

## Audience Orientations Toward New Media

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*The proliferation of new communication technologies over the last 2 decades has increased opportunities for audience activity by offering more choices and greater control over the communication process for media consumers. However, extant research on the degree of user activity with new media portrays conflicting views of audience members as more active or more passive. This study attempts to sort out this issue by exploring audience activity levels among users of new and traditional media, as indicated by instrumental or ritualized orientations toward media use. Results indicate that new communication technologies are motivated by both instrumental and ritualized motives, but are used more instrumentally than traditional channels, particularly among older users.*

Over the last 20 years, audience activity has emerged as an important concept in mass communication research. According to uses and gratifications researchers, audience activity refers to the degree to which media consumers choose to use specific media in order to satisfy felt needs (Blumler, 1979; Kim & Rubin, 1997; Levy 1987; Levy & Windahl, 1984, 1985; Perse 1990a; Rubin & Perse, 1987a, 1987b). Relatively active or passive use patterns have implications for involvement with media content, media effects, and the establishment of media policy. For instance, greater media involvement has been linked to an active orientation toward using media channels (Hearn, 1989; Kim & Rubin, 1997; Levy & Windahl, 1984; Perse, 1990a, 1990b, 1998; Rubin, 1993, 1994; Rubin & Perse, 1987a, 1987b) and can result in greater parasocial interac-

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tion or affective involvement with media content, which in turn influences individuals' information attainment and processing (Kim & Rubin, 1997; Perse, 1990c; Rubin & Perse, 1987a; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). According to Rubin (1998), an active orientation toward media use can also lead to greater cognitive involvement with media content that may increase attitude change and learning (p. 259). Furthermore, the formation of communication policy can depend on how actively media consumers are thought to process and, in turn, act on information obtained from the mass media (Tremayne, 1999; Webster & Phalen, 1994). Thus, active or passive media use patterns are important in contemporary conceptualizations of mediated information processing and effects.

Concerns about active and passive media use patterns are especially timely in view of the appearance of new media, such as the internet, web, and electronic mail. These technologies have been celebrated for offering media consumers more choice of, participation with, and control over content and, thus, more opportunity for activity. Although there are many conceptualizations of audience activity, scholars taking a uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective have framed the concept in terms of audience motivations for using a medium (e.g., Rubin, 1993). According to Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), for example, "communication motives are key components of audience activity" because they constitute "general dispositions that influence people's actions taken to fulfill a need or want" (p. 179). In fact, a number of studies have linked audience activity levels to people's motivations for media use (Kim & Rubin, 1997; Levy & Windahl, 1984; Perse, 1990a, 1990b, 1998; Perse & Rubin, 1988; Rubin, 1984, 1993, 1994; Rubin & Perse, 1987a, 1987b).

In general, the U&G literature on audience activity identifies two overarching media orientations, instrumental and ritualized use, based on users' motivations. An *instrumental* orientation involves intentionally and selectively using media for goal-directed motives such as information seeking, behavioral guidance, or arousal. By contrast, a *ritualized* orientation involves using media primarily for diversionary motives such as use that occurs out of habit or for passing time (Hearn, 1989; Kim & Rubin, 1997; Perse, 1990a, 1990b, 1998; Perse & Rubin, 1988; Rubin, 1984, 1993; Rubin & Perse, 1987a, 1987b). These two media use orientations are found to be important predictors of audience activity: research shows that an instrumental orientation is positively associated with active media use and a ritualized orientation is positively associated with passive media use.

Rubin and Perse, for example, have examined the connection between activity levels and instrumental versus ritualized television viewing motives in a variety of contexts. In one study, Rubin and Perse (1987b) found that instrumental news viewing was related to higher levels of audience activity, including more planned or intentional use of the news and higher cognitive involvement with its content. Ritualized viewing was related to lower levels of activity, as demonstrated by less intentionality and selectivity when using media content. Similar results were obtained in a study of soap opera viewing (Rubin & Perse, 1987a). In addition, Perse (1990b) examined the relationship between audience activity and motives for watching local television news. She found that an instrumental orientation predicted greater involvement in news content. Later studies that have explored media use in the cable television environment found similar results. For example, Perse (1990a, 1998) confirmed that instrumental

motives were positively associated with selectivity and involvement on the part of cable subscribers with remote control devices. Overall, this research shows that activity levels are explained in part by audience motives, at least for "older" media such as television and cable.

#### *Audience Motivation for Using New Media*

Scholars are just beginning to investigate audience motives for using newer, computer-based communication technologies (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Perse & Dunn, 1998; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). Interestingly, although new communication media might necessitate an entirely novel set of motivations, research shows that the motivations for using more traditional media, such as television and newspapers, apply to the newer media. For example, Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) found that traditional media gratifications successfully predicted the gratifications sought and obtained from using the web, as well as beliefs about the medium and Web site visitation. They concluded that "Internet use may be understood and predicted through the application of traditional gratification typologies" (p. 127). Similarly, Ferguson and Perse (2000) found more similarities than differences in motivations for viewing television and surfing the web.

Research also shows that people's motives for using new media may be classified as instrumental and ritualized, as with more traditional media. Perse and Dunn (1998), for instance, compared people's motives for using computer communication (CD-ROM and Internet access) to other media channels (e.g., television, radio, newspapers, etc.). Of the nine motives investigated in their study, the most common uses for computer communication were to keep busy and to pass time. With respect to audience activity, they concluded that because "pass time and habitual use are typically signals of ritualized media use...the results of this study suggest that there may be a strong ritualized component to home computer use" (p. 13).

Similarly, but more recently, Ferguson and Perse (2000) examined the extent to which Web use served as a functional alternative to television viewing. They discovered that entertainment as a motive for Web use had high salience among respondents and that the Web served as a source of ritualistic diversion, thus pointing toward a more passive orientation to the medium. They point out, however, that although Web use might satisfy entertainment needs due to its diversionary capacity, it may not be as effective for rest and relaxation because of its potential for activity and stimulation. Accordingly, they note that further research needs to examine how aspects of new media, such as interactivity and other features, might affect motivations for media use and audience activity levels.

In contrast to these studies, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found evidence for a more active orientation toward the Internet. Although they discovered five primary motives for Internet use, including information seeking, interpersonal utility, pass time, convenience, and entertainment, the most salient use of the Internet was information seeking, reflecting an instrumental orientation. One explanation for the conflicting results of this study, as compared to those described earlier, may lie in the fact that Papacharissi and Rubin asked about motives for general Internet use, including email and chat, whereas Ferguson and Perse (2000) asked more specifically about motives for surfing the Web. Due to differences in the communication functions and content

available on the Internet and Web, it is not surprising that these researchers obtained somewhat different results.

Together, the findings regarding audience motivations for using contemporary, computer-based media are not consistent, with some evidence indicating a more ritualized or passive orientation, and other evidence suggesting a more instrumental or active orientation. Also, this research indicates that factors such as technological features of the medium, which allow for different communication functions and content, might moderate these orientations. Due to conflicting accounts of audiences as being more instrumental or ritualized (or both) in their motives for using new and traditional media, and because new media have been heralded for their capacity to increase audience activity, it is important to examine people's motivations for using new versus traditional media. Further, research examining instrumental versus ritualized motivations across a myriad of both new and traditional media channels simultaneously can shed light on how actively newer technologies might actually be used and, by extension, can contribute to understanding individuals' involvement with media content, media effects, and the establishment of media policy, as outlined earlier. Hence, the following research question is proposed:

- RQ1: To what degree is the use of new (i.e., email, internet, and web) and traditional (i.e., books and magazines, newspapers, telephone, and television) media motivated by instrumental versus ritualized orientations?

#### *Individual User Attributes and Audience Activity*

Motivations for media use are also influenced by individual factors. For example, studies have found demographic characteristics and attitudes toward the medium to be associated with instrumental and ritualized media use (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Jeffries & Atkin, 1996; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rubin, 1984, 1993, 1994). Interestingly, however, studies examining demographic factors and motivations for media use suggest no consistent patterns. Rubin (1984), for example, found that age was positively related to instrumental television use and education was negatively related to ritualized use, whereas Levy (1987) found no sex, age, or education differences in levels of audience activity with VCR use.

In terms of internet and web use specifically, Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) found that men use the web for both instrumental and ritualistic purposes more than do women. Similarly, Abela (1997) found that although males use the internet more than females for active purposes such as conducting business transactions and downloading files, they also use it more than females for ritualized functions such as entertainment and play/fantasy. However, he further discovered that females used the internet more for the ritualized activity of escape, but found no sex differences on the relatively instrumental goal of information seeking via the Internet. Finally, Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that females used the web more than males for "school" and "work" activities and to access search engines, utilities, news, and commerce sites, suggesting more instrumental usage overall on the part of females. Together, these findings suggest that demographic factors invite reanalysis.

In addition to demographic factors, individuals' media experience may affect their

motivations for media use over time, particularly with new media whose capabilities are not immediately well understood by many users (King & Xia, 1997; Perse & Courtright, 1993; Williams, Phillips, & Lum, 1985). King and Xia note that experience levels with technologies affect the extent to which users are aware of a medium's capabilities, and therefore can influence individuals' media use patterns. Media use can thus depend on individuals' experience with how well a communication channel serves to fulfill individual needs (Perse & Dunn, 1998). For instance, greater experience might enhance users' skill, comfort, and frequency of use of a medium, resulting in a more effective, involved, or active orientation. Accordingly, Flanagin and Metzger (2000) found that experience was positively related to the relatively active behavior of seeking off-line information to verify information obtained via the internet. Given the lack of clarity in the literature, the following research question addresses the potential demographic and internet experience differences with regard to audience orientation and the new media:

RQ2: How are age, education, sex, and internet experience related to a relative instrumental orientation for using new media?

## METHOD

### *Participants*

A total of 552 respondents completed surveys for this study, which asked about the extent to which participants used specific communication channels to satisfy a number of needs. The majority of participants were drawn from introductory communication classes taught at two universities in the United States (one in the Midwest and the other on the West Coast;  $n = 417$ ). In addition to these respondents, data were also collected from a convenience sample of volunteer participants who were not enrolled in college, recruited via a "snowball" sampling technique. The snowball sampling proceeded as follows: Six undergraduate research assistants distributed five copies of the survey to noncollege age respondents, each of whom was then asked to distribute the survey to five other noncollege age respondents ( $n = 135$ ).

Student respondents ranged in age from 16 to 68 years, with a mean age of 21.44 years ( $SD = 6.07$ ), a mean of 14.53 years of education ( $SD = 1.53$ ), and home zip codes that indicated the student respondents represented a relatively large geographic area (212 unique zip codes were given, originating from 8 different states). The student sample consisted of 204 men and 210 women (3 respondents failed to provide their sex). Not surprisingly, the nonstudent sample was older ( $M_{age} = 33.07$ ,  $SD = 13.86$ ) and slightly more educated than the student sample ( $M_{education} = 15.41$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ). Participants in the nonstudent sample reported residing in 66 unique zip code areas from 3 states, 70 were male and 64 were female, with 1 respondent failing to indicate his or her sex on the questionnaire. Direct comparisons of the student and nonstudent samples found no significant differences on any key variable in this study: level of experience using the Internet, use of new and traditional media for instrumental purposes, and use of new and traditional media for ritualized purposes. Hence, the data from the two samples were pooled.

To protect against order effects, three versions of the survey that rotated both the media channels and motivations were administered randomly. Because some of the

newer media channels (e.g., Internet and Web "chat" functions) are still not widely used as compared to "older" channels (e.g., the telephone), respondents were instructed to skip questions that dealt with these technologies if they had never used them. Because the study was interested in respondents' *use* of media channels, this reported *nonuse* was not considered in the analyses.

### *Measures*

*Communication channels.* Eight communication channels were selected to represent both "traditional" and "new" media. Traditional media channels included newspapers, telephone, television, and books and magazines; and new media channels included electronic mail and three distinct dimensions of the Internet and Web. As discussed earlier, the various features of the Internet and Web result in a diversity of uses to which these communication media are put, which may themselves influence motivations for using the technology. Consequently, these technologies were broken down into their major communication and information functions: information retrieval (e.g., surfing the Web), information giving (e.g., posting information to the Web), and conversation (e.g., participating in chat groups on the Internet). These three features of the Internet and Web represent the primary communication functions for which the technology is currently being used and are sufficiently different from one another to warrant individual consideration (see, for example, Flanagin & Metzger, 2001).

*Audience motivations.* On 5-point scales, respondents indicated their agreement with how well 10 motives reflected their typical use of each communication channel. These motives were drawn from the uses and gratifications literature of both mediated and unmediated communication channels because they have consistently loaded on instrumental or ritualized media use factors in past research (cf. Kim & Rubin, 1997; Perse, 1990a; Perse & Rubin, 1988; Rubin, 1984, 1993, 1994; Rubin & Perse, 1987a, 1987b). Instrumental media usage was measured by the following items: (a) to get information, (b) to learn about myself and others, (c) to learn how to do things, (d) to provide others with information, (e) to solve problems, and (f) to make decisions. To measure ritualized media usage, the following items were used: (a) to relax, (b) to pass the time away when I'm bored, (c) to play, and (d) to be entertained.

Scaling took place in three steps. First, the extent to which instrumental versus ritualized media usage items actually constituted the underlying concepts in the data as proposed was assessed by subjecting all items to principal components factor analyses, across each individual channel (see DeVellis, 1991; Gorsuch, 1983). For 6 of the 8 channels, all ritualized items loaded together (with no instrumental items) and instrumental items formed either one or two additional factors. Where instrumental items formed two factors rather than one, no consistent pattern emerged, and the typical case was that one item loaded apart from the other five instrumental items. For the remaining two channels, the four ritualized items loaded together with one instrumental item (although this item had a high secondary loading on the instrumental factor in both cases). The proportion of variance explained ranged from 57% to 66%. Overall, these results show that instrumental and ritualized factors emerged from the data as anticipated.

Second, scales for instrumental and ritualized use were constructed by averaging across the instrumental and then the ritualized use items, respectively, for each chan-

nel. These mean usage scores are displayed in the lower portion of Table 1. Cronbach's alpha for the instrumental items across channels ranged from .68 to .84 with a mean alpha level of .76. For the ritualistic scale, the mean alpha level was .80 (range = .71 to .88).

Third, instrumental and ritualized use mean scores were derived for the new and traditional media *clusters*. For example, an instrumental use mean score for new media was calculated for each respondent by taking the average of their instrumental usage of only those new media technologies they reported using. In turn, these scores were averaged across all respondents reporting usage of at least one new medium, to obtain the instrumental use mean score for new media. Ritualized use mean scores for new media, and instrumental and ritualized use mean scores for traditional media, were calculated in like manner. In all cases, these means adjust for the number of new and traditional channels that each respondent reported using, in order that the analyses of means in the top portion of Table 1 reflect data from respondents who used *one or more* of the channels included in either the new or traditional media clusters. So, for example, while all 552 respondents reported using at least one traditional channel, 37 participants reported that they did not use any of the new channels, leaving 515 respondents who used at least one of the new channels included in this study.

The difference between the mean instrumental usage score for new technologies and the mean ritualized usage score for new technologies constituted the *relative* instrumental usage of new media. This variable had a possible range from -4 to 4 where higher values represented greater relative instrumental usage than ritualized usage of the new media.

*Experience with Internet technologies.* A 3-item Internet experience scale was constructed by averaging respondents' Internet and Web use, expertise, and access. Respondents were asked how often they used the Internet/Web, their level of expertise with the technology, and their level of access to the Internet/Web on 7-point scales, where lower values indicated less use/expertise/access. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .78.

*Demographics.* Participants were asked to supply their age in years, the number of years of education they had completed, their home zip codes, and their sex.

### *Analysis*

For Research Question 1, differences between means of instrumental and ritualistic use of new and traditional media were tested via a 2 X 2 within-subjects repeated-measures analysis for type of use (instrumental, ritualized) by type of channel (new, traditional). Because the data were taken from the same subjects, related-samples t-tests were used as follow-up tests to examine differences between two means at a time (i.e., type of use across type of channel, then type of channel across type of use). Bonferroni corrections were used in these analyses to maintain the experimentwise error rate at .05.

To locate the specific individual channels contributing to the proposed differences between the new and traditional media clusters, further analyses were conducted on the mean differences in usage of the individual channels. Specifically, a 2 X 8 within-subjects repeated-measures analysis was conducted for type of use (instrumental, ritualized) by channel (email, Internet and Web conversation, Internet and Web informa-

tion giving, Internet and Web information retrieval, books and magazines, newspaper, telephone, television) in order to examine differences in the usage patterns of the eight individual channels. As will be seen in the next section, this analysis was followed up using (a) related samples t-tests with Bonferroni adjustments, comparing instrumental to ritualistic mean scores within each channel and then (b) one-way repeated-measures ANOVAs, using pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustments as follow-up tests, to compare, first, instrumental means scores across the eight channels and, second, ritualistic mean scores across all eight channels.

Helmert or difference contrasts were not used as follow-up tests here because they exclude cases with reported nonuse on any of the technologies included in the study. Because many of the respondents had never used the conversational or information-giving features of the Internet or Web, and because our survey allowed respondents to skip questions about a technology if they had never used it, there was quite a bit of reported nonuse. Consequently, the follow-up tests consisted of pairwise comparisons (related-samples t-tests with Bonferroni adjustments) so as to minimize the impact of the reported nonuse on the results, while still controlling for experimentwise error rates and for correlated error terms that result from repeated measurement of subjects. Together, these analyses answer the following questions: Are new media used more instrumentally than ritualistically? Are traditional media used more instrumentally than ritualistically? And finally, which types of media are used more often to satisfy instrumental or ritualized needs?

Research Question 2 was tested by multiple regression analysis. A stepwise procedure was used to locate any significant predictors among those proposed (age, sex, education, and Internet experience) for the relative instrumental use of new media.

## RESULTS

Results for the first research question can be seen in Table 1, which illustrates instrumental versus ritualized usage comparisons, by new and traditional media, as well as by individual communication channels. Because the 2 X 2 analysis revealed a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 514) = 82.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$ , follow-up tests were conducted. The first row of the table shows that for new media, instrumental and ritualistic mean values are not significantly different from one another,  $t(514) = .39, p > .05$ , indicating no differences in the extent to which new media are used for instrumental and ritualized purposes. By contrast, the second row of the table shows that traditional media are used significantly more for ritualized than for instrumental purposes,  $t(551) = -11.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$ . Follow-up tests comparing the means in the top columns of Table 1 also show that new media are used more than traditional media for instrumental purposes,  $t(514) = 4.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ , and that traditional media use is motivated significantly more by a ritualized orientation than is the use of new media,  $t(514) = -6.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ .

As mentioned in the Analysis section, individual communication channels were compared in terms of their instrumental and ritualized use. Because the 2 X 8 analysis revealed a significant interaction,  $F(7, 546) = 27.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$ , follow-up tests were conducted. First, the means in the rows in the lower portion of Table 1 were examined to assess differences in instrumental and ritualized use of each individual channel. Among the individual channels, Internet/Web conversation features,  $t(185) =$



-8.16,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$ ; books and magazines,  $t(548) = -8.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .11$ ; the telephone,  $t(548) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ; and television,  $t(541) = -31.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .65$  differ significantly in the extent to which individuals use them for instrumental versus ritualized purposes. The telephone is used more for instrumental than for ritualized purposes, contrary to the other traditional media, and the Internet and Web conversation features are used more for ritualized than for instrumental purposes. In addition, the heavy use of television for ritualized over instrumental purposes is noteworthy.

Second, tests comparing the means in the columns of the lower portion of Table 1 were conducted with two repeated-measures ANOVAs, one for instrumental use and one for ritualized use. A significant main effect for channel was found for instrumental motivations,  $F(7, 546) = 17.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .18$ , and for ritualized motivations  $F(7, 546) = 14.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$ , thus follow-up tests were conducted.<sup>1</sup> The pairwise comparisons revealed that the telephone is used significantly more instrumentally than any of the other technologies, and email, books and magazines, and the information retrieval functions of the Internet/Web have significantly higher instrumental usage mean scores than the two other Internet/Web features (information-giving and conversation) and also newspapers. Finally, television is used significantly less instrumentally than all other technologies. In terms of ritualized usage, television is rated significantly higher than books and magazines, the Internet/Web conversation capabilities, email, the telephone, and Internet/Web information retrieval, none of which are significantly different from one another. Newspapers and Internet/Web information-giving are rated significantly lower than all other technologies in terms of ritualized use. The means compared in these analyses appear in the columns of the lower portion of Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
Instrumental versus ritualized usage comparisons, by communication channel

	Instrumental Use Mean Score	Ritualized Use Mean Score	<i>t</i>	<i>N</i>
New Media	3.57	3.56	.39	515
Traditional Media	3.48	3.75	-11.94 ***	552
Electronic Mail	3.68	3.63	1.18	497
Internet/WWW:				
Conversation Capabilities	3.37	3.89	-8.16 ***	186
Information Giving Capabilities	3.48	3.28	2.42	133
Information Retrieval Capabilities	3.61	3.53	1.94	463
Books & Magazines	3.65	3.92	-8.41 ***	549
Newspapers	3.33	3.30	.98	548
Telephone	3.82	3.60	5.48 ***	549
Television	3.12	4.21	-31.33 ***	542

*Note.* New media channels include electronic mail and the Internet/WWW, broken down into its three main features: conversation capabilities, information-giving, and information-retrieval features. Traditional media channels include books and magazines, newspapers, telephone, and television. Possible mean value range = 1-5, where 5 is the highest score.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

The second research question was tested using stepwise multiple regression analysis. The overall regression equation was significant,  $F(1, 502) = 118.14, p < .001, R^2 = .19$ , but age was the only significant predictor of the relative instrumental use of new media,  $b = .04, p < .001$ . Older users indicated that they used the new media more instrumentally than did younger users.

## DISCUSSION

The impetus for this exploratory research was competing claims concerning audience activity among users of new communication technologies. Although the new media have been heralded for activating their audiences in ways never before possible, prior research reveals conflicting accounts of users' active versus passive usage behavior. Consequently, this study was conducted to assess the extent to which the use of new communication technologies is motivated by instrumental (active) and ritualized (passive) media orientations, in comparison to the use of traditional channels of communication.

Results show that respondents in this study demonstrated a clearly passive orientation to traditional media channels. Compared to new communication technologies, participants reported using traditional media significantly more ritualistically and significantly less instrumentally. Furthermore, considered alone, traditional media were used more heavily for ritualized than for instrumental purposes. Overall, usage patterns reported by our respondents imply that traditional media engender relatively passive usage behavior, such as relaxation and entertainment.

By contrast, our data show that new media usage seems to be motivated by both ritualized and instrumental orientations equally. However, when compared to traditional media use, our respondents' use of new communication channels is motivated significantly more by instrumental rather than ritualized goals. Taken together these findings suggest that, first, the hope for new media to heighten audience activity is being realized, at least to some extent: New technologies are being used to achieve more active goals in comparison to traditional media. More importantly, however, the results point to the *versatility* of new technologies for their users, as indicated by the relatively equal levels of instrumental and ritualized usage in our sample. Given the unprecedented variety of content available over the new media such as the Internet and Web, this result is not surprising.

An exploration of the individual channels in the analyses (separate from their categorization as either new or traditional media) suggests at least two additional issues. First, the heavy use of television for ritualized over instrumental purposes may obscure the degree of audience activity for the traditional media cluster. Although television is clearly an important traditional media channel to consider, its effect is quite large on the ritualized use of traditional technologies overall. In essence, its heavy ritualized use overshadows the fact that some traditional media are used highly instrumentally (e.g., the telephone) whereas others are *not* used highly ritualistically (e.g., newspapers).

Second, and related, audience orientations toward old and new technologies are not entirely consistent. Instead, some traditional technologies (such as the telephone) are used by our respondents primarily instrumentally while some new technologies (such as the conversational features of the Internet and Web) are used primarily ritual-

istically. Such usage points to some slippage with the categorizations of channels as either instrumental or ritualized, as based primarily on their novelty. This also highlights an important feature of this study that has implications for further research on Internet and Web technologies in general. Our data suggest that research on the use of these new technologies can be meaningfully refined to include several dimensions of that usage. In this study, for example, findings differed across the conversation, information-giving, and information-retrieval dimensions of Internet and Web use, highlighting important distinctions among these separate features and the complexity of locating and including the various forms of computer-based communication. Studies examining Internet and Web use that do not take into account the many distinct forms of online communication may artificially group separate usage behaviors and motivations together. Such definitional issues might, in fact, inform conceptualizations of audience activity in and of themselves and so must be considered in future research on this topic.

Of the demographic variables, only age was significantly related to the relative instrumental use of the new media in this sample. Older users indicated that they were more instrumental in their media use. This finding confirms some past research on new technologies (e.g., Tremayne, 1999), but it is inconsistent with popular accounts of generational differences in new media use. For example, a common conceptualization is that the new communication technologies are the province of the young, who constitute the early adopters possessing the requisite knowledge, skill, and comfort to fully exploit the active and interactive capabilities of new technologies.

Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that, as with past research, the items comprising instrumental use reflect an information-seeking orientation, whereas the items measuring ritualized use implicate an entertainment orientation. Perhaps older people use the new media for more "serious" information-seeking purposes whereas younger users instead rely on the new media more often for entertainment-related activities. Further research is needed to identify specifically what *content* users are attending to (e.g., news or entertainment) in order to untangle this issue. Another possible explanation for our age finding is simply that the common view of the young, adept Internet user (and the reciprocal older, inept user) is no longer accurate. In fact, a study of over 3,000 Internet users shows that the average age of online users increased during the late 1990s (Pew Research Center, 1999).

This study also found that Internet experience was not related to the relative instrumental use of new media. One explanation is that the new media are simply easy for all to use and do not require a great deal of experience in order for users to be effective information-seekers. Given the sophistication of Graphical User Interface (GUI) tools, coupled with straightforward and intuitive software design, perhaps it is no longer reasonable to expect skill level or experience to impact audience usage patterns. Alternatively, experienced users may not use the new media for informational over entertainment purposes any more than do novices. In any case, further research on a representative sample of Internet users is needed to answer these questions definitively.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the motivations prompting media use is important for several rea-

sons. First, research shows that an instrumental orientation toward media positively influences media effects including, for example, the level of satisfaction with and attraction to media content (Garramone, 1984; Kim & Rubin, 1997). This suggests that if people use new communication technologies more instrumentally than traditional media, as our data imply, there may be a greater potential for media effects with new media channels.

Second, to the extent that instrumental and ritualized motivations reflect levels of audience activity, perceptions of audiences as relatively active or passive may have important policy implications. For instance, Webster and Phalen (1994) argue that during this century American communications policy has been shaped in part by the perception of media audiences as active or passive. That is, whether policy makers subscribe to the view that audience members are passive "victims" or active "consumers" of mass media messages influenced the kinds of policies they have been willing to endorse. Webster and Phalen show, for example, how passive conceptualizations of the audience led to strict regulation in order to protect audiences from potentially harmful media content, whereas conceptions of the audience as active led to a more deregulatory, speech-protective approach to media policy.

This issue becomes more pressing when we recognize that now is a crucial time in the formation of policy regarding the Internet. Accordingly, views of Internet users as active or passive are important to the extent that they may affect the degree of regulation to which the technology is subject. The battle over the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (CDA) serves to illustrate this point. Congress, taking the view of the audience as passive "victims," enacted the CDA (which prohibited indecent and obscene content on the Internet) with the goal of protecting minors from potentially harmful material. The U.S. Supreme Court, conceptualizing media consumers as relatively active information seekers, struck down the CDA largely because such a content restriction would limit the variety of content available to adult "consumers" of online information and stifle the free exchange of ideas (*Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 1997).

Finally, the debate over the extent to which audiences are active versus passive has important social implications. As Neuman (1991) and others have suggested, instrumental or active use of the new media may lead to an increase in civic participation because the diversity and abundance of information available via new communication technologies could energize the public. Neuman says, "as citizens succeed in voicing their views, they [may] begin to change their views of the citizenship role" (p. 40). Neuman further points out that even if only a few people were to take advantage of the vast information resources available through the new media, the consequences of this in terms of political engagement and participation would be great. However, it is up to future research to determine the capacity of the new, interactive communication technologies to inspire this specific *type* of active use. In addition, researchers will need to study the changes in usage patterns and corresponding levels of audience activity that will occur as these technologies continue to develop.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Space limitations prevent reporting the full results of the follow-up tests because a total of 56 pairwise comparisons were necessary to examine differences between the means in the lower

columns of the table. Statistics for these tests are available from the first author.

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