Meeting and Working on an Electronic Social Space:
Behavioural Considerations and Implications for Cross-cultural End User Computing

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The use of computer mediated communication to support team work across different organisations and countries presents a distinct work environment in which cultures from different countries, and professions come together. In addition to the national and professional cultures, the electronic work environment has embedded within it a technology culture. This paper presents the use of a particular type of electronic communications technology that supports group interaction among a set individuals communicating from different parts of the world. The paper employs a structurational perspective on culture to analyze behaviours that emerge on an electronic social space and explores the creation of patterns of relations on the electronic communication media. It concludes with a discussion of implications for cross-cultural end user computing.

Current research and practise in end user computing appears to be set within organisational considerations. Since the early eighties, when writers such as Rockart and Flannery (1981) wrote about the rise of end user computing within organisations, greater interdependence of organisational work processes and forms of collaboration that often go beyond organisations have become apparent. End user computing can no longer be seen as a phenomenon that is solely the responsibility of an IS department as it often falls under the custody of groups of users and possibly even a group of organisations. A particular area that needs to be addressed by end user computing is the use of electronic communications technologies which enable communication across different organisations, and countries. There is thus the need to address cross-cultural communication in the light of how electronic communication technologies are used. In particular, a work process is enabled which can tap the expertise of people from very different parts of the world. In effect, the role of end user computing has to address the considerations of an increasingly fluid organisational structure. One which relays on group processes for problem solving and decision making, and operates within a dispersed, multi-faceted work environment in which cultural considerations are paramount (Drucker 1988; Charan 1991; Etzioni 1961).

The support of work processes in which people do not physically meet or see each other may be provided within ‘virtual structures’ through Computer Mediated Communications Systems (CMCS). As defined by Hiltz and Turoff (1992), “these systems use computers and telecommunications networks to store, deliver, regulate and process communication among the group members and between the computer and the group”. Although the most common form of CMCS is...
electronic mail, other computerised conferencing and bulletin
board software is classified under this heading. This medium
of communication has been supporting very large scientific
and professional communities for some time, but is still a very
novel phenomenon in the context of international agencies and
in the case presented in this paper. When considering the
cross-cultural implications of computer mediated communi-
cations for end user computing, it is necessary to take into
account the culture that emerges on the electronic medium.
This culture often represents an amalgamation of national
characteristics as well as characteristics associated with dif-
ferent types of professions.

This paper uses a networking approach derived from
structural analysis (see Burt 1983, Knoke and Kulkinski 1991,
Monge and Eisenberg 1987) to consider the cross-cultural
implications of end user computing. It draws upon particular
aspects of the cultural tradition in structural analysis to con-
sider the communication relations among a set of human
actors. It uses Giddens’ (1984) writings on structuration to
to consider the production and reproduction of meaning through
communication. In particular, this paper focuses on how
meanings emerge from interaction and the patterns of relations
that emerge. This cultural perspective is investigated using an
interpretivist approach which also draws upon the positional
and relational approaches to network analysis and contempo-
rary perspectives in computer mediated communication, to
analyze interaction on the electronic communication media.
Current research in computer mediated communication and
the salient issues that affect its use are explored in a study of
electronic steering group meetings in which the different types
of behaviours are identified, mapped and analyzed. In explor-
ing the behaviour of networks, the analysis of this paper
extracts the salient features of communication across two
countries and across technical and managerial cultures that
take place on a CMCS.

**Research Approach and Domain of Investigation**

The approach of this research follows an interpretivist
strategy using a single case study. An interpretivist research
strategy enables communication relations to be considered in
their natural setting. As research into human networking is still
in its formative stages, the use of a case study is valuable in that
a real world situation is described in great depth. The case
study is not used in this research to validate a theory or
hypothesis but it is used to generate conceptual insights which
may apply to other situations. In this way, it is possible to
provide explanations for why certain patterns of behaviour
occur. A justification of this approach is provided in greater

In order to investigate the formation of patterns of
relations on the electronic media, the case chosen for investi-
gation in this paper is an international network. Known as the
Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for De-
velopment (COMNET–IT), this comprises a set of task forces
situated in different parts of the world that collaborate on
various activities (such as workshops and setting up network-
ing projects). The function of COMNET–IT is to set up and
coordinate projects, and at the same time serve as an instru-
ment for setting the direction and encouraging networking
activities among international agencies and other specialist
institutions (see Qureshi 1994ab for a more detailed descrip-
tion of COMNET–IT’s activities). COMNET–IT is composed of
a number of interconnected networking initiatives, which
together provide a broad, rich domain of investigation for this
research. In particular, the synchronous meetings among
the task forces leaders (who are also the steering group members
of COMNET–IT) are the focus of this paper. These meetings
involve the use of an electronic notice board on which the
participants log on from their respective institutions (and
countries) to participate, in the terms of DeSanctis and Galuppe
(1987), in a same time different place meeting.

In remaining consistent with an interpretivist research
strategy, the communication relations are examined in their
natural setting (the electronic notice board) and researcher is
part of the phenomena being investigated. As the researcher is
the coordinator of COMNET–IT while collecting the data for
this research, she was not considered to be an outsider and the
results were not compromised by a Hawthorn effect. Unlike
the participant observer (McCall and Simmons 1969), the
interpretivist researcher does not pretend to be neutral and
recognises that her actions are implicated in the phenomena
being investigated. At the same time, the role of an
interpretivist researcher differs from that of an action re-
searcher (Argyris et al.1982) in that the researcher is not part
of a change process and the results of the research are not fed
back into the situation being investigated.

**Investigating the Electronic Steering Group Meetings**

When investigating electronic meetings it is necessary to
consider social structures, their development and influence on
the behaviour of actors. Structuration theorists see social
structure as meaning which is created in the ways in which
actors perceive reality and enact their perceptions of reality.
Social structure is recognisable in dependencies of power,
cultural considerations and various contextual constraints
(Monge and Eisenberg 1987). The structuration perspective
proposes an emergent view of culture, in that there are deep
structures of power, and influence which constrain human
action and the patterns of relations. At the same time human
action helps to shape and define social structure (Giddens
1984). Structures of leadership, power, and domination mani-
fest themselves in relations among social actors creating
patterns in their behaviour. Patterns of behaviour that emerge
on electronic group meetings are the basis upon which it is
possible to investigate human networks. The analysis of this
paper, uses Linda Harasim’s term, *social space* to describe
they way in which human communication has transformed
computer networks into what she calls ‘places’ where people
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