Chapter 19
Challenges in Researching Portals and the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The portal is a point of convergence for many uses and users. Along with the Internet itself, the portal crosses or combines many traditionally separate areas of research, each with its own perspective or perspectives. Such a combination creates a challenge for researchers on how to combine these various perspectives in examining portal and Internet use. This paper examines the methodological challenge by combining five perspectives: historical, technical, media, regulatory and business theory. The paper provides examples of the misunderstanding found regarding concepts that are fundamental and widely understood within a single field, but unknown or misunderstood outside of that field. This misunderstanding between business, technologists, media theorists and regulators contributed to the gulf between Internet investment expectation and the 2000 to 2001 results, the US$4 trillion 'tech wreck'. Avoiding them will be important to the effective implementation of portal-based business solutions.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of the Internet is such that there is probably no research area, from biology to law or theology to material sciences, that could be excluded from the field of Internet research. Analysing the Internet from the traditional perspective of the technology workshop, the boardroom, the user community or the government policy committee provides only part of the story. Combining these perspectives provides a richer, multi-dimensional analysis. This paper describes a set of multi-disciplinary challenges found through an examination of literature in five areas of research: historical examinations of the Internet; sociological and media studies of

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communication usage; technology development; the regulatory context; and business studies of strategy and the 'Internet economy'.

The Internet is primarily viewed as a communication medium. That doesn't reduce the multi-disciplinary challenge. McPhail (1989) considers communication an inherently multi-disciplinary field of study. This research adopts a multi-disciplinary approach. Multi-disciplinary research may begin from a 'meta-discipline'. For example, in geospatial studies the single common element of physical location can be used as a means of grouping botanical, geological, historical, geographic, demographic and many other types of information. Such research may comprise multi-disciplinary teams of researchers representing the separate disciplines. Alternatively, multi-disciplinary research may result from research that follows a question beyond the traditional boundaries of a single discipline. Such research may remain oriented to the initial audience, but be written in a way that extends its knowledge into the separate field. DiMaggio et al. (2001) point to the example of Lessig, who manages to identify the technical aspects important to non-technical approaches to the Internet. This may result over time in the modification of a discipline's area of focus. This research is aligned to the first of these, the 'meta-discipline' approach. There are many examples of such an approach, of sociologists, historians, technologists and business theorists working outside of their traditional perspective, particularly in the context of technology history, user-centred design, technology philosophy and business strategy. Brown (1997) describes the multi-disciplinary perspective as 'seeing differently'.

Understanding of the Internet and Web applications such as the portal requires a multi-disciplinary approach. However, as soon as specialists in one field move into other fields, we are vulnerable to beginners' mistakes. To give a simple example, to learn lessons about the Internet from researching the history of technology, it isn't sufficient to look at what happened in the past. It is necessary to apply the tools of the historian to the available evidence. While historians debate which tools and how to use them, approaching the past with no tools and no realisation of this is likely to limit the value of any result. The insights in this paper were gained during preparation of a thesis on e-business and commercial benefit (Adamson, 2004). Some of these insights were presented to a conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, September 2006.

HISTORY

Assembling the information necessary to understand the development of the Internet requires an historical approach using the tools of historiography, the study of history. The Internet is young in historical terms. The impetus for its development, the 1957 launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik, is still within living memory of many people. With some notable exceptions many of the key participants during its technology development since the early 1960s remain alive and professionally active. The main historical methodological challenge is examining issues so soon after the event when historical significance is measured in decades rather than years:

The important effects of the printing press era were not seen clearly for more than 100 years. While things happen more quickly these days, it could be decades before the winners and losers of the information age are apparent. Even today, significant (and permanent) cultural change does not happen quickly (Dewar, 2000).

This is separate from a related debate in the study of history described by Fischer (1970, p. 141), 'that a history of ongoing events ought not to be attempted, because objectivity is impossible, evidence is incomplete, and perspective is