

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: IS IT UNITING OR DIVIDING US?

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ABSTRACT

This is the latest study on the tracking of the implications of the dynamic digital revolution in the new global environment. The series of studies began in 2006 as we attempt to understand how digital technology affects lifestyles and the way we conduct business. Digital revolution is reshaping quality of life all over the world. Internet technology is speeding up management methods, relationships, and revolutionizing communications. Virtual offices have become commonplace as social media, electronic mail messages and mobile phones become regular companions. The digital revolution is radically changing the ways individuals and organizations interact. Every minute of the waking hours of many professionals is potentially open for business. The economic impact is huge as global productivity keeps rising in geometric proportions. It is argued that this digital environment calls for new approaches to managing work-life and lifestyles, in general. About two decades ago, in the earlier days of the Internet, many thought that the free access to information and ideas would educate and enlighten us all. That it would lead to us being more tolerant and close to one another. Many people thought that it would free us from the biases and prejudices that often divide us. Has this prediction come true or is digital technology dividing us? Are we realizing the early promises of the internet? Does unlimited access to people through the internet and social media bring us together or tear us apart? Are we witnessing the phenomenon where most people gravitate to those in their various tribes? This study attempts to gauge the dynamic effects of digital technology on an essential ingredient of quality of life: unity.

Keywords: social media, digital revolution, digital technology, social movements, internet

INTRODUCTION

This is the latest study on the tracking of the implications of the dynamic digital revolution in the new global environment. The series of studies began in 2006 as we attempt to understand how digital technology affects various aspects of our relationships. Simply put, is digital revolution uniting or dividing us? Our previous studies have revealed many benefits and shortcomings of digital revolution. In this study we attempt to gauge public perception of digital technology, specifically social media usage. Is it uniting or dividing us?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A great debate is raging all over the world on whether the benefits of digitization outweigh the threats to our well-being. Rosen (2011) argues that over-reliance on technology can cause psychological problems. Are smartphones, social networking and the internet tearing us apart? Are they destroying our identities and fracturing family relationships? Are they ruining friendships and driving us all insane? Andrew Keen ((2012) says that today's online social revolution is dividing, diminishing and disorienting us. He states that social networking "over-shearers" show signs of narcissism and that constant phone-fiddlers may have OCD. He goes on to say that general exposure to technology can cause ADHD. The apparent weakness in this argument is that OCD and ADHD were in existence before digital technology. Many people find Twitter, Facebook and other online services as connecting tools to foster and enrich friendships and associations.

Thurston (2014) says that "anti-social people are the ones making our social tools, which is highly unfortunate because they can reimagine the world in code, but they lack the soft skills and everyday experiences to relate to the people they are serving. People's needs are not prioritized in the product road map because creators don't stop to ask uncomfortable questions like, "have we considered the implications of monetizing customer information? Our obsession with tech means that we ignore the implications of the sudden and dramatic transformation it creates in people's lives."

In a 2015 Harvard Business Review article, McConnell finds that “many companies struggle with digital transformation. It goes against the grain of established ways of working and is a threat to management practices that have existed for decades. Digital tools free people throughout the organization to share information easily. Communication managers no longer have total control over message, target and timing of news and announcements... Horizontal and bottom-up information flows become stronger at the expense of the traditional top-down.” Here, we can say that digital revolution unites employees within their peer groups but may lead to friction in relationship with top management because all key information is no longer coming from the top.

“Digital lets expertise emerge naturally as people ask and answer questions peer to peer. People build up reputations across the organization as the “go to” person for topics even if they are not the official experts. This bypasses HR’s system and procedures for validating experts.” (McConnell, 2015).

Digital revolution can be a double-edged sword by being a blessing to some people in the organization and a threat to others in the same organization. For instance, “IT management risks losing control over enterprise technologies because in a fast-paced business world, teams – unwilling to wait for IT to rollout official solutions – solve their own needs quickly by resorting to cloud-based, consumer tools to manage projects and share information.” (McConnell, 2015). In this case, digital technology appears to cause division among employees and IT groups. But when this division is managed well, it may lead to increased productivity.

Another area of conflict and division between management and employees is on the area of branding. McConnell (2015) continues, “personal branding worries management, as people who are active on the internal social network become “stars”, with greater name recognition inside the company than certain top managers. These defacto thought-leaders become a force to reckon with that is completely outside the “hierarchy.” This apparent division between management and employees can yield great dividend if managed correctly. There is no going back. Digital revolution is in its infancy and it is here to stay. Riolo (2017) puts it this way, “the omnipresence of social media has created an always-online society in which employees and customers expect to get what they need here and now. Bad employees are named and shamed not only by the press, but also online by their own employees – anything short of great is now no good at all.”

“HR no longer has a choice: writing policy after policy or coming up with new tick-box processes is just not good enough. The world has moved on and we need to move with it if we want to remain relevant. We must embrace technology, digitization, flexibility, engagement, inclusion, automation. We need to make a bonfire of the policies and really start empowering people to work at their best to build a fairer and more inclusive society.” (Riolo, 2017)

DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Carty (2015) says that “the digital revolution has categorically changed the way that activists’ express grievances and share information, strategize, and for on-the street forms of contentious politics, and challenge the narratives put forth by authorities and the mainstream media when there are confrontations between peaceful protesters and the police force.”

The protests in Puerto Rico that caused the resignation of Governor Ricardo A. Rosello was as a result of leaked social media chats of the governor and some of his close friends (Charo Henriquez, NY Times, July 24, 2019). Information on social media caused the outrage and the protesters received information to march on social media. There is unity among the marchers and a sharp division between the governor and the marchers – all caused by the digital revolution.

IS THE INTERNET FRAGMENTING SOCIETY RATHER THAN CONNECTING IT?

Sahan Kodagi’s (2017) blog on this subject is a masterpiece, and we cite it in its entirety:

“Many of the most profitable social network technology companies like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are valued based on their ability to create networks. This is due to a phenomenon known as the “Network effect”.

When a network effect is present the value of a product or service is dependent on the number of other users using it. ‘The value of the network is proportional to the square of the number of users’.

A classic example is the telephone, where a greater number of users will increase the value to each user.

Unfortunately, network effects can also have some unintended and unfortunate consequences. This is due to a phenomenon known as “social proof” (also known as informational social influence) that gets amplified in highly networked environments.

Social proof is a psychological and social phenomenon where people imitate the actions of others in an attempt to reflect correct behavior in a given situation. It is prominent in ambiguous social situations, and is driven by the assumption that the certain people possess more knowledge about the current situation.

In the 21st century, the amount of information that we are exposed to is tremendous. This can leave us feeling lost and unsure about what to trust and what to distrust. Leading us to look outside of ourselves for evidence on what to believe and how best to react in a given situation.

The effects of social proof can be seen in the tendency of large groups to conform to choices or ideas. This can cause people to converge too quickly upon a single distinct choice, so that decisions of even larger groups of individuals may be grounded in very little information.

Social proof is prominent on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The amount of followers, fans, views, likes, favorites and even comments that a user has positively affect how other users perceive them.

A user on Twitter with a million followers is perceived as more trustworthy and reputable than a similar user with a thousand followers, resulting in faster growth of followers and higher engagement and click-through-rates.

An entire multi-million-dollar industry, known as ghost followers, exist for the sole purpose of increasing social proof on social media and tricking people into thinking a person is reputable even if they are not. Social proof leads people to conform to the majority opinion in their social circle, rather than using logic to arrive at their opinions.

Curated Facebook news-feeds are a symptom of this phenomenon. It leads people to “like” the majority opinion of their social circle and block all contrarian opinions. Facebook’s algorithm further amplifies this by giving posts we “like” a higher priority than posts we disagree with. Leading to a vicious cycle, where all the posts on our news-feeds confirm our biases and eliminate opposing viewpoints.

Social media has caused the fragmentation of society by incentivizing people to conform to the opinions of their social circle (Networks) rather than forming their own opinions.

News outlets like Breitbart and Huffington Post have taken advantage of this tendency and now exclusively publish extreme right-wing or left-wing points of view. Similarly, companies like YouTube and Twitter which are based in liberal California increasingly seek to promote a left-wing narrative rather than trying to be open platforms. This causes a further alienation of alternative points of view.

Donald Trump used this dynamic to great effect and won the 2016 Presidential election, even though he had no establishment backing and was spending less money than his opponents.

The fragmentation of opinions and formation of bubbles have played a major part in the polarization of our society and the breakdown of civil discourse.

In a highly networked world people are not exposed to opposing points of view leading to silos and blind spots. This increases the influence of people who do not get swayed by the crowds but use logic to reach their opinions.” (Kodagi, S. 2017).

al Media Unites, Divides in Times of Tragedy

Bernard, D. (2016) is very eloquent on this subject and here is an excerpt of his report at Voice of America on June 11, 2016: “For more than a decade, millions of people turned to social networking and media sites such as Twitter and Facebook to learn the latest news.

Nothing about the Internet is purely good or bad, and those same social networks that can help bring people together can also often be used to drive them apart.

So, Is Social Media A Help Or A Hindrance In Times Of Crisis And Tragedy? The Answer, Perhaps, Unsurprisingly, Is Both.

“With social media, we can now connect with millions of people, including strangers, remotely,” says Tomas Chamorro-Premuzi, a business psychology professor at University College London and Columbia University. “Such a connection is mostly digital, but human imagination enables us to experience empathy, what other people feel, even when they are far away and we don’t know them.”

Chamorro-Premuzic says that social networks can function something like watching a sad movie: collectively, individuals can share their emotional responses together as part of a community. When overused, it can reduce profound, complex emotions and issues into talking points and babble.

“The perpetual need to overshare opinions and feelings does trivialize the expression of emotions over social media. It is not the same to lose a close friend than to change the profile picture of your Facebook page,” he told VOA.

“Social media is an amplified, yet more superficial, version of spending physical time with a close friend.

Fundamentally, our emotions haven’t changed, but social media is used to broadcast them more widely. It is harder to suffer in private now. Everybody thinks they ought to share,” said Chamorro-Premuzic.

Another issue researchers are studying is how social media can rapidly drive individuals to their “safe spot,” the place they’re most comfortable personally and ideologically, and close off opinions that are different from their core values and beliefs.

“Social media conversations tend to connect like-minded people, so it isn’t as likely to bridge big ideological divides and is more likely to deepen divisions,” says Steinfeld, a professor in the Department of Media and Information at Michigan State University, But Steinfeld says that tendency is not a hard and fast rule.

“In many cases, our connections on social media may have arisen because of similarities in one area of our lives. For example, we work in the same company, but our views on other topics are different. So we do at times see people in our network of connections making statements that are inconsistent with our own views.”

One main problem with social media use during crises, said Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, is that it enhances “confirmation bias,” or the tendency to seek out and listen to only that information that reinforces long-standing opinions.

“We mostly pay attention to those who think like we do,” he said.

Likewise, we like and share comments and contents from those who share our views, which perpetuates a vicious cycle and makes people more narrow-minded.” “On social media it is more tempting to believe that our views are the truth, because we are only exposed to opposite views in small doses.”

And, says Steinfeld, confirmation bias affects not just the sources we seek out for news and information, but those we’re most likely to listen to and share. “It’s just more common that the people in our network tend to agree with us on the big issues “ (Bernard, D., 2016)

We will examine how our study participants respond to some of these observations in our literature review.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were distributed over the internet and on Facebook over a period of four days in August 2019 and two weeks in September and October 2019. One hundred and twenty-six (126) responses were returned. Various questions were asked in order to gauge current prevailing opinions on whether the usage of digital technology, specifically social media, is either uniting us or dividing us. The questionnaire was a survey instrument designed to measure participants’ perception on the impact of digital technology on many aspects of people’s ways of life. The questionnaire elicited both quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was divided into a number of clusters containing questions and/or statements with similar answer blocks. The first cluster of the survey sought to find out the extent of internet and social networking penetration among the participants, giving participants the opportunity to circle the response that closely identify their experience.

Participants were asked if they had access to the internet and if they had electronic mail (email) addresses, and how many email addresses they have. This cluster concludes by having the participants indicate whether they have social media accounts. The second cluster of the questionnaire sought to find out whether smartphone, Facebook, Twitter, all the other dimensions of social media are tearing us apart or uniting us. The third cluster of questions dealt with the complex dilemma of social media. For instance, participants were asked to react to the statement that digital revolution, as represented in social media, can be a double-edged sword by being a blessing to some people in the organization and a threat to others in the same organization. The fourth cluster of the survey allowed participants the chance to say anything else they wished to contribute on the impact of digital technology in our society today. The last cluster of the survey contained questions to help identify the demographic information of participants of the study. Using similar questions from the survey, a subset of ten professionals who participated in the survey was invited to take part in a focus group to express their thoughts on the impact of digital technology, specifically social media, on society.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

One hundred and twenty-six (126) people responded to our survey. One hundred percent (100%) of the participants own cell phones. Personal computer ownership is at ninety-six (96%). . All respondents have access to the internet and email addresses, with an average of three different email addresses per participant. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of participants have social media account. When asked whether smart phones, Facebook, Twitter, social networking and internet are tearing us apart sixty-two percent (62%) said “yes”. Ninety-six percent (96%) believe that the phenomenal growth of social media usage has dramatically changed how people interact with one another. Sixty-four percent (64%) of participants say that social media usage has improved communication with friends, family members and business associates. At the same time, fifty-eight percent (58%) contend that social media usage is also destroying our identities and fracturing family relationships. Fifty percent (50%) would agree that Twitter, Facebook, and other online services are connecting tools to foster and enrich friendships and associations. Seventy-three percent (73%) say that our obsession with technology means that we ignore the implications of the sudden and dramatic transformation it creates in people’s life. Sixty-nine (69%) of respondents either disagree or are not certain that social media usage goes against the grain of established ways of working and that it is a threat to management practices that have existed for decades. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of respondents observe that communication managers no longer have total control over message, target and timing of news and announcements because of social media usage. Sixty-two percent (62%) either disagree or they are not certain that digital revolution may unite employees within their peer groups but may lead to friction in relationship with top management because all key information is no longer from the top the bottom. Fifty-nine percent (59%) either disagree or are not certain that social media usage lets expertise emerge naturally as people ask and answer questions peer to peer. This same group either does not believe or they are unsure that people build up reputations across the organization as the “go to” persons for topics even if they are not the official experts, thereby bypassing human resources system and procedures for validating experts. An overwhelming majority of ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents unequivocally state that digital revolution can be a double-edged sword by being a blessing to some people in the organization and a threat to others in the same organization. Ninety-two percent (92%) of participants observe that increasingly, especially in times of tragedy and trauma, people turn to their online communities for news for solace, to share painful experiences of confusion and sadness, and reach out to friends for emotional support and counsel... Eighty-eight percent (88%) say that nothing about social media usage is purely good or bad, and those same networks that can help bring people together can also often be used to drive them apart. Eighty percent (80%) say that the perpetual need to overshare opinions and feelings does trivialize the expression of emotions over social media. Fifty-four percent (54%) of participants say that social media can rapidly drive individuals to their “safe spot,” the place they are most comfortable personally and ideologically, and close off opinions that are different from their core values and beliefs. Only 48 percent (48%) say that social media conversations tend to connect like-minded people, so it is not as likely to bridge big ideological divides and is more likely to deepen divisions. Thirty-six percent (36%) of participants have no opinion on the last question. Sixty-nine percent (69%) say that one main problem with social media usage during crisis is that it enhances “confirmation bias” or the tendency to seek out and listen to only that information that reinforces long standing opinions. Fifty-eight percent (58%) would agree that most people on social media like and share comments and content from those who share their views, which perpetuates a vicious cycle and makes people more narrow-minded. Sixty-five percent conclude that on social media, it is more tempting to believe that our views are the truth, because we are only exposed to opposite views in small doses.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our research question was answered at the outset when sixty-two percent (62%) of the participants said that smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, social networking and the internet are tearing us apart. Our study also reveals that the phenomenal growth of social media usage has dramatically changed how people interact with one another. At the same time, sixty-two percent of the participants say that social media usage has improved communication with friends, family members and business associates. They say that Twitter, Facebook, and other online services are effective connecting tools to foster and enrich friendships and associates. But our obsession with technology means we ignore the implications of the sudden and dramatic transformation it creates in people's lives. But our study participants would not agree that social media usage goes against the grain of established ways of working and that it is a threat to management practices that have existed for decades.

Communication managers in organizations no longer have monopoly of information because of the ubiquitous usage of social media. An overwhelming majority of the participants say that digital revolution, specifically social media, can be a double-edged sword by being a blessing to some people and a threat to others. But there can be no doubt that increasingly, especially in times of tragedy and trauma, people turn to their online communities for news and comfort and to share powerful experiences of confusion and hurt and ultimately reach out to friends for emotional support and counsel. The study findings conclude that nothing about social media usage is purely good or bad and those same social media that can help bring people together can also often be used to drive them apart. The results of our study call for caution in oversharing and in making certain we do not always migrate to only our safe spots, the place we are most comfortable personally and ideologically. We must not succumb to the lure of closing off opinions that are different from our core values and beliefs. Another pitfall of social media usage is confirmation bias. This is the tendency to only listen to the information that reinforces long-standing opinions. About seventy percent (70%) of our study participants pointed out that confirmation bias tends to be the root cause of division in the usage of social media. A best practice in social media usage is to avoid sharing only comments and contents from those who share your views and, thus, avoid perpetuating a vicious cycle and making people narrow-minded. The overall conclusion of this study is that social media usage is mostly dividing us but the trend can be reversed towards the positive aspects of social media.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER STUDY

There is a need to keep this type of study current and continuous. The study participants come from essentially the southern states of the United States. There may be regional differences of opinion on this subject. A study with a larger sample is suggested.

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