
Context-dependent vs. content-dependent: an exploration of the cultural behavioural patterns of online intercultural communication using e-mail

Norhayati Zakaria*

Faculty of Business and Management,
University of Wollongong in Dubai,
1-02 Block 15, Knowledge Village,
PO Box 20183, Dubai, UAE
E-mail: norhayatizakaria@uowdubai.ac.ae
*Corresponding author

Derrick L. Cogburn

International Communication Program,
School of International Service,
212 McCabe, American University,
Washington, DC 20016-8071, USA
E-mail: dcogburn@american.edu

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the cultural behavioural patterns of online intercultural communication in a globally distributed collaborative environment. We conducted a qualitative content analysis on the data drawn from a public e-mail archive of the trans-national civil society participants in the UN World Summit on the Information Society. The findings showed that there were no significant differences observed between the frequency of contributions between high and low-context participants in the collaborative processes. But, importantly, the findings suggest that culture matters in the form of intercultural communication styles and the cultural values to which participants subscribe. Based on Edward Hall's high and low-context theory, distinctive patterns of high-context and low-context cultural behaviours were evident in the strategies, approaches and communicative mannerisms of people participating in the distributed collaboration under analysis. In summary, online cultural behavioural patterns can be illustrated as context-dependent or content-dependent.

Keywords: high context; low context; cultural values; intercultural communication styles; globally distributed collaboration; World Summit on Information society; context-dependent; content-dependent; e-mail.

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Biographical notes: Norhayati Zakaria received her PhD in Information Science and Technology from Syracuse University and her area of expertise bridges between the field of cross-cultural management and information communication technology. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor at Faculty

of Business and Management, University of Wollongong in Dubai, UAE and Senior Lecturer at College of Business at Universiti Utara Malaysia. She has been engaged for many years in research focusing on cross-cultural issues such as managing, trusting, and leading people and global teams to effectively collaborate in a face-to-face and virtual environment, and building online cross-cultural training for developing cultural competencies.

Derrick L. Cogburn is an Expert on global information and communication technology (ICT) policy and in the use of ICTs for socio-economic development. He is an Associate Professor of International Relations in the School of International Service at American University and an Associate Professor in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. He also directs the Centre for Research on Collaboratories and Technology Enhanced Learning Communities (Cotelco), an award-winning social science research collaboratory between Syracuse University and American University investigating the social and technical factors that influence geographically distributed collaborative knowledge work, particularly between developed and developing countries.

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1 Introduction

The phenomenon of globally distributed collaboration has intensified the needs for managing intercultural communication, defined as interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds with distinct communication patterns, preferences and styles (Gudykunst, 1997; Novinger, 2001). Hall (1976) established that different cultures use divergent communication styles that consequently impact one's ability to effectively collaborate. In his theory, called high vs. low context, he explained that communicative behaviour is strongly rooted in one's cultural background. For example, in high-context cultures (e.g. Malaysia, Korea, Japan, France, etc.), people put more emphasis on non-verbal cues a behaviour known as context-dependent. On the other hand, in low-context cultures (e.g. USA, UK, Italy, Australia, etc.), people rely more on words spoken or written, a behaviour known as content-dependent.

Manifestations of culture are often shown in a person's intercultural communicative behaviours. According to Chen (2001), Gudykunst and Nishida (1986), one's communication styles is deeply rooted in one's cultural values. Several studies have established that communicative behaviours vary across and within cultures, and that these variations can be explained by Hall's diversity opinions and many more. The concept of high-context and low-context communication styles is well-supported (Bresnahan et al., 2002; Grosse, 2002; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst et al., 1997; Kim, 2005; LeBaron, 2003; Pekerti and Thomas, 2003; Shachaf, 2008). In order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretations, it is important to comprehend the meaning in what a person says and also how things are said – i.e. the communication style one uses

for generating ideas, exchanging opinions, sharing knowledge and expressing ideas (Zakaria et al., 2003).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the intercultural communication processes particularly looking at the participation of Civil Society members in the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) with myriad cultural backgrounds collaborate virtually in trans-national network structures. The main objective of this study was to present a rich description of how different intercultural communication orientations impact Civil Society globally distributed participation using e-mail during WSIS. By using Hall's high vs. low-context cultural dimensions (Hall, 1976), the study provides valuable insights into understanding the multi-dimensional cultural variables involved in geographically distributed intercultural communication and a concrete foundation on which to build other research studies. Thus, these are the specific research questions.

RQ1. What intercultural communication patterns are observed in e-mail messages of trans-national civil society participating in WSIS?

RQ2. What differences exist between high-context and low-context intercultural communication patterns in this geographically distributed environment?

We used a secondary dataset – the archival e-mail messages and the analysis was conducted deductively. The analysis was guided by intercultural communication theory developed by Hall (1976). Hall's high-context/low-context framework is a useful lens from which to identify participants on the e-mail listserve using high-context communication styles in order to compare them to people using low-context communication styles. In addition, this theory also provides the most relevant lens to explore cross-cultural communicative behaviours as compared to other cross-cultural theories. For example, Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2000), both are renowned cross-cultural theorists who have developed cultural values that are consistent with Hall's work. Yet, their dimensions focus more on work values, while Hall's work proffers on communicative behaviours.

With respect to how these communication processes may differ, it hinges upon culturally imbued characteristics of individuals. The content analysis is conducted in a setting that is based on purely naturalistic interaction events of the global virtual team members. In specific, we identified the intercultural communication patterns based on the participation of Civil Society Members in the process of reaching consensus to formulate global information policy during WSIS. This research context is unique because it comprises multi-stakeholder participants where people with diverse cultural backgrounds and with different communication styles come together to work but at a distance.

Although more and more people from different cultural backgrounds are participating in a distributed environment, yet little empirical research has attempted to bridge the areas of intercultural communication and cross-cultural management, and CMC (Amant, 2002; Olaniran, 2001; Zakaria and Cogburn, 2008). In essence, this study is significant because in the past, studies have looked at the issue of cross-cultural communication and its cultural challenges in a face-to-face environment (Ferraro, 2009; Hooker, 2003; Tayeb, 2003). However, as we suggest above, increasingly working environments in both the private sector and civil society are moving to globally distributed teams. There is more empirical and theoretical work necessary to understand whether people communicate the same way in these trans-national environments, or if they transcend

their normative behaviours (Anderson, 2001; Araujo and Chidambaran, 2008; Oetzel, 2005; Shachaf, 2008; Zhu et al., 2006). This study has attempted to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon so that multi-national corporations (MNCs) can alleviate frustration and reduce misinterpretation within teams separated by time zone, geographic distance and cultural differences. In the following section, the findings will illustrate the different communicative behaviours, which are consistent to the face-to-face behaviour as observed by the high vs. low-context behaviours.

2 Theoretical framework: high context vs. low context

We applied Edward Hall's (1976) theoretical lens through which we examined the cultural behavioural patterns of online intercultural communication. This theory provides a concrete explanation for communication complexities as well as collaborative behaviours that are based on cultural values. Hall introduces a cultural dimension called context, a continuous spectrum from high context to low context, which illustrates the degree to which a person pays attention to non-verbal cues in a communicative situation. High-context culture emphasises settings or the environment (i.e. context), while low-context culture emphasises words or content.

Hall realised that everyday communication could cause information overload, which he defines as "...a situation in which the system breaks down when it cannot properly handle the huge volume of information to which it is subjected" (p.85). Context plays an important role in minimising information overload allowing an individual to select what to pay attention to and what to ignore. Contexting involves two completely different but interrelated processes (Hall, 1976). It involves the inside of a person (a person's brain, experience and structure of the nervous system) or external such as the situation or environment that an event occurs or a person is in.

Contexting is thus a process and a strategy by which an individual evaluates the amount and level of information to obtain from or provide to another person when communicating. Understanding the process of 'contexting' also aids in overcoming or minimising cultural differences. Communication problems often arise when individuals define, interpret, understand and communicate information differently. This problem is exacerbated between people with different cultural values: what is considered useful, meaningful and worth communicating among individuals in one culture may not be considered so by people from another culture (Zakaria et al., 2003). Individuals from diverse cultures have different communicative behaviours. Everyday communication decisions such as language use and word choice, why (or whether) a person says what he wants to say, and when and to whom he says it become significant. In short, these decisions illustrate the process of contexting, a strategic behaviour in which a person screens out irrelevant information in order to avoid information overload (Hall, 1976).

The process of contexting thus hinges upon an individual's culturally imbued characteristics (Chen, 2001; Chen and Starosta, 1998). In his earliest book, *Silent Language* (1959), Hall argued that the language of behaviour is far more important than linguistic code. This silent language is the contextual code, which carries varying meanings. People from different cultures have different ways of interpreting meanings of the messages or information they receive (Chen and Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst, 1997; Hall, 1976; Ting-Toomey, 1999); therefore, different communication practices and

preferences can result in miscommunication, misunderstanding and misinterpretation among people with conflicting or mismatched cultural values.

Hall's classic theory lays the foundation for many other later cultural theories (for example, Gudykunst et al., 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2000). It is useful to note that Hall's theory provides one explanatory perspective for understanding communicative behaviours in globally distributed collaboration – that is a cultural perspective. There are other alternative ways of explaining online communicative behaviours (e.g. leadership, technology, trust, coordination, etc.), all of which provide potential areas for future research though they are not the focus of this study.

3 Methodology: content analysis of archival e-mail messages

3.1 Research context: civil society participation in World Summit on the Information Society Geneva

This study explored the behavioural patterns of online intercultural communicative behaviours of civil society participants during the first phase of the WSIS. WSIS was an international conference that was held in two phases: WSIS I in Geneva (December 10.12.2003) and WSIS II in Tunis (November 2005) (<http://www.itu.int/wsis>). Overall, the goal of WSIS was to develop a global information communication technology (ICT) policy framework to deal with challenges posed by an information society (WSIS, 2003a, 2003b). WSIS played an important role as an avenue for global dialogue, discussion and consensus building in the acceptance of norms, rules, principles, values and decision-making processes among multiple stakeholders (Klein, 2005). This conference was sponsored by the United Nations and organised by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) that specifically addresses issues relating to the role of ICT policy-making processes in influencing and shaping global governance outcomes.

We used a secondary dataset based on archival e-mail messages. The Civil Society participants used e-mail in the form of a listserv as their primary vehicle for communication and collaboration. The participants came from all parts of the world – Asia, Europe, Africa, North America and South America. The data obtained was from a six-month period because these were the most active months in terms of observable online communication behaviours. In addition, we chose to analyse WSIS Geneva-Phase One because that phase also most closely reflected the dynamics of human collaboration in a globally.

3.2 Content analytic framework

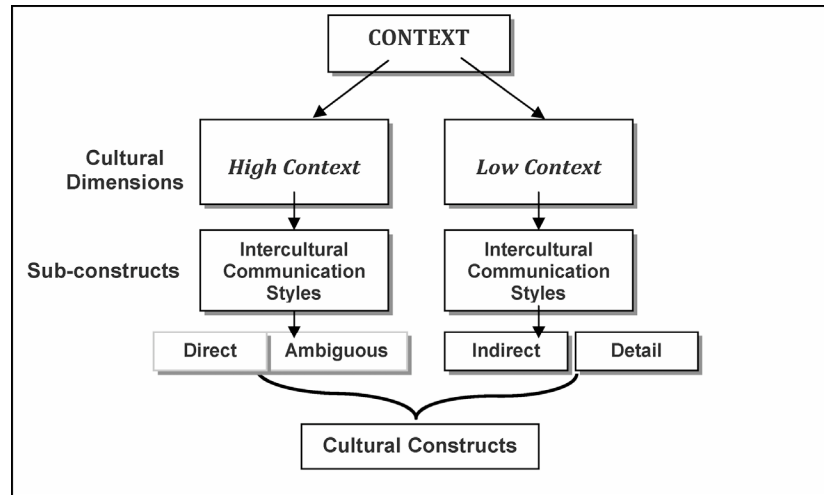
We used content analysis as the primary research methodology. Content analysis is recognised as an effective research tool for studying recorded human communications (Babbie, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002). The primary source of data for this study consists of the public archival e-mail messages of the virtual civil society plenary. The data covers a six (6) months period from June 2003 to December 2003. Through content analysis, this study attempts to decode information like "...who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?" (Babbie, 2004, p.314). Content analysis is an unobtrusive research technique and well-suited for understanding human intercultural communication because the data is used as it occurs in its most naturalistic setting, thus

facilitating external validity. The archival e-mail data was imported into Atlas-TI version 5.0, a commercial computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, used for content analysis. We used a deductive coding scheme based on Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context theory and other supported cross-cultural literature (Gudykunst et al., 1997; Triandis, 2002). In this study, the unit of analysis is an individual message, and the coding unit is the sentence and paragraph within each individual message.

3.3 Coding procedures and coding schemes

In this study, the deductive analysis of the data was to identify the discernable patterns of intercultural communication styles based on analytic framework of high context and low context (Gudykunst et al., 1997; Hall, 1976; Triandis, 1994; also see Figure 1). An important aspect to note is that the cultural analysis relies on basic assumptions derived from high-context and low-context cultural orientations as well as other related cultural constructs. In other words, the analysis is based purely on the messages that are coded and as such culture is an indicator of the individuals' behaviours as demonstrated in their e-mail messages. In this respect, culture is derived from the messages. This study had looked at cultural values at the individual level (e.g. which communication style do people use when they collaborate via e-mail?). This is because with globalisation, individuals' behaviours are more context- or content-dependent and thus not necessarily rooted in their national background.

Before we analyse the data from WSIS I, several procedures of the content analysis was carried out. We first coded the demographic information for each of the messages to provide descriptive analysis on the overall background information of the participants, e.g. number of messages posted on the overall participation in a distributed environment. Then, we coded the member's participation in which we identified the differences in intercultural communication styles using a deductive analytic framework. In this study, we utilised the deductive method based on Hall's high-context and low-context cultural dimensions for online communicative behaviours, for e.g. constructs such as indirect vs. direct, ambiguous vs. detail (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Kapoor et al., 2003). Each of the definition and examples of the constructs are listed in the codebook (Table 3.1). The first step we took was to develop a tentative set of *a priori* dimensions. These dimensions were based on several different coding schemes selected from the literature reviews (Adler, 2007; Gudykunst, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1994; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2000) and context theory (Hall, 1976). The development of cultural coding schemes was discussed with research team and expertise in cultural studies. The cultural codes were refined after referring to existing literature and the outcome of the pre-testing scheme. For example, for the intercultural communication styles sub-category, the refined cultural constructs were reduced from three to only two for clarity (refer to Figure 1). Also, these revisions were made in order to improve the way the data were to be analysed.

Figure 1 Coding scheme: sample of revised 'cultural context' codes

Source: Hall (1976), Gudykunst et al. (1997) and Triandis (1994).

4 Findings: cultural behavioural analysis on the online intercultural communication patterns

The following cultural analysis aims at providing in-depth descriptions of the behavioural aspects of civil society members who are engaged in globally distributed collaboration during WSIS. It was evident in Cogburn's (2005) study that they used e-mail more frequently and regularly as compared to some other means such as videoconferencing or instant messaging. We will discuss the findings based on two types of behaviours, which are high vs. low-context dimensions. We deduced the behaviours based on the content of the messages using the theoretical lens selected. For analysis purposes, we have removed all the real names of the e-mail WSIS participants. Instead, we have replaced it with a fictitious name in order to protect all participants' privacy. Hence, the names are not an indicative of a real person's identity but more importantly is to illustrate the content of the e-mail analysis.

4.1 Understanding high-context behaviours

When examining the cultural patterns of behaviours based on the e-mail messages, many interesting illustrations and variations emerged in terms of the indirect and ambiguous constructs. For the 'ambiguous' construct, the structure and nature of the message varied in short and long messages. The short messages normally had restricted codes embedded in them and the codes might be meaningful for some participants, yet meaningless for others. For example, in one message, Vince sent a reply that said 'I second that'. This expression is restricted in the sense that only those participants who have been following the discussion could easily and quickly decode the underlying meaning of such reply. It would be difficult for someone to join the discussion if they did not understand the context and the substance of that reply. Other similar short replies were like Gary's, "[*]

Also, reminding people of the dentist ("floss") is usually not a good idea if you want their sympathy" or a scornful answer from Vince, '...huh, English?' or Charlie's comment of, 'That's 18,000 years-a bit more stability in ICANN than may be prudent...').

All these examples demonstrate heavily restrictive codes or short phrases that needed to be further interpreted. Some participants also used non-verbal cues such as punctuations, i.e. question mark, hyphens, slashes, asterisk, colons, parentheses and non-verbal icons such as and smiley and many more. Non-verbal cues were evident in most of the short messages and restrictive codes used by participants in the listserv. Other non-verbal cues used include capital letters (And IF we decide..., or not for ONE, as it was expected) when people tried to assert a point, exclamation mark (I agree definitely with you, Beatrice!, or sigh!) to show total support or disagreement, quotation mark (In France WSIS is 'not on the agenda' in the national press), and abbreviated words (FYI, BTW, P.S., AKA) in which those abbreviated words may not necessarily be understood in other cultures. These non-verbal cues did not have a universal understanding among the participating participants, which often times resulted in confusion, misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Another version of the ambiguous message was one which was lengthy and had unclear goals or multiple purposes. At times, the goal was implicitly stated or was buried in the lengthy message. For instance, Fedrick (Box 1) took 614 words to express his feelings and from one paragraph to another, there was no coherent theme to it, and sometimes it was out of context.

One can only understand the substance of the message once they reach the end. Initially the content seems to be related to speaker's nomination. But Fredrick's message 'beats around the bush', which made it hard to follow his proposals; at first he seems to think that choosing Raymond might be the best option, but then he concluded that a woman representative might be the best option.

A closer look at another construct called indirect showed that many of the messages captured a friendly tone and brought a sense of warmth and caring, as well as humour. The introduction of a message normally began with a formal tone to it, followed by heavy padded words of complementary or appreciative statements such as this:

Dear all,

I just want to thank everyone for the comments, expressions of appreciation and constructive criticism that has come in on the priorities document. With more time we could no doubt have polished the text further, but I think we have made important progress in including more concrete proposals in relation to previous documents.

I also want to thank everyone who has worked hard on getting the document out. This was a truly collective effort and the writing was shared among a large group of people.

Sandra

Or this:

Dear Sandra, Benjamin and all

First congratulations for doing a great job again. Just to advise you that – is happy to endorse the Document and the same for the CRIS Campaign.

Bonne chance in Paris!

Best

Melanie Harrison

Box 1 Example of ambiguous and lengthy message

Dear Michael and everybody,

Raymond addressed the general assembly during the Intersession, in July in Paris. See <http://www.wsis-pct.org/pct-talk-en-16jul03.html> for the text. The text is very good and the tone was passionate and convincing. It had a very strong impact on the audience. May be it was 'unusually' good ... I personally liked very much the end: "Free software is necessary for sustainable development. If everyone in your country uses a program that's secret and controlled by a single company, that's not development, that's electronic colonization".

As far "high profile" is concerned (Re another post) a person from the delegation from Janet told me, later on at PrepCom3, that in the whole assembly, the only one whose name would not fall into the dustbins of history would probably be his name, and not the names of ambassadors, ministers, former ministers and so on that were present. This remark being done, we must stressed again, that Raymond seems a good choice not because he is a celebrity but because he participated to the WSIS process and has a strong message to deliver.

As far as impact is concerned, many people in the delegations of emergent countries are ITC persons that are in fact, making the ITC policy of their own country. They are quite sensitive to strong ITC-related messages and are bored by general and vague declarations. The impact is real and the influence not negligible.

Raymond just broke his arm and will not be able to come next week in Geneva and probably not in December unless there is a chance he may address the general assembly either as an opening ceremony speaker or as a general debate speaker. Unlike those criticising the 'technologist' or the 'unusual', we are not going to have any negative comments against Madeline, I personally never heard her before at PrepComs we trust the judgment of the HR caucus concerning the former Minister of Culture from Mali. She is expected to be an excellent speaker (in French, which is good for linguistic diversity and from Africa which is good for regional balance).

Possibly the bottom line is that some people do not wish that a white male from the US may represent the Civil Society (I won't argue on this, there are pros and cons) but his message (I hope) is agreed upon by everybody. We are not dogmatic, if Raymond nomination as an opening ceremony speaker is generating such surprisingly negative comments then, for the sake of unity, we propose that it might be better if the Civil Society would choose yet another opening ceremony speaker. Concerning this choice, personally, I am urging the Civil Society to come out of the 'Matrix', Do we need to abide by the rules of the Media society, the 'advertising' society? Do we need some external celebrity that never participated to Prepcoms (there was a thread about this before)? Do we need to have a parachuted celebrity that we are not sure she/he will deliver the message (at least most of it) as compiled by the C&T drafting group? If this CS finally comes up with such kind of choice, we need to be sure that she/he will do so. It seems this was assured to be this way with the Nobel Prize winner from Iran (who seemed to be a good choice because of an exceptional political context).

Another solution, possibly the simplest is to choose an opening ceremony speaker among the women that, at one occasion or another, (Assembly or Press Conferences) already represented the CS with great success, namely (in alphabetical order, forgive me, if I forgot some names) Blanche, Mariette, Sandra, Samantha.

Best regards, Fedrick

Sometimes the message also has an apologetic or polite tone to it. For example, in the following message, Vienna expressed her opinion in a tactful manner although she obviously did not agree.

Dear Steven,

CS has spent a great amount of energy discussing and rediscussing its structure. In Paris, CS managed to get a substantial amount of work done, and there is at all three levels: the CS Plenary, the CS Contents and Themes Group and the CS Bureau. I am sorry but I do not see why we need to discuss the structure of CS again, coming back to issues that have previously already been clarified. I do fully agree with you that transparency is very important, but I believe the current system, where the CS Contents and Themes Group, as well as the CS Bureau report back to the CS Plenary works just fine.

Best regards, Fedrick

Other evidence of indirectness was messages with an indefinite or uncertain tone. For example, Yutaka (below) used words like ‘will be useful’ or ‘I am not sure’ to express his feelings. These words are not assertive but more tactful.

Dear Yon Pan-Yong,

It will be useful if a session at UNESCO can be organised using a conference call at the same time as the face-to-face meeting. The subject is very important in the current world, so that it deserves involving Civil Society opinions as much as possible. It would be the case that those whose communications may be monitored would have far less opportunities to travel to Europe (due to costs, lack of access to information, etc.) than those who are not.

I am not sure if setting a conference call system is possible as the meeting is starting next week, but believe that it is worth a try.

Best regards,

Yutaka Kiyoshi

Sometimes, participants posed a question like Kathryn’s “as we will have few opportunities for interventions, I am wondering if we can coordinate and agree on a combined intervention, or should we go for two slots?” She could have directly said, ‘We should coordinate’, but instead of an order she turned it into a question for everyone else to respond and as a result it sounded more like a request, waiting for approval. Another indirect message which was more subtle in tone and not forceful was from Rince:

James,

I think it means that the drafters will do their best to make everyone happy. But being a document that incorporates the views and proposals from multiple sources, everyone should be understanding if their input is not incorporated exactly as submitted. Those of course who feel that their input was not adequately addressed do not have to endorse the document.

Rince Plum

4.2 Understanding low-context behaviours

As above-mentioned, for low-context cultural orientation, the intercultural communication styles sub-category are direct and detail. People who employed a direct communication style often attempted to be as specific as they could by addressing questions in a bulleted or numbered form. They also responded to a message by pasting the previous message (in whole or in part) into their reply, then answering it in a systematic and logical order. This provided other participants with the relevant context and facilitated participation.

>Hi James,

>

>I was there and very much in the meeting. And I am not confused. I >believe Vince's proposal was in relation to coordination of activities. In >his own words, "If they both can think of a way to moderate and >coordinate activities (not only debates), that will be great".

*Yes, there are plenty of things that need coordination, which could be performed by a local person in Geneva. The Secretariat is doing a great job, yet we need to have someone – like Renee, e.g. – who can watch the things between Paris and Geneva *in* Geneva.*

Also, we need a better organisation BEFORE PrepCom-3, so that we don't waste time on day-to-day issues in the first 3 days in Geneva.

However, directness can at times be considered abrasive or harsh like this opening line from James: “What do you mean by this statement: We cannot, of course, expect a consensus document to be perfect for everyone; that is part of the compromise that consensus implies”. No doubt James was looking for a specific answer about a statement but it was said in a bold manner. Interestingly the response he received from Sandra was equally direct and explicit, “Simply that every organisation will still find something they would have liked included or improved”.

From another perspective, direct messages usually present an assertive statement up front, followed by a detailed explanation. This seemed to be the common pattern of behaviours observed from a low-context culture. But it is a shorter version compared to the high-context behavioural pattern which has several steps of expressing what they do not agree with. For example, Sandra’s opinionated e-mail began with “First, just to say that consensus is not synonymous with unanimity: it means that in the spirit of achieving a common position, there are no overriding objections” then followed with 421 words of justification (see Box 2) of what she meant to express. Another example is this explicit request from Akito [emphasis added in bold]:

Assertion

I request that the following paragraph be deleted from the Civil Society Priorities Document:

Explanation

"To these ends, the current management of internet names and numbers and other related mechanisms should be re-examined with the full participation of all stakeholders in light of serving public interests and compatibility with human rights standards".

It can only serve to support the arguments of governments that wish to gain control over internet resource allocation, and others hoping to see the ITU or some other inter-governmental organisation take control of internet naming and addressing.

It should be deleted.
Kind regards,
IsuzukiAkito

Conclusion

Box 2 Example of detailed message

Dear all,

I unfortunately missed the recent debate on rooms during the intersession. So let me add a few comments. The situation is the following:

- (1) The UNESCO has two main facilities, at less than five minutes walking distance but still in a different building.
- (2) The conference itself will take place in the main building (place de fontenoy).
- (3) In this building, two large rooms are reserved for the governmental process (plenary and possible drafting group).
- (4) Only two other rooms are available in this building during the intersession: one is reserved permanently for the private sector; the other one (room 9) should be a natural fit for civil society plenaries: medium size, with a podium. The UNESCO told me they try to Wifi-enable the whole venue, so this room should be WiFi as well if signal goes through the thick floor. But there is no translation available and getting our own translators in would have required previous screening by the translation office of UNESCO (the corporation is very protective as you know).
- (5) The main problem is: as no general reservation was made by anybody from either the civil society bureau or the CS division of the executive secretariat, 2 1/2 days on 4 were already reserved on a first-come, first served basis.

Box 2 Example of detailed message (continued)

- (6) Two reservations (total 1 day) were: for the full afternoon of the 15th, by an organisation called "Observatoire National de l'Internet des professions liberales" (web address: <http://www.apipl.org>, contact: Thierry Bouchard at: 33 (0)6 82 14 25) who will be organising a series of 'auditions of experts' on the role of 'professions liberales' in civil society – for the full morning of the 16th, by the organisers of the Local Authorities Summit on the Information society to be held in Lyon on Dec 4–5 (contact Vera Kluckhorn: 33 (0)6 75 61 26 08). As there were no rules established, it seems difficult to prevent them from holding meetings they already have advertised and are legitimate to hold.
- (7) This leaves the pb of the remaining 1 1/2 day (the morning of the 15th and the whole day of the 18th) where the only appropriate room for Civil Society as a whole is reserved by our friends from ... Webforce. I leave to the Civil society bureau the question of how to handle this in the most appropriate manner. But it certainly raises some concern.
- (8) As a matter of security, I reserved the afternoon of the 16th and the whole day of the 17th to make sure it would not be taken before we decide what to do. These time slots are therefore at the disposition of all civil society but I would keep 2 hours on the 16th (ideally 3 to 5) and 2 hours on the 17th (at a time to be determined). They will be used for presentation of the OpenWSIS web site and an illustration of its methodology, but also to allow some other actors to present the processes they have launched: this includes CRIS, but also the UNESCO, the ICT4D platform and the VirtualWSIS, initiatives that can be of interest to civil society.
- (9) Additional – very – small spaces (not really rooms, more like openspaces with high separations) are available near the room 9 and we may use them for light drafting, but they will be close to the offices reserved for the executive secretariat.
- (9) The UNESCO is very keen on providing additional meeting rooms and enough space is available in the second building, which is really close. Internet connexions can be available but neither projector nor WiFi.
- (10) The contact person for rooms is: Nelly Dale, Information Society Division UNESCO, 1, rue Miollis – 7443 Paris Tel.: + 45.1 66 34 4398 Fax: + 45.1 78 55 31 65, E-mail: n.dale@unesco.org. She is very cooperative and will really try to accommodate the needs we may have. But they did not have any mandate to regulate who reserved what and should not be held responsible for us not having made a general reservation beforehand.
- I hope this will clarify the issues. And anyway, we'll manage. The key question is: shall we wait until the afternoon of the 16th to have a first plenary meeting?
- Best to you all, Butler Darnell

On the other hand, a detail message in general has extensive, elaborative explanations and descriptions, and/or is full of instructions, procedures or steps to be taken on a subject under discussions. A good example of this is the message given in Box 2, sent by Butler, containing 716 words. The e-mail clarifies what was going on and contains

several decision-making aspects such as recognition of and an answer to a problem. This 'detail' construct is closely interrelated with a 'direct' message. Direct messages use succinct and precise words, and are terse in nature. Although detail messages are often long, the content of the message is clear and straight to the point, meaning it has a direct tone to it. For instance, the e-mail from Butler was long but he used numbered items to state his point clearly. Also his sentences were short and he provided a point of reference to the reader about what he intended to say, using plain and clear words and punctuations such as 'the situation is the following': or 'the main problem is':

In essence, the results showed that the pattern of 'direct' communicative behaviours had three parts: (1) begin with an assertive statement, followed by (2) a body of text that explains, clarifies or justifies the assertion and finally (3) a conclusion that wraps up one's view. In summary, please refer to Table 1 as it illustrates the differences between high vs. low-context cultural behaviours when civil society communicate using e-mail.

Table 1 Overall comparison for cultural patterns of online communicative behaviours

HIGH CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin message using formal salutation or initial greetings • Introduce initial paragraph with elongate complements, gratitude and appreciation • Use polite and padded words to express feelings or to avoid being frank • Seek for approval by asking questions instead of disclosing real intentions or opinions • Provide overall lengthy messages without clear direction or focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seldom begin message with a formal salutation, use more less formal greetings • Jump into the subject matter straight away or express feelings clearly • State opinions first, then use polite words, i.e. say thank you late in the message • Use succinct, brief, assertive and concise words to make a point • Provide lengthy messages when giving instructions or detail explanations on the assertion made

5 Practical implications for multi-national organisations

Olaniran (2001) in his work has argued that CMC is designed such that it only takes into account the Western perspective with built-in values such as freedom, independence and democracy. These values may not be well-suited for high-context cultures that place more importance on values such as norms of status, hierarchical power and consensus. Time appropriateness is also a crucial aspect of designing CMC. For instance, Hall (1983) introduced a time-based cultural dimension of monochronic vs. polychronic. This dimension measures the extent to which people emphasise the degree of urgency in completing a task. For high-context people, time is plentiful and they move slowly from one task to another, so they can engage in multi-tasking behaviours – an orientation called polychronic. Conversely, for low-context people, deadlines and punctuality are vital, and they place priority on one task at a time – Hall's monochronic orientation.

Therefore, the types of CMC to be used must be compatible with cultural values that the users ascribed to. For example, a user needs to take into consideration the time orientation that the person he or she is dealing with – a question whether that person falls under a time orientation that place high urgency on tasks to be completed or not. The implication for organisations thus is to design CMC with two levels of appropriateness – media and time – and to strive to balance both with the users' cultural values. Culturally sensitive design takes into account cultural differences; as a consequence CMC will be improved in term of usefulness, and ease of use makes an innovation a success.

In the international business setting, when expatriates were sent abroad, many types of preparation and cross-cultural training were given to them in order to reduce culture shock, anxiety and uncertainty. Yet the possibility of failure still exists despite substantial investments made by many MNCs on training programmes (Black et al., 1990; Giacolane and Beard, 1994). Yet, today with the advancement of technology, global managers no longer need to travel to participate in global projects, and so some of the adaptation and acculturation process may be eliminated but not all. Problems with communication and collaboration will still need to be addressed because people will still encounter cultural differences even though they are working without geographical and space boundaries. Indeed, with the rise of the global market and the global information society, it is likely that they will encounter more different cultures than ever before.

Thus, one of the crucial implications of this study is that training participants to manage, cope with and appreciate cross-cultural differences can help reduce the collaboration and communication problems. Most importantly is that with cross-cultural training, multi-national organisations are developing online intercultural communication competencies for global virtual teams that are necessary in this new distributed working environment.

6 Conclusion

The significance of this study lies in its exploration and description of the cultural online behavioural patterns of intercultural communication for trans-national civil society collaborating via e-mail in the UN WSIS. It also investigated whether different cultural orientations gave rise to different communicative behaviours during these globally distributed collaboration in which this study makes a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which individuals from different cultural contexts behave – in a consistent manner or transcend their normative behaviours. Participants from both cultural orientations demonstrated high collaborative behaviours, while strongly maintaining their communication styles and cultural values with minimal inverse effect on participation in, for example, the decision-making activities.

Thus, it can be suggested that in future undertakings, research should be conducted to understand deeper to what extent one's cultural values can be acculturated in an online environment (a portrayal of switching behaviour) and if yes, whether or not the switching behaviour that transcends one's normative communicative behaviour can be sustainable over time. In addition, it would also be interesting to make comparisons whether or not people continue to behave the same way as they would in face-to-face encounter as compared to when they participate in the distributed environment. In essence, the question can be encapsulated as "Are you behaving and communicating consistently or differently in the new working environment?"

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