



Chapter XIV

**Dynamics of Information in
Disseminating Academic
Research in the New Media:
A Case Study**

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Much academic research on information technology (IT), systems (IS), and management (IM) has been branded by practitioners in business as unusable, irrelevant, and unreadable. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that conventional outlets for such work, e.g., scholarly journals and conference proceedings, can receive significant real-world exposure. By reversing the push-pull dynamics of information dissemination and retrieval in the new media, alternative approaches are emerging. This article presents the history of a case in point with data recorded over a period of 15 months. It is shown that the Internet in general and the World Wide Web in particular will be significant resources in bridging the gap between practice and relevant research.

INTRODUCTION

Since the conventional medium for the dissemination of academic research is that of the printed journal, it is appropriate to adopt the newsprint industry's terminology of the New Media for Internet-based communication. As the World Wide Web (WWW or Web for short) has emerged as the increasingly dominant application of the Internet to publish and browse information, we assume it to be the primary platform for the New Media. Given the perception among practitioners of printed journals as mostly irrelevant academic research, the natural question is

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whether the New Media can make any difference. For the answer, we need to examine what initiatives academics have taken on this front.

There is indeed a growing body of literature on scholarly electronic publications (see Bailey, 1997, for a bibliography.) In the IT-research area, there were discussions of a global community of scholars (Watson, 1994), electronic journals as legitimate media (Kling & Covi, 1995), and barriers—motivational, institutional, technical, and philosophical—to adoption (Ives, 1996). Yet, the focus has remained by-and-large “intramural,” in the sense of exploring the technical possibilities within the confines of well-set academic values and priorities among scholars. Even in cases that go beyond transplanting old practices to the New Media, implying transformation of processes such as peer review and collaboration, there is little effort in breaking the mold of prevalent academic culture. In brief, the academic trend in deploying the New Media can only lead to the same kind of knowledge base that is of little use to practitioners (Harrison & Stephen, 1996).

This prompted an examination of the underlying issue of information dissemination and retrieval. With the New Media, this has become known as push versus pull (Cortese, 1997). In Ho (1999) a two-dimensional framework is proposed to capture such dynamics of information. Horizontally, the relative characterization of how information is disseminated and acquired is displayed. Note that to the extent that information is being made available for public consumption, there is always an element of push in the sense of broadcasting, whether it is in print, airwaves, or electronic signals. Without any attempt at formal definitions, it is important to have some guiding principle to distinguish push from pull. A simple one is in the form of a question: “Can you look it up at your own leisure?” If so, then it is pull. This is certainly the case with books in a library or newspapers on a coffee table, but not so with the real-time broadcast of radio or television programs. The vertical axis indicates whether the content of the medium is primarily designed for mass consumption, or customizable to individual interests. The question to ask here is “To what extent do you see only what you are looking for?” In this sense, the distinguishing emphasis is put on how an individual is guided to information of interest, rather than the selectiveness of the overall material. For example, a typical book is a line by line presentation (linear text) designed by the author. Much as any reader can skip around the pages, the layout is the same for everyone and primarily meant to be followed cover to cover. By contrast, a dictionary, while providing the same overall content to every user, is specifically designed to help find only what one is looking for.

Within this framework, both conventional and emerging media can be characterized (see Figure 1). Books and newspapers are highly mass-pull while radio and television are highly mass-push. Bulletin boards, especially those with classified and want ads, sit higher on the custom scale (the same goes for special sections of newspapers for this purpose). So-called 1-to-1 marketing (Peppers & Rogers, 1996), in which individual purchasing behavior is culled from massive customer databases and used to target advertising campaigns, can be considered highly custom-push. Three Internet-based media are shown in italics in Figure 1. Online services, in the

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