Don’t push that button!!

Decision-making in an instant-gratification society.

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Computing in a variety of forms holds a fascination for people of all ages. The ability to stay in touch, see someone via Skype, play a game, read a book, post pictures, view pictures, comment on someone else’s thought, and connect globally is amazing. Being in control of the impact one has on another person/group of people is empowering. But what happens when that button-push for some aspects of social media, goes bad? In an instant-gratification society, are we gratifying too instantly?

Keywords: social media, technology, society, decision-making

Categories: *Computers and Society.*

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# The Challenges

Technology, in all shapes, sizes, forms and fields, has radically changed people’s lives. The actions on the side of the user sees the provider scrambling to keep up with the times. Downloading and sharing music, software, e-books, games and dvds necessitates some sort of business protection in the form of End User License Agreements and Terms Of Agreement, Software License Agreements, and Software License Agreements. While the law does its best, society as a collective responds with their interpretation of how some technologies can be used; not necessarily should be used.

The reality is that the legal process is no match for technology’s lightning-fast progress. The software manufacturers, the online game developers, the video chat people, the Instagram owners….all of these businesses are looking to protect their assets by, among other things, ensuring their Terms of Agreement (TOA) and EULAs (End User Licence Agreement) are updated and reflect the current state of society. While the law addresses what is theoretically in the best interest of members of society, at a more base level, individual moral-decision-making is governed by the individual in relation to her/his perceived needs.

# Theoretical

There are a wide range of theories that could be debated in relation to the technology/user society; the Instant-Gratification society could be discussed under the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). The approach initiated with media and audience attention. There is an audience, there are goals and needs of users, and, on a mass media scale, users will show degrees and kinds of activities.[[1]](#endnote-1) This theory gives power to the consumer related to personal choice of media consumption.

Five guidelines are part of the Uses and Gratifications Approach[[2]](#endnote-2):

1. Audience is active
2. Linking of gratification and media choice rests with the user.
3. Media competes with other sources of satisfaction.
4. Media goals can originate with users.
5. Value judgments should be suspended while people explore independently.

Within this theory, there are 5 uses for wanting to use media: to be informed, to identify with characters, to be entertained, to enhance social interaction, and to escape from daily life.[[3]](#endnote-3) This theory can easily be applied to current media consumption: cell phones and related installed applications, Facebook (FB) and other social networking sites, instant messaging, news feeds, bulletin boards, Twitter, and simply being online (internet) visiting a range of websites that meet the desire to share one to one or one to many.

All of these characteristics and uses for UGT focus on the need of the audience to interact with media. MDT, or Media Dependency Theory, is related to UGT. With MDT, the focus is on the user’s goals; why they are consuming media. UGT states that a user’s needs are the reason for consumption of media. With the instant-gratification population, MDT may serve as a better fit. The theory supposes that different people have different needs, and use technology in different ways. It is easy to generalize and say that all people use FB to stay in touch with their family. There are a multitude of reasons why people use FB, and each person is influenced in a different way, depending on how s/he consumes media.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As there are a multitude of reasons why people use social media/technology products, there seems to be less of a justification for that usage. The intent is to do ‘x,’ but the consequences can be ‘y’ and ‘z’; neither of which have positive consequences. Everett Rogers, in The Diffusion of Innovations, discusses or desirable and undesirable or consequences[[5]](#endnote-5) While consequences should be considered before using technology, the reality is that news websites retract, kids sext, people tweet, people hack, and people take action for the fame. Even if the primary consequences are considered, it is the secondary consequences that has the greater potential to ruin lives.

**Examples**

Reddit.com is a bulletin board site in America with a huge following and 10,000 ‘sub-reddits’ with specific topics. Ranked 9th as a top 100 website in America, Reddit taps into a global website of 46%[[6]](#endnote-6) of Redditors/visitors, which makes Reddit a powerful social platform. But it is a platform without many boundaries. For some situations, the lack of constraints has led to positive outcomes, but there have also been decisions made on Reddit without enough information, and once shared, while the words can be retracted, the consequences cannot be altered. Reddit professes to be the Front Page of the Internet, but the content relies solely on an initial poster, and the sharing of information via readers who may not always make the wisest of decisions.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In April, 2013, it took one individual Redditor to make a decision about posting information regarding the Boston Marathon Bombing. Reddit went crazy. One Redditor posted a picture snagged from a Facebook page of Sunil Tripathi, a student missing since late February, 2013. The Redditor pasted it next to the photo of the youngest bombing suspect. The decision to post these pictures together may have been a joke. It may have been a desire to get ‘upvotes’ on Reddit, and to feel the fame. For the Redditor, a positive experience, apparently without consideration of the negative secondary consequences for Sunil’s family, who became victims to hatred and harassment from all who had heard or ‘saw’ that Sunil was one of the bombers. That one decision to push the button and post the information and use technology in that fashion, had a profoundly negative impact on Sunil’s family and friends and indeed Sunil himself, who was later discovered to have already been dead. Deciding to merge those pictures appeared to have no benefit other than to garner attention. It brought instant gratification through the push of the button to post the image and text. Through MGT, it is noted that different people have different needs, and use technology in different ways. For the Redditor who posted, it likely stemmed from a desire to have Reddit fame. Other Redditors bought in. It is exciting to be a part of a large group of people ‘accomplishing good.’ There were also Redditors who chose to not participate, using the technology in a different way. MGT considers the 5 components of the UGT, but these authors note that a better fit for technology decision-making lies with MGT.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Facebook (FB) with the little ‘thumbs’ up, is well-known in America (191 million) and indeed in other countries, such as India (195 million) and 1.86 billion active users. [[9]](#endnote-9). It is recognized as THE social media giant, with huge reach and strong brand recognition. It’s not only used for social systems and support groups, games and social events, but also for business pages and for staying in touch with families. On the flip side, FB has some negative uses as well. Not every user understands the settings, nor use them to keep her/his page private. Businesses, wanting to keep their virtual doors open, need to stay on top of site visitors to monitor what has been posted.

Entering someone’s page is like entering their yard, to call them names; but with FB, you can say things to a user’s ‘face’, without saying it to their physical face. Pushing that ‘post’ button does not ensure perpetuity, but it likely provides the gratification of taking the action and hoping for the results to be explosive and/or hurtful. The goal for the button-pusher is to get a response. That’s the bottom line for MGT: the user’s needs are met consuming media to meet their goal.

Another form of social media is Twitter. It is incredibly popular and people spend a considerable amount of time ensuring their ‘tweets’ are witty or pointed barbs. Donald Trump and Elizabeth Warren had a very public, visible and unbecoming Twitter war, as did Donald Trump and Meryl Streep. And J. K. Rowling. It is hard to imagine how much damage can be inflicted in 140 characters, but Tweeters range from the neighbor next door to Taylor Swift, Michelle Obama to Justin Trudeau. The ages range from middle school to senior citizens. And each one of these people consider the consequence (sharing information) but neglect the secondary consequences of being misunderstood, being wrong, or having the tone misinterpreted. With positions of authority, recognition or fame, there is a heavier moral hat to wear, because your audience is incredibly large and your fame (rightly or wrongly) carries weight. For MGT, the goal could be to be know, or be ‘followed,’ or to simply follow people and be a part of a community. It is filled through the use of technology; the push of a button on a phone or a click on the website.

Snapchat was very popular with youth. It was a simple way to share an image that you did not want to have remain. “Delete is our default”[[10]](#endnote-10) This was to ensure the safety of users. And Snapchat seemed very reassuring to parents and users, that there were strict guidelines in place to protect users.[[11]](#endnote-11) The reality is, it’s just words. With Snapchat, the desirable consequences can be to hurt or cause embarrassment. With MGT, why people are consuming the media, focusing on their goals provides the answer. If the goal is to cause someone pain, there are options; Snapchat is one of many forms of technology to achieve this end. Youth have committed suicide because they have been humiliated on social media. In one instance, a 15 year old female committed suicide after her friends took a video of her, without permission. Hours after the mother discovered the body, the girl’s aunt turned to FB for answers, where she promptly got her answers: a video taken whole the female was in the shower.[[12]](#endnote-12) Snapchat’s platform was intended to prevent such things, but a user can take a screenshot, or use another phone to capture the picture or video. Depending on the need of the user, it can be fed through the use of social media via the push of a button, for good or for bad.

**UGT/MDT**

With UGT, the need lies with the user to involve themselves in media. With MDT, the focus is the goal of the user. One has to consider whether or not the user is facing a specific need; like an addiction of sorts, or whether the user has a specific goal of causing harm. Answering that question would be akin to readily determining if a murderer intended to kill (MDT) or if s/he was so wound up on the idea of killing that it became a need. (UGT) Neither are buttons one would like to see pushed.

The guidelines for UGT overlap slightly with its off-shoot, MDT. Both audiences are active; actually doing some action. There is a connection with the kind of media and the gratification one obtains, based on the decision of the user. With MDT, however, the focus on the user goal is different than the UGT need. The differing sources would rest more with UGT: with MDT, the goal is the driver and the technology is chosen.

With UGT, there are multiple reasons for using media; all of which focus on the need of the user: to be informed, entertained, to escape from reality, to identify with characters and to become more sociable. With MDT, there is one consideration: the self-defined goal of the user. Because users under MDT have a goal, and choose their technology, things appear to be more deliberate. The pushing of a button for instant gratification is an intentional action. With UGT, there is a need to feed a need, and one meets that need wherever one can. Han, Min and Lee studied UGT in relation to Twitter, and found that “Social gratification is one of the most important explanations for SNS usage.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Wang et al move beyond a general ‘gratification’ explanation. “Media use is affected by individuals’ beliefs and attitudes, which in turn, are reinforced by media use. Also, this perspective is consistent with the conceptual distinction between gratifications sought, which drive media use behaviour, and gratifications obtained, which are the outcomes of the behaviour.” [[14]](#endnote-14) Gratifications sought would be more aligned with UGT, and obtained would be in keeping with MDT; the former wants a need filled, and the latter seeks to have a goal met.

The UGT and its extension, MDT, are not without criticism. The individual focus makes it hard to predict beyond the sample population, but more importantly, that there us a lack of clarity surrounding concepts such as needs, motives, behaviours, consequences as well as social and psychological backgrounds. [[15]](#endnote-15) It seems unlikely that one could formulate one specific need, motive, behaviour and consequence as well as similarity in social and psychological environments. But as research now shows, it is possible to show common themes of behaviour related to obtaining gratification from social media.

**Conclusion**

Whether UGT or its off-shoot, MDT, there is a clear pattern that society is getting gratification from FB, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Reddit, or a range of other media. Given the predilection for technology and toys of the younger generation, it would seem prudent to investigate further, with an eye to the field of education and this fixation with wanting to be entertained, and wanting things now. The desire for immediacy appears to be a factor in pushing the button for good or evil. As a 16 year old pointed out in a discussion on justification/rationalization behind posting rather rude comments on a friend’s gaming chat, “It doesn’t hurt him. It’s just words.” It is likely that more than a few people will remember the pain of public school name-calling and the pain it wrought. The teenager’s rationalization was that people know what behaviour to expect in a game (likely true) and that it wasn’t intended to hurt (uncertain) so what was the problem. With the push of a button, obscenities and rudeness fly across the sky and land in someone else’s computer. Her/his face and/or reaction cannot be seen by the sender. But at least the sender got pleasure from the instant gratification resulting from the push of the button.

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