

Uses and gratifications

Which of the uses and gratifications of the traditional media can be transferred to Internet media? What does the Internet provide that the old media can't? (Karen Jurgensen and S. Shyam Sundar)

In a small town, we want it all

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Living in a town of about 13,000 residents and a county with about 160,000 residents, I have found the uses and gratifications of traditional and Internet media are both complementary and vibrant.

As newspapers around the country struggle to find their footing in the Internet world, the happy circumstance in this small town, as in other small towns around the country, is that local news is in such demand that the newspaper's circulation continues to grow. The power of local news is well known. What is more interesting, perhaps, is the way media outlets combine in a small town to give residents a rich, helpful stew of information and make them feel part of a real community.

For example, a few weeks ago a leading citizen of St. Augustine died. He was both loved and respected. The newspaper became a forum for admirers to express their views. But, in the context of traditional media gratifications, what was most important was the St. Augustine Record's editorial praising the gentleman. This carried a weight and substance that no online commentary could have matched. The Record was truly a community leader and conscience.

The newspaper is not only a local leader, but it is also personally and unabashedly involved with readers' lives. Readers see themselves in the pages of the paper regularly. That still carries a certain weight for many. The front page is filled with news from our town. National news rarely rates a front page story nor does news from our nearest larger city, Jacksonville. The pages of the paper are filled with scores, religion news, check passings, virtually verbatim press releases from one organization or another, obits, crime news, planning and zoning decisions, school issues, calendar items and local advertising.

A particularly popular Page Two feature is "Take The Record Along." Every day two photos of readers grinning and holding copies of the paper in faraway places fill the center portion of the page. The feature is charming and popular. In fact, the paper receives so many photos that it periodically has to catch up and run an entire page of photos. In the process, readers get to show off the grandchildren, or their hobbies and interests, or just smiling vacation memories. Readers also learn more about one another and our community. When the first photo arrived from the Antarctic, it merited a front page column by the editor.

The newspaper enjoys wide readership. Its editorials sway local policy decisions. Its news helps to create a sense of community and awareness. One must read the paper to be informed about St. Augustine and doing so makes one feel truly a part of the town. As with any publication where the readers are intimately aware of the facts in a story, readers do get upset about errors in the coverage. And, of course, what we do not see from this newspaper with its small reporting staff is much substantial local investigation.

Technically, of course, most of the foregoing could be transferred to the Internet. But it has not been. To some extent, the medium is different and that dictates a different product. While the paper's website contains online copies of that day's stories, the impact and identity are entirely different. The place of local news is diminished. The home page leaves more of a sense of marketing than of timely local news. There is little breaking news or substantial new content. It is difficult to tell if this is because of cost-cutting mandates or a different business model or different audience demands online. Whatever the reason, the traditional values of the local newspaper are blurred on its website and it does not hold the same place in the community that the printed edition does. If the identity and values of the local paper were preserved and expanded online, perhaps readers less attached to the tangible paper would find the same rewards online that I and others feel with the physical product.

In contrast, some months ago, a local entrepreneur sponsored a trunk show for young local designers. There were stories in several newspapers about the upcoming event, but the medium that seemed most suited to spread the word with the intended audience – other young people – was the Internet. In that case, the newer medium was able, largely through viral emails, to bring in an audience the traditional media could not have delivered. Older locals who attended were heard to say “Who are these (young) people? Where did they come from?” So in a local market dominated by an old media newspaper, new audiences found another way to reach one another.

Along similar lines, in a series of meetings the local arts agency held around the county to hear from people interested in the arts, the chief request was for an interactive website. St. Johns is a sprawling county with several distinct population centers. People are hungry for an entity to bring them all together for information and for fellowship, to create a new arts community online and to share news of events, classes, resources. They do not feel they get the information through other avenues. The vastness and ease of accessibility of the Internet will make this possible. The new website is expected to launch in 2008.

Another virtue of the Internet one finds in a small town is the extent to which the medium opens the world up and becomes a practical assistant to daily life. Almost any question can be answered with a few key strokes. Information on travel is readily accessible as are financial and medical information. Parents can share in the lives of their grown children through sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Shoppers are well aware of the eBays, online catalogues and classified advertising of the Internet. Real time information can easily be retrieved by cell phone. One can follow a story, an issue, a subject in exhausting detail through the surveillance of search engines. Communities of people in different parts of the country or world can form around special interests. Time can be managed through pod casts and simple online retrieval. National and international news, context and perspective are easily found. In other words, what was once a small town with small town resources is now part of the world at large. Traditional media have not and cannot meet all of these needs.

As a consumer, I do not want to lose any of these distinct mediums. They allow me simultaneously to revel in the glories of small town life and to partake of the riches of the world. I hope all will flourish. In thinking about the virtues of the old media transferring online, however, I have three nagging concerns: serendipity, investigation and democracy. Serendipity means I stumble across an article in the newspaper about a county commissioner who wants to put a road through a maritime forest to ease development, investigation means the local newspaper analyzes campaign contributions and reveals that the commissioner's backers are developers, and democracy means the commissioner was voted out of office because of what people learned. On scales large and small, these values must be protected. So far, although there are some exceptions, they seem to work best in the traditional media. We must not lose them to the progress of the Internet.

Internet Affordances Drive Uses & Gratifications

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The concept of “active audience,” proposed by early uses-and-gratifications researchers to capture the purposiveness and attentiveness in media consumption and contrast it with the general assumption of a “passive audience” among media-effects scholars, has reached a pinnacle. Internet audiences are so active now that we seldom refer to them as “audiences.” Instead, we call them “users,” in keeping with the letter and spirit of the uses-and-gratifications paradigm.

Usage implies an action, not simply reception. What explains this transformation in our media consumption? The technology of the internet offers numerous action possibilities, or “affordances.” The keyboard invites us to type, the mouse to point, the hyperlink to click, and so on. These affordances transform our media experience by inviting us to engage with content in such a deeply personal way that we do not simply act, but also actively construct meaning.

Dozens of experimental studies at our laboratory and elsewhere have identified four broad classes of affordances as being particularly influential in shaping our uses of—and gratifications derived from—internet-based media. These are Modality, Agency, Interactivity, and Navigability.

Internet’s ability to provide content in multiple modalities (text, pictures, audio, video) is the reason why we sometimes refer to it as “multimedia,” and research indicates that presenting information in multiple modalities is not simply convenient but also perceptually and cognitively significant. As it turns out, we process information from one modality quite differently than another, expending far more cognitive effort with textual information and experiencing greater telepresence with audiovisual representation of information. Moreover, some modalities unique to the internet, such as animation and pop-ups, are shown by research to evoke visceral responses in users, commanding our attention while simultaneously inviting our wrath. In addition to dictating how we perceive and process content, modality enhancements in digital media serve to cue cognitive heuristics about the quality of underlying content. As we know, the visual modality is more trusted than text, i.e., pictures cue the realism heuristic leading us to quickly conclude that if something is photographed, then it must be more real than if it is simply written about in textual form. Virtual reality modality can cue the being-there heuristic, leading us to factor in the authenticity and intensity of our experience when making judgments about the content delivered through that experience. Newer modalities could cue the novelty heuristic and probably the coolness heuristic as well, leading to generally positive consideration of message content. In this way, the modality of presentation can be quite influential in dictating our stance toward content delivered by the internet-based media.

The agency affordance of the internet allows us all to be agents or sources of information. While previously the role of gatekeeping was the domain of a privileged few, now anybody and everybody can serve as a gatekeeper of content on the internet. Blogs allow us to broadcast our own content or filter other content on the Web. The rise of user-generated content on the Web, in the form of such platforms and sites as Youtube.com and MySpace, has profoundly altered the sender-receiver equation of communication, but more importantly given rise to new uses and gratifications. Our studies show that digital media users are more agentic and like to assume the role of sender or source of information, thanks to widespread proliferation of customization technologies. They are also motivated to build community, as manifested in their efforts to participate in online forums in large numbers, post comments on others’ blogs and willing participants in collaborative filtering applications that dominate so many Websites. In fact, they rate content chosen or favored by other users as being more worthy than that offered by professional

journalists. Therefore, agency-enhancement and community-building are new gratifications driven by affordances that let users serve as sources of content, both individually or collectively. In terms of transmitting meaning, self-agency can connote own-ness whereas other-agency may lead to the application of either the expertise heuristic, machine heuristic, or bandwagon heuristic, depending on whether the other is a professional gatekeeper, a bot, or the collective will of other users.

The interactivity affordance goes to the heart of audience activity by allowing users to interact with and through the medium. News presentation is no more static; indeed it is dynamically managed by the consumer. Research at our lab has shown that some interactive features such as drags are physiologically significant, commanding heightened attention, but they also tend to impede processing of content. In general, interactivity has proven to be a double-edged sword, with users desiring more of it, but responding negatively to content delivered via high levels of interactivity. For example, our studies with political candidate websites have demonstrated that interactivity has a positive effect on user impressions of the candidate up to a point, but too much interactivity is as bad as no interactivity, partly because it entails more effort on the part of the user and partly because it results in a rigorous scrutiny of content. Interactivity assures intense engagement with content—good content will appear much better, but most content on most internet sites is mediocre, so interactivity is likely to highlight flaws in content that might have otherwise have been ignored. The very presence of interactivity on a Website or any other digital application is likely to carry meaning to users. For example, it signifies openness of information access and participatory nature of a forum, which can directly lead to positive perceptions of the content even without an effortful consideration of the nature of the content.

The fact that the internet is a space rather than simply a window means that architectural and interior design considerations enter into the communication equation, making navigation a key aspect of online user experience. Gratifications like flow, play and the quality of information scent (to follow, for example, in a search engine) are likely to predominate, indicating the broader range and scope of information obtained and entertainment derived from internet-based media. Affordances designed to aid user navigation can convey rich meanings pertaining to presence of variety and the benevolence implied by the scaffolds made available.

In sum, the modalities, agency, interactivity, and navigability offered by internet-based media have profoundly transformed not only the conception of media use but also the nature and scope of gratifications sought and obtained by users. They have allowed users to not only consume media content but also experience them in richer ways by sharing it with others, asserting their agency and building community along the way.