

The View beyond the Corner Office

Thoughts on an interdisciplinary theory of international corporate communications

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1. Introduction

No doubt about it: The significance of international corporate communications¹ is growing, and the complexity associated with it is increasing almost exponentially. But systematic understanding of international corporate communications (ICC), even in the corner offices of the German PR industry's top management, is not well developed. The few truly expert agencies are helpful service providers, but they cannot solve the basic problem, either in theory or in practice.

There is no comprehensive interlinking of PR knowledge with relevant expertise derived from other disciplines. Anyone who wants to position specific content through specific institutions by means of specific people in specific media in a specific country has one overriding need: specificity and expertise on all those levels.

This essay will illustrate the status quo in this area through examples and propose a heuristic analytical grid, along with its interdisciplinary application. Finally, it will conclude with a few basic considerations about the future of cross-border corporate communications.

2. The current state of research

The specialized literature about international corporate communications (ICC) dates back more than half a century. The Library of Congress registered the first edition of "Who's Who" in public relations in 1959, and the first "Handbook on International Public Relations" was published in 1967. But only in the last ten years has there been a small boom in scholarly research on this topic.

"Internationale Unternehmenskommunikation im Globalisierungsprozess," "Public Relations ohne Grenzen," and "Lokal oder Global?" are just a few of the many monographs and essay collections that have been published in Germany. Two major

collections by Hugh M. Culbertson and Ni Chen (1996) and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh and Dejan Vercic (2003) garnered the most international attention. A series of titles with a regional focus, for example on Europe, also appeared (cf. Sievert 1998 and updated 2006). "Each country of Europe has developed a subtly different kind of media," Cathie Burton and Alun Drake wrote (2004: 15) in a very practice-oriented manual. "In fact, the idea of a European media landscape is in itself a misnomer: nothing much links the sensationalism of Albania to a British broadsheet or a long French analytical feature." In PR theory, Betteke van Ruler and Dejan Vercic (2004) have shown in their collection how differently public relations as a science is practiced in different European countries, even while it holds the potential for a very rich, fruitful exchange.

What is common to all of these essays is that they primarily or even exclusively link to and develop the discourse within the field of PR. Whatever economics, law, cultural studies, political science, sociology, social psychology, linguistics and even communications theory beyond the range of PR have to say about the topic scarcely enters into the picture, if at all. The result is that terminological distinctions already in use in other fields for some time have been reinvented. More importantly, PR is robbed of the opportunity to ensure its ability to make relevant, high level connections in theory and practice within a relatively short time. In particular, international comparative sub-disciplines within the fields mentioned above could contribute a great deal to an understanding of ICC, and the cross-border components of some of these fields have a large lead on PR research.

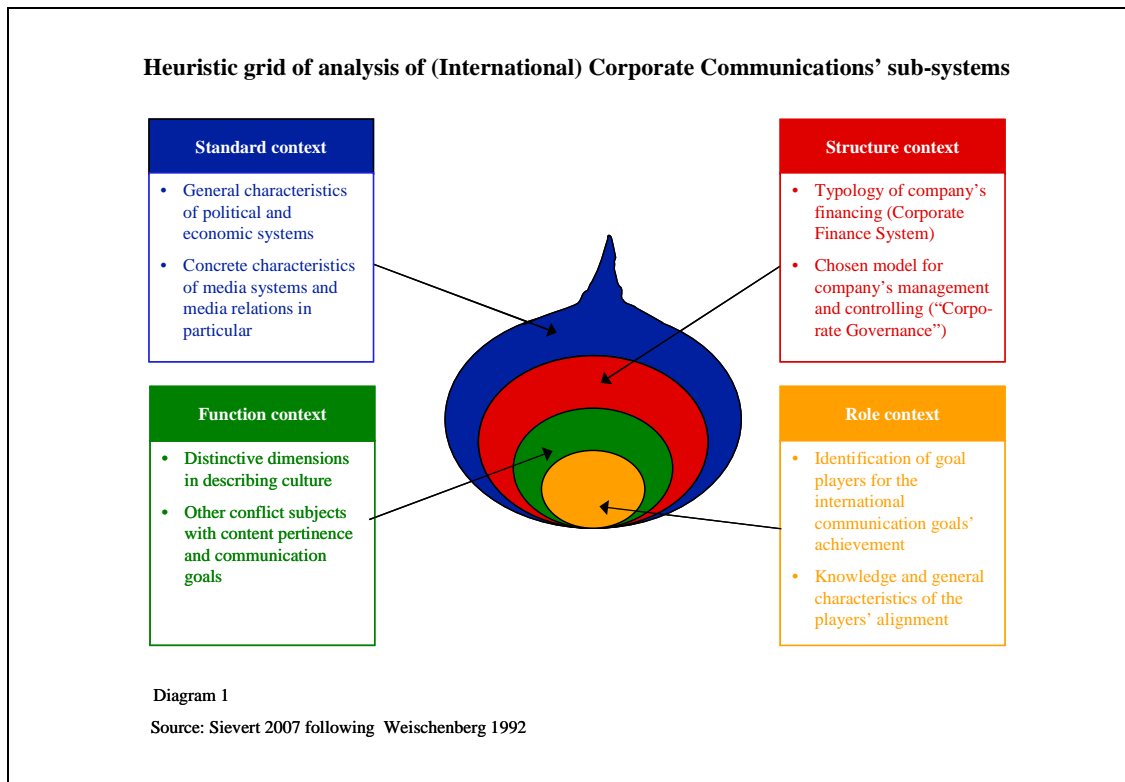
3. Suggestion for a heuristic analytical grid

To analyze ICC, a heuristic working model that is as differentiated as possible is required. One starting point is Siegfried Weischenberg's description of the social system called "journalism," which, with a few modifications, can be applied to the social sub-system of "corporate communications."²

In his essay, Weischenberg, a Hamburg journalism expert, distinguishes among the normative, structural, functional and role contexts of journalism that refer to the systems, institutions, statements and actors associated with the media (cf. Weischenberg

1992: 67-70). He compares these contexts to an onion in order to illustrate mutual interdependencies and influences. Analogous to Weischenberg's model, the social subsystem of corporate communications can also be represented by the layers of an onion.

Economic and political systems and the respective media environments in which corporate communications occur form the normative context. In the structural context, specific foreign target institutions, usually corporations, are scrutinized with regard to their financial and leadership structures. The functional context primarily involves cultural dimensions and conflicts that can (and should) influence the contents of international corporate communications to a great extent. Last but not least, the role context looks at international target actors against the backdrop of their different features, expertise, and attitudes.



For each of these contexts within ICC, research can be carried out regarding the individual countries which are the targets of international communications. This research

would look at the extent to which distinctions can be made between the contexts or the extent to which differences in other industries or corporate cultures flow from them. In this way, for each communications situation confronted in practice, a grid could be developed that would cover all target countries, institutions, media and actors. PR agencies could use the grid as they planned and evaluated efforts and strategies.

The examples in this essay are taken from media relations because universal examples are not available. These examples are relevant because media relations still plays a central, if no longer determinative, role in corporate communications. The additional emphasis on non-specific PR content serves to demonstrate the full potential of a more interdisciplinary approach. Individual models from other disciplines are assigned to a context for the purpose of illustration. To the extent possible, individual aspects of the model are described as pairs of opposites in order to develop a kind of rough ICC compass for a specific ICC project at the end of this essay.

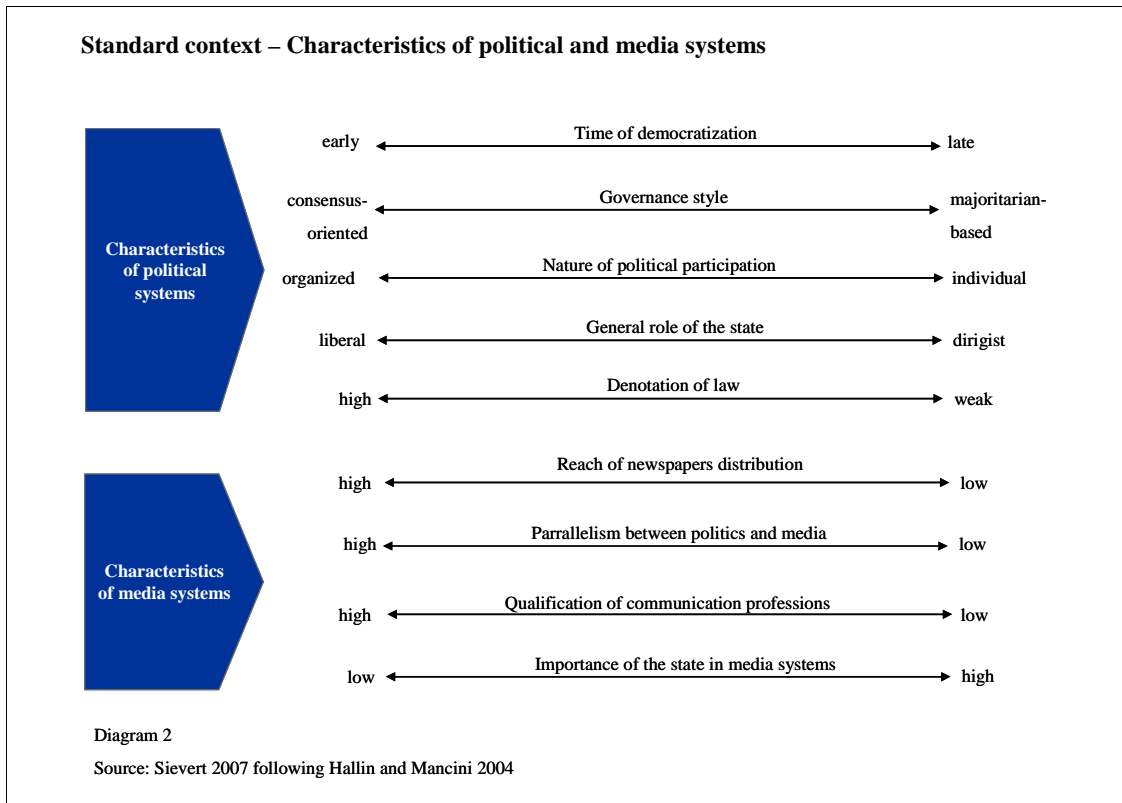
4. Interdisciplinary application of the heuristic analytical grid

4.1 Normative context in political science and general communications theory

In considering the normative context of ICC, helpful stimuli can be found in the fields of political science and general communications theory. In recent years, two models have been developed in these disciplines that integrate a political and economic perspective in relation to a description of various types of media systems. Their authors are Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, as well as Roger Blum.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) developed a total of three media and political models that rest principally on nine indicators. These aspects, labeled "characteristics" by the authors, can be illustrated in somewhat abbreviated form as pairs of opposites. Building on these nine distinctions, the authors assigned 18 Western countries to one of three models. For countries like France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, they established a polarized pluralistic model. In these more directorial political structures, newspaper print runs are low and the media are closely aligned with highly polarized politics. Journalism

is marked by opinion, barely professionalized, and easily instrumentalized. The state intervenes significantly in the media and subsidizes the press.



Great Britain, Ireland, Canada and the United States are assigned to the liberal model. The market plays a big role, print runs are medium-high, and there has long been a commercial, relatively neutral mass press. Journalism is highly professionalized, self-regulation is institutionalized (while also weak at times), and the media distance themselves from politics and play an active investigative role.

The researchers classify the media systems in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Switzerland as democratic and corporatist. Newspapers have high print runs, the mass press developed early on, and the party-affiliated press has been significant historically, although more recently it has been overshadowed by a neutral commercial press.

Standard context – Country classification in three models of media systems according to Hallin and Mancini

	Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model	North European or Democratic Corporatist Model	North Atlantic or Liberal Model
Countries concerned (examples)	France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain	Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland	Britain, United States, Canada, Ireland
Newspaper Industry	Low newspaper circulation	High newspaper circulation	Middle newspaper circulation
Political Parallelism	High political parallelism; commentary-oriented journalism	External pluralism especially in national press; shift towards neutral commercial press	Neutral commercial press; information-oriented journalism; internal pluralism (in the UK more external)
Professionalization	Weaker	Strong	Strong
Role of the State in the Media System	Strong state intervention (including press subsidies)	Strong state intervention, but with protection for the press freedom	Market dominated (except strong public broadcasting in UK and Ireland)

Diagram 3

Source: Hallin and Mancini 2004: 67-68; revised by Sievert 2007

A second approach by Blum (2005), a Swiss researcher, can be described only briefly here. Blum distinguishes among six models, three of which roughly correspond to Hallin and Mancini's distinctions. Particularly noteworthy are the East European shock model (Russia, Turkey, Iran), the Arab-Asian patriotic model (Egypt, Yemen) and the Asiatic-Caribbean model (China, Vietnam, Burma, Zimbabwe and Cuba).

Taken together, both approaches offer an outstanding opportunity for communications professionals to adjust at a system-wide level to the target country of their communications and thus prepare three subsequent analytical steps. The systems of journalism and their political backgrounds are similar in the countries the researchers assigned to a single model of media system, so the way in which media relations can (and must) operate as a part of corporate communications can be assumed. Analogously, journalism and PR in these countries differ substantially from journalism and PR in countries assigned to a different model of media systems.

4.2 The structural context using the example of law and finances

When the issue is better communicative understanding of a specific foreign corporation, economics and business administration in particular are interdisciplinary sources of insight. An understanding of the legal system can contribute interesting perspectives as well, particularly where it goes beyond generalities about legal standards in the target country and looks into their implementation in corporate reality.

If the goal is to understand a specific corporation and its communicative behavior, that will not be possible without at least basic knowledge of financial structures and the cultural implications associated with them. Within corporate finance, Erik Berglöf (1997) has developed an interesting approach that describes models of venture capital finance. In contrast to classical financial literature, he distinguishes not only between equity and debt capital and direct and indirect financing, but also between arm's-length finance and control-oriented finance. Using the examples of the United States and Japan, he also indicates clearly that, while all forms occur in most countries, there are nonetheless traditional financial systems and associated corporate forms typical of each country.

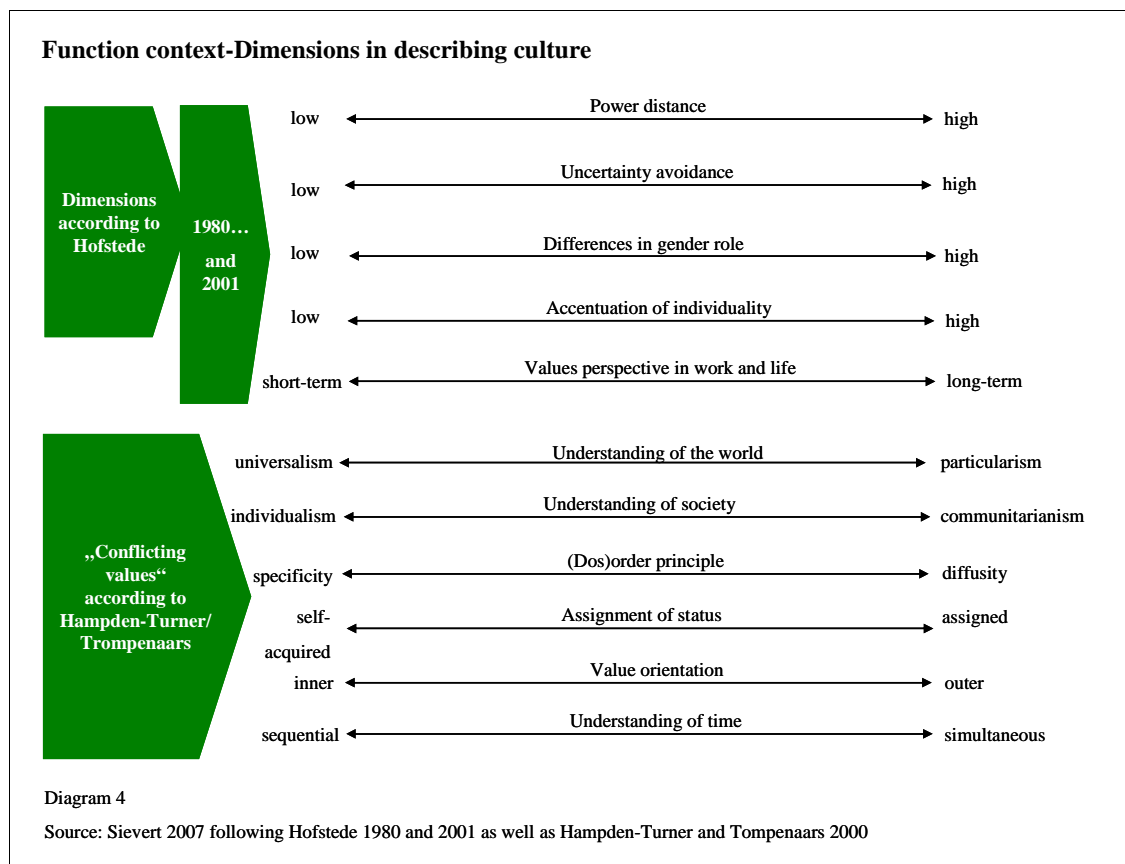
Comparative corporate governance research within the study of law makes similar country-specific distinctions. Cynthia A. Williams and John M. Conley (2005: 494, with additional references there) begin their analysis with the classic distinction between the Anglo-American outsider and the Continental European insider systems. Alongside these two types, Christine A. Mallin (2006: xii-xiii) distinguishes two other groups: a Central and East European one marked by the privatization of the 1990s, and a much less uniform Southeast Asian system with a great deal of state influence. Despite this variety, however, there are nonetheless "certain core features which emerge, such as the importance of transparency, disclosure, accountability of directors and protection of minority shareholders' rights." (Mallin 2006: xiv). Williams and Conley (2005: 550) locate an "emerging third way." Great Britain is taking this third way by combining the American and Continental models.

In the case of the structural context, both of these systems offer corporate communications the possibility of preparing PR activities in an international context for a specific target institution. The existence of country-specific dominant types facilitates

this work, although it is not a substitute for considering the individual corporation and its classification.

4.3 The functional context using the example of cultural and management studies

The target country in general and the target institution in a more narrow sense are not the only factors in the design and implementation of international corporate communications, however. Target content has to be carefully considered as well—whether it can be directly conveyed in a certain cultural context or whether perhaps it needs to be transmitted through several interim steps. This factor plays a particular role in larger, consolidated corporations in which the corporate culture is not necessarily the same throughout affiliated national companies.



Geert Hofstede, a Dutch communications expert, was the first to show this empirically. He identified four different dimensions to describe cultures (cf. Hofstede 1980), to which he later added a fifth (cf. Hofstede 2001). Despite some shortcomings, his findings provide helpful cultural insight and awareness, which can be taken into account when producing PR content.

Within classical management studies, Charles Hampden-Turner (Cambridge) and Fons Trompenaars (Amsterdam) have established an alternative distinction centered around six basic conflicts with regard to communicative target contents in management. This approach is noteworthy in that in addition to pointing out the conflicts, it provides possible solutions based on case studies.

Much can be written on the issue of designing content of culturally conditioned communications. But even the distinctions briefly introduced here can contribute to more discriminating campaign design for cross-border informational content.

Country classification in the seven Hofstede's models of cultural systems

	Name	Power distance	Avoidance of insecurity	Individualism vs. collectivity	Masculinity vs. femininity	Countries
I	Developed Latin countries	high	high	high	intermediate	Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, France, Spain
II	Less developed Latin countries	high	high	low	wide range	Chile, ex-Yugoslavia, Columbia, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Venezuela
III	Developed Asian countries	intermediate	high	intermediate	intermediate	Japan
IV	Less developed Asian countries	high	low	low	intermediate	Hong Kong, India, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand
V	Middle East	high	high	low	intermediate	Greece, Iran, Turkey
VI	Germanic	low	high	low	intermediate	Germany, Israel, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, South Africa
VII	Anglo-Saxon	low	low intermediate	high	high	Australia, Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, USA
VIII	Nordic	low	low intermediate	intermediate	low	Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden

Diagram 5
 Source: Hofstede 1980 following Henry 2001, translated at http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interkulturelle_Zusammenarbeit

4.4 Role context using the example of human resources science and journalism research

Last but not least, the role context of the actors involved and especially their target actors must be considered. Since comparative international data on communications specialists is not available, the discussion must be limited to PR professionals working in Germany. However, comparative data from journalism research is good, so this professional group will be the subject of cross-border comparison, with the focus on media relations as previously mentioned.

There are already two summaries concerning communications actors in Germany (cf. Sievert and Thomann 2005 and Lüdeke and Sievert 2006), so only the most important findings will be mentioned here. In a comprehensive personnel study of 255 PR professionals conducted in the summer of 2004 (cf. Langen and Sievert 2006 on methodology and other results), close to a quarter of the respondents said they were responsible for worldwide communications at their corporations. When these global communicators in Germany are analyzed, the statistical average is a 50-year old man with a liberal arts and social sciences education who works in a telecommunications or chemicals industry.

But at the level of actors, who is the media relations counterpart to this average global PR professional? Until a few years ago, the state of research on international comparative journalism polls was even sparser (cf. Weischenberg and Sievert 1998). A pioneering collection of essays by David H. Weaver summarized studies from 21 countries and thus made possible a comparative consideration of journalism features and attitudes formulated according to dichotomies.

In the present case and building on Weaver's work, one can investigate the extent to which features and characteristics of individual target actors in ICC are typical for certain target countries. Among other findings, the results regarding journalists' understanding of their role are particularly interesting. "There is much disagreement over how important it is to provide entertainment, to report accurately and objectively, to

provide analysis of complex issues and problems, and to be a watchdog on government," Weaver summarized (1998: 478–479).

The great differences in understanding of the role of journalists underscores the importance of intercultural expertise gained through interdisciplinary studies in public relations. The wrong tone in a press release or, even worse, a thoughtless remark that would be completely harmless in Germany but that is insulting to a "foreign" journalist can endanger an entire communications process.

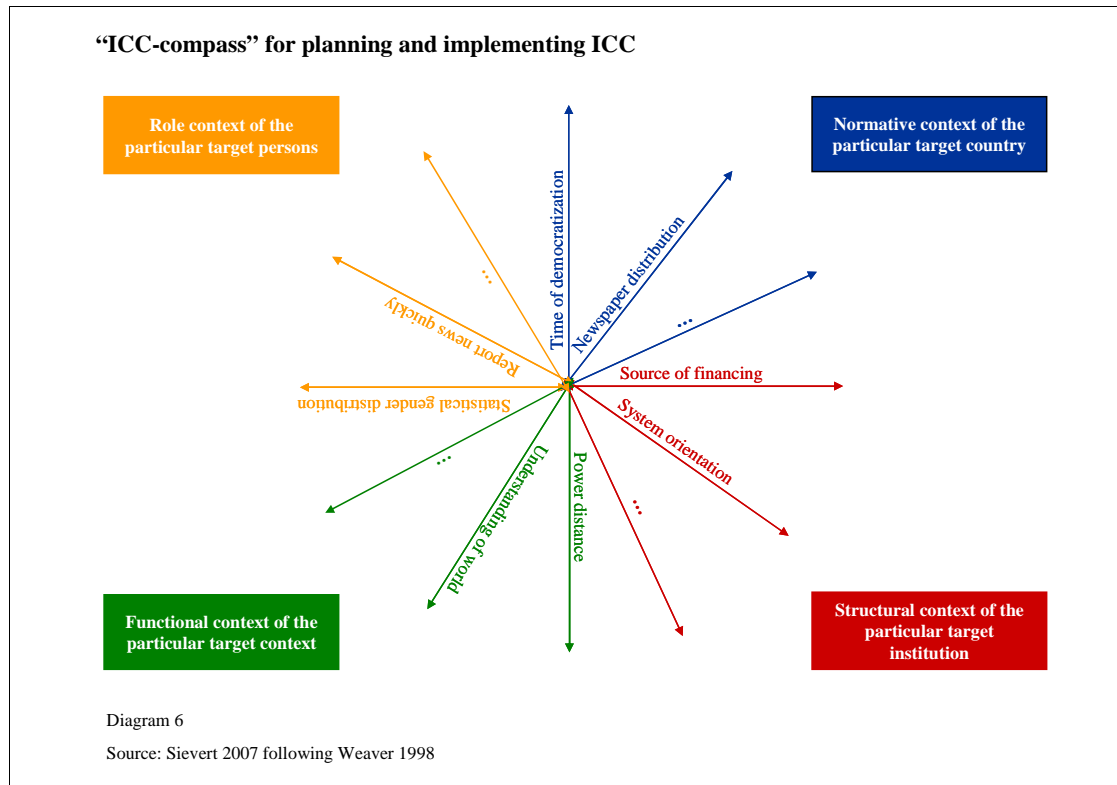
5. Summary and perspective

The discussion above illuminates the complexity of the context within which international corporate communications occur. It illustrates how important is it for a globally-engaged corporate communicator to be knowledgeable about the levels of target countries, target institutions, target contents and target actors (or why he or she should ensure that employees or service providers have the necessary knowledge). With the right information at hand, PR professionals are in a position to create a kind of ICC compass with regard to dichotomies in all four contexts presented (cf. diagram 5).

How many and which particular compass axes should be selected for an individual strategic communications goal depends upon the situation. In any case, however, by combining the points on the individual axes, a kind of rough map emerges. When the cultural expressions of the individual contexts for all axes are compared to the map, the biggest cultural differences between the system in which a communications project originates and those of the target system become apparent. This background knowledge seems quite useful for professionals directing cross-national and cross-cultural corporate communications.

This essay intends to make evident the potential usefulness of interdisciplinary approaches in international comparative PR research—without forgetting the core expertise, which for reasons of space could only be mentioned in passing here. It goes without saying that this core expertise needs to be part of PR education (cf. Sievert 2005 and Sievert/Lüdeke 2005). The author seeks to point out a few possibilities in this direction.

Put simply, PR professionals are not the first to be engaged with international and multicultural comparisons and models. The wheel need not be reinvented, and a look beyond the corner office can only be for the better.



End notes:

¹ The terms corporate communications (CC) and public relations (PR) are used synonymously here. The distinctions between them suggested by some authors do not seem to serve a purpose in this context. When public relations refers to the narrower field of media relations, the latter term is used explicitly.

² In this essay, the author chose a working model that, in the final analysis, starts from system-theoretical concepts from the German-speaking world (cf. instructively Sievert 1999). Corporate communications is understood here to refer to a territorially differentiated subsystem of the economic system. The present essay does not provide the

necessary space or the appropriate context to discuss related questions. An essay on that issue is in the planning stages.

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