Delight and Disaster Relief through the Use of Multimedia

Laura Lally
Mohammad Ahad

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/jibl

Recommended Citation
Lally, Laura and Ahad, Mohammad (2009) "Delight and Disaster Relief through the Use of Multimedia," Journal of International Business and Law: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/jibl/vol8/iss1/6
DELIIGHT AND DISASTER RELIEF THROUGH THE USE OF MULTIMEDIA

Dr. Laura Lally* & Mohammad Ahad**

INTRODUCTION: DELIGHT AND DISASTER RELIEF

Information technology can play a large role in disasters. First, IT frequently exhibits the characteristics of disaster prone systems. IT is frequently complex, tightly coupled and poorly controlled (Lally, 2002) which makes it prone to accidents in the normal state of its operation. Furthermore, the rapid pace of change in the field of IT makes the control of these systems an even greater challenge. However, Lally (2003) argued that IT can also play a role in disaster prevention, mitigation of damages, and the enhancement of learning to prevent future disasters. As a final stage in disaster survival, Lally (2008) introduced the concept of Post Crisis Renewal and applied it to survivors of Hurricane Katrina.

Individuals, organizations, and societies that have survived life changing crises face the challenging task of rebuilding their lives and cultures. In Lally’s case study of Hurricane Katrina, she argued that IT-based technologies can help this difficult process (Lally, 2008, p.14)

Rebuilding a sense of community is an important task in the face of a devastating loss and keeping in touch with fellow survivors and loved ones an important part of recovery for the individuals involved. In the case of New Orleans, half the population has been relocated, creating a culture in a state of Diaspora. Concerts and food festivals throughout the world can help keep the city’s unique culture alive, as well as making others aware of it. Internet sites keep individuals in touch with family and friends, and can educate others about the city’s history, art and architecture.

Most citizens of the U.S. “Know what it means to miss New Orleans,”

* Dr. Laura Lally, Associate Professor, IT/QM Department, Zarb School of Business, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York.
** Mohammad Ahad, New York Institute of Technology, New York.
Since Katrina, films, concerts, and cookbooks have celebrated the unique qualities of New Orleans culture. Celebrities such as Spike Lee, Wynton Marsalis, and Brad Pitt have played active roles in relief and rebuilding projects. Web sites have also played a large role in the rebuilding process:

One example of this was during Hurricane Katrina, when software consultant Katrina Blankenship permitted her website to be converted to an online forum about the hurricane including pointers to other websites and a message board to help locate missing people. The site received over 12 million hits and is still active as a Katrina memorial site and a source for hurricane preparedness information (Lally, 2008, p.12).

Individuals who are able to survive and flourish again after disasters tend to be those who can remember happy times in the past and look forward to happier times ahead. Sigmund Freud wrote in “Mourning and Melancholia,” that “a critical difference between ordinary grief and acute depression is that mourners can successfully anticipate a life where there will once again be joy and meaning,” (Banks and Coutu, 2008, p. 114).

Unlike the case of New Orleans, most U.S. citizens are not highly aware of the culture of Afghanistan. Newspaper headlines like “Afghanistan the Beautiful” are meant to be a joke (Newsday, March 24, 2008, p. A10). Newspaper images focus on war and destruction, rather than on the beauty of the culture that is struggling to revive itself. This paper will argue that Positive Affect Technology—Lally's (2008)—technology designed to delight individuals—can help raise awareness of the beauties of Afghanistan’s unique culture, and that resulting awareness will make Americans more willing to support post war relief efforts.

The authors considered this a major challenge, since the words “Afghanistan” and “Delight” do not usually appear in the same sentence in today’s media. We developed two multimedia presentations on the beauties of Afghan culture and conducted a survey to determine if the presentations impacted support for cultural rebuilding. Our results were strongly positive indicating that individuals exposed to the delights of another culture would be more like to support relief efforts. The results could have major significance for how other developing countries and the aid organizations that help them, make use of IT and delight to further their fund raising goals. A second goal of the research would be to develop educational materials, specifically for Hofstra’s entry level business computing class, to encourage students to develop presentations and Web Sites to raise awareness of other cultures.
A. Rumi and Rosewater: Discovering the Beauties of Afghan Culture

Since 1979, Afghanistan has been under siege, first by the Russians and then by the Taliban, leaving a severely damaged infrastructure, health care, and education system. Intervention by the United States, England, and Australia, focuses primarily on military aid, motivated by the desire to avenge 9/11 and drive the Taliban followers of Osama Bin Laden out of the country. In 1979, U.S. lead forces, aided by local Mujahedeen militias, succeeded in driving out Russian invaders. But as Charlie Wilson noted, “Americans won the war and lost the peace,” (Crile, 2004, p. 172) leaving behind a devastated country where the average age of the population was fourteen. Current chairman of the Joint chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen warned the U.S. congress that, “We can’t kill our way to victory,” and that the U.S. needs to “improve its nation building abilities,” (CNN, 2008) to secure a lasting peace in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan was on both the silk road and the spice road and as a result is a heterogeneous blend of a number of cultures that have left behind a wide range of beautiful cultural artifacts. A museum show of these artifacts is currently in the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. The show highlights from the National Museum of Kabul which was destroyed by the Taliban. The show includes a trove of items from a storehouse in Bagram that was at the center of the silk trade, featuring a range of treasures from Afghan, Chinese, Greek, Indian and Roman origin. Also included in the show is the “Bactrian Hoard,” from Tillya Tepe a tomb containing more gold jewelry and artifacts than King Tutankhamen. The tomb was discovered in 1978, just before the invasion of the Russians by a Russian scientist, and its contents buried in a safe until just last year. Afghanistan also has a rich literary tradition, and celebrates its great poets such as Rumi and Jani. Elaborate tombs of great poets adorn the landscape of Afghanistan and Turkey. A new English translator, Coleman Barks, has created a new surge of interest in Rumi’s work in the English speaking world (Barks, 1995). Afghanistan, like New Orleans, has beautiful music and fascinating cuisine with exotic seasonings, such as rosewater (Saberi, 2007). Entrepreneurial initiatives are underway, such as the one by Jalalabad farmer Shafiq Azizi to grow roses for perfume and rosewater, instead of using the land to grow opium poppies (Watson, 2008).

B. Experimental Design of the Study

Students entering both sections of Dr. Lally’s IT 14 class in the Fall of 2008 were given a survey asking them to list up to ten things they know about New Orleans and ten things they know about Afghanistan. Students recalled an average of 7.2 things about New Orleans. Although all students mentioned
Katrina first, most also students recalled positive joyful things like Jazz, Cajun cooking, the Saints and Mardi Gras as well.

In comparison, students recalled an average of 4.7 things about Afghanistan all almost entirely negative such as terrorism, women’s rights violations, and the opium trade. A number of recollections were wrong including “Oil rich” (one response described Afghanistan as both “Poverty Stricken” and “Oil Rich”) and in the Middle East. These responses could be explained by student’s exposure to the news media. A search on the term Afghanistan on news media sites resulted in overwhelmingly negative facts and events. To counter this negative view, we developed two multimedia presentations on Afghanistan to raise student’s awareness of the culture and tested to see if the presentation would impact their support for rebuilding Afghanistan’s infrastructure and culture.

The multimedia presentations, Afghan Odysseys I and II, focused on:

I) Treasures from the Kabul museum which encompassed art work from the many cultures that have lived in and crossed Afghanistan during its years as a trade route, including the Bactrian Horde a collection of gold jewelry and sculpture large than the one found in King Tutankhamen’s tomb, Roman and Greek style sculpture, jewelry and elaborately decorated cookware, Buddhas from the Bamian Valley, as well as traditional music and quotations from classical Afghan poets such as Rumi and Jani.

II) The people and places of Afghanistan including the stunning landscape of the Bamian Valley, the sport of Buzkashi, carpet bazaars and caravans of Afghanistan that one could have seen on a tour of the country prior to 1979, featuring the music of the lively Afghan national dance. The presentations are currently in Powerpoint and will be developed into a Web site. Versions of the presentations without the music are attached in Appendices A and B.

The experiment utilized the classic control group design:

O X O
O O

Our research propositions were:
Research Proposition #1: Individuals who view “Afghan Odyssey’s I and II” will recall more things, and more favorable things about Afghanistan, than those who do not.

Research Proposition #2: Individuals who view “Afghan Odyssey’s and II” will be in favor of greater degrees of post war support for Afghanistan, than those who do not.

Research Proposition #3: The more positive things individuals remember about a culture, the more likely they will be in favor of post war support.

Immediately after completing the preliminary survey, the students in the test group were shown the Afghan Odyssey presentations. Two weeks later, the students were again asked to recall ten things they knew about Afghanistan. During that time the news media covered stories of corruption in the Afghan government, and further incursions of the Taliban into the country, which now were listed in student’s recollections. Students who had seen the presentations now recalled 7.6 things about Afghanistan in comparison with the control group (3.9), providing support for Research Proposition #1.

Students who had been shown the presentations, now also recalled beautiful landscapes, Buddhas, Rumi, Buskashi, hand woven carpets, bazaars, music and other positive things about the culture. Both the groups of students were then asked to respond on a Likert scale (1 to 7), the degree to which they agreed that the U.S. should help rebuild Afghanistan’s infrastructure and culture. Students who had been shown the presentation averaged 6.2 on infrastructure rebuilding and 5.7 on cultural rebuilding, in contrast to the control group who scored 4.7 on infrastructure rebuilding and 4.2 on cultural rebuilding. This statistically significant result supported Research Hypothesis #2. There was a strong positive correlation between the number of positive things students could recall and willingness to support infrastructure rebuilding (.81) and cultural renewal (.77), in the group who had been shown the presentations supporting Research Hypotheses #3. The control group still recalled almost nothing positive.

C. Extending the Study and Developing Educational Materials

This study can be applied across a wide range of cultures about which there is limited global understanding. Often cultures that have been besieged by war and poverty are represented overwhelmingly with negative terms and depressing images, perhaps with the hope of generating sympathy for fund raising causes. News media further reinforce these negative images which may
endure over time. Many Americans over 40 still associate Vietnam with smelling like “napalm in the morning” as described in the movie “Apocalypse Now,” despite the current beauty of the landscape and many cultural treasures. American’s over 40 were frequently ordered to eat their vegetables as children because “people are starving in India.” Again, despite beautiful landscapes, cultural treasures and a much richer culinary tradition than American has of making vegetables taste delicious, India has also been typecast in terms of poverty and conflict.

This bombardment with negativity, however, can induce burnout even in generous, caring individuals as all disaster areas begin to look and sound alike and appear to continue emerging no matter how much effort is made. Using multimedia to induce delight may provide a fresh new way to gather attention, involvement, and financial commitment to cultural appreciation and renewal in a global environment.

References


