

Chapter 30

IT Use and Social/Media Time Displacement

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ABSTRACT

Each new Information Technology (IT) takes time away from other daily activities. Three highly-publicized early studies of the initial impact of Information Technology indicated it was having negative effects on both social life and mass media use. However, a number of national surveys since then – from the Pew Center; the General Social Survey (GSS), the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), and the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) -- have not replicated these results. Indeed, they find support for Internet and other IT use sometimes being associated with increased social life and media use (especially reading). Moreover, this finding continues to hold after education, income, age and other predictors of social life and mass media use are controlled.

INTRODUCTION

The “Functional Equivalence” Hypothesis

According to the “functional equivalence” hypothesis, a popular new technology like the Internet should replace those activities whose functions were served by previous technologies, as when the automobile (or “horseless carriage”) replaced the horse, or when radio was thought to have displaced the early phonograph or other forms of home music “production” (including playing of

instruments and singing, Postman 1985). Given its multiple and unprecedented range of functions, it might be thought that the Internet would displace time in a number of different activities.

This hypothesis was generally confirmed with the arrival of television. As TV was beginning to diffuse in the 1950s, several empirical studies were undertaken by scholars and media organizations to document the enormous effects TV was obviously having on society. The expectation that time now spent with television would displace other platforms of mass entertainment, such as radio, movies and light fiction was the focus of

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many early empirical studies of TV's impact, such as the long-term studies of "Videotown" (New Brunswick, New Jersey). Indeed, these and other similar studies (e.g., Bogart 1955; Coffin 1954; Schramm, Lyle and Parker 1958) -- some of which were panel studies needed to support causal inferences -- turned up results quite consistent with the hypothesis (Weiss 1969).

A more comprehensive and systematic effort, however, would be undertaken by a team of multinational researchers in the 1960s who had the larger question on their agenda, namely how people across the globe distribute their time over the *full range* of everyday activities (Szalai 1972). The project introduced a new social science method called the *time diary* to document how much daily time was devoted to activities like sleep, housework and free time. The possible effect of the introduction of television on these other daily activities thus became an obvious by-product of this most ambitious and carefully planned project. Analyses from these 12-nation diaries from 1965 suggested that television's impact did indeed spill over significantly onto these other activities to accommodate the new chunk of nearly 90 daily minutes now devoted to TV (which was more than 10 hours of the 168 hours of the week -- or almost 10% of people's time awake).

Robinson (1972) found that TV owners in almost all of the 12 countries did report spending less time on these "functionally equivalent" mass media activities, like radio, movies and light-fiction. However, this decline in other media accounted for only 2 ½ hours a week, compared with the nearly 10-hour increase in TV viewing. Thus, many non-media activities were different as well, especially the lower figures for social activities outside the household (offset somewhat by higher visiting or social contact inside the TV household itself). This may be indicative of an indirect functional equivalent, in the form of "visiting" with the characters on the screen. But this additional lower visiting (and its attendant travel) also only accounted for another 2 ½ hour

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First, *social activities* outside the household were lower (offset somewhat by *higher* in-home visiting or social contact within the TV household itself). This may be indicative of an indirect functional equivalent, in the form of "visiting" with the characters on the screen. But this additional lower visiting (and its attendant travel) also accounted for another 2 ½ hour decline, meant that about half of the new viewing time also had to come from activities outside free time.

Second, *non-free time activities*, particularly sleep, grooming, gardening, and laundry, were also were systematically lower for TV owners. While these are harder to fit under the functional equivalence umbrella, they seem to have a perhaps discretionary character as far as time displacement is concerned. The combined lower figure on these non-free activities was closer to 4 hours.

Again, this tripartite pattern could be found across almost all of the 12 individual countries in the Szalai study, in spite of the large national variance in TV diffusion and ownership in the mid-1960s -- which ranged from 28% in Bulgaria to 49% in the Soviet Union to 80% in West Germany and to 95% in the US. Importantly, these patterns also held after adjustment for education, age and other significant demographic predictors of viewing in each country.

To put it in another context, the free time differences between owners and non-owners were up to twice as large as the free-time differences between men and women in these countries at the time. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the combined 12-nation data came from single-time surveys and not from the kind of panel studies that would be needed to support causal arguments.

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