



Perceived channel efficiency and motivation and orientation of information seeking as predictors of media dependency



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ABSTRACT

This study examined media dependency in the context of Internet media. It introduced the construct perceived channel efficiency in information seeking process and tested its effect on media dependency. The study found that perceived channel efficiency of the traditional media and Internet news sites, and motivation and orientation of information seeking contributed significantly to media dependency. Motivational and news-related factors varied in their effects on perceived channel efficiency and media dependency. Contrary to the media dependency thesis, availability of alternative media was not found to be a negative predictor of dependency on preferred media. Possible reasons were discussed, including changing scenarios of functional alternatives in the digital age, conscientious media selection and the ritualistic use of media.

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1. Introduction

Media dependency has been studied for decades (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1990; Lowrey, 2004; Rubin and Windahl, 1986; Skumanich and Kintsfather, 1998). According to the theory, social members, whether an individual, a group or a social institution, depend on media resources to meet one or more of their goals (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). Studies have looked at antecedents and consequences of media dependency (Halpern, 1994; Lowrey, 2004; Morton and Duck, 2000). Most researchers explored media dependency as a dependent variable of behavioral and societal factors, while few examined media dependency as a result of news information seeking process through different media channels. When accessing news information through a variety of channels, and when information seeking is driven by different goals, the dynamics of relationship between news consumers and the media become multifaceted. Changes in media dependency may also occur after the Internet became an accessible media channel and more people get news information from the Internet. There are more media channels and functional alternatives to traditional media for news consumers to choose from, and a wide scope of information that audience can access. While these factors in the news information access process have significantly changed the pattern of media use and possibly media dependency, few media dependency studies have explored factors playing a role in the information seeking process and the consequent media dependency in the age of the Internet media. This study examines media dependency as a consequence of perceived channel efficiency, motivation and orientation of information seeking, and availability of functional alternatives.

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2. Literature review

This study is informed by the theoretical framework composed of the media dependency theory and the functional alternative perspective. The literature on media selection and motivations in information seeking also provides foundation for developing hypotheses regarding media dependency involving both traditional and the Internet media.

2.1. Media dependency and factors shaping it

Dependency is defined as “a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party” (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976, p. 6). For the media system, according to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, its power lies in the control over scarce information resources through which individuals, groups, organizations, and other social systems come to rely to attain their goals. A goal is a mental representation of a desired end state that social actors pursue (Palomares, 2013). “Dependency may result when an individual ritualistically uses communication channels or instrumentally seeks out certain communication messages” (Rubin and Windahl, 1986, p. 187). Media dependency, on the individual level, is concerned with the types and patterns of dependency that people have with the media system in general and specific media in particular. The level of media dependency varies due to the goals an individual holds when using media. There are three aspects of such goals: understanding, orientation and play (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). People have different goals when they use media and media vary in their capacity to help users to achieve their goals. For example, information from newspapers and the Internet news sites both facilitate understanding and orientation, but the scope of information and the extent to which the information satisfies the desired needs are different. Therefore, people may rely on newspapers and the Internet news sites to achieve different goals. The degree to which one depends on media to realize his/her goals is determined by the perceptions onto what extent media facilitate to attain these goals. People form the perception of media’s capacity of goal fulfillment as they use media. Media dependency relationship is thus developed over time (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

The degree of media dependency is also contingent on external factors that are out of individuals’ control such as social conditions. These external factors lead to variation of the availability of media channels and other non-media alternatives. Dependency on a specific medium follows the perceived lack of functional alternatives and restricted motives for media use (Rubin and Windahl, 1986). “The more functional alternatives available to an individual, in terms of both quantity and quality, the lesser is the dependency on and influence of a specific channel” (Rubin and Rubin, 1985, p. 39). However, the Ball-Rokeach explication of MSD theory posits that the mere presence of a functional alternative will not lead a person to instantly become less dependent on a traditional medium and more dependent upon the alternative, rather, there is a process in which a dependency relationship is created, moving from awareness and exposure to dependency (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

The media dependency theory highlights two major aspects. One is the goals an individual holds when using media, and the other is availability of media channels and other non-media alternatives. In the digital age, while the goals of media use could remain the same, the ways that the goals are fulfilled have changed significantly. More media channels for information access are now available. The growing number of functional alternatives could change the scenario of media use that some media dependency studies were based on. For example, the perception onto what degree that a medium can fulfill one’s goal may change, and the media selection criteria would change accordingly. A wide variety of media becomes available could make dependency on one specific medium less likely to occur.

Most of the media dependency studies dealt with traditional media (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1990; Lowrey, 2004; Rubin and Windahl, 1986; Skumanich and Kintsfather, 1998). In the age of traditional media, media dependency was relatively easy to establish because few media channels were available to choose from. In the digital age, the available media channels for news access continue to grow. With an increasing number of functional alternatives, it becomes not so easy to settle with one media channel as a dependent media source. Furthermore, when the information seeking goal is clear and the alternative media channel offers high level of technological advantage and information accessibility, if media dependency is established, the extent to which that one relies on new media for information could be much stronger than that for traditional media. Previous studies either examined media dependency on a single medium or media in pairs for identifying the effect of functional alternatives. They often failed to take into account the difference in media dependency due to media functional properties and overlooked the factors that shape media dependency in the information seeking process. As media technology continues to advance, high dependency on the Internet and other Internet-based media channels for information becomes a noticeable phenomenon (Dong et al., 2010; Riffe et al., 2008; Sun et al., 2008). There are many issues regarding media dependency in the digital age remaining unanswered. For example, besides the perception of the degree that a medium meets the specific information needs, what other factors are shaping media dependency in the digital age? To what degree media dependency on the Internet media differs from that of traditional media in terms the factors that shape it. To examine the factors that shape media dependency in the digital age becomes an imperative task of media scholars in order to understand the interaction between changes in media landscape and audience selection of their preferred media for news information and the mechanism of media dependency in the digital age.

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