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TARGETS’ PRACTICES: HOW PEOPLE ALLOCATE THEIR ATTENTION AMONG MULTIPLE STREAMS OF INCOMING INFORMATION

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Abstract

The communication environment within organizations provides multiple opportunities for informational retrieval throughout the day. While previous research has explored media choice from a sender’s perspective, little research has explored the choices receivers or targets make in attending to messages and information streams. This paper explores the process that targets use to evaluate messages by introducing a model of target attention allocation. Built on theories of media choice, uses and gratifications, and social exchange, this model focuses on targets’ need to reduce uncertainty, the interactivity offered by the media available to them, and the social norms guiding their media choices. In doing so, the model provides a means for measuring targets’ willingness to remain focused on a given information stream or, conversely, switch to another information stream.

Keywords: Media choice, attention, messages, electronic communications
1 Introduction

In the Oscar-nominated movie “The Social Network,” Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg is portrayed in a deposition room where a lawyer is questioning him about the development of his idea for Facebook. The lawyer asks Zuckerberg, “Do you think I deserve your full attention?” and Zuckerberg replies, “…You have part of my attention – you have the minimum amount. The rest of my attention is back at the offices of Facebook where my colleagues and I are doing things that no one in this room, including and especially your clients, are intellectually or creatively capable of doing. Did I adequately answer your condescending question?” In this scene, Mark Zuckerberg’s character is dividing or compartmentalizing his attention. He is allocating part of his attention to the opposing attorney and part of his attention to his tasks back at the office. Zuckerberg is not alone. We have always had the ability to allocate part of our attention to one stimulus and part of our attention to another – whether it is by multitasking or daydreaming (Singer, 1975). However, the rapid development of new communication technologies over the last two decades has allowed us to be accessible (and to access others) at virtually any time or place (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2005), and we can now participate in multiple tasks or interactions simultaneously or nearly simultaneously (Gonzalez & Mark, 2005; Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008). The merits of this accessibility and multitasking are both hotly debated (Loukopoulos, Dismukes, & Barshi, 2009; Souitaris & Maestro, 2011; Spink, Cole, & Waller, 2008) and attention has become a topic of considerable academic and public interest (Chun, Golomb, & Turk-Browne, 2011; Davidson, 2011; Roda, 2011), but there is no question that the need to allocate our attention (consciously or unconsciously) among multiple incoming streams of information has increased significantly over the last several decades.

Despite the increased technological opportunity to divide our attention, the volume of incoming information (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Sutcliffe & Weick, 2008), and expectations regarding greater accessibility, little has been written about why people decide to shift some or all of their attention from one incoming “input” to another – whether that input is in the context of a one-on-one, one-to-many, or small group interaction. Historically, managing the flow of incoming information has been considered a vital managerial skill (Brannick, Michaels, & Baker, 1989), and scholars have studied how people make choices about sending messages (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Watson-Manheim & Bélanger, 2007), but we know little about how (and how actively) people assess alternative incoming streams of information and decide whether to shift their focus. Computer science, marketing, mass communications, and human factors scholars have all examined the visual characteristics that catch our eyes and attention (e.g., unexpected movements and sounds), but far less is known about what other factors affect our more volitional shifts in attention when faced with multiple streams of incoming information. Under what circumstances do we behave as Zuckerberg did, deliberately parceling out our attention? Under what circumstances do we fall prey to the allure of our devices and the norms regarding their use and divide our attention almost involuntarily? When and why do we take an incoming phone call, text message, or email while attending a meeting or sitting in a classroom? Conversely, when do we opt to ignore (or disable) potentially distracting claims for our attention?

In this paper, we draw on social exchange theory to propose a model of targets’ incoming information handling practices, where the “targets” are potential receivers of messages and information. Our paper contributes to the long line of research and theory in information systems and organizational communication regarding the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by addressing a theoretically and managerially critical (but virtually unstudied) issue. Whereas previous research has explored message senders’ media choices extensively, this paper opens a new line of research on targets’ (i.e., actual and potential receivers’) choices about how they attend to incoming messages. In the sections that follow, we briefly review several relevant literatures, present our model of attention allocation among incoming information streams, and discuss the model’s theoretical and managerial implications.
2 Literature Review

Several major streams of literature inform our model of target’s handling of incoming information: media choice, uses and gratifications, and social exchange theory. We describe each below.

2.1 The Media Choice Literature

While the target’s or receiver’s perspective has received little attention, the literature has given much attention to senders’ choices, the reasons for those choices, and their use of various media alone and in combination (Watson-Manheim & Bélanger, 2007). This research has explored choice from a rational perspective (e.g., Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory), a Social Influence Perspective, and a combined perspective (Webster & Trevino, 1995). Each of these theories takes a primarily sender-focused approach to understand how senders choose media for message delivery.

The media richness model (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Daft et al., 1987) is the most widely studied rational model of media choice (Fulk & Boyd, 1991). It suggests that the communicator makes decisions about the use of a specific medium based on the needs of the message. Media are categorized on a continuum from lean to rich according to the provision of four characteristics: the ability to (a) facilitate feedback, (b) communicate multiple cues, (c) present individually tailored messages, and (d) use natural language. The goal of the media richness model is to choose the right medium for the right message in the most efficient manner. Those managers who are most adept at making these choices have been found to be more successful in some media choice studies (Daft et al., 1987; Lengel & Daft, 1988). Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) is another rational approach to media selection. It characterizes the extent to which a medium has the capacity to transmit information about facial expression, direction of looking, posture, dress, and nonverbal cues.

While the rational approaches place the characteristics of communication within the medium of the message, the Social Influence Perspective suggests that message choice resides in the contextual influences of the people involved (Fulk, 1993; Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). Still taking a sender-focused approach, the social influence perspective suggests that individuals will make media choices based on the norms in their environment. Several researchers have expanded on this idea, suggesting that perceptions of the medium vary by individuals based on experience with the medium, the context, the norms of the individuals involved, and the message (Carlson & Zmud, 1999).

In a comprehensive examination of media use and choice factors, Trevino, Webster and Stein (2000) suggested that attitudes about communication behavior as it relates to media use needed to be examined in a more comprehensive way. Trevino and her colleagues (2000) suggested that in exploring communication media attitudes and their influence on choice and use, we should focus instead on recipient attitudes towards communication media.

More recently, scholars have pointed out how media choice often involves the combination of multiple media (Watson-Manheim & Bélanger, 2007), how ongoing media use is as important as initial media choice because users adapt media to their purposes through their use (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), and how biological and cognitive factors also may play important roles in senders’ choices (Kock, 2004; Robert & Dennis, 2005).

Taken together, these major streams of research regarding senders’ media choices suggest several important points that bear on questions of targets’ or receivers practices. First, how do the characteristics of the medium or media available influence receiver choice? Second, how might the norms and context provided the situation influence receiver choice? And third, what would a rational choice model by receivers or targets look like?
2.2 The Uses and Gratifications Literature

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is one of the most influential theories in the field of mass communication (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). It is also useful for our purposes because – unlike the media choice literature – it emphasizes receivers or audiences rather than senders. UGT holds that people actively seek out specific media in search of specific results (i.e., “gratifications”). In contrast to other theories of audience behavior, UGT included a much more agentic role for people who consciously assess multiple media in pursuit of their goals (Blumler, 1979; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Katz et al., 1973). UGT highlights the notions that people receiving information actively assess the costs and benefits of potential media, that their needs are multifaceted (cognitive, affective, social, political, etc.), that media are only one stimuli among many that may compete for people’s attention, and that – although receivers have individual agency – people make media choices in a social context that both shapes and is shaped by their actions. It is in this final sense that UGT and the Social Influence Perspective noted earlier share a common emphasis on the social embeddedness of individual’s media choices.

While UGT initially explored mass media channels like television or radio, it has also been used to understand use of interpersonal media like the telephone (Dimmick, Sikand, & Patterson, 1994). Dimmick et al (1994) argued that the telephone blended characteristics of both a mass media and an interpersonal media. This perspective was reinforced with the introduction of mobile cellular devices that allowed the phone to transmit content-oriented information traditionally bound by more mass media channels (Leung & Wei, 2000). Research has catalogued gratifications attained by the telephone to include status, sociability and affection, relaxation, mobility, and immediate access (Leung & Wei, 2000).

UGT has focused on what makes an individual choose to use the telephone generally, not why an individual chooses to answer the phone. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of ways to explore why an individual might choose to respond to this type of media. Specifically, it highlights the target’s value assessment of a specific medium. This value assessment is explicitly addressed in social exchange theory.

2.3 Social Exchange Theory

While past research has examined the message characteristics, situational variables, and medium characteristics influencing a sender’s choice of media, little research has focused on the receiver and potential decisions that the receiver makes when confronted with multiple options for interaction at any one time. Some research has explored attention and the characteristics of the task or the context that might facilitate attention (Roda, 2011). Rhetorical theory has explored specific strategies that a speaker can use to influence and engage the audience (Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). However, an audience’s choice is not about attending to a speaker or not. Rather, the choice is more often, which message is most worth my time or attention? We propose that this decision is based on an evaluation of current communication alternatives in a cost-benefit type of analysis.

A cost benefit analysis model that has been used by communication researchers to explore an individual’s choice of relationship is the social exchange perspective. While some refer to social exchange as a theory, it is actually a perspective for viewing different types of theories, both micro and macro, from an economic perspective (Emerson, 1976). Thibaut and Kelly (1959) used the concept of social exchange to apply to the way people assess relationships in terms of the costs and rewards they provide. Assumptions that ground this theory are that humans are rational beings who seek rewards and avoid punishments. Additionally, the norms and standards that human beings use to evaluate these costs and rewards are individually constructed and vary from person to person.
In order to make effective choices about the relationships that a person should remain in, Thibaut and Kelly (1959) claim that individuals are continuously evaluating relationship alternatives. The evaluation of alternatives is based on both the value an individual places on what they expect to receive from a relationship as well as the alternatives available to them at any one time. We base our current model on this evaluation process to understand how targets evaluate information streams.

While we recognize the critiques of both the social exchange model and the media richness theories as overly rational, we believe that the choices targets make when responding to incoming messages are not necessarily strategic or rational. However, we are using this approach as a way to understand the weights that a target might use in assigning attention to various media streams. We do recognize the important role of other weights like social norms (which we incorporate into the model). But we also see a rising lack of attention to social norms and an outcry regarding the lack of etiquette associated with mobile phone use (Williams, 2009). Speakers must be aware of these receiver concerns or risk being ignored. Said one consultant of the practice of putting a Blackberry or iPhone on a conference table during a meeting, “It’s a not-so-subtle way of signaling ‘I’m connected. I’m busy. I’m important’. And if this meeting doesn’t hold my interest, I’ve got 10 other things I can do instead” (Williams, 2009).

3 Theoretical Model

3.1 Key Terms

Our model focuses on “targets” and the allocation of their attention among multiple incoming information streams. We recognize that using a sender target model supports a more linear, sender receiver model of communication. While we recognize the dynamic and interactive nature of communication, we would like to focus specifically on the receiver or target of information in the seconds where they make choices about incoming streams of information. In this way we are trying to take a snapshot of the decision making that occurs very quickly within the ongoing dynamics of a complicated conversation. Therefore, in this context, a “target” is an individual receiver or potential receiver of information. That information can come via a variety of channels or media. For example, a person could be the “target” of information from a colleague calling them on the phone, a family member sending them a text message, or a group of co-workers talking in a team meeting. A person could also be a target if they are in an audience or other large group setting. For example, one could be the target of a professor’s lecture, a keynote speaker’s address, a video, etc. In such contexts, one may be receiving information, but the term “receiver” has generally been limited to interpersonal communications, so we adopt the broader label of “target” to capture both traditional message recipients as well as audience members. In addition to the 1) traditional sender-receiver context, and 2) audience members (who may occasionally talk but are primarily on the receiving end of the interaction), our use of the word “target” is also intended to capture: 3) potential receivers in the sense that a message can appear on someone’s device (blackberry, email inbox, smart phone, etc.) but the person hasn’t necessarily actually looked at or opened the message; and, 4) people looking at information streams from Facebook, Twitter, and similar social media.

Given this sense of targets, we define “incoming information” broadly to include any information directed at a target – whether it is actively received or not. By limiting ourselves to directed information, we are setting aside the allocation of attention to ambient streams of information (e.g., background music or television). Furthermore, we are not addressing the role of some observed activity that is not directed at the focal individual. For example, one might see and/or hear a group of colleagues talking in the hallway and their conversation might attract our attention (briefly while we decide whether to ignore it, close our office door, or rise to join their conversation). We might also hear a noise on the street outside. Both could clearly trigger attentional processes, but the scope of this
paper is limited to directed claims for our attention in which someone is “targeting” us specifically (as individuals or members of a particular group). We do so because such directed claims are more closely tied to the power of mobile technology to force decisions about how to allocate our attention.

By attention, we mean the cognitive process of focusing on some aspect of the environment while ignoring others. Attention is one of the oldest and most studied topics in economics, education, psychology, and neuroscience – and a continued topic of interest for some of the most famous living social scientists (Kahneman, 1973, 2011). It has also become a topic of heightened interest for management and information systems scholars (Ocasio, 1997; Roda & Nabeth, 2009). This interest is driven partly by the increase in competing claims for our attention, as well as the essential role that attention plays in choices of all kinds; we cannot choose something without first paying attention to it (Leotti, Iyengar, & Ochsner, 2010).

3.2 Model

The social exchange, comparison level, and comparison level alternative concepts can be used to analyze the choices that targets make regarding incoming information. We propose that people evaluate incoming information streams based on three elements: need for information or the reduction of uncertainty or equivocality (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Daft et al., 1987), the interactivity of the medium (Short et al., 1976; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987), and the social norms of the specific communication situation (Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990; Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987). The example of a manager attending a group meeting helps illustrate how these three elements operate. First, one’s need for information (essentially one’s desire to reduce uncertainty about something) will influence the way that a particular information stream is evaluated. For example, the extent to which a manager who believes that material that the group is discussing will be useful in accomplishing a specific task will influence the value placed on that information stream. If the manager needs this information and cannot get it another way, the manager will attend and engage and be less likely to attend to an additional information stream coming from a text message. The interactivity of the communication medium refers to the extent to which it enables bi-directional interaction. Media vary in terms of the expectations for interactivity on the part of the communicators involved. Media categorized as more rich place offer greater potential for interactivity (Daft et al., 1987). For example, a one on one conversation might place a higher expectation on the receiver to respond than a conference of 60 people. This interactivity also might influence the quality of the interaction. Specifically, a manager experiencing high uncertainty about a specific topic may want the information but feel lost by the mode of the information. If the manager has limited opportunity to clarify or ask questions, or the material is presented in such a way that the manager does not understand the content, the lack of interactivity in the medium may influence a decision to not attend to the message.

The third element that influences the evaluation of a message is the social norms of the situation. Research suggests that message choices are influenced by the norms associated with a specific media type (Fulk et al., 1987). Different communication situations bring with them norms associated with proper etiquette or expectations associated with the receiver or target’s role. While these norms vary, and are continuously changing, they can be important to understanding how receivers make specific choices (Reisch et al., 2008; Turner & Reinsch, 2007). For example, a manager might attend a meeting of 30 people as a means to show respect for the meeting and its participants.
These three elements influence the extent to which a target is satisfied by a specific information stream and therefore likely to remain attentive to it despite interruptions from other incoming messages.

The process that the target follows is depicted in Figure 1. The target is in a meeting or conversation and is faced with an additional incoming stream of information. The target then makes an evaluation of the two streams in question (existing and new) based on satisfaction with the current stream (conversation or meeting) and the alternatives available. This evaluation considers the need to reduce uncertainty, the interactivity of the choices available, and the norms of the situation, which will influence whether the target remains focused on the current information stream or elects to shift some (or all) attentional resources to the second stream. The higher the uncertainty, interactivity, and the greater the norms associated with attending to the current message stream, the less likely the target will parcel out attention to the new information stream.

Building on social exchange theory, the comparison level and comparison level for alternatives concepts, used to understand how a person decides to stay in a specific relationship compared to realistic alternatives to that relationship (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), can also be used to understand how people make decisions about whether to “stay with” a specific information stream or switch to another. Using values placed on outcome, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives, Roloff (1981) created a matrix that would describe the various conditions under which someone might make the choice to stay or leave a particular relationship. A similar approach can be used to understand the factors that might influence whether a receiver would stay or leave a specific message or conversation to participate in another one.

Carrying forward this example, each meeting or interaction is assessed by a comparison level to decide whether the meeting is good or bad. Comparison level for alternatives describes the competing messages available at any one time. This assessment determines how stable the receiver’s attention is at any one time. For example, let’s say Michelle is in an important face-to-face product meeting. She compares the meeting to her comparison level of meetings of that type. Using that assessment, Michelle decides that the current meeting is effective, primarily based on her need for information and her ability to interact (medium of communication). She also has no alternatives at this time. Her phone hasn’t vibrated so she hasn’t received any competing messages. When Michelle’s phone vibrates with a text...
message, she has to decide whether or not she will look at the phone to find out who it is from (attend) and then whether she will engage with that texter (be present). Michelle makes this decision based on the comparison level for alternatives concept. She considers the alternative choice and decides whether her need for information and ability to interact with that individual (interactivity options in that medium of communication) warrants engaging in the text message. For this decision, Michelle also considers the third element affecting target choice, social norms. If it is accepted practice to respond to texts during her current product meeting, she may be more likely to engage than if the norm is to be fully present in the meeting.

The following table (Table 1) reflects the use of comparison and comparison level for alternatives concepts as they are applied to a current conversation or information stream. The current conversation or meeting describes the outcomes received by the target in terms of uncertainty reduced and satisfaction with the medium or interactivity provided. Comparison level refers to the standard the receiver compares the current conversation or meeting to. Finally, comparison level for alternatives refers to the additional message choices presented to the receiver. State of the conversation refers to the stability of the target’s attention based on the evaluations the target makes of the current conversation/meeting and available alternatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Value of Current Conversation or Meeting, Comparison Level, and CL Alternative</th>
<th>State of the Conversation or Meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Current Conversation/Meeting &gt; Standard for this meeting &gt; Choices Available</td>
<td>Stay in the conversation or meeting, Satisfied and stable. Focus on the meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Current Conversation/Meeting &gt; Choices Available &gt; Standard for this meeting</td>
<td>Satisfied and stable. Focus on the meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Standard for this meeting &gt; Current Conversation/Meeting &gt; Choices Available</td>
<td>Unsatisfied and stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Standard for this meeting &gt; Choices Available &gt; Current Conversation/Meeting</td>
<td>Unsatisfying and unstable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Choices Available &gt; Current Conversation/Meeting &gt; Standard for this meeting</td>
<td>Satisfied and Unstable. Quick to switch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Choices Available &gt; Standard for this meeting &gt; Current Conversation/Meeting</td>
<td>Unsatisfied and unstable. Likely to switch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. How Outcome, Comparison Level, and Comparison Level for Alternatives Affect the State of a Conversation/Meeting.

Table 1 can be applied to various communication situations to better understand the choices available to targets. In Scenario 1, the current conversation is better than the standard conversation that a target has had. Additionally, the other choices available are not good. Using a business person in a meeting as an example to run through various scenarios, this situation might describe a good meeting that is better than most meetings. It is information that the person needs and she is enjoying the opportunity to participate and interact based on the media form. She has not received any texts during the meeting or she hasn’t received any that are more interesting or important than the current meeting she is participating in. Therefore, she is satisfied with the meeting and likely to stay in it. In Scenario 2, she is happy with the meeting, but the choices available to her (other texts or emails she has received) are also interesting and more interesting than what she expects to receive. She will be satisfied with the meeting and stay in it but may look at her cell phone or laptop to see who the
message is from – thus attending briefly but not participating in the second conversation. In this situation, she will feel bad about checking because she is happy with her current situation.

Scenarios 3 and 4 involve bad meetings. The standard meeting that she is expecting or comparing the current meeting to is better. In Scenarios 3 and 4, she doesn’t like the meeting she is in. However, in Scenario 3, the choices available to her are not good either. Here the situation is unsatisfying but stable. In this scenario, she has very limited alternatives available to her. Either she doesn’t have a wireless device with her for receiving messages or the norms of the meeting have prevented her from having any wireless device in view. In Scenario 4, she doesn’t like her current meeting and although the other message choices that she receives during the meeting are not great, they are better than just sitting and listening to the current meeting drone on and one without getting anything done. So in Scenario 4, she is likely to attend and then engage in the alternative message.

Scenarios 5 and 6 involve great alternative message choices. In Scenario 5, the choices available are better than her current conversation or meeting. The choices provide better reduction of uncertainty and the opportunity to engage interactively through the medium available. While she likes the meeting she is in, when she receives these particular choices, she is likely to take the call or text. However, since she likes the meeting, the norms associated with engaging in another message unrelated to the meeting may be important to her and as a result, she may feel guilty about making that choice. In Scenario 6, the current meeting is not effective. Therefore she will take the alternative message choice feeling little guilt or concern since the current meeting may be wasting her time. Because of the excellent alternative choices available to her, both of these quadrants are unstable.

4 Discussion

The communication environment is rapidly evolving with more information streams coming to the target than ever before. A 2011 study from the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project found that cell phone users between the ages of 18 and 24 exchange an average of 109.5 messages on a normal day and receive 50 messages per day (Smith, 2011). The likelihood that these texts received within the context of an ongoing message environment is high, considering users are carrying the phone with them throughout the day. Therefore, meetings, conversations, and other information streams within the daily life of organizations will be interrupted with alternative choices. The present research begins to explore the assessment of the choices available to these communicators. In doing so, the research adds to our understanding of media choice from a receiver’s perspective, complementing the current work on media choice decision making. Additionally, it engages our understanding of the comparison process to help to predict the variables that influence the stability of a given communication situation.

This research provides the managerial community an understanding of the variables to consider when creating message choices so as to maintain the stability of a given conversation or information stream. Specifically, managers may need to consider the uncertainty needs of their targets as well as the interactivity offered by the medium providing the message. Additionally, managers should recognize the role of norms in influencing this process and consider creating explicit norms governing the acceptability of target media switching within the context of organizational meetings or conversations. This development of explicit norms may be even more important considering the research on the downsides of multitasking, suggesting that when the brain switches from one task to another it is forced to accomplish
two distinct complementary steps involving goal shifting and rule activation, leading to less efficient task completion (Rubinstein, Meyer, & Evans, 2001; Yeung & Monsell, 2003).

Future research should test the viability of this model by exploring targets’ perceptions of alternative information streams and document their reactions to them. Recognizing the choices that targets make throughout the workday in evaluating alternative information streams will be critical to the understanding of how work gets done and how information is processed.
References


