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 practice 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 communications 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 different types of professions.

This paper uses a networking approach derived from structural analysis (see Burt 1983, Knolke and Kulksinki 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 consider the communication relations among a set of human actors. It uses Giddens’ (1984) writings on structuration 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 contemporary 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 exploring 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 detail in Qureshi (1995).

In order to investigate the formation of patterns of relations on the electronic media, the case chosen for investigation in this paper is an international network. Known as the Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development (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 networking projects). The function of COMNET–IT is to set up and coordinate projects, and at the same time serve as an instrument for setting the direction and encouraging networking activities among international agencies and other specialist institutions (see Qureshi 1994ab for a more detailed description of COMNET–IT’s activities). COMNET–IT is composed of a number of interrelated 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 Gallupe (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 researcher (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 manifest 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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