Literature about cultural distances on the Net
A teaching note

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The internationalization process is traditionally seen as an incremental process of global expansion. A company that is internationalizing moves from its home market to a geographically or psychically proximate market. Subsequently, it advances further and explores distant markets and at last may become a global company (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). With the Internet the process looks different. When a company establishes a website in a widely spoken international language it becomes, in principle, a global company. However, the company cannot be everything to everybody: it needs to focus. The Internet-based internationalization process can be characterized as *decremental*. Such a process starts in the global arena, focusing on "being everything" to a limited number of customers. In a sense then the conventional and the Internet-based internationalization process form total opposites. In an incremental internationalization process, the company decides how it should expand from being a local player to being a global player. In the decremental process, it has to decide how to come down from a global, all-encompassing position (represented by the first website) to a well-targeted, specific market position.

The Internet alters the perception of *distances* and thus directly influences a company's internationalization process. Earlier, physical distances in time and space were key dimensions in defining what international business was all about – a company became international when it began to transact with customers across national borders. Today, even for companies that do not (or do not want to) do cross-border transactions, the reality of globalization is inescapable: the Web knows no boundaries. Furthermore, because collecting market information at a low cost is now feasible; knowledge about promising markets outside the home market is created, thereby leading to an increase in international transactions. Distances, however, are not merely geographic. Cultural differences and differing national regulations also create "distances," even when two countries are in geographic proximity (as in the case of USA and Mexico, or Italy and Slovenia). Such borders do not disappear when Internet enters the scene. The psychic distances in terms of differences in language and cultural background and differences in political-economical contexts

continue to remain as barriers to Internet-based internationalization. Even in the age of the Internet, international actors have to understand such differences in order to manage the company's internationalization process.

In this teaching note literature about the psychic distances in terms of differences in language and cultural background will be the main focus. However, differences in political-economical contexts can also be seen as psychic distances because the political-economical contexts are to some extend defined by the macro-culture of the current country.

The teaching note is organized so that the first section introduces you to more literature about Internet and distances. The next section, which are considered as the main section of the teaching note present literature about psychic distances in terms of differences in language and cultural background. The last section considers background material that can be used to reflect over in problem formulations and a like.

Distances

What are distances? In my work it have been understood as the physical distances as time and space, the physiological distances as differences in language and cultural background, political-economical distances defined by the differences between national states and managerial distances as ability to cope with distances as such.

Since my master thesis in international business economics at Aalborg University (Rask & Skræm, 1997a) I have been working with Internet as a social technology that change the meaning of distances. The first time I elaborated on the meaning of distances in international business was when we discussed this meaning related to teaching and research in international business (Rask & Skræm, 1997b). This was based upon a teaching note by Sørensen (1990). In a pilot project where a questionnaire was prepared a series of interviews were done. Some of the business people reflected on the ability of the Internet to change the meaning of distances (Rask, 1998). Some of these reflections can also be found in the report of the survey (Rask, 2000). English versions of the study can be found in (Rask, 1999b; Rask, 2001a). I have made a few web-based tools that also relates to distances regarding information about Denmark (Rask, 1999a) and information about understanding of the history of the Internet as well as make sure that you are updated when URLs change, moves or go dead (Rask, 2001b).

Castells (1996, p. 470) describe distances as "The proportion of distance relates to the intensity and frequency of interaction between two social positions". Economist writer Frances Cairncross proclaims that it is the "death of distance" caused by the communications revolution (Cairncross, 1997).

Evans and Wurster (1997; 2000) focus on the central theme of the trade-off between information richness and information reach, essentially deciding the borders of organization that is being seriously challenged by the Internet.

Negroponte (1995) claims that firms with digital products, processes and relations do not care about distances anymore.

Slevin (2000) notes that globalization is to taking action across distances.

Cultural differences and Internet

Language and cultural differences in relation to the Internet can have implication on the understanding of the market opportunities (Palumbo & Herbig, 1998; Quelch & Klein, 1996; Samiee, 1998). BusinessWeek have a cover article about the general use of English in Europe that can set this in perspective (Baker, Resch, Carlisle, & Schmidt, 2001).

Bennett (1997) found five significant clusters of export barrier variables (psychic distance, practical export problems, resource constraints, trade restrictions and market risk) and explained whether an exporting business would operate a Web site through the degree of IT competence, employment of foreign agents, and respondent executives, cost consciousness and sense of psychic distance from foreign markets.

Benson (1998) highlights the changes to lifestyle, culture, society, and architecture emerging or likely to emerge as a direct result of developments in communications technology.

Cairncross (1997) argue that the international business language will be English.

Cascio (2000) argues that there are sound business reasons for establishing virtual workplaces, but their advantages may be offset by such factors as setup and maintenance costs, loss of cost efficiencies, cultural clashes, isolation, and lack of trust.

Cox (1999) considers the opportunities and challenges for designers of business simulation/games afforded by the multicultural environment of the Internet. It is suggested that business games designed for Internet use demand more detailed consideration to be given to their role as tools of communication and to the profile and culture of the end users.

Etzioni & Etzioni (1999) addresses an often-asked question: Can virtual computer-mediated communications (CMC) communities be "real," have the same basic qualities as face-to-face communities?

Harris & Moran (1996) states that utilizing the Information High-way, the global leader requires not only computer competency to access the Internet but also cultural sensitivity when interacting with persons from a different cultural context. Beside computer language, most international exchanges take place with individuals using English as a second language. While a few corporate representatives will travel abroad, the main communication will occur by means of the Internet.

Hassan (1999) shows that contemporary globalization has two dimensions: outward into geographic space, and inward into culture and society. The focus then moves to culture and information technology within the space economy of late capitalism and argues that a crisis of finite geographic space has led to the deepening of the commodificationary processes of capitalist accumulation into the "identity spaces" of culture and society. In the end he concludes that it is difficult to decide if cyber-Utopians are naive, self-deluding, conceited or worse, when they conceive of democratic cyber worlds when most of humanity has no regular access to clean water much less a telephone or computer.

Igbaria (1999) find that the term virtual society refers to all components that are part of a society's culture based on the functional rather than the physical. A culture once based exclusively on physical contact is in the process of being transformed to a culture where goods and services are accessible without the need for face-to-face contact with other people.

Jensen, Pedersen & Talbro (2001) has brought together a group of Internet gurus and collected their ideas about how the net are changing the world.

Locke, Levine, Searls & Weinberger (2000) show how the Internet is turning business upside down. They proclaim that, thanks to conversations taking place on Web sites and message boards, and in e-mail and chat rooms, employees and customers alike have found voices that undermine the traditional command-and-control hierarchy that organizes most corporate marketing groups. "Markets are conversations," the authors write, and those conversations are "getting smarter faster than most companies."

McDonough, Kahn & Griffin (1999) focus on global new product development teams and discovered that differences in country culture, country of origin and geographic dispersion had an impact on the need for communicating information quickly (speed), communicating rich information and communicating different volumes of information. The authors found that these differences affected communication indirectly as a consequence of six factors: (1) the approach used to solve problems; (2) the means used to communicate with leaders; (3) decision-making practices; (4) different languages spoken by team members; (5) the technological capability of the member's country of origin; and (6) extreme geographical dispersion.

OECD (1999) shows that e-commerce and English are very strong connected.

Poster (1999) discusses national identities and the Internet.

Schlegelmilch and Sinkovics (1998) states that the globalisation of information has not only broken down country and cultural barriers, but also contributed to the creation of new ones. Barriers that do not follow traditional ethnic or religious affiliations, but are based on sub-cultures such as "techies" versus "greens." This means that companies can no longer rely on geographical markets to be dominated by a singular culture (e.g. the Spanish culture). Ethnically based cultural differences (e.g. food consumption habits) are widely experienced outside their original context

and culture itself is becoming a commodity represented through its tradeable artefacts. Thus, marketing managers will need to revisit the meaning of cultural differences in an environment where information is global and cultural and social proximity – feelings of "closeness" and "familiarity" – are created through media.

Sheth (1996) and Sheth & Sharma (1997) concludes that purchasing function is dramatically shifting from the transaction-oriented to the relational-oriented philosophy, and it is also shifting from domestic to global sourcing. This will change the role, processes and strategies of procurement and, therefore, will we need new understandings of suppliers as customers; cross-functional supplier teaming; economic value of supplier equity; supply experience curves; hub and spoke organization; bonding with suppliers; global sourcing processes; cross-cultural values in purchasing; cross-national rules and regulations; and service procurement.

Shields (1996) brought together a group of writers on the Internet and cyberspace, this volume presents a systematic description of the development of the Internet, its history in the military-industrial complex, and the role of state policies (such as those that lead to the building of information superhighways). Contributors examine the arrival of E-mail, explore online discussion groups, and consider the prospect of an online world. They also address the development of this technology as a commercialized leisure form and a forum for underground political organization and critique.

Simeon (1999) finds that cultural and institutional differences are given for the contrasting approaches to Web design, information and service delivery.

Thussu (1998) has edited a book that debates on globalization, the public sphere, and the potential of the Internet for empowerment. Exploring the question of whether media globalization is helping create a global public sphere, it offers alternative regional and gender-based perspectives on globalization, as well as an argued case for the relevance of a formulated thesis of media imperialism.

Ulijn, Lincke & Karakaya (2001) investigate the context of global electronic commerce that leads to an increasing use of email in negotiating deals, which to this point has been carried out almost exclusively via face-to-face (FTF) or other high-feedback media (e.g., telephone) but not of non-FTF media. This study, involving 20 participants, uses speech act theory and psycholinguistic analysis to explore the effects of culture on non-FTF communication.

Whittle (1997) tries to provide ordinary people without previous exposure to cyberspace with a cultural foundation for their explorations, while challenging cyberspace experts to examine the implications of their assumptions about such topics as free speech, community, intellectual property, ethics, freedom, and civic virtue.

E-commerce and e-business in perspective

Economist has a good collection of articles about Internet (Economist, 2001b) where I especially will recommend looking at the articles about Borders in cyberspace (Economist, 2001c) and geography and the Internet (Economist, 2001a). Economist has also made some surveys that are very useful to grab of things.

1. The New Economy (Economist, 2000e)

2. E-management (Economist, 2000b)

3. E-commerce (Economist, 2000a)

4. Globalisation and Tax (Economist, 2000c)

5. Government and the Internet (Economist, 2000d)

6. Business and the Internet (Economist, 1999)

7. Technology and Development (Economist, 2001d)

Additional readings that could be useful:

1. The *structural factors* of how worldwide is the Internet I will suggest to look at statistics from International Telecommunication Union (2001) and Nua (2000)

2. *Digitalization processes* (Turban, Lee, King, & Chung, 2000, p. 3-5) and about e-business in general

3. What kind of *internet marketing activities* are possible – see (Hanson, 1999) or other similar textbooks where Bishop (1999) will be a good choice because it focus on which countries are using digital technology and which ones need to catch up - How a localized company can become global without a large capital investment - Creating a global marketing vision - Step-by-step strategies for using digital importing and exporting, virtual global networking, international information management - How to use the Internet to develop global business relationships - Global manufacturing and distribution - Ratings of all major trading players according to digital capabilities, political and economic stability and business culture.

4. *Internet Marketing Strategies* (Angehrn, 1997; Geiger & Martin, 1999; Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Hoffman & Novak, 1997; Hoffman, Novak, & Chatterjee, 1995; Klein & Quelch, 1997; Peters, 1998; Quelch & Klein, 1996; Rask, 1999b) and in Danish (Rask & Buch, 1999; Rask & Skræm, 1997a)

5. *Internationalization and Internet* (Andersen & Christensen, 1998b; Bennett, 1997; Hamill, 1997; Haynes, Becherer, & Helms, 1998; Lituchy & Rail, 2000; Palumbo & Herbig, 1998; Poon & Jevons, 1997; Poon & Swatman, 1995; Quelch & Klein, 1996; Watson, Zinkhan, & Pitt, 2000)

6. *Internet from a buyer's perspective* (Andersen & Christensen, 1998a; Andersen & Christensen, 1998b; Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Lancioni, Smith, & Oliva, 2000; McIvor, 2000; Min & Galle, 1999; Nouwens & Bouwman, 1995; Roberts & Mackay,

1998; Steinfield, Kraut, & Plummer, 1995; Stump & Sriram, 1997; Tucker & Jones, 2000).

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