



Webs of Culture: Applying Intercultural Communication Theory to Understand Distributed Decision-Making Processes

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Abstract

The overarching research question in this paper is: What is the influence of high-versus-low context cultural orientations on effective participation in globally distributed collaboration using email? Two subsidiary research questions follow: (1) What discernable patterns of cultural variation are evident in the email messages, and (2) What is the effect of cultural variation on the contribution of Civil Society during the following stages of the decision-making process: (a) problem identification, (b) proposal making and generation of ideas, (c) response to ideas and deliberation, and (d) solution. To answer these questions, we will apply Edward Hall's (1976) intercultural communication theory as the primary lens. Specifically, we will employ a cultural dimension called "context" which explains the variations in terms of high-context-versus-low context. Other literature in this domain will also be used to explore the various aspects of cultural impacts.

The main objective of this paper is to propose a research design that uses content analysis to look at the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) public archival email messages. From this source material, we will apply intercultural communication theory in order to provide descriptive statistical analysis and in-depth descriptions for each of the decision-making stages described above, from a cultural stance. At the completion of this study, we hope to be able to demonstrate specific impacts that high context and low context cultural backgrounds have on globally distributed collaboration, and to suggest some fertile areas for future research such as how to minimize the different cultures' drawbacks and maximize their positive advantages to facilitate globally distributed collaboration.

Keywords: Cultural values, High context, Low context, Intercultural communication, Distributed decision making, Globally distributed collaboration

1. Introduction

The ability to manage globally distributed collaboration has become crucial as multinational corporations increase their reliance on global virtual teams. Rapid globalization and the advancement of computer mediated communication (CMC) technology entail greater efforts on managing globally distributed collaboration across the world. Virtual collaboration often takes place through CMC technologies, many of which rely heavily on the Internet, and complex information systems (Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002; Solomon, 2001). Computer mediated communication technology (CMC) is defined as the process whereby messages are electronically transmitted from senders to receivers in both asynchronous [e.g. email, discussion forums, etc.] and synchronous settings [e.g. internet relay chat, videoconferencing, etc.] (Elton, 1982; Olaniran, 1994). For example these may be teams in Japan and teams in Germany collaborating on a 12-week software development project with teams in Malaysia, or information communication technology (ICT) policy experts in the USA presenting a proposal and negotiating an alternative solution with experts in Africa and Korea. The advantage of this new form of collaboration is that it provides opportunities for people to work with anyone, anywhere, and any time.

Globally distributed collaboration also demands managing intercultural communication, defined as interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds with distinct communication patterns, preferences, and styles (Novinger, 2001; Gudykunst, 1998). On the one hand, CMC allows people to communicate and collaborate unrestricted by barriers of

time and space. On the other hand, cultural barriers stemming from different managerial aspects and communication styles may adversely affect various elements of collaboration such as negotiations, deliberation of ideas, self-disclosure, conflict resolution, coordination, and so on (Thorne, 2003). Potential culture-related management problem areas include overcoming high anxiety and uncertainty of feelings (Gudykunst, 1997), managing conflicting and frustrating situations (Adler, 2002), saving face in confrontational situations (Ting-Toomey, 1997), making effective group decisions (Oetzel, 2005), using language and non-verbal communication (Lim, 2003; Tayeb, 2002), and adjusting to and acculturating in a new environment (Kim, 1990).

With the range of cultural values, managing this new form of collaboration and communication in a distributed environment using CMC becomes more challenging and intensified. The use of CMC between people with different cultural values can either facilitate or impede collaboration and communication (Amant, 2002; Olaniran, 2001). Early scholars of CMC suggested that it is ineffective in several areas [e.g. establishing online relationships, producing effective communication, and expressing oneself or receiving feedback] due to the absence of contextual, visual, and aural cues (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Kiesler, Siegal, & McGuire, 1984). For example, electronic mail (email) is referred to as a “lean media” because it relies purely on textual elements. For people whose intercultural communication styles rely heavily on non-verbal or paralinguistic cues (tone of voice, facial expressions, body movements, and gestures) to interpret the information they receive, lean media may pose a significant barrier to effective communication.

However, later views of CMC challenged the notion of reduced social cues (Joinson, 2001; Lea & Spears, 1991; Walther, 1992, 1996). They argued that lean media actually encourage participation by providing anonymity, removing the need for socially accepted responses in expressing opinions and maintaining identity, increasing the ability to control information about oneself, and offering a more liberated self-disclosure. People whose intercultural communication style relies on non-verbal cues to interpret meanings normally dislike confrontation. When expressing their opinions, they prefer a harmonious and friendly atmosphere in order to save face and avoid humiliation or insulting situations (Ting-Toomey, 1997). However, very few studies have investigated whether CMC would provide such individuals a comfortable way to be expressive and opinionated (Olaniran, 2001). On the other end of the spectrum, people whose intercultural communication style values verbal communication feels comfortable using email because it is consistent with their normal patterns of communication. They would readily use words to express their feelings and opinions in this textual-based medium. Again, this perspective has not been adequately addressed in the study of culture and use of CMC (Olaniran, 2001; Shachaf, 2005).

Several empirical studies were conducted to understand the effect of culture on globally distributed collaboration, yet there are still deficiencies and inconsistencies in their findings, which this paper attempts to address (Cogburn & Levinson, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2002; Shachaf, 2005). The unresolved question therefore is how does culture impacts effective participation when people use CMC technologies to collaborate in a distributed environment? The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of culture on effective participation (in the form of email) of civil society in the United Nation World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). Civil society includes non-governmental and non-profit organizations, networks, and voluntary associations. In this study, individuals who belong to the abovementioned entities are considered members of civil society, and they can participate in WSIS as long as the United Nation accredits the organizations they belong to. Participation hence requires no membership fees.

Therefore, this proposed study takes a “high-versus-low context” theoretical framework (Hall, 1976) as well as other related cultural dimensions useful for understanding cultural differences inherent in managerial issues such as divergent communication styles, conflicts arising from deliberation, and distinct decision-making strategies pertaining to CMC use. Effective participation is defined as when individual(civil society members) are making significant contributions in the following stages of decision-making process— (a) problem identification, (b) proposal making and generation of ideas, (c) response to ideas and deliberation, and (d) solution. The significance of this study is thus to explore and describe the cultural factors that influence the participation of civil society members when they collaborate using email and whether different cultural orientations give rise to different communicative behaviors, and thus impacting an individual’s contributions (e.g. whether a person becomes less or more effective in their participation).

In this regard, we will be looking at the cultural variations such as communication styles, individualism vs. collectivism, and task vs. relationship orientation when people engage in the decision-making process. From Hall’s theoretical lens and literature support, people that employ high context communication style have different style of making proposal as opposed to people that employ low context communication style. Moreover, the way people present their proposal can also influence the response they generate. Subsequently, the behavior can also influence whether or not the proposal can achieve a consensus that leads to a solution (s) within the participating members.

Substantial empirical research in cross-cultural management and intercultural communication literature has established that numerous challenges arise when people of different cultures collaborate and communicate at an interpersonal level (Adler, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 2005). In a similar vein, CMC literature has also studied the effects and characteristics of technology that facilitate or hinder communication (Daft & Lengel; 1986, Kiesler & Sproull, 1986; Walther, 1996).

However, little empirical research has attempted to bridge these three areas—intercultural communication and cross-cultural management, and CMC (Amant, 2003; Olaniran, 2001).

Several other deficiencies also exist in the empirical studies regarding the impact of culture on communicative behaviors of globally distributed collaboration such as: (1) the few empirical studies that exist have not provided consistent findings or offered definite answers regarding cultural impacts, (2) the effects of different behavioral patterns arising from the presence of diverse cultural values were insufficiently explored or described, and (3) the application of cultural theories to explain the cultural effects on globally distributed collaboration is fairly limited (Cogburn & Levinson, 2003; Evaristo, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Massey, Montoya-Weiss, Hung & Ramesh, 2001; Shachaf, 2005; Thorne, 2003). Yet, the growth of globalization and the increasing use of CMC demand a greater understanding in order to manage globally distributed collaboration, a research gap that will be explored and understood in this study.

Based on the abovementioned literatures, there are some inconsistent results on the impacts of culture when people with different cultural values participate in a globally distributed collaborative environment.

Therefore, the grand tour research question proposed for this study is:

What is the influence of high-context versus low-context cultural orientations on effective participation in distributed collaboration using email?

Specifically:

- RQ1. Are there discernable patterns of cultural variations evident in the email messages? If so, what are they and when do they become evident?
- RQ2. How do cultural variations appear to impact the contribution of Civil Society members during the following stages of the decision-making process:
- a. Problem identification;
 - b. Proposal making and generation of ideas;
 - c. Response to ideas and deliberation;
 - d. Solution.

2. Cultural Conceptual Framework

This paper examines a 'globally distributed collaboration' phenomenon (see Figure 1), exemplified in the WSIS event where civil society members from all over the world collaborate on agenda and issues regarding the global information society. Cogburn (2005) established that civil society members used email as their primary means of collaboration when participating in WSIS. Therefore, this study focuses simply on email participation and does not consider other CMC tools such as blogs or wiki webs, or face-to-face meetings. The meetings, however, are important to the direction of civil society. Effective participation in WSIS will be measured by individual's contributions made by a civil society member during the decision-making process. The decision-making process focuses on four stages: (a) problem identification, (b) proposal making and idea generations, (c) response to the ideas or deliberation, and (d) solution. Based on the stages, we will investigate the communicative behaviors from two distinct cultural orientations, high context and low context. For example, an individual may contribute in the four stages differently depending on whether he or she is high context or low context.

The descriptions of the decision-making process can be illustrated in four stages. The first stage involves the identification of problem. It is crucial for members to identify and recognize the issues or problems that they want to solve or bring into attention in WSIS. This is the initial step in decision-making process. The second stage is called proposal making, which centers on the ability of a civil society member to make proposal by giving or generating ideas, and presenting a position on the problems identified or putting across self-interest issues. In public policy making processes, Kingdon (1995) termed this stage as 'agenda setting.' The third stage is called response to ideas or reactions (supportive or contentious), and deliberation. This stage is also known as 'specification of alternatives' where people can choose from range of options (Kingdon, 1995, Adler, 2002). The final stage is called solution (one or many or non-solution), in which the decisions are made either by consensus or by authoritative action. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to mention that success in one of this stage is not an indicative of success in others. In addition, the stages are not necessarily occurring in a linear fashion. Some or all of the stages are iterative and interdependent and may occur several times before solution is reached and/or agreed upon by members. Likewise, some stages can also be left out. The main outcome for effectiveness is that member can reach a solution that addresses the problem as well as corresponding to the proposal made and responses generated.

On the contrary, there are three instances where participation can be considered ineffective (not the focus of this study):

- a) First, when a member fails to identify a problem. Without identification, proposal may not be concrete when in search of a solution.

- b) Second, even though a person may already identify a problem, and then initiate a proposal, if the proposal is not convincing or attractive enough, the proposal may not generate any responses from members. Subsequently, the proposal may just be ideas without further actions.
- c) Third, even though the proposal was heard, argued, and deliberated, yet at times it may fail to generate solutions that are in consensus or no solution was achieved at the end.

Phase One of WSIS generated two documents, a Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action. However, this study does not attempt to look at the impact of culture on WSIS outcomes. Rather, this study will focus on the effect of culture on the dynamics of communicative behaviors using email (as pointed out in the circle area of Figure 1.0). The internal dynamics within this collaboration will provide evidence of the two cultural variations (high context and low context). This study is expected to: (1) enumerate implications for civil society effectiveness in this policy formation process, and (2) demonstrate whether or not culture impacts individuals' participation when they use email as their communication mode and how does it impact their participation.

3. High-Versus-Low Context Theoretical Lens

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

Hall realized 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 minimizing 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 minimizing 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. Individuals from diverse cultures have different communicative behaviors. 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 thus become significant aspects to investigate. In short, these decisions illustrate the process of contexting, a strategic behavior 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 & Starosta, 1998). In his earliest book, *Silent Language* (1959), Hall argued that the language of behavior 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 & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst, 1997; Hall, 1976; Ting-Toomey, 1997); 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, Hofstede, 1980; Glenn, 1981; Trompenaars, 1994; Gudykunst et al., 1997). It is useful to note that Hall's theory provides one explanatory perspective for understanding communicative behaviors in globally distributed collaboration – that is a cultural perspective. There are other alternative ways of explaining online communicative behaviors (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.

4. Methodology: Content Analysis of Archival E-mail Messages

We propose to use content analysis as the primary research methodology. Content analysis is recognized as an effective research tool for studying recorded human communications (Krippendorff, 2004, Babbie, 2004). 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. This study uses a deductive analytic framework to analyze the data.

4.1 Research Context: Civil Society Participation in WSIS

World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) is an international conference sponsored by the United Nations (UN) and organized by International Telecommunication Union (ITU) with two-phase events—WSIS I in Geneva, 2003, and WSIS II in Tunisia, 2005. WSIS specifically addresses issues relating to information communication technology (ICT) policy-making processes in influencing and shaping global governance outcomes. WSIS may occur in only a few days, but the preparatory and follow-up processes occur over a period of years. Klein (2005) noted that the activities are most intense during the preparatory phase. Between 2001 and 2003, there were two series of meetings: preparatory meetings (prepcoms) and regional meetings. All the three prepcoms were held in Geneva at 6-month intervals. The regional meetings were carried out in various locations around the world but within a shorter time frame. All the meetings were set to gather input from around the world and to prepare the documents to be adopted in WSIS I.

Overall, the goal of WSIS is to develop a global ICT policy framework to deal with challenges posed by an information society (WSIS, 2003a; WSIS, 2003b). WSIS plays 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). WSIS as a process attempts to encourage an inclusive and broad participation that consist of three main actors: government, private sector, and civil society.

In this study, we focus only on the participation of civil society members. Civil society participation in WSIS originates from several organic non-hierarchical structures (see Figure 2) such as (1) civil society plenary (CSP), (2) civil society bureau (CSB), (3) content and themes working group (C&T), (4) 19 thematic caucuses and working groups, (5) civil society families, and (6) civil society division (CSD) of the secretariat (2005). Civil society members can contribute to and influence the outcome of WSIS (in the form of its two primary documents, the Declaration of Principles and Action Plan) in several ways:

- Developing positions and lobbying at the national level to feed into regional processes;
- Participating in regional conferences to develop regional consensus positions;
- Participating in international preparatory committee meetings (PrepComs) to develop global consensus positions;
- Proposing and influencing the language (content) of draft documents between on-site events via electronic submissions

The structure that we will focus on is the virtual civil society plenary which includes all civil society members that are registered on the email listserv. CSP is seen as the highest and most legitimate component of civil society. CSP approved the creation of virtual space not only to enhance member participation but also to ensure greater awareness and transparency among and between civil society members in the global governance process. This new structure was introduced in April 2003 by CSP after the PrepCom 2 meeting in Geneva. This virtual space is unique because this is the first time the participation of civil society is promoted at a distance. Furthermore, this online participation structure offers an appropriate research context for this study because of its dynamic process of collaboration within civil society members and the presence of strong elements of intercultural communication.

4.2 Sources of Data

The primary source of data for this study consists of the public archival email messages of the virtual civil society plenary. The data covers a 32 months period from April 2003 to November 2005. We will first analyze data from WSIS I, covering April 2003 to December 2003. We will then use the results to further analyze WSIS II, covering January 2004 to November 2005. Between these two phases of WSIS, many face-to-face preparatory conferences and regional meetings took place, which impacted member's email participation in the decision-making process. Although data for these interim meetings, such as what transpired in the meeting is available, it will not be included in this study. We will only use the dates of the face-to-face meetings as punctuations whereby to observe the patterns of email participation.

4.3 Analytic Framework

The archival email data will be imported into Atlas-TI version 5.0, a commercial computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, used for content analysis. We will use a deductive coding scheme based on Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context theory and other supported cross-cultural literature (i.e Gudykunst et al., 1996; Triandis, 2002) (see Appendix 3). In this study, the unit of analysis is an individual message, and the coding unit is the sentence and paragraph within each individual message.

Beginning with data from WSIS I, several procedures of the content analysis will be carried out. We intend to first code the demographic information for each of the messages. This descriptive analysis will provide overall background information of the participants in terms of number of messages posted on the overall (based on monthly basis as well as based on individuals), name, email address, gender, language used, country, region, and organization name. Then, the member's participation when they contribute to the four-stage decision-making process (as illustrated in Figure 1.0) will

be coded. We will isolate each member's contributions in four distinct areas – problem identification, proposal making and idea generations, response to ideas and deliberation, and solution. This analysis will further provide information such as the number of proposals made, types of proposals, overall frequency of proposals, sequence of proposals made in conjunction with face-to-face punctuations such as PrepComs, regional meetings, and summit events, and so on. Once the demographic and participation analysis were conducted, we will conduct a cross-tabulation analysis by looking at the correlation between demographic and proposal making activities. This analysis will generate numerical values such as of frequency of occurrence of the different coding categories.

The most critical analysis would be an exploration of the effect of culture on the participation as illustrated in the decision-making process. The cultural analysis will look at two cultural orientations, high context and low context by examining several sub concepts such as communication styles, individualism vs. collectivism, task vs. relationship oriented. We will perform analysis on the four distinct stages cross-sectioned with the two context types. We will then be able to describe the impact of the different cultural orientations on members' contributions to the decision-making process during WSIS. Once the cultural variables are coded, we will also conduct descriptive statistical analysis such as frequency counts or tabulations on the distinct cultural orientation—high context and low context, and do cross tabulations to identify unique relationships among three main categories--demographic, decision-making, and culture. Subsequently, in-depth descriptions of the effects of culture on the shared patterns of behaviors will be presented by providing verbatim quotations from the messages received from civil society members.

5. Implications and Conclusion

Effective communication between individuals from different cultures is a prerequisite for international management, cross-cultural management, and effective global policy-making. The goal of this study is to provide insights into the human communicative behaviors that facilitate intercultural online communication, as well as to present the implications for effective globally distributed collaboration for civil society members and organizations.

This study will have important implications for multinational corporations and international organizations by suggesting methods for building more effective cross-cultural training, ensuring higher cultural awareness and sensitivity, teaching appropriate behaviors for overcoming cultural differences in globally distributed collaboration, developing intercultural online communication competencies, and designing culturally-sensitive IT applications for effective electronic communication. All of these contributions serve the end goal of enabling global civil society to collaborate effectively at a distance with use of socio-technical infrastructure (Kling, 1996) that are compatible with their multiple cultural values, as evident within civil society.

Besides the practical implication, this study is expected to offer some insights to cross-cultural management, intercultural communication, information systems, and computer-mediated communication, as well as contributing to a culturally attuned theory of globally distributed collaboration. This study will provide an integrated theoretical framework that encompasses individuals with a range of communication styles and patterns stemming from their cultural values. Although Hall's theory has been widely used to explicate intercultural communication in a face-to-face environment, it has been under-applied in an online environment, a niche that this empirical research attempts to fill.

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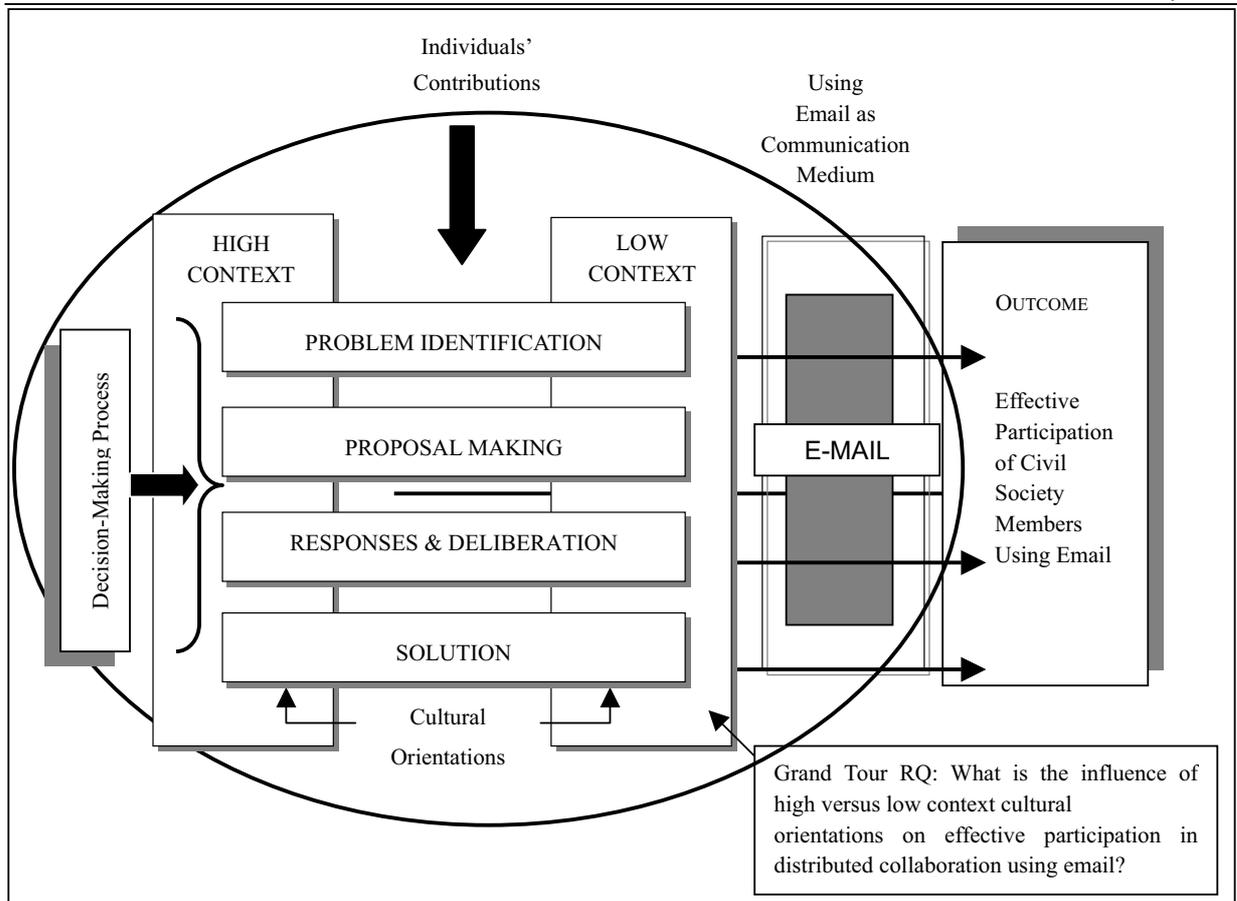


Figure 1. Globally Distributed Collaboration of Civil Society in WSIS using email

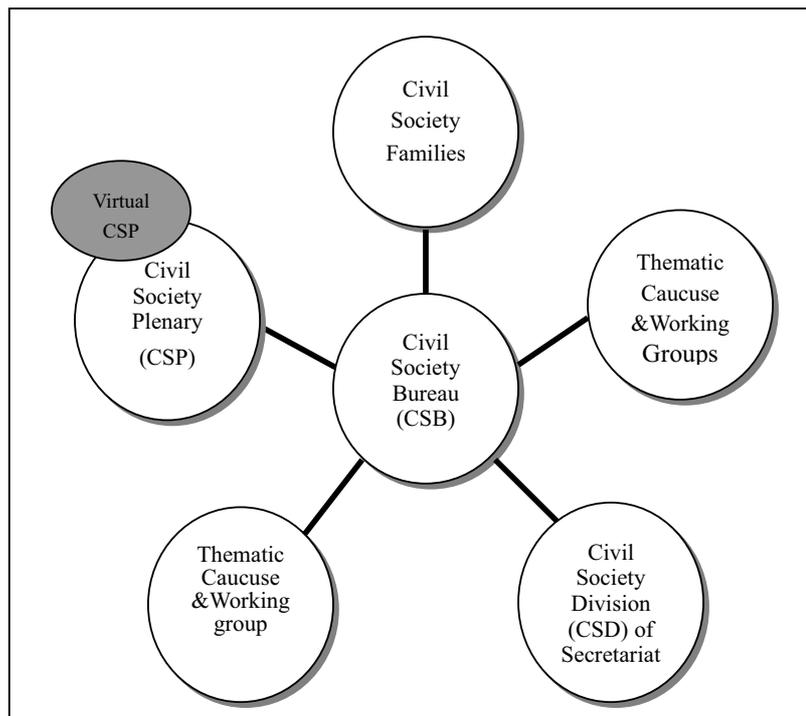


Figure 2. Non-Hierarchical Structure of WSIS Civil Society (Adapted from Cogburn, 2005).