessment, comparatively limited. Even from an academic perspective, most of the research in public relations, marketing and corporate reputation come from the West and are based on results in those markets. Why should social media be any different?

We have, I believe, an ethnocentric bias in our discussion of digital communications.

So what is an ethnocentric bias? This bias can be thought of as a “dire need for multiculturalism” in how we discuss communications (Sriramesh, 2002). I argue that the cultural attributes underpinning the broader discussion of integration into business, politics and society reflect the biases of North America and Western Europe. Consider this simple example: how many people in 2011 continue to ask if the internet can serve as a democratic force capable of unseating authoritarian governments? As an American I have much in common with this question, but as an expat living in Asia for nearly a decade, I also see the question as rather idealistic.

“And so what?”, some readers may ask. A fair question indeed, and in response I would point out many of the global changes that we are all well aware of. Economic and soft power shifts eastward as countries like China, India and Indonesia improve their social and economic conditions while Western economies appear anaemic under crushing debt. Numerous business and news reports have discussed the BRIC economies, now sometimes referred as the BRICI economies with the inclusion of Indonesia, and their increasing importance. The growing middle classes in many Asian countries are now consumers who buy Western goods, pay full tuition for their kids to attend Western universities and now carry the pride and confidence of people coming into their own. Looking at digital markets, we also see that many of the fastest-growing internet markets are found in Asia. From South Korea to

The diversity and complexity of markets demands that we do not look at digital media through a one size fits most lens.

Singapore, China to Indonesia, and India to Australia there can be little doubt that global power shifts are underway. The diversity and complexity of markets demands that we do not look at

digital media through a one size fits most lens. As professional communicators, we will increasingly find ourselves engaging Asia in a multitude of ways.

Key characteristics of the current discussion

Before proceeding further, I need to be a bit more specific about this thing I call the “discussion.” As a voracious consumer of web sites, reports, podcasts and books devoted to digital media, allow me to begin by looking at precisely

this content we all encounter each day. We can begin with the world's most visited web destinations (Alexa, 2011).

1. Google
2. Facebook
3. YouTube
4. Yahoo
5. Windows Live
6. Blogger
7. Baidu
8. Wikipedia
9. Twitter
10. QQ.com

Two of the top ten destinations are from outside North America and in Asia to be specific. Baidu and QQ are located in China, the world's largest internet market. Looking a bit more broadly at the top 20, sites such as Yahoo Japan, Sina.com.cn and Google India appear. The top global destinations are largely Western, a few are Western businesses with local offices, and only about 15 per cent of the top 20 sites are businesses created outside the West.

It seems perfectly normal that we prefer to talk about what is biggest or most popular. And in Asian markets we seek out any sign that we are somehow a part of this global trend. We want to see ourselves as, and be seen as, part of something that is taking the world by storm. So, in March, when it was announced that Jakarta was the world's Facebook capital, people around the region (including Indonesians) gave out a collective victory cry (Socialbakers, 2011a).

Western social media sites, case studies and discussions also seem to command the overwhelming share of voice in top selling books. I next looked at social media books sold via Amazon.com. My goal here is not, in any way, to criticize these best-selling books, the authors or the content. In fact, I purchased, read and enjoyed many of these titles. I want only to illustrate the pattern I am seeing in terms of content and perspective shared.

A quick look at Amazon.com's top 100 books in March 2011, listed under a "social media" search for relevance, revealed that only three of the top 100 books explicitly identify Asia as a region worth a book, chapter or even promi-

ment case study. These books instead were dominated by the most popular topics that you might expect (including but not limited to): Zappos, Coca Cola, Starbucks, Ford, Google, Huffington Post, Dell, Digg, Google, Yahoo and Craigslist.

I next visited the Ad Age Power 150 daily ranking of marketing blogs and sought out top blogs focusing on Asia in any noticeable way. Immediately, just by glancing at the flags showing the nationality of the top blogs, only one out of the 150 blogs claimed a nationality outside of North America or Western Europe (Ad Age, 2011). Further investigation into that one blog revealed no obvious focus on markets other than the West. The top 50 blogs revealed exactly the same pattern (Technorati, 2011). In terms of the blogosphere, both authors and content appear to be shaped with Western-centric point of view. The topics in the blogs were little different than the books I examined.

The one little bit of good news came when I turned to the academic research being published about social media use in higher education. Asia gets a bit more recognition when we turn to scholarly, peer-reviewed research published in journals. Limiting myself to academic research published in 2010 and accessed through the university library database Science Direct, I identified 97 scholarly articles with the key words *blogs*, *wikis* or *mobile*, which reported scholarly research study findings from around the world. The studies, when grouped geographically based on where the participant sample population came from, had the following breakdown: 70.1 per cent came from Western cultures in North America, all of Europe, Australia and New Zealand; 25.7 per cent from greater Asia; and the remaining articles from Latin America, Middle East and Africa.

But as I turned from the academic to commercially produced reports, Asia quickly falls off the radar screen. To be fair, several very good commercial reports, which included Asian markets, were published in 2010. Nielsen, Yahoo-Synovate “Net Index”, KPMG “Consumers and Convergence”, TNS “Global Digital Life”, Burson Marsteller’s Corporate Social Media Report, Edelman’s “Trust Barometer” and “Digital Brand Index”, Boston Consulting Group’s “The Internet’s New Billion”, Universal McCann’s “Wave” report, ComScore’s report on South East Asia, and a variety of releases from the Asia Digital Marketing Association dominate Asia’s commercial report landscape (ComScore, 2011). Two points, however, stand out.

First, many of these reports look at China, India or Japan, as their sample population. As you will see shortly, Asia is composed of many fragmented markets with different platform preferences and online behaviours. No one or two countries could possibly represent the entire region. There is no single Asia.

Second, perhaps with the exception of the Yahoo-Synovate Net Index studies, few commercial businesses look at the ASEAN markets. In all fairness, this could possibly happen because of limited opportunities to recoup any investments made into these mostly emerging markets. But in the case of Singapore, which is a very advanced economy, here market size might be an issue. With a market of only 5 million people and an average household income in 2011 of SG\$5,000 per month, again the market opportunity may simply be too small.

Solid research findings based on a suitable sample size and reliable instrument are scarce, and there is a serious shortage of reliable data about many Asian markets.

Any claim about an ethnocentric bias would be remiss without also considering the nature of many Asian markets and the businesses operating within. Many of Asia's leading internet businesses likely appear foreign to much of the world because they were designed with the local tastes in mind. Baidu and QQ in China, Mixi and Gree in Japan, and Cyworld and Naver in South Korea are the classic examples.

One of the key reasons why these local sites have such a strong advantage over the global competitors like Facebook and Google, and in some cases soundly defeated them, is sociolinguistic differences. Not only do internet users in China, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand and India (to name a few) typically not speak Western languages at home, but they also have different social expectations and behave quite differently online. So when consumers choose between a local platform that feels like a natural fit, and a foreign competitor that seems less intuitive, the local businesses often triumph.

When we mix it all together, a complex set of reasons emerge for what I see as the dominance of Western voices and topics in the social media discussion. At the most basic level, there are more people around the world using and talking about, for example, Facebook than Cyworld. This statement is in no

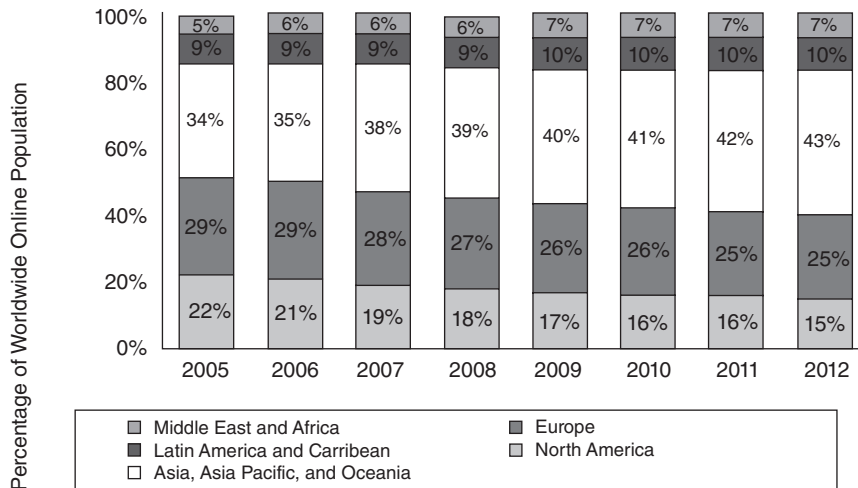
way a criticism, but a simple fact. However, beyond that, looking at the most popular sites, successful books, academic research and commercial research, I see North America and Europe holding an overwhelming share of voice.

Unfortunately, the conversation as I have described it here seems difficult to reconcile, in some respects, with the market size and user activity we see in Asia.

Asia's social media scene

Forecasts of the world's internet population in Figure 20.1 show that an increasing portion of users will come from Asia.

Asia, however, is not a homogenous region by any stretch of the imagination. It is home to more than 2,000 spoken languages, political models ranging from monarchies to democracies to authoritarian governments, incredible wealth and unforgiving poverty, and numerous religions. And when it comes to social media, there is a common expression, which goes something like this.



Source: Jupiter Research Worldwide Internet Population Model (3/08) Steven Noble, Senior Analyst, Forrester Research. Presented Ad-Tech, SG

Figure 20.1: Asia: tapping into the trend

South Korea has one of the world's most advanced information societies, Japan has the world's most advanced mobile market, and China has the world's largest internet market which functions like a giant technology incubator.

At this point we could draw from a host of additional statistics to illustrate the amazing digital activity in Asia. These statistics, at the start of 2011, include the following:

- China Internet Watch (2011) reported that the number of internet users in the mainland had reached 457 million by 2011 (projected to reach 500 million by mid-year). North America has 266 million internet users.
- Indonesia is currently the second largest Facebook community in the world with 35 million users out of a total internet user population of only 40 million people out of a total country population of 240 million (Socialbakers, 2011b).
- South Korea is the world's number two information society as reported by the International Telecommunications Union.
- User behaviours vary significantly from country to country. The Chinese show an appetite for the old fashioned bulletin board systems and active online engagement while, in contrast, Singaporeans are generally reserved online and consume content without engaging. Australians, according to the data, seem to be heavy social networkers.

Social media is in Asia, and in a big way.

So I hope that now the problem emerges more clearly. The social media conversation, in my view, is currently dominated by topics, case studies and advice out of North America and Western Europe. However, sitting in Singapore and studying the media markets across Asia, I observe markets that have limited similarity to the social media accounts I so commonly read. This disconnect, what I call ethnocentrism, is a problem for anyone trying to figure out how to succeed online with marketing, PR, sales or community building.

What works in the West will not transfer one-to-one in the East. Our efforts must be localized.

As a university professor, I am especially attuned to the relative lack of reliable research reports and case studies. I would be hard pressed to recall how many times I have been solicited, as a conference speaker or host, for more local cases. The pleas are that I make every effort to not have another speaker discuss the Old Spice campaign or Obama's election campaign. The same can be said of executive education participants, MBA class members and undergraduates – they all ask where are the local cases? They are tired of discussing another Google case study from Harvard (yet voraciously consume the latest news *about* Google). Many an audience has clapped after a speech, kindly complimented the speaker and exited the conference facilities expressing displeasure only to friends.

There is an audience in Asia hungry for local insights.

Leadership and the path forward

In an article titled “The Shift of PR Wealth to Asia” written by Burson-Marsteller's APAC President and CEO Bob Pickard (2011), important advice was shared with readers working in Asian markets.

There is a long tradition of complaining about Western-centrism in Asia, with many derisive of those with ‘global’ titles who are thought to lack understanding of the Asian context. Sometimes these complaints seem valid but what we're going to find now with this shift of global PR power is that it's easy to criticise but a lot harder to paint on the bigger global communications canvases we're seeing on our side of the Pacific for the first time.

Simply put, are we going to sit back and complain or will we embrace and act on the opportunity these increasingly important markets are presenting to us? I am all for action, and considering the nature of these markets, fragmented and many of emerging-market status, I think a particular kind of leadership is required.

The answer, I believe, rests in public private partnerships (PPP). Markets are not the solution. If left to their own devices, for profit companies will only

research markets within which they stand a reasonable chance of getting a return on their investment.

This raises two immediate concerns:

- What happens to small markets like Singapore and Brunei, or to still-developing markets like Thailand, Philippines and Pakistan?
- Market-driven solutions will likely limit the research scope to activities, which are in some sense billable or, in social media language, able to be monetized.

What about NGOs, governmental communications or the use of social media in education and developing the digital literacy of our children?

In Asia, many people look to the government for leadership and solutions. This notion of state solutions, while anathema in some places, can be openly embraced in parts of Asia Pacific. This point offers one more – poignant – example of just how different the East can be. And now, my call for PPP falls into alignment with the ideas presented earlier in this chapter. There is a critical role for governments, businesses and academics to play. The needs are broad, and the ability to learn from these diverse vantage points is great.

What I am describing is a leadership challenge that is harmonious in its balance of public interest and the profit motive. Any Western company or individual pursuing this challenge will need to display strong leadership in balancing the competing needs and, above all else, function as a learning organization. With fragmented markets, different stages of market maturity, global competition, diverse cultures and regulatory uncertainty in some cases, bridging the different needs will not be easy.

But, then again, it is precisely this sort of challenge that ultimately led many professionals to make Asia their home and to rise each morning to face these challenges, which never fail to excite, distress and compel each of us.

Roundup

Want more? See what has been said about this chapter or get involved and discuss it with the author and other readers on our LinkedIn group, find it by visiting <http://www.socialmedia-mba.com> or search for “The Social Media MBA Alumni”.

Days after the tragedy in Japan in 2011 we saw the best of what people using social media have to offer. Examples included online mapping projects, sharing stories that needed to be told, sourcing for resources and donations, and updating news reports and warnings around the nuclear plants.

This is leadership, and I think all businesses wanting to operate anywhere in Asia will benefit from taking a leaf or two from this book. We can see how online activities are localized and use similar yet tailored approaches to better communicate and make positive changes in all walks of life. One size does not fit all in Asia.

In the absence of reliable data about your market, competitors’ communications or customers, what are three practical steps for researching your target audience and making data driven decisions about your communications? Start by being specific about the data you want and how you would get it. Then, allow the market-specific data to guide your decision making.

In the next chapter Zaheer Nooruddin will continue to paint the picture of the social media opportunity in Asia.

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