L. Elizabeth Mackey
PhD Student
Rhetoric, Scientific, and Technical Communication

Ebola, Technical Communication, and the WHO Website:
(Selectively) Globalizing Public Health Emergencies

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Department of Writing Studies
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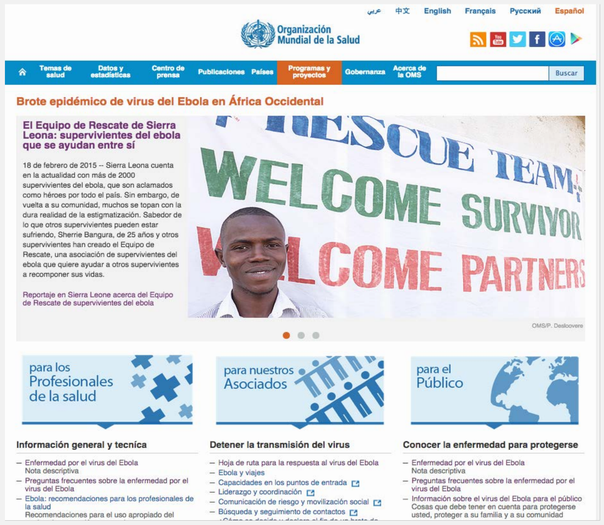
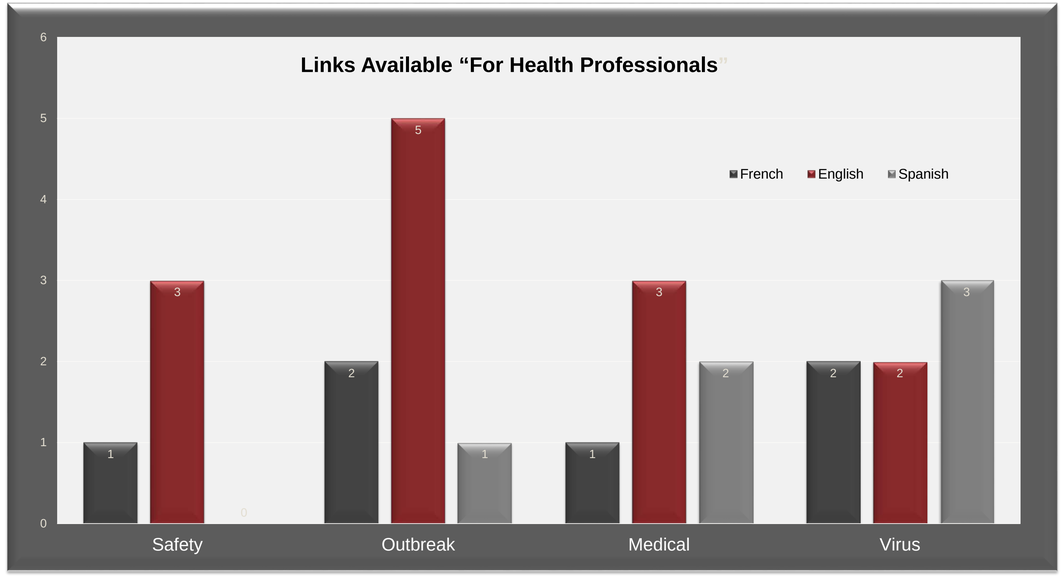
"*While all essential content is available in the six official languages, technical content - with the intention of rationalizing the use of resources - is deliberately published only in some languages. Decisions on what content to publish in which language(s) are made based on an analysis of the target audience needs, and in response to emergency situations and crises.*"

--WHO Statement on Multilingualism



THE STUDY

This study reviewed a portion of the WHO Ebola webpage content (see above) available in three languages: English, French, and Spanish. In each webpage excerpt, technical information was organized according to a particular audience: Health professionals, WHO partners, and the public. Within each designated audience, I took inventory of the available links in each language and coded them using themes specific to that audience. During this six week period, I also monitored and catalogued news stories that appeared at the top of the webpage, noting type and frequency of change. The results of this study are a result of both content and rhetorical analyses.



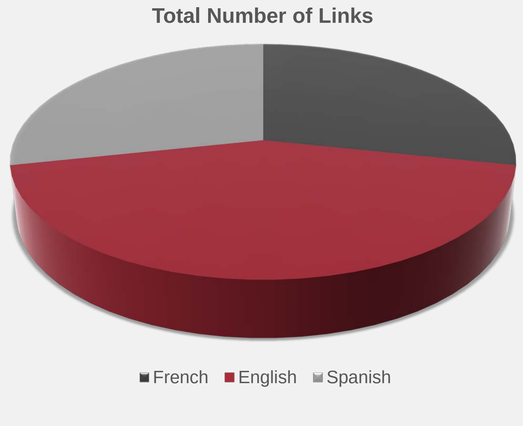
The chart above measures the amount of data available on the WHO Ebola page in English, French, and Spanish for the "Health professionals" audience. The chart also displays a sample analysis of themes. In this case, four themes emerged from the technical information links posted on the webpages: *safety, outbreak, medical, and virus*.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- WHO fundraising is specific to the English webpage
- The English Version 1 (EV1) site is the most influenced by culture (American)
- All multilingual Ebola webpage have the same basic design and structure
- Infographics are explicitly stated and linked in English only
- The number of links available in English is nearly twice the amount available in French and Spanish—combined.
- The "news" stories posted on each webpage are frequently updated in English and French—not Spanish.
- Safety information is minimally provided in English and generally unavailable in French and Spanish
- Essentially, the webpages fail to respond to multilingual audiences

WHO's multilingual web site, publications and other resources ensure that health information reaches the people who need it, in the languages they can understand. This makes access to health information both more equitable - and effective.

--WHO Statement on Multilingualism



CONCLUSIONS

A lack of transparency exists within the WHO website regarding how content is evaluated as "essential" and then translated into multiple languages. For instance, safety information for health professionals was only available in English. This includes information like hand washing and burials. During a public health emergency—particularly a disease outbreak—isn't this the kind of information multilingual audiences should have access to?

Given the use of the WHO during public health emergencies, the amount of information available to a variety of populations is limited. As well, in determining "audience needs," the organization has abstracted language from culture. That is, one language represents a significant portion of the world population, but it does not illustrate cultural knowledge. In other words, the current availability of content on the website fails to be equitable and effective across languages during the most globalized period of history to date.