

OnlinePLUS – supplementary material

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4.4 Data collection

As pointed out by George and Bennett (2005, pp. 89-90), case studies are usually not about the implementation of *one* established method of data collection. Instead, several data sources and data collection methods are combined, and the social scientist carrying out such research should become used to doing “detective work” (p. 90), immersing herself or himself in the wealth of information available. Naturally, for different forms of data, suitable methods of data collection and analysis have to be employed. This research is based on three forms of data: (1) PR professionals’ own descriptions and reflections regarding their summit work, supplemented by (2) my own open observation on the site of the summit and (3) a collection of political actors’ PR material published online and offline over the course of the summit. Also, internal strategy memos provided by two actors were incorporated in the analysis.

4.4.1 Core method: semi-standardized interviews

The point of interviewing PR professionals at the Cancún summit was to learn about the circumstances, routines, and reflections pertaining to their work and, ultimately, to reconstruct how they take strategic decisions. In the literature, two particular forms of interviews are commonly recommended for such endeavors: semi-standardized interviews and – as a particular subtype – expert interviews. The main difference between these types essentially lies in the conception of the interviewee and the nature of the material that is generated.

In *semi-standardized interviews*, according to Flick (2006, p. 155, 206), the interviewee is viewed as a multifaceted person holding ‘subjective theories’, i.e. special knowledge and assumptions (both of explicit and implicit nature) on a given topic. Open and closed questions are posed by the interviewer to attain that knowledge. They are at least partially inspired by theories or hypotheses and arranged in a particular order covering different aspects of the topic. For Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2009, p. 139), this approach is particularly suitable for research on focused topics, such as specific private or professional routines. However, they emphasize that in semi-standardized interviews, interviewers should not just routinely ‘reel off’ the interview guide in its prearranged form without paying attention to the answers but instead handle the interview guide with flexibility. Such responsive attitude would mean, for example, allowing for ad-hoc changes to the order of questions if necessitated by the nature of the interviewee’s answers. The challenge of semi-standardized interviewing is to

maintain the balance between generating material on pre-selected aspects and simultaneously preventing the interview situation from becoming too rigid and artificial (p. 144).

As particular subtype of semi-standardized interviews, *expert interviews* focus less on a person's complex background and subjective experience, but more on the specific expertise that person holds on a particular topic (Flick, 2006, p. 165). Such expertise can be composed of (1) operational knowledge on institutional procedures, rules, or mechanisms relating to the research topic, (2) background knowledge on its context, or (3) the authority to share influential interpretations relating to the topic (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2009, p. 134). This typology highlights that differentiating between what counts as expert interview and what is 'just' a common semi-standardized interview is not easy. Essentially, the decision depends on how one conceives of the interviewees' responses. If they are viewed more as subjective takes on aspects of the interviewees' lives, as personal attempts by multi-faceted individuals to make sense of what they do, one would speak of semi-standardized interviews. If, however, they are seen as pieces of knowledge that only people occupying certain professional roles can possess and, in the eyes of many, lend them special reputation, one would probably consider the method an expert interview. The dividing line is fuzzy.

In my study, some interviewees certainly possessed the status of experts. They were able to contextualize their work, to put their job in a wider perspective, and to offer interpretations of larger developments in international political PR. Other interviewees, however, employed a more subjective and narrow perspective, focusing more on their individual business without appearing to be too concerned about the 'big picture' or what is happening in the field beyond the borders of their particular organization. In order to account for both types of interviewees, I attached the general label of 'semi-standardized interviews' to my method of conducting interviews. However, I had also looked into the particularities of interviewing experts.

THE EXPERT INTERVIEW AS PARTICULAR FORM OF SEMI-STANDARDIZED INTERVIEWING

Van Audenhove (2007) mentions several factors turning expert interviewing into an advantageous method. For example, it provides for quick access to information that could not be retrieved otherwise. Hence, it is less time-consuming than other approaches (although this statement can be questioned if one calculates the time spent per case) and delivers detailed data of high quality – Bogner, Littig, and Menz (2009) even describe it as "collection of data whose richness is without competition" (p. 8, own translation). In addition, interacting with experts is considered relatively easy (compared to other forms of surveys/interviews) and can quickly lead to additional interviews with other people in the interviewee's network.

The arguments of high data quality and research efficiency are counterbalanced by some criticism: Firstly, experts should not be regarded as providers of objective information. Quite the opposite, experts always employ a specific perspective, or personal bias, and are part of societal "power relations" (Van Audenhove, 2007, p. 7). Their knowledge usually has political dimensions to it and might even be contradicted by "counter experts" (p. 9). Hence, expert knowledge – despite its apparent value – should always be critically challenged, never

naively accepted. Secondly, the limited degree of standardization and significant role of open interaction can make it hard for expert interviews to be inter-subjectively verified (Bogner, Littig, and Menz, 2009). This raises issues of reliability and the role of the researcher in data collection. Thirdly, the type of information that is gathered through expert interviews may be described as “anecdotal and illustrative” (Van Audenhove, 2007, p. 9) by some. Researchers might be able to build explanations on expert knowledge, but this does not mean that they can be generalized on a broader scale. Here, the issue is one of representativeness, which was discussed above (see 4.1.2).

In expert interviews, interview guides are tailored to only obtaining information on aspects of explicit interest, they have “a much stronger directive function with regard to excluding unproductive topics” (Flick, 2006, p. 165). At the same time, questions should still be characterized by high degrees of openness and not evoke particular answers (Gläser and Laudel, 2009, p. 131). Also, the interviewer should remain flexible for potential changes in the order of questions and for new, unforeseen topics to come up (pp. 42-43). Both concerns should ideally be balanced when developing interview guides – a task that can be challenging (ibid.). More generally, expert interviews should be conducted one-on-one, allowing the interviewer to pay full attention to one interviewee at a time (p. 43). Selecting from the different channels available for administering interviews, expert interviews should ideally be done face-to-face, only in exceptional circumstances on the phone (pp.153-154).

As a special feature, many of my interviews on summit communication routines did not take place outside summit times at arbitrary locations, but in the heat of an actual summit. Hence, interviewees were asked about their business right when and where it was unfolding. Instead of the usual *ex-post-facto* interviewing, this resembled some kind of ‘live interviewing’, which facilitated process-tracing (see 4.1.1) and certainly provided for richer accounts of summit proceedings than if done retrospectively. How exactly these interviews were administered, I describe in subsequent sections. Access to the conference venue was obtained through accreditation with the UNFCCC as an official observer.

4.4.1.1 Development of interview guides

The purpose of the semi-standardized interviews was to learn about the development of communication strategies within governmental and non-governmental delegations. In particular, a selection of long-term and short-term factors, which were hypothesized to have an influence on actors’ choice of strategy, was to be explored. These factors were part of a conceptual model that had been developed prior to fieldwork (see 3.3.2). The empirical challenge was to find out what influence these factors really had and whether additional ones existed. Consequently, the interviews had to touch upon all these factors and generate sufficient information for evaluating their influence on strategy choice.

While for the measurement of long-term factors, such as the level of funding, one interview would probably have been enough, short-term factors, like the impact of dynamics and interactions among actors, could not have been adequately captured by just one point of

observation. In order to determine changes in the choice of strategy, at least two interviews per actor were deemed necessary. To embrace the idea of process-tracing, an ideal interview sequence of even three interviews per actor was conceived: (1) before or shortly after the start of the summit, (2) in the middle or latter half of the summit, and (3) shortly before or after the end of the summit. Through such sequence, the processes behind strategic communication activities were to be traced closely. (As I describe below, the sequence turned out to be slightly different in the heat of fieldwork but still adequately captured summit dynamics.)

The first of the three interviews was to focus on the interviewee's tasks and background, communication structures and processes within the organization, the actors' overall message to be communicated at the summit as well as more general plans and expectations. For the second interview, the spotlight was shifted to actors' summit communication routines, such as their media relations, responses to media coverage and other actors' moves, or cooperation with external service providers. Interviewees were also asked for an interim evaluation of summit business and about their communication's target groups and transnational orientation. In the third interview, an evaluative perspective was employed, as interviewees were asked about lessons they had taken home from the summit and an assessment of their Cancún communication. Questions about funding and the interviewee's perception of the nature of the event rounded off the final interview.

Again, all these constructs or concepts were selected so as to cover the factors included in my conceptual model. For each of them, one or more interview questions were developed, usually in a format so as to invite interviewees to talk freely (open questions starting with 'what', 'how' etc.). Closed questions were only used for obtaining specific information, such as the existence of running contracts with consultancies. All questions went through several rounds of revision. They were reviewed in team discussions and checked by senior colleagues. Through this process, they could be gradually improved and made ready for fieldwork.

The layout of my interview guides was roughly oriented towards the format created by Helfferich (2005), but with some adjustments: It featured a four-column table on a page in landscape format. The first column on the very left listed those theoretical constructs or concepts of interest that information was to be gathered about. For each of these, one or more interview questions were assigned in the second column. Next to each question, aspects of particular interest were compiled in the third column. These bullet points served as a kind of checklist, which made it easier to monitor whether interviewees were touching upon the desired points with their answers. If that was not the case, these aspects could be specifically raised, possibly with the help of potential focusing questions, which were listed for some of the aspects in the fourth column on the very right. For the interview with the UNFCCC, which served the purpose of learning about the logistics and infrastructure of the Cancún summit, a separate, fourth interview guide was developed, which comprised a completely different set of questions. As opposed to the column-style format described above, it simply listed the questions one after the other, some of them supplemented by potential focusing questions. All interview guides can be found in the appendices.

4.4.1.2 Recruitment of interviewees

Recruiting interviewees turned out to be strenuous at times. A particular challenge stemmed from the fact that only one or two people per actor held positions matching the focus of my research. As the objective was to explore communication strategies and their development, the interview had to be conducted with officials actually involved in delegations' strategic communication decisions, such as the communications director, chief spokesperson, or head of media relations. Just recruiting any random member of a given delegation would not have worked; some seniority and strategic outlook was required. Hence, the set of interviewees to be recruited was extremely small and comprised particular pre-selected people.

The identities of these officials were researched prior to the summit with the help of government and NGO websites, phone directories, and organizational charts. In some cases (especially for ministries with deficient websites), this required some creative efforts, such as guessing likely email addresses or reconstructing internal hierarchies based on scant information. Finally, a list of ideal interviewees was compiled, which also included their deputies as potential stand-ins. About one and a half weeks prior to the beginning of the summit, I contacted all desired interviewees via email, concisely informing them about my research, inviting them for a series of short on-site interviews over the course of the summit, and addressing the issue of confidentiality. Accompanying the email was a supporting letter on university letterhead signed by my supervisor (see appendices for email and letter).

The response to this initial communication turned out to be limited. Only three replies were received, and they were rather skeptical in tone – mostly regarding the capacity of making time for several interviews in the midst of a hectic summit. This skepticism, however, could be turned into more cooperative attitudes by means of follow-up emails emphasizing my readiness to react highly flexibly to time constraints and be 'on stand-by' whenever needed. Half a week before the beginning of the summit, I sent a second email to all those desired interviewees having kept silent up to that point. In that reminder, I also mentioned that I might take the liberty of following up by phone or approaching them personally at the site of the summit, thereby emphasizing that I was serious in my endeavor and could not be easily ignored. This second email triggered responses from another three actors. With all actors who had replied, individual email correspondence was conducted, discussing potential concerns, arranging first interview appointments, or exchanging contact details for later scheduling.

In the case of those communication professionals with whom no prior email correspondence could be arranged, the only option left was to find them at the summit and hope that they would spontaneously commit to participating. Tracking down these officials was not always easy. For some actors, the respective country pavilion or information booth could serve as first point of contact, but nonetheless I often found myself waiting in lobbies or outside meeting rooms, hoping for my 'target person' to appear and give me a chance of presenting my case. All of this required quite some endurance and courage, but it certainly got easier and felt less embarrassing over time. Approaching senior officials without warning and requesting their cooperation can indeed be practiced.

4.4.1.3 Sequence, mode, and setting of interviews

After the initial communication (via email or face-to-face), all contacted interviewees reacted positively to my request (with the notable exception of the US); some of them – especially in the NGO camp – even seemed rather eager to participate in my study and voiced their interest in learning about its final results. As already mentioned above, the initial plan of interviewing each actor three times during the summit turned out impossible to realize. Only for two actors, this ideal sequence could be implemented (Germany and WWF International). For all other actors, arranging the first interview took so many days that the summit had progressed beyond its opening phase by then. In these cases, a different interview sequence was implemented: One interview was done face-to-face at the summit, followed by a phone interview in the weeks after the summit, i.e. in early 2011. The questions in the three interview guides developed for the original sequence were allocated across the two interviews according to where they fit in most logically. In the case of one actor (India), to which contact could only be established towards the end of the summit, the face-to-face interview on site was omitted and the phone interview conducted right after the summit with an abbreviated interview guide. Figure 4.2 presents a timeline listing all interviews. The average interview lasted 30 minutes.

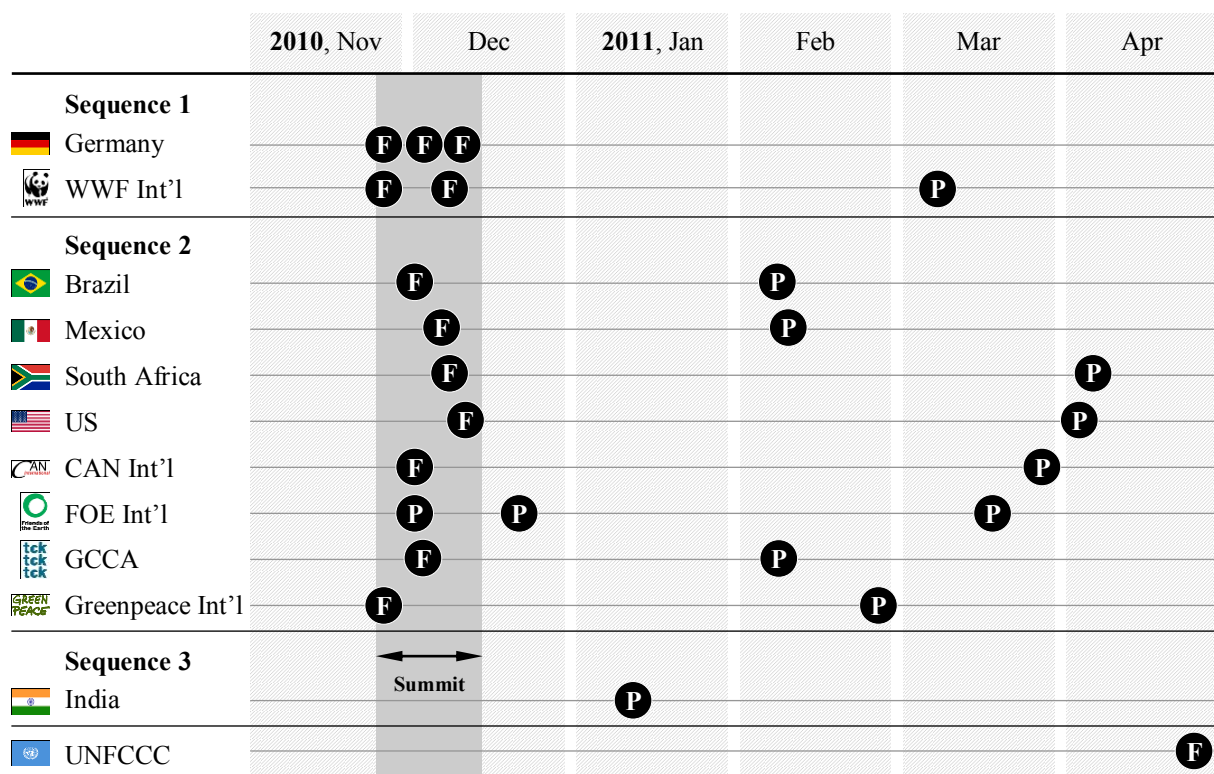


Figure 4.2: Timeline listing all interviews conducted (F = face to face; P = by phone)

In summary, all actors (with the exception of India) were at least interviewed twice. While it would of course been desirable to conduct three interviews per actor, as originally planned, this turned out to be impossible. For that sequence to be realized, all interview appointments would have had to be fixed prior to the summit (an ambitious endeavor given the low rate of

response to my email requests) and the sheer conduct of all these interviews would have required more personnel. But even in their altered sequence, the interviews were still receptive to actor dynamics, such as ad-hoc changes in strategy or the failing of expectations.

ROUTINES AND REFLECTIONS REGARDING THE FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

All face-to-face interviews took place on the conference grounds, either at Moon Palace or *Cancunmesse*. Before meeting the respective interviewee, I usually checked if any of the meeting rooms in the vicinity were vacant and then proposed to do the interview there. Some of the face-to-face interviews were also done in a cafeteria or sitting outside one of the conference buildings at Moon Palace. Some of the government communicators also invited me to their office. At the beginning of an interview, after some warm-up talk, I routinely offered a brief introduction to my research and asked for permission to tape the interview with a digital voice recorder. This was always granted, with the exception of one interview with a US communicator, where I had to resort to written notes. I was under the overall impression that my interview guides worked well and did not leave the interviewees uncertain about the questions' foci. Smaller comments expressed on the side (such as 'that's a good question' or 'yes, we have thought about this a lot') gave me the impression that my questions bore relevance to interviewees' professional lives and got to the point. With some minor exceptions, interviewees understood the questions like they were meant and offered comprehensive answers. In general, NGO communicators appeared more eager to reflect on their work and provide strategic insight. At the end of every face-to-face interview, I thanked the interviewee and asked for a follow-up interview by phone in early 2011. In the case of the US communicator, who did not appear particularly thrilled about being interviewed and showed little cooperation, I refrained from requesting a second interview and resorted to a different interviewee for that (see 4.3).

ROUTINES AND REFLECTIONS REGARDING THE PHONE INTERVIEWS

For the phone interviews, I called the interviewees on their office landline, mobile phone, or Skype account. On my side, I always used Skype for placing the calls, in combination with the Pamela recording tool. Overall, the phone interviews were of similar nature than those done face-to-face at the summit, although some differences became obvious: Firstly, only being able to *listen* to an interviewee – as opposed to experiencing a multisensual face-to-face encounter – seems to have a notable hampering effect on a qualitative researchers' capacity to draw meaning from an interview situation. As I had gotten to know all my phone interviewees personally at the summit (except for the Indian interviewee and the stand-in for the unhelpful US communicator), I always had some understanding of what kind of person I was talking to on the phone. Without this previous face-to-face impression, many personality traits of these political PR professionals, which carried significance in the context of my analysis, would have gone unnoticed. A second difference concerned the level of attentiveness and detail shown by the interviewees in the phone interviews. By the time these were conducted, the interviewees were back in their everyday, non-summit office routine and often appeared to squeeze the interview into hectic workdays, in which the Cancún summit did not really matter

anymore. While memories of COP-16 still seemed fresh, the capacity to make time for thorough looking back was clearly limited in these situations. This again demonstrated to me the methodical value of making an event subject to interviewing and observing *as it unfolds*. Being present on site and collecting data in the midst of the action – when people’s minds are constantly occupied with summit proceedings and they think and talk about nothing else – seems to provide a wealth of insights that could probably not be obtained *ex post facto*. Still, for a more sober evaluation from some distance, the phone interviews seemed to be just right.

4.4.1.4 Securing confidentiality

Strategic communication, the main focus of this research, is driven by the motive to exercise influence (see 1.3). Characterized by such intent, it can be considered part of a struggle – e.g., for public opinion or influence with decision-makers etc. For this reason, the planning of strategic communication, the development of communication strategies, usually takes place back-stage, since disclosure might strip an actor of a potential advantage over other actors. Communication strategies are privileged, valuable information, whose public distribution actors want to limit. In the context of my research, this constituted a challenge, as I had to convince interviewees that a sharing of strategic insights would not be to their disadvantage.

In this light, I actively addressed the issue of confidentiality when recruiting interviewees. In my initial email, I assured recipients that “any information shared in the interviews will be treated with upmost sensitivity and not be used for any purpose beyond this research” (see appendices). Furthermore, I emphasized in the interviews that the transcripts would neither be published as a whole nor outside this research. Some interviewees requested the option of going ‘off the record’ for certain parts of the interview, which I agreed to. Such passages were marked accordingly in the transcripts and used for my background knowledge only.

ANONYMIZING INTERVIEW EXCERPTS

Direct quotes from the interviews are integrated frequently throughout the empirical chapters. In order to conceal the identity of the respective interviewee and thereby prevent the attribution of possibly sensitive information to a particular organization, the source was stated in anonymous form as a four-digit interview ID at the end of each quote. However, since the source of a quote in a section clearly referring to one particular actor might easily be guessed and the ID thereby decoded, a set of secondary codes was used for more sensitive quotes in sections that are not actor-specific (such as the one on tactics of influencing media). This way, the deciphering of an interview ID on the basis of one particular quote would not mean that other quotes stemming from the same interview would also be attributable. On an exceptional basis, two actors were given the assurance that none of their quotes would be attributable to their organization (not even in actor-specific sections), which lowered the number of quotes by those actors used here.

Supplementing the information shared in the interviews, two actors provided me with internal documents laying out overall messaging strategies as well as possible responses to opponents' statements. Both memos were made available for background purposes only; direct quotations were not permitted. As requested by the actors, I confirmed this by means of a written note:

“Let me confirm to you in writing that all information and documents shared with me will exclusively be used for academic research purposes at the University of Mannheim, Germany. None of the raw data (interview recordings and transcripts, internal documents) will ever be published or used beyond the confines of this research project. The academic publications coming out of this research will only utilize these data in an abstracting, anonymized manner, in the form of paraphrases or brief excerpts. All raw data will only be stored on University servers, which are protected against unauthorized access through common security measures. This research is supervised by Professor Dr. Hartmut Wessler, Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Mannheim, who can be contacted at any time in the case of questions or concerns.”

It was my impression that through actively taking on and earnestly handling the issue of confidentiality, some basis of trust could be established with most interviewees. This was certainly conducive to being granted follow-up interviews and access to internal documents. What I learned through this research is that managing confidentiality concerns seems to be an integral aspect of such a study. Interviewees will certainly raise corresponding questions; having appropriate answers and procedures in place may facilitate fieldwork.

4.4.2 *Supplementary data: on-site observation and collection of PR material*

The information obtained through semi-standardized interviewing was supplemented with two other types of data: Firstly, as an accredited observer of the 2010 Cancún climate summit (and the Copenhagen summit one year before, which I visited to get accustomed with the object of research), I gathered numerous first-hand impressions and experiences at the site of these events. Except for one internal NGO strategy meeting that I attended in Cancún, this observation was commonly conducted in an *open, covert, nonparticipant* manner – ‘open’ for the absence of standardized observation schemes, ‘covert’ for the nondisclosure of my identity as a researcher to the ordinary summit participant, and ‘nonparticipant’ for my remaining passive in the field. In keeping the posture of a “professional stranger” (Flick, 2006, p. 223), I attempted to maintain a curious but detached look at whatever I came across at these events. Observations that I considered noteworthy in the context of my research (even if they were only trivialities of summit business) were noted down in a research diary. This notebook also stored my daily schedule, reflections on interview situations, and occasional thoughts and ideas on the event as whole. As described below, this corpus of personal notes was helpful in reconstructing the sequence and atmosphere of my interviews as well as the general setting and circumstances of the summit.

Secondly, I collected all PR material the eleven actors in my sample (1) physically distributed at COP-16 as part of their official summit communication and (2) published online before, during, and after the summit in clear reference to the event. Hence, this collection included print publications and DVDs an actor offered at information booths, country pavilions, or the document distribution stations as well as online news items that an actor published on its official website. Posts in blogs or on social media profiles were not included. Where actors had put online a dedicated summit website or a special section on their regular website, screenshots were made. In addition, official conference documentation by the UNFCCC or the host government was also collected. This included, among other material, daily programs, the list of participants, and a venue map. This corpus of PR material also included internal strategy memos that two actors had provided me with for background purposes. In sum, all these documents provided for a wealth of information that turned out to be valuable in the course of data analysis for contextualizing and validating interviewees' reflections regarding their communication strategies.

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