Lab in the Wild asks: What's your Internet like?

Eurekalert!

Cambridge, Mass – August 6, 2012 - One size fits all? Not on the Web. Users from different countries and cultures actually interact with information in different ways.

To explore how people click and tap through the vast network of online offerings, a team of computer scientists from Harvard have launched the "Lab in the Wild [1]".

The project, led by Katharina Reinecke and Krzysztof Gajos, both at the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS), will administer an ongoing series of voluntary tests designed to elicit information about various users' "online culture."

Drawing on past aggregate data, the simple and fun tests provide instant feedback, so test takers can see how they are similar to or different from other groups of users based upon their country and culture.

Ultimately, success for the project will depend upon the researchers gathering and analyzing results from thousands of users globally.

"Although people on the web are often thought to merge into a homogeneous online culture, they still differ," says Reinecke, a postdoctoral researcher in the Intelligent Interactive Systems group at SEAS, led by Gajos. "We are seeking to answer questions like: How does your cultural background influence how you perceive and process information? Which types of websites do you find most appealing, trustworthy, and intuitive? In short: What would the Internet look like if you designed it?"

To see the differences first hand, participants in the Lab in the Wild project can compare their own ideas on what makes a website beautiful with what others think. For example, not everyone likes the simplicity associated with many German websites or the colorful busy designs common in South Korean pages.

Participants can also test whether they are more sensitive to a focal object (as most Americans are) or more attuned to the broader context (as many Japanese are).

Similar to the popular TestMyBrain website that aims to collaborate with "citizen scientists" to learn about how the brain works, the Lab in the Wild is designed to understand how people around the world differ in the way they think, perceive information, and use technology. In fact, the researchers are collaborating with the Vision Lab at Harvard University, led by Ken Nakayama, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, which runs the TestMyBrain project.

Of course, personal preferences are often simply that—personal, and unrelated to national culture. One of the aims of the researchers is to shed light on how culture

and other factors shape such predilections and to use the data to build better, more intuitive user interfaces.

"Previous research has already found huge differences in what people find appealing online, and it has provided hints about what kinds of websites and workflows they can work with most efficiently," explains Gajos, Assistant Professor of Computer Science at SEAS and an expert on personalized user interfaces. "We want to build on that in order to make computers adapt to people's needs and preferences rather than the other way around."

A recent study by collaborators from Gajos' lab, the University of Zurich, and the online scheduling company Doodle.com, has suggested that cultural differences exist in the way cultural groups want to use calendar management tools. In countries that are believed to have more collectivist and group-oriented cultures, study participants were much more likely to mutually agree on specific dates versus those in more individualist societies. For example, U.S. participants in the study seemed to be the least influenced by the availability of others. In addition, participants who lived in fast-paced environments were more likely to book meetings well in advance.

In another experiment about online look-and-feel preferences, Reinecke found that while Swiss participants generally preferred a simple user interface with very few colors, Rwandan and Thai participants chose much more colorful and complex designs, adding more icons and information. Moreover, participants were able to work more efficiently with interfaces that were adapted to their preferences.

The Lab in the Wild is an attempt to expand on smaller efforts like these and obtain more statistically reliable samples.

"Computer science research on user interface designs often concentrates just on Western audiences, which can alienate overseas users," says Reinecke. "To create truly responsive, intelligent designs that won't get lost in translation, so to speak, it's important that we gather input from a global audience."
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