

Chapter XIV

Measuring Internet Dependency

Jaime L. Melton

Pepperdine University, USA

J. Lynn Reynolds

Fuller Theological Seminary, USA

ABSTRACT

Internet dependency measures need to be refined from the previous measurements with regard to media dependency in order to more fully understand relations with the Internet and how the population uses the Internet to facilitate adaptation into a constantly changing culture. The basis for this study will be media system dependency theory; however, there are new concepts that need to be refined in order to build a greater understanding of how dependencies vary with types of media. The application included in this chapter tries to identify how users of the Internet learn information about culture and, therefore, facilitate their adaptation into the information age. With regard to Internet dependency, findings show that Internet goals, unlike those posited in the media system dependency literature (namely, understanding, orientation, and play) were better identified as goals related to information, communication, entertainment, and news.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet serves a wide range of communication roles such as interpersonal communication, group communication, and mass communication, as well as disparate functions ranging from e-mail and interactive games, to chat rooms and Web surfing (Mastro, Eastin, & Tamborini, 2002). Because of the tremendous growth in recent years,

there is a strong need for additional understanding of this medium through improved measurement instruments.

This chapter uses media system dependency theory (MSD). This theory has the ability to explain the dual-dependency relationship among the media and social organizations such as political and economic systems (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). But more than the macro

applications are the implications of the micro or individual media dependencies that scholars have recognized (Ball-Rokeach, 1998; Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993; Merskin, 1999). In both instances, the media system is an information system whereby media power or dependency is related to the degree of informational resources that are produced by the media. Dependency relationships that exist among the aggregate media system need to be refined as well as those relationships with a specific medium such as the Internet.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Morris and Ogan (1996) propose scholarship focused on the Internet may be less due to the fact that as a newer medium, scholars have confined studies to more traditional forms of media that are more conforming to existing models and theories, such as those in the uses and gratifications literature. However, MSD looks at individuals as problem solvers. As problem solvers, individuals are goal oriented and motivated to seek out information to achieve their goals. Unlike needs as used in uses and gratifications (U&G) applications, goals are vulnerable to external influences. MSD goes beyond U&G to account for the social environment, and how an individual's goal to understand, to orient themselves, and play in this environment is impacted by the media's control over the informational resources needed to attain those goals (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). This opens up multiple focal points that expand many relationships within society. Specifically, the Internet may be:

(a) one-to-one asynchronous communication, such as e-mail; (b) many-to-many asynchronous communication, such as . . . electronic bulletin boards; (c) synchronous communication that can be one-to-one, one-to-few, or one-to-many, and can be organized around a topic . . . such as chat rooms; and (d) asynchronous communication generally characterized by the receiver's need to

seek out the site in order to access information that may involve many-to-one, one-to-one, or one-to-many source-receiver relationships. (Morris & Ogan, 1996, p. 43)

When all of these possible relationships are considered, it makes individuals wonder not only how they functioned before the Internet, but also what would be the best way to frame these relationships in order to provide societal insight. Unfortunately, little measurement explains how this dependency has evolved.

With regard to micro-MSD relations, individuals are goal oriented, and may form dependencies with the media as a means of achieving these goals (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach, 1998; Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993; Merskin, 1999). The media typology goals identified that motivate individuals to utilize the media are understanding, orientation, and play. An individual's media dependency strengthens, based on the media's ability to produce relevant content that satisfied these goals. Similarly, the media's ability to produce cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects depends on the degree of usefulness the media has in achieving specific goals.

MSD seeks to answer, "Why, when and how are the media powerful regarding individuals and interpersonal networks and with what consequences?" (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 27). The major assumptions behind MSD are that: (a) society can only be understood in knowing the relations among its parts; (b) humans are motivated to achieve understanding, orientation, and play goals; (c) to attain those goals, one must seek informational resources such as the media either as a whole or through individual mediums; (d) the power of the media stems from control over desired resources that individuals, groups, or society need in order to attain their goals; (e) a change in one dependency will affect other related dependencies; (f) the construction of knowledge is held at the macrolevel;

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