## A Comparative Analysis of Website Expressions of National Culture and Mediation

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "A Comparative Analysis of Website Expressions of National Culture and Mediation," Paule Salerno-O'Shea identifies what the official websites of the National Ombudsman in Ireland and France reveal about mediation in those national cultures. The way both national mediators are portrayed indicates how mediation is represented at the national level: 1) these in-stitutions were created by acts emanating from national representative assemblies; 2) the ombud-spersons are nominated by representatives of the nation (in Ireland, the appointment is made by the president upon resolution passed by both Houses of the *Oireachtas* [Parliament] and in France by a presidential decree during a *Conseil des Ministres*; and 3) these institutions/people deal with both the public service of the country in which they operate and act for the benefit of the people of those countries. The comparative readings of the websites is enriched by the use of Hofstede's di-mensions, namely the notions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. Salerno-O'Shea highlights discrepancies between national character as expressed by Hofstede and national characteristics found on the websites.

Paule SALERNO-O'SHEA

**A Comparative Analysis of Website Expressions of National Culture and Mediation**



Paule SALERNO-O'SHEA

My objective in this paper is to discuss what the official websites of the Médiateur de la République in France <http://www.mediateur-de-la-republique.fr> and of the National Ombudsman in Ireland <http://www.ombudsman.gov.ie>, respectively, reveal about mediation in those specific national cultures (see above: since working on my study I present here, the visuals and contents of the pages have been changed; this, in itself, is of note). The way the Ombudsman in Ireland and the Médiateur de la République (MDR) in France are portrayed in their official websites (as they appear in January 2005) is of some interest in so far as it indicates how mediation is represented at national level: a) these institutions were created by acts of legislature emanating from national representative assemblies (Irish Ombudsman Act of Oireachtas, 1980 and French Law, 3 January 1973); b) the Ombudspersons are nominated by representatives of the nation: in Ireland the appointment is made by the President upon resolution passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas (Parliament), in France by Presidential decree during a Conseil des Ministres (Cabinet meeting); c) these institutions/people deal with both the public service of the country in which they operate and act for the benefit of the people of those countries. Despite the fact that foreigners are entitled to the use of the services provided by the national ombudspersons, it remains that most people using the service will be either Irish or French. In any case, it seems to be the way the French report covering the first thirty years of the Médiateur de la République interprets the situation: the word *administré* (member of the public) is often replaced by that of *citoyen* (citizen). This "national" characteristic is important as it may explain how mediation is perceived in the countries studied. In international business negotiation, Geert Hofstede's dimensions of national culture have long been used as explanatory variables in the way discussions are held. This knowledge can then translate into more efficient and informed ways of reaching agreements. Given the national character of the websites, one would assume that the national dimensions of culture as expressed by Hofstede are

reflected in the MDR and Ombudspersons websites. Hofstede identified initially four dimensions of national culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity. The fifth dimension, long-term versus short-term orientation, is not included here as there is insufficient information on Ireland and France on that aspect. Hofstede specifies that "Power Distance ... is related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality," "Uncertainty Avoidance ... is related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future," "Individualism versus Collectivism ... is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups" and "Masculinity versus femininity" ... is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women" (28). One would expect to find, in the two selected national mediators' websites, the following characteristics regarding Hofstede's dimensions of culture: a) great similarities in "Individualism," both countries being regarded as highly individualistic; b) great differences regarding Power Distance, France being more unequal than Ireland; c) great differences in the Uncertainty Avoidance, Ireland being more tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty in society; and d) differences in the level of masculinity, Ireland being more masculine than France.

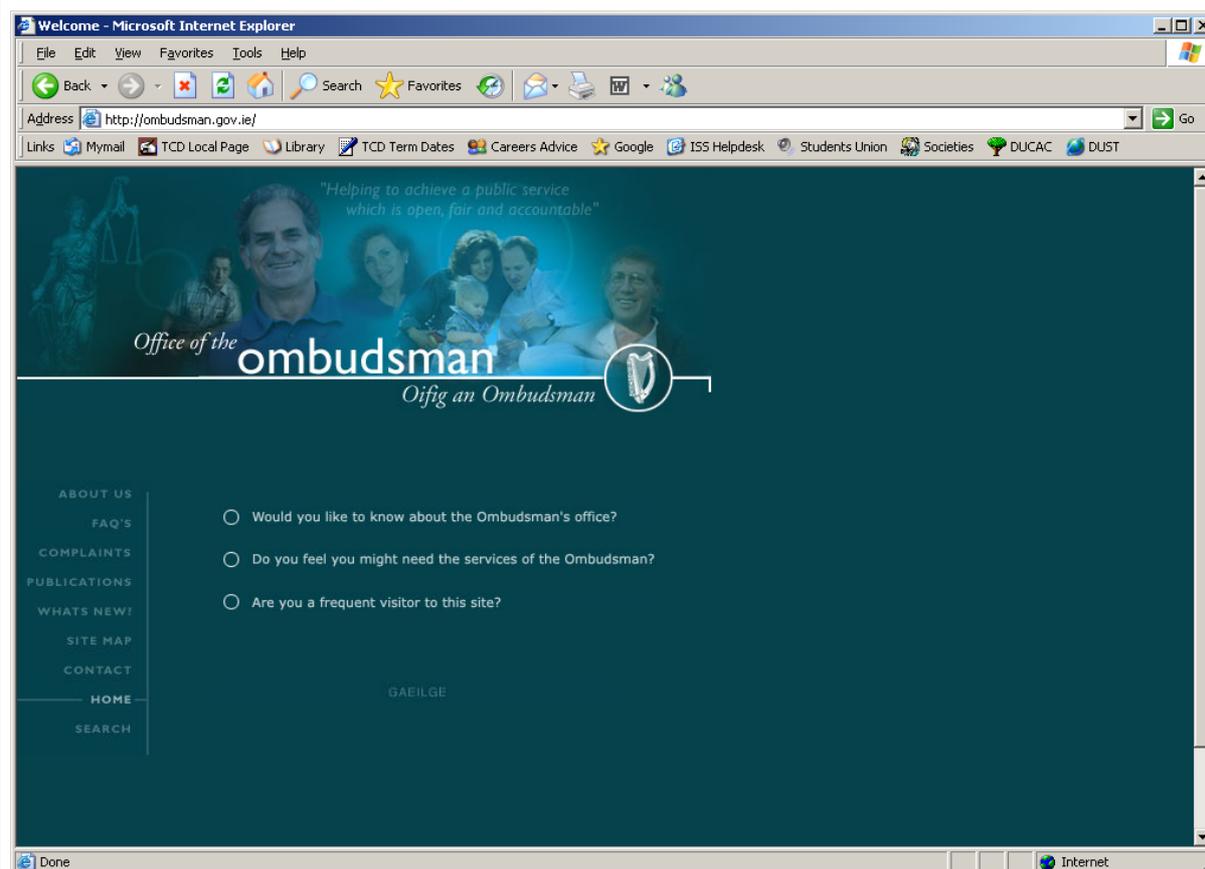In this study, I highlight discrepancies between national character as expressed by Hofstede and the national characteristics found in both websites. It is argued, for example, that the historical, economic, and social changes witnessed by Ireland in the last decade have had a tremendous impact on its national culture. Semiotics and semantics will be used to present a comparative analysis of both websites. My study focuses on the home page of both websites. According to Peter Stockinger, an expert on the semantics of new media, the homepage of websites is of particular relevance. Of course, it constitutes a central access point of information, but it also reflects, on the one hand, the self-attributed identity of the website (if not that of its author(s) at least that of the institution/person(s) represented) and on the other hand the image, the representation that the site has of its intended public, therefore playing an essential function in the constitution of the communication contract between the site and its audience (see Stockinger, *Les Sites web. Description, evaluation et conception*). In the two different national contexts considered here, the use of the web to promote the services of national mediators is instrumental in the refining of an identity for the role of mediator. According to Richard Hallett and Judith Kaplan-Weinger, who analysed the tourism websites of two Baltic countries, linguistic and visual texts can be seen as mediators in the construction a national identity. A multi-modal discourse analysis of national Mediators' websites is a slightly more complex task in so far as the Mediator uses a website, which, in itself, acts as a mediator to construct the mediator's identity and the site identity, but also constitutes an expression of a country's identity (see Hallet and Kaplan). What follows is an analysis of the expression of individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity in the selected websites.

According to Hofstede, "A High Individualism ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are paramount within the society. Individuals in these societies may tend to form a larger number of looser relationships" (<http://www. hofstede.com>), as well, according to Hofstede both Ireland and France are very individualistic countries. To start with, it is relevant to examine how individuals are represented on the sites, starting with the MDR and the Irish Ombudsman, followed by their teams of regional collaborators, and finishing with the other individuals featured. Going back to the notion of identity of the mediator, the French site refers mostly to one person, le Médiateur de la République, whereas the Irish site refers to the Office of the Ombudsman. The word "office" can be ambiguous. The original Ombudsman Act (14 July 1980), Article 2, establishes "the office of Ombudsman and the holder of the office shall be known as the Ombudsman." Here, the word "office" is to be understood as "a position of authority or service" or else as "tenure of an official position" (as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary*). One could also argue that the site constitutes the virtual office, a place where the work of the Ombudsman is carried out. But an "office" can also be understood as a group of people working for/with the Ombudsman. This interpretation is corroborated by the use of the plural personal pronoun "us": indeed, the first item in the vertical menu of the home page invites the visitor to find out information "about us." "Us" refers to a collective and does not seem intended as the use of a royal "we." The word "office" occurs three times on the home page of the Irish site (twice in English: Office of the Ombudsman, Ombudsman's office and once in Irish: Oifig an Ombudsman), whereas "the Ombudsman" as a person is

only mentioned once in the expression: "the services of the Ombudsman"). The general impression is therefore that one is dealing with a group of people united for a purpose, rather than with one individual. The Irish Ombudsman is portrayed as plural, whereas the French one is represented as unique. On the French side, this uniqueness is reflected in the full title "Médiateur de la République," which echoes that of the "Président de la République," both in structure and sound. The person seems to matter more than the office which is called "la Présidence de la République." However, the Médiateur de la République is also first referred to as an "institution" on the homepage. Far from being the fruit of some coincidence, the relationship between the institution and the Médiateur is meaningful. In the report covering the first thirty years of existence of the French Médiateur de la République, a full section entitled "a personalised institution" (Stasi 17) stipulates that the Law passed on 3 January 1973 is original in so far as it personalises the office, which is a rare occurrence in the French system (Stasi 17). The word " Médiateur," with a capital M, appear six times on the homepage. This personalisation is also expressed in the contents of the home page where the contact details of the MDR are provided in full: postal address, telephone and fax numbers but also in the layout of those details, the addressee's address being positioned not in the center of the page, as would be the case with official or business headed paper, but on the left-handside of what could be described as a virtual rectangle evoking an envelope. Contacting the Mediator by traditional mail, with an address which is very ordinary in format ("7, rue Saint-Florentin, 75008, Paris"), really gives the potential mail sender the impression that he/she is writing to a person, not an office. Indeed, there is no such thing in the address as a "CEDEX" Code (Postal code for corporate users), or the name of a department, or the mention of some "Palace" as would be the case, for example, with the Palais de l'Elysée for the President or Palais Bourbon for the National Assembly.

The team of delegates who help the Ombudsman on the French territory are mentioned on the home page as well (twice), but they are referred to as a sum of individuals by a countable noun in the plural form (les délégués). By contrast, the regional collaborators of the Irish Ombudsman do not appear as such on the home page and when they to appear on a different page of the site, they are grouped under the heading of "Office" (Cork Office, Coolock Office, Galway Office, etc.). Both the Irish Ombudsman and its regional collaborators are set in a context where groups seem to be more prevalent than individuals. Can the same trend be found in the representation of other individuals on the home page? On the French site, one can see a strip of photographs juxtaposed across the page. This immobile banner is made of black and white passport type photographs of a variety of people posing on their own. Incidentally, one will note that such a type of photograph is called "photo d'identité," or "identity photograph" in French. Diversity characterizes the people portrayed in terms of age, gender, and ethnic origin. It seems however difficult to relate these photographs to social class or occupation, with the exception, may be of what seems to be a young intellectual/student-type white man. On the Irish site, the number of people represented is much smaller. Theirs faces and upper bodies are incorporated into the dark green banner which is also a background for some symbols and a mission statement. Some people are represented on their own. Despite their casual attire, some are wearing the colours of their blue or white tops might be interpreted as traditional indicators of clerical or working class status. The centre is occupied by what appears to be a happy traditional nuclear family with a baby. By contrast, the only baby on the French site is featured on his own. At first sight, the French banner seems to be made of discrete elements, whereas, some individuals are bound together the Irish site. Yet, if one is to reflect on the French banner one realizes that the passport photographs actually make up a chain of people. People are links, an idea echoed in the icon on the right hand side corner of the page. The idea of linking people together is clearly outlined in the New Year speech given by Jean-Paul Delevoye, accessible from the top flash banner of the site in January 2005, in which he says (Delevoye, Présentation des Voeux, 9) that "the need for mediation is recognized and that there is a realisation of the role that it must play in the reconstruction of the social link (le lien social) in our country." Mediation, while it defends individuals' interests is also an opportunity to reverse the weakening of national cohesion (Delevoye, 3). On the Irish side, the family image is far from being innocent. In Article 41 of the Constitution of Ireland (1937), the family is defined as "the natural

primary and fundamental unit group of society." According to Hofstede, "Whereas in the collectivist society the family is the smallest unit, in the individualist society the individual is the smallest unit" ( Hostede, 227). The Irish Constitution refers to a "unit group," not a "unit," but it still includes a group on its home page, at the centre of its banner, and this "fundamental unit group" of society does not achieve this status on the French website. One could argue, however, that the concept of group itself is in fact much wider on the French site where people are linked not by blood ties but by a metaphorical mother, represented twice on the site, both at the top of the page above the address and as a watermark in the background. Marianne is the revolutionary and republican figure who represents the values of the republic i.e., liberty, fraternity, and equality. On the French website, it is republican values which constitute the nature of the link between siblings. Blood does not enter the equation, a fact reflected in the extreme diversity of skin colours and ethnic backgrounds. By contrast, only white individuals feature on the Irish website. This indicates that, officially at least, the reality of the relatively recent population movements in Ireland has not been integrated in a very public office. This is, at best a regrettable omission, at worst it demonstrates a disconnection with reality. It is also interesting to note that whereas three groups of potential target audiences are identified on the French website (citizens, members of parliament and "juniors"), the Irish websites addresses an individual, a fact expressed in the way the three questions are formulated: Question 1: "Would you like to know about the Ombudsman's Office?" Question 2: "Do you feel you might need the services of the Ombudsman?" Question 3: "Are you a frequent visitor to this site?" The last question leaves no doubt as to the number of people being addressed with the use of the singular for "a frequent visitor." To sum up this first part, it would appear from the above analysis that Ireland and France, contrary to Hofstede's findings, do not score equally in terms of individualism. The mediator and its team are portrayed more collectively in Ireland, whereas mediated people are portrayed more collectively in France. This discussion is not as mathematical in results as an index, but it is my belief that these interesting trends can be identified, if not quantified, by the approach adopted here.

Hofstede's findings place Ireland and France at virtually opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of Power Distance. In Ireland does "society de-emphasizes the differences between citizen's power and wealth"? Does it stress "equality and opportunity for everyone?" As far as France is concerned, can it be said that: "inequalities of power and wealth have been allowed to grow in society?" (see <http://www.hofstede.com>). In the homepage it is the power of the Mediator and his team that is expressed. Indeed, no one would enter into a mediation episode knowing that the Mediator is powerless. But the Mediator will also empower the citizen, seen as the weaker negotiator when opposed to the strength of the public service. This empowerment can, J. Wall reminds us, take the shape of "information, advice, friendship" (Wall qtd. in Moore 392). The official powers of the mediator are defined a couple of clicks away from the home page. However, "Power is not a characteristic of an organization or person but is an attribute of a relationship" (Moore 389). In this study, I focus not so much on the Powers of the Mediator per se, but rather on how the relationship between the citizens and the Mediator reflects or not equality and opportunity for everyone and on the expression of the distance between the citizens and the Mediator: the political authority and the rights of the mediator emanate from the people, at both executive and legislative levels, as indicated in the introduction. On the French site, this is mostly expressed in the pervasive references of the Republic throughout the visual and textual page. A "republic" is defined (*Oxford Dictionary*) as "a state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives and which has an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch." The references to the Republic are numerous and can be found in the name "Médiateur de la République," but also in the symbolic features. Marianne, the young women with a Phrygian hat is one of the symbols of the French Republic and features prominently on the home page: it is part of the chain of the banner containing passport photographs of French individuals, it is also used as the subtle background for the home page in the form of a watermark. Marianne is therefore one of the people and one for the people. She carries implicitely the values of "liberty, equality, fraternity," even though those words are not included on the homepage, contrary to what happens on governmental sites, e.g., <http://www.elysee.fr>, <http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr>). Another mani-

festation of the values of the republic is inscribed in the tricolour scheme "blue, white, and red" of the website, evoking the French flag born under the French Revolution which is now the national emblem of the Republic. The white represented the King, the blue and the red the colours of Paris. The red is also interpreted as a revolutionary colour. On the Irish site, the discrete reference to the constitution through the presence of the family and the presence of the Harp, which will be discussed later, evoke the sources of power. In a variety of fields, the centralisation of Power in Paris has often been criticized, leading to reforms. Initially, the activities of the Mediator were also concentrated in the French capital. Nowadays, some central services performed mostly by public servants are still based in Paris (Stasi 57-59), but delegates (unpaid volunteers), are to be found throughout the French Territory (Stasi appendix), as suggested by the Map on the left hand corner of the home page. One may note that only France and Corsica are featured, whereas French Departments and Territories under French rule situated overseas (DOM-TOM), which also have delegates are not pictorially represented. The will to reduce the distance between the people and the Mediator and its services is demonstrated in this decentralisation, even if not every case can be treated at a local level. Decentralisation also happens in the Irish Case but is not a feature of the homepage.

We saw earlier that empowerment can take the shape of "information, advice, friendship." Here, I focus on the salient ternary structures of the discourse of both homepages as signs of the empowerment of the mediated people. A quick glance reveals two main information providing ternary groups on the French homepage. The main one is that of the three main titles: "Le Médiateur --La médiation -- L'actualité." The second one is constituted of "Citoyens/Citoyennes -- Parlementaires -- Juniors." This type of organisation is very familiar to a French audience. Indeed, it has been drummed into pupils and students at school. It is also familiar in rhythm to a public submitted to numerous political speeches, be it in the way people are addressed at the very start of a public declaration (Madame, Mesdemoiselles, Messieurs) or in the number of themes usually declined during those speeches. The ternary structure therefore refers to a pre-existing frame of an official nature: this is how official information is usually presented. As a consequence, access to this information is made easier for the audience. Interestingly, whereas in political speeches, notably presidential ones, the French would expect to be designated as "Français, Françaises," the choice of words "citoyens/citoyennes" might surprise. It is meaningful, not only because of its unexpected character, but also because those words specifically belong to the discourse of the French Revolution, a theme already imbued in the site. "Citoyen/Citoyenne" were terms of address used during the Revolution in a bid to emphasize the equal status of people. The Mediator, whose power comes from the people does not place itself above the people, but with the people, on the same level, in the same way that the various individuals represented on the banner are on a horizontal line, at the same level. Another device to provide information consists effectively of an adaptation of the discourse to the target audience. Three types of audiences are identified on the French website ("Citoyens/Citoyennes – Parlementaires- Juniors"), whereas no such distinction is available on the Irish site. More information is provided also with direct access, from the flash top banner, to the Mediator's magazine, aptly called "Médialogue," showing not only the desire to inform but also to be informed. This is corroborated by the easy way of contacting the mediator by e-mail since one only has to click the envelope icon in the bottom right corner of the page. Such a task is also possible on the Irish site, but it is less direct. Yet, directness cannot, up to now, describe the submission of complaints to the MDR. Indeed, whereas cases can be brought directly to the Ombudsman's Office in Ireland, the French system requires, at least in theory, the intervention of an elected Member of Parliament. However, the present MDR has made very determined moves to change this situation and is promoting the idea of a direct submission of cases to the Mediator (Delevoye, "Audition de M/Jean-Paul Delevoye, Médiateur de la République"). On the Irish side, the ternary discourse at the centre of the homepage differs completely in style from that of its French equivalent. Indeed, it is constituted of the three grammatical questions already mentioned to discuss individualism. These questions are much closer to an "advice" or "friendship" type of discourse. The tone, set out in question 1 is friendly, it proposes information. Question 2 addresses the needs of the visitor, and question 3 has a very social tone, but its aim is not very clearly ex-

pressed. Analysed globally, these questions would not be out of place out of the mouth of a shop assistant. And as in a good shop, one is looking for advice and friendly service. One explanation for this could reside in the image that Ireland tries to project: it is Ireland Inc. we are dealing with. Just like a company Ireland has got its mission statement "Helping to achieve a public service which is open, fair and accountable." Just like a company, it displays its gyrating logo, the harp, the emblem of the State. Unlike what happened on the French website, there are no republican values, colours (no green, white, and orange flag) nor is a map of the country included. In the French case, these were used to legitimate and explain the power of the Mediator. They would have the opposite effect in the Irish case for obvious historical reasons.

The above referred to questions can be interpreted also in a different light. An informal relationship, where social distance is reduced, is established between the Ombudsman and the visitor trough the use of common vocabulary (on this, see Candlin and Maley 206) and relatively simple syntax in the questions, which sound very conversational and not official. In order to personalise the relationship, the pronoun "you" is used to simulate personal address, even though the addressee is unknown to the "speaker." Some scholars have argued that "Mediation constructs and is constructed by a discourse of wants, need, interests, and options, and not, as law, by a discourse of rights and obligations" (Candlin and Maley 206). The relationship between the Ombudsman and the visitor very much illustrates this type of discourse of mediation discourse, for example "Would you like to know about the Ombudsman's Office?" and "Do you feel you might need the services of the Ombudsman?" This informal, other-centred, heavily modalized discourse (example: use of "would" and "might" in the questions) also echoes a therapy type of discourse, which is not surprising since "The aim of improving personal relationships ... builds upon the interpersonal focus of social practices like counselling and therapy" (Candlin and Maley 217). On the home page, these seemed to be reserved for people with a higher level of computer literacy than that required on the French site: no phone or fax number, no postal address. Ordinary people are expected to know the meaning of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). This hardly goes in the direction of "equality and opportunity for everyone." There are striking differences in the way the French and Irish Website empower the visitor: in the French case empowerment seems to be mostly achieved by information, whereas in the Irish case the advice and friendship paradigms dominate with their concerns for wants, needs, feelings, and steadiness of relationship. The French homepage makes a pedagogical effort to reach specific audiences, the Irish one narrows its target audience to reasonably computer literate people. This can be partially explained by a quicker take up of the internet in Ireland, probably linked to the demography of the country where young people represent an important proportion of the population, which in turns results in an increased familiarity with this technology. It is interesting to note that in 1999 there were less than 20 internet users per 100 inhabitants in France as opposed to 30 for Ireland (see Deiss). The variety and the numerous means put in place to reduce the distance between the holder of the mediating power and the citizens in the French case suggests a strong trend towards the empowerment of people. Even if power distance was high in the past, as suggested by Hofstede, things are definitely changing. On the Irish side, the increased use of technology due to a particular type of economic development leaves behind those who are less technologically and maybe financially comfortable and constitutes a real risk of excluding part of the population. Advice, therapy, and help are ironically more readily available to those who can help themselves in the first place.

If the French and Irish cultures were widely different in their attitudes to uncertainty one would expect great differences in the degree of reassurance provided by the Mediator/Ombudsman on his/her website in order to engage in the mediation process. According to Christopher Moore, the first steps in the mediation process need to include the "1) building of personal, institutional, and procedural credibility; 2) establishing rapport with the disputants; 3) educating participants about the negotiation process, the role of the mediator and the function of the mediation; and 4) gaining a commitment to begin mediating" (90-91). The three first items, credibility, rapport, and education can be used as means of reducing the uncertainty of the mediation process. The establishment of a rapport and the education of the parties have been discussed in the previous sections of this paper. Thus I concentrate on the first stage, namely, the building of credibility, and in par-

ticular, institutional, procedural, and substantive credibility. Personal credibility: the personal credibility of the Mediator is not expressed in detail on the home page. Two examples to illustrate this fact: his/her name is not included and the replacement of the French Mediator at the end of 2004 did not entail a major change on the homepage. It is however, an important feature, which receives some attention in other frames of the websites. Institutional credibility: the institutional credibility dominates the homepage of both sites. Institutional credibility and the authentification of information provider and relationship with judicial system: the source of the information is clearly stated in both cases. For the Irish website, it is to be found in the html address (<http://ombudsman.gov.ie/home>) which includes both a reference to the government and is similar to that of the Government of Ireland website (<http://www.irlgov.ie>) and other government departments. It features the state Harp, which "is always used by Government departments and Offices" and "also appears on all Irish coins" (<http://taoiseach.gov.ie>). A watermark, which is another traditional means for the authentification of money is used on the French page, echoing a typical role of the state a money maker, literally. The symbol of the Republic, Marianne, features on this watermark. Both the Harp and Marianne embody the long history of the state and function as reassuring elements of permanency. If the concept of equality of citizen constitutes part of the French motto, it is expressed on the Irish website by a scantily clad statue holding the scales of Justice. The absence of these scales on the French site is significant in so far as, historically, the scales of justice featured in combination with representations of Marianne. However, the Mediator's institution in the French context makes a point of distancing itself not from justice or equity, but from the judicial connotations of the scales of justice, which evoke a more adversarial type of encounter. According to the Law of 13 January 1989, the Médiateur de la République is very clearly independent from the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. On the Irish side, the Ombudsman Act the Ombudsman of 1980 states in its 4th heading (Functions of the Ombudsman) that the "Ombudsman shall be independent in the performance of his functions," but the similarity or parity of authority with judicial official precedes that statement of independence under the third heading (Salary and Pension) by stating that "There shall be paid to the holder of the office of Ombudsman the same remuneration and allowances for expenses as are paid to a Judge of the High Court." The French site is clearly determined to avoid any confusion or even parallel which may arise from the use of the Scales, reassuring its visitors that they are not going before a judge.

Institutional credibility, past record, and promises: on the French homepage, the building of credibility relies heavily on the past successful and impartial record of an independent institution as featured in the statistics, annual report, 30th anniversary report, the description of the organization's expertise, and services (in Le Médiateur /Une institution / Le rôle du Médiateur / Les délégués du Médiateur) and the geographic territory covered (Map). This past record is completed by the assurance that the institution is an active one (L'Actualité and the top of the page mobile banner encouraging to consult the last publication of the "Médialogue" and an evolutive one (les réformes). It follows traditional methods to build credibility (Moore 92) by giving direct access to documents presenting expertise, services, former users of the service, case studies of disputes, credentials of membership in recognized dispute resolution associations (Le Médiateur dans le Monde), and by disclosing financial issues to demonstrate institutional impartiality. The "délégués du Médiateur" are unpaid volunteers although civil servants also work for the French Médiateur. Once budgets have been allocated to the Médiateur, the Cour des Comptes (the French National Audit office) is the only authority allowed to verify the accounts. Procedural credibility: The immediate access to reforms, case studies, and statistics serves to improve the "procedural credibility" defined by Moore as "the belief of the disputants that the process the mediator has proposed has a strong likelihood of success" and the "substantive credibility," which that same author sums up as "the knowledge, expertise, or experience regarding the content of issues in dispute that the moderator can bring to assist the parties" (92). The Irish website provides access to these credibility-building factors when one uses the vertical menu on the left-hand side of the page. However, the access is not as direct and the site is, relatively speaking, more geared to answering questions than to presenting information. The site map of the Irish website features 13 questions. Only 5 questions are included in the French site map. In addition, one may recall that, whereas 3 ques-

tions feature centrally on the Irish home page, none are to be found in the French one. It seems that, in the French case, reduction of uncertainty avoidance takes place by initially providing information and then answering questions, whereas in the Irish case, the use of set questions from and to the Ombudsman constitutes a preferred way (but not an exclusive way) of conveying information, and therefore, reducing uncertainty. Of course, questions can be addressed in a "non-set" way to the Médiateur de la République through the e-mail window that appears when clicking on the envelope and by using the contact e-mail on the Irish site. The mission statement "Helping to achieve a public service which is open, fair, and accountable" is also used to build credibility. Its sounds like a statement of intention. As such, to build credibility, it presupposes that the visitor trusts its author. In the belief that facts speak louder than words, the strategy used in the French site, which consists in making accessible past record at first glance, seems more efficient. In sum, both websites provide numerous examples of uncertainty reduction strategies. The form of reassurance provided seems to vary more than its degree. The efforts deployed by both site suggest a strong need for the implementation of uncertainty avoidance mechanisms, but promises are more acceptable in an Irish context.

I now turn to a dimension of national culture where one would expect some marked differences between Ireland and France, namely expressions of Masculinity and Femininity. Hosfstede finds that Ireland is more masculine than France: "Masculinity versus femininity ... is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women" (28) and "Almost universally, women attach more importance to social goals such as relationships, helping others, and the physical environment, and men attach more importance to ego goals such as careers and money" (279). Interestingly, I find it difficult to analyse the home page in terms of masculinity and femininity. In relation to mediation and femininity, one could consider that, the aim of a mediator's homepage is to build up a relationship in order to help others, making it, by essence, a feminine exercise. For Hofstede, 1) establishing a friendly atmosphere at work, 2) stressing equality and solidarity, and 3) resolving conflicts through problem solving, compromise and negotiation are more feminine values. One would expect the homepage of a Mediator/Ombudsman to reflect the first three feminine values mentioned above. The numerous happy and friendly-looking people on the passport photographs of the French homepage contribute to softening the first contact with the institution, reassuring visitors that the site is for them, whatever their age, gender, and colour, and that the issue of the visit is likely to leave them with a smile on their faces. A friendly atmosphere is established similarly on the Irish banner, even if it is less inclusive (for example, there are no older women and no coloured people). The type of discourse, as described previously, is especially friendly. Solidarity and equality are expressed in French republican values and the chain of individuals. Equality and fairness are mentioned in the mission statement and referred to in the Irish Scales of Justice. Overall, the rationale for the two sites is to resolve conflict through compromise and negotiation. As for information and masculinity, according to Hofstede, valuing the facts of being "up-dated" and "trained" are more masculine attributes. The need to be up-dated is acknowledged on both websites ("What's new?," Actualités and Médialogue), but it is more pervasive on the French site. The need to be "trained," or "educated," is also more obvious on the French site, with its high level of informative content, its pedagogical type of discourse and its special focus on "Juniors." Women are represented on both sites. On the French One, Marianne stands for France and the Republic, the source of power, mother of all French citizens and numerous types of women are represented (except for women looking over 50, a comment valid for the Irish site too!). The word Citoyennes, in its plural feminine form is used, whereas grammar would have accepted a plural masculine form Citoyens to cover both men and women, even if, traditionally, a gender distinction is made in political speeches. On the Irish site, the female statue holding the Scales of Justice and two young white women and a white baby girl are featured. Women as mothers are represented exclusively as an allegory on the French site and as both a reality and allegories (of justice, of the Constitution on the Irish one). Traditional roles and feminine values are visually expressed on both pages. The tone of the discourse is resolutely more feminine on the Irish website, whereas the stronger manifestations of the will to "up-date," and "train people" make the French website more masculine. On a factual note, never has a women been appointed as a MDR in France, whereas the current om-

budsman in Ireland is a women. Looking at one of the most prestigious national offices, never has a French President been a woman, whereas the previous and present Presidents of Ireland are both women, even if, of course, both offices are not strictly equivalent. In practice therefore, Ireland seems to be less masculine than Hofstede's finding would suggest.

From he above findings and discussion, some lessons can be drawn for mediators and they refer mostly to the way one conducts the initial stages of mediation. Implications for communication, power issues, and reduction of uncertainty: in initial contacts in French culture, priority will be given to one-to-one relationships, stressing the benefits for the mediated and the common good (example: that of the nation and neighbours). In Irish culture, communication from a group to an individual is acceptable, with a focus on positive consequences for the mediated and his/her immediate group of reference (example: his/her family). On both sides, the power of the mediator will need to be affirmed, for instance through historical and popular mandate legitimacy, but the empowerment of people will be initially achieved through the provision of information in the French case and through that of friendship and advice of a therapeutic or commercial style in the Irish case. Reduction of uncertainty avoidance will be necessary in both national contexts and take the form of historical echoes, assurances as to the source of the information and services provider. Mentions of the judicial system and numerous questions from the mediator will be best avoided in the French situation, whereas they can exist in the Irish one. Facts and past record will be necessary for the French public, statements of intention are likely to be received positively by an Irish party. The type of discourse used will be more feminine in nature in the Irish case than in the French one. General remarks on Ireland: Ireland is more feminine and more eager to avoid uncertainty than one would have expected. Relatively speaking, individuals seem to be portrayed as self-centred and family-centred and less inscribed in a collective chain of individuals than France. The citizens' proximity with power is ambiguous as it favours the computer literate white public in a very blatant way. These trends seem to reflect the changes in Irish Society since the early 1990s, with for instance: a) the increasing role of women in the economic and political spheres; b) the need for reassurance stemming from the erosion of trust towards institutions following a string of political, financial, and religious scandals; c) the decline of community spirit, partly owing to longer journeys to and from work, with people focussing more on immediate family and less on nationalistic ideals; and d) the existence of an educated computer familiar workforce shaped by the country's economic success. General remarks on France: France is characterized by a more masculine discourse than was anticipated. The desire for information illustrates the need of the country to be reassured by facts. There is a strong will to underline the link between the community and the individual. There are strong indicators showing a trend towards a reduction of power distance. Traditional means for conveying information express the awareness that not everyone has taken part in the e-revolution. A situation partly explained by a rather poor economic performance since unemployment in France is still at 10%. Since Hofstede's findings, unemployment in Ireland and in France has evolved in two opposite directions. Today, Ireland's unemployment figures are very low and this type of change is bound to have tremendous impact on a country's population, be it in terms of literacy or of confidence, to name but a few of the factors which influence and are part of national culture. These modifications ought to be taken into consideration when mediating. While the analysis carried out in this paper does not translate into mathematical indices, it is hoped, however, that it has contributed to the rethinking of the dimensions of individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity in the field of mediation in the Irish and French contexts. Historical and economic factors have shaped countries' approaches to mediation. As far as future research is concerned, it would be interesting to carry out an analysis of mediation websites for other countries. Italy would be an interesting case, as it does not have a national mediator as such, which reflects its relatively recent unification.

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