

# MEDIA EXPERIENCE AND ON-LINE USERS' ACTIVITIES<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

This paper discusses the relationship between the individuals and the media, focusing on activity theory as a new explanatory approach to the theme. By discussing this concept in contrast with other various approaches that have been suggested in the field of media studies, we introduce the concept of “activity” as a central piece in elucidating the current status of the relationship between the user and the media, namely in an on-line experience. This relationship is constructed, in accordance with this perspective, not as a passive relationship based on exposure, but as a productive relationship, in which the media are used as objects within the context of collective and individual activities of objectification of a productive consumption relationship based on the mediation of artefacts. Activity theory offers new ways to understand the relation between the media and its users, but most importantly, it unveils new opportunities to understand why users become engaged differently with certain media, namely in the context of communities, though promoting the emergence of a so called media participatory culture.

## **Keywords**

Activity/activities; Use; Audiences; Consumption; Media; Communities.

Introduction: all men are active...

Human beings, whether individually or collectively, are constantly involved in activities. We are by definition beings that seek out, act and do things everyday, sometimes rationally and other times irrationally.

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the notion of activity and incorporate it into the specific scope of media studies, focusing mainly on rethinking this concept within the context of the emergence of the so called new media, particularly the Internet, and a new form of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) associated with these same media.

Activities are a central part of the contemporary relationship between the subjects and the media. With different formulations, the notion of activity, and the term *action* that is so often associated with it, is present in many of the conceptual frameworks that have emerged in the area of media studies along the years, but more importantly, it is closely linked to the actual configuration of this relationship as an object of study, to the extent that it is the existence of human action that establishes the conditions of this relation.

Concurrently, the concept of activity appears associated with a school of thought that is not well divulgated within media studies, known as activity theory. Originated in the work of Russian psychologists Vygotsky and Leont'ev (Engestrom, Miettinen & Punamaki, 1999), this school of thought can be applied within various contexts, including what is probably the application closest to the subject we are discussing, the relationship between subject and media, occurring within the field of human-computer interaction (Nardi & Kaptelinin, 2006; Kuuti, 1996). Here we seek to focus specifically on one of these theory intervention areas, the one which implies the relationship between activity and subjective communication (Davydov, 2002) and respective implications. Though, one of the main purposes of this article is to explore the potential of this discipline in this context. Activity theory deals with the manner in which subjects interact with each other and with artefacts, within the context of daily activities. We believe such an approach can greatly helps us in thinking about the relationship between the subjects and the media, while simultaneously allowing for a fruitful discussion of a working hypothesis that states the primary importance of the medium instead of the message, as a more convenient move towards better understanding the contemporary condition of this relationship.

The study of the relationship between individuals and the media is one of the founding projects of the media studies field and knowledge in this area has evolved to the extent that its own objects of study, namely the media, have evolved.

Throughout the history of the media, we have observed an epistemological movement that has shifted the object of study – and subsequently the perspective of the subject/media relationship – from the understanding of the effects media have on people, to the analysis of what people do with the media. A central part of such a pro-

cess has been the growing interest and problematic nature associated with the topic of audiences.

Audiences are an object of study that is both fascinating and elusive. Audiences are by nature hard to define. There is, however, an initial premise that we can accept without hesitation: media consumption and use is a social activity and everyone involved in that process is inherently part of an audience.

Being part of the audience often refers to the existing involvement between subject and media, and this activity is often assessed as being more or less utilitarian, more or less intentional and more or less selective, depending on the theoretical perspective in question.

In the context of our proposal, "activity" is a concept understood in a broader sense and detached from a concrete relationship with the media. It is seen as a general manner of viewing things as part of an activity, while at the same time seeing them as a way of conducting a process. Every subject does this. We are all like this because, above everything, we are all active.

The assumption that in the eyes of the media the main activity of the subject is consumption leaves us with complex questions that are difficult to answer. If the attitude of the individual is indicative of its relationship with the media, what then is the nature of this relationship: a passive relationship or a productive one? If this relationship is a productive one, then how can we understand the status of the audience as a mere recipient of the media discourse? If, on the contrary, this is a passive relationship, then how can we explain the replication of the consumption activity that occurs via the transaction of messages amongst the audiences?

These are some of the difficult questions that media studies have tried to answer in the past, namely in the framework of mass communication research, using relatively stable categories and variable models that seek to understand the role of the subject in relation to the media, and its respective implications.

## 2. What is the relationship between activity and communication?

Media distribute messages and texts of a variable nature regarding things, actions and events the audience relates to. This relationship is a process that varies according to each individual and always implies an accessible material side – the medium itself – and an intangible side – the messages that are mediated – which, together

with the subjects, constitute the relationship environment where activities occur.

Since communicative interaction in its various forms became an object of study, media messages have always represented an essential area of interest. This triangle between subjects, communication media, and messages, led to an institutional perspective on audiences, focused on their measurement and assessment, whether for commercial purposes or with the intention of collecting information that could help in the decision-making process within economic and political contexts (Webster, Phalen & Litchy, 2000).

A critical approach to audiences (Ruddock, 2001) has come to oppose this institutional perspective with successive configurations that engender audience-related problems, sometimes doing no more than asking unanswerable questions or creating new paradigms that either cannot be generalised, or cannot be replicated within the real context of daily life.

The relationship between the subjects and the media that concerns us here can be regarded on the basis of three points of view that result in different research approaches: a relationship centred on the medium, on audiences' or on culture. Any of these perspectives can be better understood in accordance with the relevance that is placed on the two most sensitive elements in this relationship: the text and the context.

Text and context can be understood as expressions that replace the message and the social and cultural environment, which are central parts of all theories that discuss the relationship between the subjects and the media. Theories solely focused on the medium correspond to the so called "effects theories" and place all their attention clearly on the text as the basis of transmission, which results in effects. Theories that focus on audiences are based on transactional perspectives, where the consequences for the text consumption and reception context are discussed, while the theories that focus on culture put more emphasis on context, namely a discussion on the media's relevance in constructing the general symbolic cultural environment where the individuals interact.

Of the three perspectives listed, the one that appears to be more relevant in terms of considering the central value of the activity throughout the process, in light of its transactional and interactional character, is the one that focuses on the audience and seeks a balance between the text and the message.

Whichever perspective we take acceptance of the consumption of the medium, or its messages if we prefer, as something central to this entire process has driven various types of research concerned with the detailed analysis and understanding

of such activities or their consequences. There is one element, however, that almost always predominates: the association between consumption as an activity and messages to the detriment of the medium, namely because:

a) Focusing the consumption activity on the medium would imply attributing a passive role to the audience;

b) Focusing the activity on the medium implies accepting the instrumental and deterministic characteristics of the communication apparatus.

The ongoing debate about the passive or active nature of audiences and its implications in terms of subjective meaning construction processes in fact underlies many of the dominant formulations of what an activity is in the field of media studies.

Some of these formulations and respective contributions, namely those developed within the context of the "uses and gratifications" theory (Kim & Rubin, 1997), "reception studies" (Costello & Moore, 2007) or within the context of the "media use as social action" theory (Renckstorf, 1996), introduce the concept of activity as a central variable for the understanding of the relationship between the subjects and the media.

At the core of these proposals we almost inevitably find the message, which is sometimes seen as the cause of effects, according to the first theories developed within the scope of media studies, or sometimes in subsequent theories as the object of interpretation and the basis of discourse.

This discussion has evolved throughout history alongside the dichotomy between a passive audience and an active one. The capacity of the subjects to define their own meanings for the messages carried by the media or the subjects' complete submission to the carried product act as gauges that assess the audience's active or passive characteristic.

The group of perspectives fixed on the uses and gratifications theory represent one of the most relevant approaches in the creation of an active audience, by emphasising individual choice and necessity as elements that explain the relationship between the subjects and the media.

Activity is not viewed within this context as a principle that explains the relationship, but as a consequence of the relationship. That is to say, activity is a process that is specific to the relational system that is created between medium and subject, but it does not conceptually preside over its creation. Within this view, the relationship precedes the activity that results from the relationship.

In the context of the uses and gratifications theory, an activity is the process by which the subject selects and decides which messages are of interest to him according to its intentions. An activity is thus perceived as a facilitator of the relationship with the medium, while selectivity, attention and involvement are the forms of activities that mediate such a relationship. However, an activity can also be an individual obstacle to the process of relating to the media, particularly in cases where there is distraction or escape from contact with the message. Within such a context, an activity is formalised as something multi-dimensional that is at the origin of the needs that generate expectations in the subject and different consumption patterns (uses) and therefore different consequences (gratifications), depending on the activity that is involved. The essential aspect of this approach is the definition of the need for gratification as a catalyst for the individual's behaviour and, consequentially, of his or her activities.

The uses and gratifications theory proposes formulating the activity of using a medium as something that is motivated by the needs of individuals who make choices in accordance with pre-existing interests. Here, the subject is seen to interact within a broad social context in which his or her activities are catalysts for social actions (Kim & Rubin, 1997) and the way the subject uses and interprets the messages differs in accordance with the type of need that motivates his or her attitude toward the media.

There are three aspects that are particularly noteworthy in terms of the uses and gratifications theory: the planned and organised characteristic of the consumption activity; the emphasis on individual motivation; and the concept of use as a consequence of exposure to a message. Any one of these postulates raises numerous questions and its global or localised criticism has been the cause of some of the questions that have ensued from this approach (Livingstone, 1993). Excessive focus on content and on the individual to the detriment of attention to social contexts and the respective implications has sparked approaches that are more attentive to the process of collective construction of meanings.

Concentration on contents (messages) and on the categories of reader/decoder/audience member have continued to be present in later approaches, such as those we associate with reception studies (Jensen & Rosenberg, 1990), but in this case with a significance equivalent to the one given to questions of real practices of media usage. The active audience begins to be understood in a more collective manner as a "community" that constructs socially shared meanings.

Reception studies focus on popular forms of constructing media messages, such as soap operas, using qualitative methodologies that often have an ethnographic

basis, to interpret social practices that cause different types of uses, which according to this perspective are at the centre of the relationship between the individual and the media. For reception studies, social context and the underlying influence of the surrounding environment are the determinant variables of the process. However, great importance continues to be attributed to text (the message) as an essential element in understanding subjective activities, to the extent that the text is symbolically codified, often with large ideological connotations included in the vehicle of expression, or it is selectively reconstructed by the subjects in accordance with their own social values – class, gender, age, etc. This focus on the text reflects the general orientation of this theoretical approach and prevents a more generalist understanding of the role activities have in the subjects' experience. Audience's behavioural patterns can only be understood as a means of choice and response to media messages, in accordance with a relational context mediated by specific individual, communitarian and cultural variables.

In reception studies, the relationship between activity and communication is centred on the multiplicity of meanings that the collectively organised subjects attribute to messages according to how they use the media that carry those messages.

Any one of the previous approaches considers the concept of activity as being central to the understanding of the relationship between subjects and media, to the extent that subjective activities are what turn them into an "active audience" and allow for the isolation of various relevant aspects of the relationship between the subject and the media, namely on what concerns mass communication media.

However, none of these perspectives entirely avoids a possibly excessive emphasis on the content of the communication process, nor is it able to dissociate the activity of the subjects from the specific process of exposure to a media message. While these theories can be useful in understanding the relationship between the media and certain aspects of individual, social or cultural life, they do not tell us much about the exact nature of the relational activity that occurs between the subject and the medium, namely in terms of concrete individual and collective actions of media usage in the context of new media. Perhaps the reason for this has to do with the stability of the mass communication media these theories dealt with and which resulted in a relational model essentially based on the existence of a phase of exposure to the medium, whether active or passive, that determined the creation/reception of a content that moulded the entire experience. The medium was in fact the message.

### 3. The medium as the object of the activity

Our perspective is that only through greater attention to the actual medium can we understand the current characteristics of the relationship between subjects and the media. Why? Essentially for two reasons: because the use of the medium has become more important than the message, or has at least become dissociated from it due to the nature of digital platforms and their growing importance (Poster, 2006), and because it is exposure to the medium that appears to be guiding the subject's attention, along with the subject's involvement with the media, and not exposure to the content/message (Howard & Jones, 2004).

At first glance one could rashly conclude that we are dealing with a behavioural perspective that entirely excludes the socially constructed character of technologies and the social reality that encircles their diffusion (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). Conception of reality as something socially constructed results in an interactional model in which audiences are viewed as something active that constructs different meanings via the communication process. The content of that communication process (the messages) is then conceived as an object that is to be interpreted by communities of subjects. The response of the audience is thus a response to the influence of a social and cultural whole to which it has contributed. By affirming that we should specifically be focusing on the medium, we are apparently negating the primary importance of the social aspect.

Our working hypothesis assumes that the relationship between activities and communication is an expressive procedural relationship in which communication expresses the relationship of manipulation of an object, namely the medium, by the subjects according to a need and specific available information (de Souza, 2005).

Validation of this hypothesis will be discussed taking into account a specific medium: the internet, which causes changes in social environments and in the nature of the consumption process that orients the relationship between the subjects and the media. Furthermore, we intend to frame the emergence of one specific phenomenon, on-line participatory culture, within such theory and by doing so hopefully show that such approach offers better explanatory qualities than others used in the past, especially in the case of on-line users' experience. By making this affirmation we do not intend to support any deterministic discourses that exalt a revolution with each new PC generation or that view information as an unstoppable social force. Our initial premise is relatively simple: if the technological foundation has changed (it is unquestio-

nable that digital technology has changed the technological foundation of our media), then the nature of our media consumption activity has also changed and as such we should and can rethink the actual concept of activity on the basis of the communication principle being the expressive foundation of a material activity.

Discussion of this hypothesis has a double objective: introduce the concept of activity, namely in the manner in which it is conceptualised within the context of “activity theory” (Nardi, 1996; Roth & Lee, 2007), as a possible basis that will allow us to better understand the contemporary relationship of the subjects with communication and information technologies, and validate the assumption that the symbolic environment constructed by contemporary man via a media culture is above all precisely the result of a process of activities, which if incorporated according to its own frame of reference, which we here relate to the consumption activity (Poster, 2006), can help explain unique and real social circumstances.

The mass media dealt with by the uses and gratifications theory or the reception theory, which we discussed above, adapted well to the almost exclusive emphasis on content and the social and cultural environment. Meanwhile, the new media resulting from the gradual dissemination of information technologies and digitally based communication (Winston, 2003) have greater difficulty in adapting to this categorisation, particularly with respect to context. Our proposal involves paying attention to the context of the experience according to other variables that are not solely associated with content (Costello & Moore, 2007), but it does not imply diminishing the value the audience has as an element that aggregates the entire process.

The audience, as a category that allows the subjects to be collectively organised in accordance with the messages and the media, has been understood to be, as we have seen before, both a starting and a finish point in understanding the process of using and receiving messages. By shifting the focus of our analysis to the communication medium understood as a material element, our theory focuses on the subject’s capacity to *act*.

In order to define the type and nature of actions, we will resort to both activity theory (Nardi, 2006) and the media use as social action theory (Renckstorf, 1996), and discuss the relationship of the media with the subjects in accordance with a perspective we call “material” because it is focused on discourse, not as a symbolic universe, but as a group of mediatised actions (Scollon, 2001) and real objects that are available to subjects.

The media use as social action theory states that individuals get involved in activities that are based on their own aims, intentions and interests. It is the interaction that results from these activities that enable subjects to reflect on their actions and generate meaning. At the centre of this approach is the theory that individuals have the capacity to act on objects in their daily lives, whether they are means of communication or messages mediated by them. Activities underlying these individual actions thus become central to the construction of meaning and it is this that enables the individual to develop a relationship with the media that is clearly interpretive.

Although media use as social action theory essentially focuses on the mass media, it involves principles that are applicable to any type of medium, namely by postulating that the media are limited to offering subjects content that corresponds to objects determined by an environment where the medium is the main symbolic element. It is in accordance with this environment that subjects begin to be idealised as creators of messages.

This perspective thus seeks to break with a set of dichotomies established within the context of media studies, namely that of active and passive; message and medium; consumption and production; object and content; and exterior and interior, focusing the entire relationship between the subject and the media on the subjects' process of acting.

Media use as social action theory has essentially evolved within the context of mass communication studies (Renckstorf, 1997), but the principles mentioned there are a clear benefit in understanding the current context of the relationship between subjects and the digitally-based media, particularly when such a relationship is understood in light of an explanatory system that not only breaks with those dichotomies, but is also able to incorporate the subjective action into the social context where it occurs.

Activity theory allows one to go beyond the media use as social action theory, to the extent that although the two theories share the assumption of the existence of resources available to the subjects for use in actions, activity theory also attempts to understand how these actions generate new actions that lead to original consequences within the social context and which can be supported by activities that are not limited to involvement with the medium but incorporate the subjective relationship into a process of relational effort. What is more, activity theory exhibits an integrated system (Engestrom, 1999) in which we can see that the context is clearly more relevant than the text and the relational activity of the subject becomes a holistic cultural base

that enables simultaneous understanding of the specific relationship between subject and medium and between the community of subjects and the medium, in a more global and historically constructed manner. Activity theory therefore seems to be a suitable approach to our working hypothesis and as such in the remainder of this text we will discuss the feasibility of the theory within the context of media studies.

Activity theory states that when individuals interact with the surrounding environment, actions are developed that result in productive tools. These tools are an external manifestation of mental processes, which as they are formalised, become more accessible and communicable to other subjects, thereby generating social interaction.

Activity theory is an approach that has its roots in the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and of the founders of the historical-cultural school, Leont'ev and Luria, who, in the old Soviet Union, wrote a series of papers in the 1920s and 1930s focusing on the problems of subjects' cognition and learning. The possible contributions of activity theory are quite diverse and the theory has gathered greater interest in such diverse fields as educational psychology (Roth & Lee, 2007) and human-machine interaction (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), essentially to the extent that it is an approach that enables subject analysis to focus on the subject's concrete activities in the real world.

#### 4. Activity, actions and relationship with the media

In the particular case of media studies and to the extent that they are profoundly influenced by the evolution of their own objects of study, activity theory seems to be tailor-made to include local activities (media usage) that use historically-created artefacts and that evolve within a society where various networks foster the evolution and circulation of objects (Winston, 2003).

Activity theory adds two essential contributions to our discussion: firstly, it allows the mediatization of the relationship between subject and medium to be reconceptualised, and secondly, it allows various "activity" levels to be incorporated, which will allow us to go beyond the dichotomy between text and context.

In its simplest form, an activity is defined as the involvement of a subject with a particular objective. If we like, we can call this the first level of the activity's object, its existence as a material entity in the world. The activity is developed by the subject, who is encouraged to resolve his or her problem or proposal, namely the object, and as such uses artefacts (tools) worn to establish a mediatized relationship that

occurs in collaboration with others (the community and which results in something) (Fig. 1). This is the second level of an activity, with a subjective view of a present or future objective. The system that activity theory advocates results from the knowledge accumulated in this mediatisation process between subjects, artefacts and objects (Engestrom, 1999).

Activity theory thus focuses on the specific interaction between subjects and objects according to motives. Motives refer to the fact that a particular object corresponds to the satisfaction of a subject's need. The meaning of any system component is thus determined by its role within a particular context in accordance with the response it allows to a motive. The ultimate cause of any human activity thus becomes a need (Nardi, 2006). It should be pointed out that although activity theory takes into account various types of needs, it states that it is only when the need is actually perceived that an activity emerges. The concept of activity thus includes orientation towards an object that simultaneously motivates it and directs it. The essential property of a need is therefore the fact that it cannot be separated from the object. However, activity theory, using a dialectical process, is able to incorporate activities' objectification into the historical-cultural process to the extent that it postulates that all needs are transformed by culture and society, which defines incentives and constraints, particularly technological in nature, with regard to selecting the objects of needs.

This systematic vision enables activity theory to analyse subjects' concrete actions and respective interactions with artefacts in light of historical and cultural contexts that do not necessarily depend on the nature of the mediatised text or on the specific state of the subject at the time, as occurs in other approaches in the media studies field that we have referred to above.

In activity theory, the nature of the object always depends on the nature of the subject, such as in the case of the media use as social action theory; however, the nature of the subject also depends on the nature of the object; the medium is therefore placed at the centre of the entire relationship, as stated in our working hypothesis.

Activity theory identifies three distinct levels in any activity: activity, action and operation. Activities consist of actions or a series of actions that conform to the identified levels. Actions are an essential component of any activity but they are not perceived from a task point of view as in the more traditional approaches of human-machine interaction (HMI) and are instead material formulations conditional upon an activity (e.g., if the activity is writing this text, one action will be the bibliographic research upon which it depends). Last of all, an operation is the way of executing actions. Op-

erations correspond to the necessary concrete conditions for attaining the object.

These different levels of an activity enable distinctions to be made between the activity intended as an effort and other types of events more commonly associated with the term “activity,” and which are structures that correspond to the concrete involvement with something, and which herein will henceforth be understood as being tasks and as such shall be interpretable as actions that realise activities (Roth & Lee, 2007).



FIGURE 1. ACTIVITY THEORY BASIC MODEL (KUUTTI, 1996)

The subjects of individual activity systems conduct actions collectively and adopt a general motive that corresponds to an object needed by many. This process implies that the structure of an activity should be collectively modelled in accordance with rules and conventions that attribute to the community the role of effective instrument for mediating the relationship between the subject, artefacts and the object of the activity (Fig. 2).

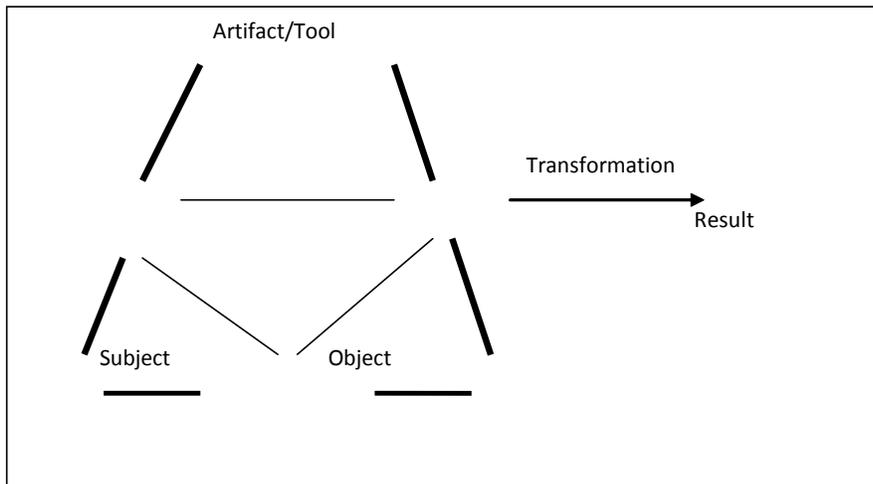


FIG. 2. EXPANDED MODEL OF AN ACTIVITY SYSTEM

According to this model, we can thus understand that activity theory proposes a system that is constantly changing, in which the subjects not only use the instruments but also adapt them according to their motives and collectively negotiated rules. The proposed relationship between the various elements of the system therefore does not contradict a model of social construction of reality, but rather stimulates it, while incorporating the existing interactions and relationships into a framework governed by objects, in which human activity is culturally mediated.

In addition to enabling us to better understand the various levels present in an activity, the theory being discussed introduces the concept of reference, which names the dialectical relationship between actions (objectives) and operations (conditions). As such, an operation is moulded not only by its specific objective – for instance, the way a task is understood in terms of the more traditional HMI approaches – but by the conditions of the motive and objective that enable it to be realised. In other words, an operation, the most basic stage of an activity, emerges as a response to a relationship of satisfaction of an object in accordance with a state of the action and its material context. Accordingly, the subject shall always consciously choose its tools for executing the activities and actions in accordance with the objects in question and thereby mediate the relationship between object and subject.

The relationship we have just described validates our working hypothesis and we are convinced that it is the one that best allows us to understand the current status of the relationship between the subject and the media. In order to confirm this possibility we will next introduce discuss try understand on-line users behaviour in light of the activities they conduct and see how this contributes to the emergence of a so called participatory cultural (Jenkins, 2006).

## 5. Internet Activities

Generally speaking, the Internet is especially complex. Most importantly, it is not a homogeneous technology. It is a group of diverse functionalities that includes e-mail, games, online newspapers, chat, blogs, and social-networking sites such as Hi5 or YouTube. The Internet is the ideal space for discourse and therefore a very important object of study if we want to understand the status and value of activities within this platform social and cultural context.

Past research conducted regarding the Internet focused on the use of measurement tools, namely those that refer to exposure (Harper, 2003) in order to try to understand user behaviour. The problem with such approach is that on the Internet we can find vast amounts of original behavioural variables, such as a dispersion of users' activities while interacting with the medium. As such, the user can simultaneously be playing games, doing homework or watching videos. This phenomenon requires that from the start we assume that in this case, use of the medium is not equivalent to the number and type of activities the subject performs while using the medium.

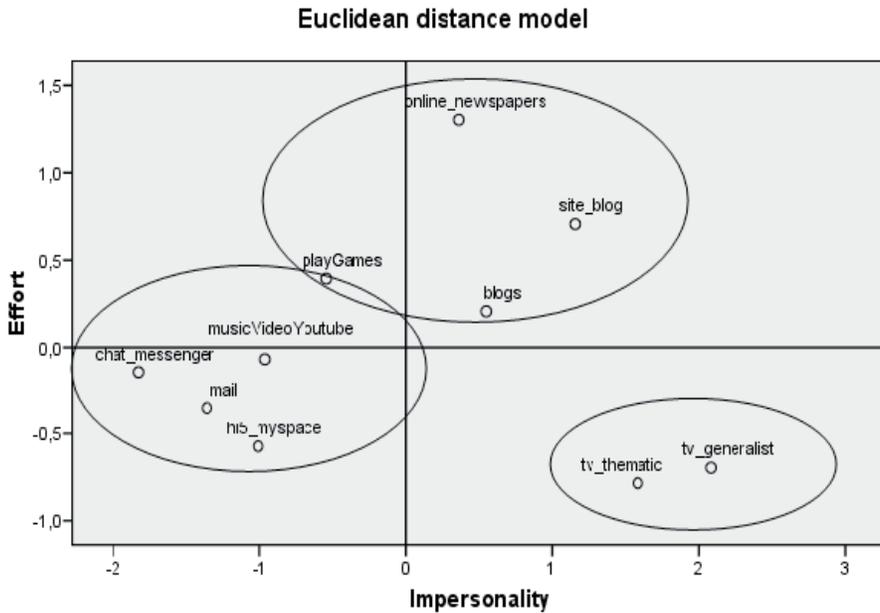
As such, it is the activity being conducted, not the technology being used, that is the key to understand Internet usage. In our study (Damásio & Poupa, 2008), an attempt was made to precisely identify the type and nature of the activities that are involved in the relationship between the subjects and the Internet medium.

A multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) method was used to construct a spatial chart and find a group of dimensions for the activities associated with the Internet. In 2007, a questionnaire was given out to a sample of 1932 individuals, 599 (31%) of which were female and 1333 (69%) were male. The ages ranged from 12 to 18. Most of the respondents were secondary school or university students of Portuguese nationality. This questionnaire asked the respondents to indicate their preferences for a group of activities related to the medium in question in order to construct an overall spatial chart that represent this space of interaction.

In a later phase of the study, a derived approximation was used and the preference indication was based on the frequency of each activity (Schkade, Stafford & Stafford, 2004). Among other data, this study resulted in identification and subsequent spatial representation of on-line activities in terms of two dimensions. Dimension 1 identified and highly rated activities directly related to personal communication or to forms of individual expression (such as posting information on Hi5 or YouTube). That is why it is appropriate to identify Dimension 1 as the *Personal Expression* Dimension. In contrast, activities with a negative value in Dimension 2 exhibit reduced effort. These activities include those related to traditional media such as TV, along with a group of Internet activities that do not require much effort or learning. In contrast, activities that exhibit a high value in Dimension 2, such as website development, writing blogs, or online gaming, require some effort, whether it be a simple reading effort, an effort to overcome a technical difficulty in constructing a website (Hee Song & Zinkhan, 2008), or an effort to learn the rules of a game. Dimension 2 is therefore an *Effort* Dimension.

The graphic representation of MDS resulting from this study illustrated in figure 3 provides an overview of the various activities identified. The graph depicts the relationships of perceptual proximity/distance between the various activities, as well as the positioning of each activity along the axes in question: *effort* and *Personal expression* here represented by the negative value of *impersonality*.

### Derived Stimulus Configuration



Stress = 0.06047 RSQ = 0.98163

FIG. 3. SPATIAL REPRESENTATION BASED ON THE MDS OF INTERNET ACTIVITIES.

The chart reveals three areas: The first is located in the left quadrants and groups together activities that include chat, instant messenger, e-mail, Hi5 and YouTube. It is an area of low effort and low impersonality. This area groups together activities that involve interaction with other users and personal expression. The second area is located in the upper quadrants and includes the following activities: reading blogs and newspapers, and constructing websites and writing blogs. This area groups together

activities that require effort. Games are on the borderline between these two areas, likely because they have very diverse levels of complexity.

The two areas of Internet activity appear in opposition to television, quite distant from it. TV-related activities are located in the bottom-right quadrant in this activities group space. They represent extreme values of impersonality and low effort. This is the TV space and there is no Internet activity in its vicinity.

The results of this study show that television is a unique experience, very distant from all Internet activities. Within a two-dimensional space, television occupies a single quadrant in contrast with a group of Internet activities whose main characteristic is that they are forms of personalisation and personal expression. In addition, television appears in opposition to another group of Internet activities that are associated with some form of effort.

The two-dimensional space, with an axis of personal interaction versus impersonal and an axis of effort versus non-effort seems to be a true representation of Internet activities and their relationship with mass-media such as television. In this overall communication space shared by Internet and television, television comes across as a medium characterised by impersonality and absence of audience effort. Internet activities, on the contrary, show great diversity in terms of these two dimensions. Impersonality on the Internet varies from the high values in creating websites to the low values characteristic of using Hi5 and e-mail.

Internet activities are grouped into two clusters: the first is a cluster of basic activities that require low effort and low impersonality, while the second is a cluster of advanced activities that require high effort. One of our first goals was to understand who were the users included in the cluster of advanced activities and verify if such group included on-line communities users. For that purpose we developed a score for the usage of advanced activities. The results show that male tend to have highest scores on the usage of advanced internet activities (Table 2). The same happens with people with high number of hours per day of internet usage (Tables 1 and 2). They also tend to have highest scores on the usage of advanced internet activities. Those two correlations were significant at the 0,01 level as the next table shows.

Correlations

|                 |  |                         | qts horas por dia usadas net em casa, trab/escola ou outro local | advanced ActivitiesScore |
|-----------------|--|-------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Kendall's tau_b | qts horas por dia usadas net em casa, trab/escola ou outro local | Correlation Coefficient | 1,000  | ,248**                   |
|                 |  | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .  | ,000                     |
|                 |  | N                       | 2074   | 1607                     |
|                 | advancedActivitiesScore  | Correlation Coefficient | ,248**   | 1,000                    |
|                 |  | Sig. (2-tailed)         | ,000   | .                        |
|                 |  | N                       | 1607   | 1681                     |
| Spearman's rho  | qts horas por dia usadas net em casa, trab/escola ou outro local | Correlation Coefficient | 1,000  | ,326**                   |
|                 |  | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .  | ,000                     |
|                 |  | N                       | 2074   | 1607                     |
|                 | advancedActivitiesScore  | Correlation Coefficient | ,326**   | 1,000                    |
|                 |  | Sig. (2-tailed)         | ,000   | .                        |
|                 |  | N                       | 1607   | 1681                     |

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 1 – CORRELATION TIME OF USAGE/TYPE OF ACTIVITIES

Our second goal was to find if there was a demographic group to which online communities had a stronger appeal. We found that this was true for female and for the group with less than 16 years old (Tables 2 and 3).

participar em sites de comunidds online \* Sexo Crosstabulation

|   |                    | Sexo           |          | Total  |       |
|---|--------------------|----------------|----------|--------|-------|
|   |                    | Masculino      | Feminino |        |       |
| participar em sites de comunidds online | nunca              | Count          | 135      | 388    | 523   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | 163,8    | 359,2  | 523,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | -28,8    | 28,8   |       |
|   | menos 1 vez semana | Count          | 106      | 210    | 316   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | 98,9     | 217,1  | 316,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | 7,1      | -7,1   |       |
|   | 1 a 2 dias semana  | Count          | 125      | 280    | 405   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | 126,8    | 278,2  | 405,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | -1,8     | 1,8    |       |
|   | 3 a 6 dias semana  | Count          | 127      | 194    | 321   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | 100,5    | 220,5  | 321,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | 26,5     | -26,5  |       |
|   | tds dias           | Count          | 137      | 310    | 447   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | 140,0    | 307,0  | 447,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | -3,0     | 3,0    |       |
| Total                                   | Count              | 630            | 1382     | 2012   |       |
|   | Expected Count     | 630,0          | 1382,0   | 2012,0 |       |

Chi-Square Tests

|                              | Value               | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 18,378 <sup>a</sup> | 4  | ,001                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 18,228              | 4  | ,001                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 5,203               | 1  | ,023                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 2012                |    |                       |

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 98,95.

TABLE 2 – CORRELATION SEX/TYPE OF ACTIVITIES

We also found that the relation between sex and visiting online communities is significant at the 0,05 level. Female tend to visit online communities more often the same being true for people with less than 16 years old. The relation between age and the frequency of visits of online communities is significant at the 0,05 level.

participar em sites de comunidds online \* idadeEscala2 Crosstabulation

|   |                    |                | idadeEscala2 |         |            |        | Total |
|---|--------------------|----------------|--------------|---------|------------|--------|-------|
|   |                    |                | 15 ou menos  | 16 a 18 | 19 ou mais |        |       |
| participar em sites de comunidds online | nunca              | Count          | 0            | 110     | 326        | 104    | 540   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | ,8           | 128,2   | 311,7      | 99,3   | 540,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | -,8          | -18,2   | 14,3       | 4,7    |       |
|   | menos 1 vez semana | Count          | 0            | 72      | 191        | 58     | 321   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | ,5           | 76,2    | 185,3      | 59,0   | 321,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | -,5          | -4,2    | 5,7        | -1,0   |       |
|   | 1 a 2 dias semana  | Count          | 1            | 93      | 237        | 82     | 413   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | ,6           | 98,1    | 238,4      | 75,9   | 413,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | ,4           | -5,1    | -1,4       | 6,1    |       |
|   | 3 a 6 dias semana  | Count          | 2            | 75      | 198        | 53     | 328   |
|   |                    | Expected Count | ,5           | 77,9    | 189,3      | 60,3   | 328,0 |
|   |                    | Residual       | 1,5          | -2,9    | 8,7        | -7,3   |       |
| tds dias                                | Count              | 0              | 137          | 232     | 80         | 449    |       |
|   | Expected Count     | ,7             | 106,6        | 259,2   | 82,5       | 449,0  |       |
|   | Residual           | -,7            | 30,4         | -27,2   | -2,5       |        |       |
| Total                                   | Count              | 3              | 487          | 1184    | 377        | 2051   |       |
|   | Expected Count     | 3,0            | 487,0        | 1184,0  | 377,0      | 2051,0 |       |

Chi-Square Tests

|                    | Value               | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 24,621 <sup>a</sup> | 12 | ,017                  |
| Likelihood Ratio   | 23,878              | 12 | ,021                  |
| N of Valid Cases   | 2051                |    |                       |

a. 5 cells (25,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,47.

TABLE 3 – CORRELATION AGE/TYPE OF ACTIVITIES

From the previous analysis we can conclude that on-line communities' users are not the same users that perform advance internet activities. Considering that, we cannot affirm that the emergence of a so called participatory culture corresponds to any form of advance use of the medium, but that, on the contrary, it represents some of the simplest type of activities involved in the on-line experience, namely due to the simplicity of the activity being performed.

The activity model empirically validated in this study corresponds to a system of activities where the subjects are provided with resources (Internet services) in order to conduct actions that seek to fulfil subjective objects. These resources are not established in a deterministic manner, instead, in accordance with the context, they facilitate production of actions that are made available to others in an emerging social network.

Thus, in light of activity theory we can interpret Figure 3 as a representation of a system that produces consumption, where the relationship between individual subjects is an exchange that depends on the level of effort and therefore activity, a factor that is determined by the nature of the object that is to be fulfilled, which ultimately depends on the medium (context) and not the content (text). A specific type of activities, use of on-line communities, was used to illustrate this and elements were shown exemplifying how specific groups of users develop different activities in accordance first of all with their experience of the medium.

#### 6. The relation between the user and the medium: I am what I do

The presented model sufficiently proves our initial working hypothesis and establishes activity theory as a basis for rethinking the contemporary relationship between subjects and media. The concept of activity as it has been introduced here enables us to consider the concrete experience of consumption as a moment when the audience takes on an active function in accordance with the activity it performs over the media object. In addition, the concept of “activity” relates the meanings contained within a medium with daily social practices, thus allowing consumption to be understood also as a form of relationship between the media and life. Consumption relates to the media in two ways: on the one hand the media themselves are viewed as objects to be consumed, while on the other hand they provide audiences with guidelines about the position they should take in a consumption culture, which implies that the presented theoretical approach should not neglect the activity’s contextualising cultural environment.

Acts of consumption are understood here as examples of mediated updating of socially constructed meanings, which causes the concept of activity to begin placing material practices at the centre of communication studies to the detriment of the more traditional concerns with the message and its results/consequences. Based on this, an original approach was presented relating the use of on-line communities with the experience of the medium and related activities. This allowed us to isolate a specific group of users more favourable to the consumption of such activities – females under 16 – and to isolate the same in the sphere of low effort/low impersonality type of internet activities.

In the proposed model it is the tool and the object/subject relationship that best describes the current position of the subject in relation to the media. It is only by describing the activity that occurs irreversibly and in real time that we can currently understand the nature of the relation between the subject and the media in the context of an on-line experience.

While an activity is conducted through material objects, it produces and reproduces social identities and material structures within a nexus of practices (Scollon, 2001).

Throughout this article we have discussed various theoretical approaches to the problem of the relationship between subjects and the media, always focusing on understanding the nature of that relationship and the contribution of different perspectives. Activity theory with its object-oriented conception and its procedural description of the material realisation of the various objects by the subject is an approach that enables us to overcome problems and dichotomies that are present in other perspectives, bridge the gap between individual and collective subjects and view the problem as a productive consumption relationship in relation to an artefact that helps satisfying needs.

The key idea we are left with in terms of this process is that of mediatisation of the relationship between the subject and the media by artefacts. This observation leads to our assertion that media studies should consider the possibility of once again focusing their attention on the medium, rather than on the message. Concurrently, activity theory proposes a very specific notion of context, distinct from other socialising approaches, whereby the context is considered the sum of the objects, actions and operations where the activity occurs. The empirical analysis of a case study has proven the validity of this notion of context and its relevance to the description of the current status of the relationship between subjects and the media. Individuals consciously generate contexts (activities) through their actions and in large part according to their objects. Today, it is more often the case that we are what we do!

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