Information Richness in Organizational Mix Mediated Communication: Coordination across Region

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Abstract

Information Richness Theory (IRT), as the basis of Media Richness Theory (MRT), explained information processing inside organization. Both IRT and MRT have decided that face to face is the best medium to solve equivocal and uncertain information problem.

Lately, the development of new media for organizational purposes questioned the role of face to face as the richest medium to solve uncertain or equivocal problem. Inter-organizational communication, especially for organization in different regions, increases the use of new media to do organizational teamwork. Communication has become mobile, which means must be able to be conducted everywhere according to the work or activities of agents and clients.

This qualitative research studied the information processing between an event organizer agent with its client through new media facilities like instant messages, short text messages, emails, and phone calls. Qualitative approach was planned to find a deeper understanding about the meaning of sharing among the agent and the client, to determine the type of symbol (as information) and medium to collaborate. Each staff of the client communicate and choose each kind of symbol and medium, that they use, personally, according to the urgency and competency.

This research study discovered that information richness was built personally, with more than one media. While communication must be mobile, character of symbol and medium of face to face communication like direct feedback, cues, language, and personal, can be replaced by mixed new media technology.

Keywords-component: Information Richness, Mediated Communication

I. Introduction

There are debates on the implementation of Information Richness Theory (IRT) and Media Richness Theory (MRT), particularly about the implementation of face to face as the best medium to reduce uncertainty and equivocality in information process.

It was started when organizational communication faces dramatic change after the explosion of communication technology among diverse workforce [1]. Expansion of organizational activities across regions is increasing the use of mediated communication. There is a challenge on external organizational communication, from an agent to a client in different region. New Media is needed to make a contact, make a negotiation, support a decision making and maintain a relation. Organizational communication needs whether a conventional or new media, which is able to convey rich / complex information (face to face) or poor / simple (telephone, letters, memo, bulletins, documents, computer output) [2, p. 32, 3, p. 358, 4, p. 554]. Former research by Daft and Lengel in 1983 had theorized media usage in working place, dichotomize the quality of a media to high and low richness. Further research on media richness focused on perception of media fit (to user), which was not simply dichotomize the usage of media into high and low [5, 6]. Recent research of MRT came from: 1. Situational changing which enforce people to use more than one medium [7, 8]; 2. Media richness is not a fixed feature of a medium [9]; 3. Innovation of instant messaging, video conference, chatting as synchronous as face to face communication [10, 11]; 4. Limitation of interpersonal competence of the manager in media usage / access [12].

Inter-organizational communication means a cooperation between two or more organization, in different locations or even regions. Equivocal and
uncertain information will be transmitted and shared across regions. In this situation, face to face communication is not always an effective and efficient medium to communicate. The weakness of face to face communication for inter-organizational communication is its high cost. When face to face become expensive medium, it will be a consideration for the organization to look for the efficient medium. Situational condition like the need of frequent coordination and negotiation, is the other consideration in deciding the fittest communication media. Then, how could the member of organization find media that have high rich information to reduce equivocal and uncertain information?

Member of an organization as individual has also personal consideration, communication competence, and believes, toward a rich medium based on his/her perception/experience. A personal frame of reference will determine the medium extension usage [12]. Uncertainty and equivocality of information, is also a personal perception, vary for each person. The perception in reducing equivocality and uncertainty is personal too. Daft and Lengel mention that personal is one of the element of IRT and MRT (4). Several research toward information and media in IRT and MRT mostly focused on quantitative approach. Generalization trough experimental [8, 12, 5] and survey method [11] brought limitation. Those research tried to focus on certain situation, but do not cover the real situation in the real working place. This inquiry was trying to picture out the real situation of the implementation of IRT in organizational communication context. Every member of communication process will be explored, in the way they communicate, share information and determine communications media.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Information Richness

Originally, Daft and Lengel (1983) have written a theory about information richness [2]. Information richness is the basis for MRT. Information richness (IRT) is defined as the potential information carrying capacity of data [2], provides substantial new understanding. It is less discussed, since it is included in media richness theory.

Then, Lengel (1983) proposed a continuum of information richness to explain information processing behavior in organizations. Richness is defined as the potential information carrying capacity of data. If the communication of an item of data, such as a wink, provides substantial new understanding, it would be considered. The importance of information richness is that communication media vary in the richness of information process.

Manager’s media choice behaviors are both of symbolic communication behavior and symbolic creation behavior [4]. Symbolic communication behavior transmit symbol which has become an agreement and known by all communicator. It has capacity to transmit simple data/information. This kind of symbol is proper for instruction, where interpretation is unnecessary.

Manager also faces equivocal and uncertain information problem. Equivocality occurs when there is multi-interpretation of information. Uncertainty is the condition when there is a lack of data to make decision. Message equivocality in uncertain situation must be solved and cleared. Symbol as the result of uncertainty reduction process became an important information for organization to decide or solve crisis.

Through the lens of IRT, the substantial consideration of media or new media usage could be traced. Substantial matter of a medium usage is depended on the information transferred to each of the communicator. Information is produced by members of organization, with personal experience and consideration, modification for each specific purpose, organizational or individual. Reduction of uncertainty and equivocality of information are both about managing information richness then selecting certain media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Medium</th>
<th>Information Richness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to Face</td>
<td>Highest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written, Personal (letters, memos)</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written, Formal (bulletins, documents)</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeric Formal (computer output)</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conceptualization of information richness related with two kind of former symbolic behavior, information as symbolic communication or symbolic creation. If information richness is placed as symbolic communication, means that information is clear. It will be easy to predict the most suitable medium. While for information richness as symbolic creation, where is transactional sharing meaning became the basis of communication practice (versus transmission or interactional), each communicator has an ability as
an individual to create interpretation toward information (as information richness), including to decide which medium has the highest richness as a tool for communication. Limitation of Lengel (1983) laid on type of medium to convey information. The other medium like Computer Mediated Communication (video conference, short text message, chat, instant message, etc) was not clearly involved in the theory.

2.2 Media Richness Theory

Information richness determines media differences in carrying the information in MRT. Media richness is a capacity of a media to facilitate synchronous feedback, multiple cues (verbal and non-verbal), language variety, and personal focus [3] on information processing. Manager needs more than one media to do contextual communication.

Letters, memo, bulletin and all written medium is kind of media to transmit simple information. The information is easy to be understood, convey low equivocality and uncertainty. When the information is high in equivocality and uncertainty, face to face and telephone must be chosen to build mutual negotiation, which is fair for each member of communication process.

MRT warned that opposite practice in media usage may bring ineffective process. Example, high richness media to transmit work direction to employee might trigger unexpected feeling from employee [2]. In the other way, using low richness media to negotiate uncertain situation, might led to false decision.

Lately, diverse workforce in internal managerial or inter organization (as client), makes manager or employee less able to depend on the highest richness media (face to face). They need another proper media. Example, email has been successful in convey equivocal communication [8]. The emergence of new media in organizational communication has opened new perspective of MRT. Media richness is not a fixed feature of a medium, but could be changed by shared social construction, which refers to an object that is, at least in part, socially constructed and subjectively generated [13]. Low richness media could be transformed into high richness media depends on communication perception.

2.3 Mediated Organizational Communication

As organizational business is expanding, the communications must follow the expansion. Works of communication technology connects network society, as communication channels [14]. Dichotomy of rich or low media has developed to the new capacity of new media

New media develop the character of face to face in its gadget, to reach the highest richness of communication. New media technology are electronic mail, instant messaging (IM), voice mail, facsimile, audio and video conferencing, computer conferencing, management information system, group decision support system, internet and world wide web, plus wireless networks (cellular, smart phone, personal digital assistants) [10]. Communication via a media or new media (not face to face) is mediated communication. The latest wireless network technology such as instant message (IM) offers presence awareness as the capability to represent synchronous communication, similar to the characteristic of face to face communication [11].

III. Research Method

This research is designed to explore information richness in new media between event organization agent and client in diverse workforce. A single case study is held to find deep data and analysis. The case is focused toward coordination and negotiation between them to held events together.

Research question are:
1. How was information transmitted from organization to client vice versa?
2. What is the definition information richness in mediated organizational communication context? How to identify media richness in mediated communication process?

3.1 Subject

Subject of this research is a pair of event organizer with its client. They were communicating across provinces by the use of several new media. The organization is Simpati, works as event organizer, handling the client’s events in several cities in Indonesia. They communicated online and offline, but mostly online.

3.2 Procedures

Simpati as the event organizer agent was asked to decide a client who is able to join the research program. Then five informants were chosen as the member from client organization. The representative from Simpati was the manager of event organizer. Data collection was conducted by deep interview and record of posting message through email, short text messages and instant messages. Instant messages was
presented as message chat in blackberry messenger. Records from conversational interview and observational sessions were made. Collecting data was finished when it was saturated.

Data analysis is based on Miles and Huberman procedures: data reduction, presentation and conclusion [15]. Data triangulation was conduct to validate the data collection. Triangulation was held through cross informants interview.

IV. Results

Data collection was based on transcription of interview and observation. Mediated communication process was categorized and presented below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Source – Receiver</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Medium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sending Event Schedule</td>
<td>Client – Agent</td>
<td>Event Schedule</td>
<td>Email, Instant Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Planning and Theme and Design of Promotion and Publication</td>
<td>Agent – Client</td>
<td>Date, confirmation of item for exhibition</td>
<td>Instant Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sending Approval of Theme and Design of Promotion and Publication</td>
<td>Client - Agent</td>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>Instant Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Conforming advertisement for the event</td>
<td>Agent - Client</td>
<td>Advertising schedule – media – item to advertise</td>
<td>Instant Messaging, Telephone, Short Text Message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sending approval of advertisement</td>
<td>Client - Agent</td>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>Instant Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Organizing event</td>
<td>Agent - Client</td>
<td>Special offer for decoration, over charge, basic property for the event</td>
<td>Telephone, Instant Messaging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Feed back</th>
<th>Cues</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Noise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Indonesia, formal</td>
<td>Impersonal (office account)</td>
<td>Network delay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Verbal, non verbal (paralanguage)</td>
<td>Indonesia, formal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Crowd, network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Text Message</td>
<td>Direct / indirect</td>
<td>Verbal, non verbal (emoticon)</td>
<td>Indonesia, formal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Network delay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant Messaging</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Verbal, non verbal (emoticon)</td>
<td>Indonesia, formal/informal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Low Battery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The event is monthly exhibition and car selling. It is held in various cities in Indonesia. Along with the preparation, both agent and the client had a face to face meeting at first for time arrangement of the event. Then, they do online coordination and negotiation to arrange the event and solve problems. Elements of information and media richness are shown below:

V. Discussion

5.1 Information Richness on Mediated Organizational Communication

Coordination was the main communication task between agent and client. Inside coordination, there were symbolic communication and symbolic creation. Symbolic communication was presented in task no.1,3,5. Approval of a publication was a simple information. Even though it was simple, there were sometimes an information which must be confirmed. Confirmation conducted because of uncertainty and equivocality. A sample of discussion which was held by instant messenger:
Agent: Ass wr sb.... Angga (client’s staf) thank you for your schedule. Where is the address for flyer and banner?
Client: meaning?
Agent: I mean, do we use previous address for Palembang?
Client: Palembang? Palembang use previous concept.

The agent received schedule of exhibition and auction from the client, without any other information about exhibition location. The information from client to agent was not rich, because it was contain uncertainty (lack of data). Feedback question from agent to client was equivocal/multi interpretation, as the “address” could refer to the address of producer of flyer or the address for exhibition. The question was complete and the answer became approximately, not exactly. The client was guessing the agent’s question. If the information was not rich, it would not give a chance to any type of the communication medium to be rich too. For the case of low equivocal and uncertain information, instant messages were solving the problem perfectly.

Then, symbolic creation is included task no.2,4,6. Negotiation was done to discuss theme, design, promotion, advertisement and event. Phone calls from mobile phone were used for negotiating urgent detail information.

Designing event is a creative process, which need fresh ideas from event organizer, and rarely recycle ideas from the older one, particularly for repeated event. Creativity needs creation. It means that symbolic creations will always salience in communicating event plan.

5.2 Media Richness
According to data and original theory, the rank of media richness for mediated communication is:

![Figure 1. Media Richness Rank](image)

Telephone is the medium with direct feedback and ranked as the highest rich media above all, even though noise is present, such as crowd and network error. Instant messaging rises above all media, as the most frequently used media by almost all member of communication. Only one of staff’s client, reject to use instant messaging, as the result of failure in technology adoption.

Client: I have instant messenger, but I did not enjoy typing, the character was too small. I would like to call by phone

In other way, the advantage of using instant messaging is called presence awareness. Technology of instant messaging allow user to be aware of status (online), availability (idle or away) and typing response of each user contact [11]. These are several reasons why they use instant messenger:

Agent: It was simple and fast. I did not enjoy opening email while I were mobile

Client: Status of instant messaging was an information for me. There are codes for, checked mark, D (for delivered but not yet read), R (already read).

In some occasion, instant messenger was cheaper and faster than email or short text message. Agent and client easily discussing simple matter by instant messenger. In certain occasion, several face to face character were the same as instant messaging character (direct feedback, more than one cues, language and personal). Delayed feedback existed when a client away on a meeting. In case agent did not received direct feedback by instant messenger or email, the agent will use mobile phone. Urgency of direct feedback and the requirement of negotiation, was the situation which triggered agent or client to use more than one media.

Agent: In time of deadline, I need direct feedback from client. If I did not received it immediately, then my instant message must be followed by phone.

There are tasks which use more than one media also: 1. Sending event schedule (email, instant messaging), 2. Confirming advertisement for the event (instant messaging, telephone, short text message), 3. Organizing event (telephone, instant messaging). Mix media was used when the confirmation, reminder and coordination are needed. Sending email then followed by instant messaging will reduce delay in checking email. According the experience between them, mix
media helps both of them to transmit information directly and correctly, without face to face process. Richness of face to face as communication media is replaced by mixed of new media usage.

VI. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion and Limitation
1. In the context of inter-organizational communication, information richness is not only represented by single media, but mix media. The conversation is included coordination, confirmation and negotiation. Advantages of face to face in direct feedback, cues, language and personal, can be replaced by instant messaging or mix media, such as email followed by instant messaging or instant messaging followed by phone.

2. Information richness has a shared meaning and varied for different situation. Finally, media richness is depended on the dynamic of information richness interpretation.

3. As qualitative research, exploration is limited to certain case and can not be generated to all organizational situation. Each case of organizational communication must be solved specifically according to the main problem. Quantitative research can be done to support this research result, covering information richness with mix new media in several organization.

References


