

Virtual Construction of Social Reality Through New Medium-Internet

Dr. Sahin KARASAR
Eastern Mediterrane University
NORTHERN CYPRUS TURKISH REPUBLIC

ABSTRACT

This is a study on the creation of social reality in virtual setting such as chat/discussion/list groups, based on a theoretical framework of social and cultural reality. It was tried to be found how closer one can get to and create the reality in relation with others in virtual settings.

It is a survey type study. For this, a virtually communicated group (45 persons) was selected and given a questionnaire in their natural virtual settings. The members were questioned on their socialization experiences.

By the development of communication technology, not only new communication forms but also different interaction modes take place. The main characteristic of these interactions is the existence of long distance between the communicators, which is becoming a way of life in modern times. Traditionally, there exists a widespread belief that the communication technologies have replaced the traditional face-to-face communication, which in turn had limited the benefits of interactions. However, the exploratory findings of studies like this one suggest that this may not be the case. Therefore, further and more focused studies should be carried out to assess the real value of virtual communication settings.

Keywords: Internet, Construction, Communication Technology, Turkey,

PROBLEM

With the development of mass media technology, the computer has become very important in people`s daily life. The computer is a more important source for people to learn about, and be aware of the world than some other information sources such as newspapers and television. It seems to be most revolutionary form of communication that reaches people at large.

While being so involved, it has also begun to change traditional ways of life. The most revolutionary change has come with the introduction of the internet.

With the internet, old concepts such as mass media have been changed and new concepts such as virtual reality and virtual community have been introduced (Schramm, 1997).

These changes have mainly been as a result of technological innovations. Social, psychological, and economical effects are still being investigated.

MASS MEDIA

The mass media can be defined as a system that is constituted by a configuration of organizations and institutions producing and distributing cultural products that are theoretically available to entire population in given societies at approximately the same time (Ball-Rokeach and Cantor, 1986). The mass media affect and are affected by political, economical and other social systems that constitute a society (Ball-Rokeach and Cantor, 1986; Davidson, Boylan and Yu, 1982).

The existence the internet connected nature of mass communication system is one of the most important ways in which today`s society differs from all previous ones.

Before the advent of the internet, Becker and Schoenbach (1989) argued that there had been three important steps in media history that influenced people and gave them new options in terms of its use. The first step was the introduction of print press in the early 1600`s. For the reader, the newspaper was a mass medium superior to all other media, including letters and verbal communications. The second step was the invention of the radio. This step came almost 300 years after the emergence of the newspaper. With the arrival of radio, newspapers could no longer rely on being the first source of information. Furthermore, the radios could transmit the live impressions of events that press could not challenge. Another important audience function that radio took away from the older media was entertainment. The third change in the media environment was the advent of television. Beginning in the late 1940`s, television helped visually transmit images of events to the audiences. As a natural consequence, television started to diminish the size of radio audiences. There were many significant changes in the media environment of Western societies starting from late 1980`s. As Becker and Schoenbach (1989) mentioned, the common outcome of the changes in the media environment was an increase in the number of options available to the user (audiences).

In the last two decades of the 20th century, computers and more lately the internet have become the dominant mass medium. The internet has become the most common and possibly the most effective communication channel.

INTERNET

The internet, while being actually envisioned in the early 1960`s, is considered to be a 1990`s phenomenon. The internet is an electronically networked system, brilliantly structured through the worldwide computer network. It is a base for the virtual communication (Kaye and Medoff, 1999, p. 2). Its global nature facilitates communication among people of all nationalities from every country in the world. It is a two way communication system in which everyone is a potential message provider and a potential message receiver. With the internet, people no longer have to wait until newscast time to hear the evening news. Information on the internet is available all day and is accessible at the audience`s convenience. According to Kaye and Medoff (1999), the internet transforms an audience from merely being information receivers into information providers. Because an internet user may also provide the others with information by sending the information to them.

The internet is clearly changing the way people receive and transmit information. The internet lets one to peek into strangers` lives by viewing their personal homepages with their photographs. All the information one could possibly absorb in a lifetime is available to everyone on the internet.

The internet is changing media use patterns and lifestyles of millions of people who have grown to rely on it as a source of entertainment, information, and communication channel. More and more people are discovering and using this interactive medium everyday. According to Kaye and Medoff (1999), electronic mail (e-mail) seems to be the most common use of internet. The e-mail was developed in the early days of internet. Individuals communicate with each other simply by writing messages on their computers and then electronically sending them to recipients` computers.

Another most commonly used form of internet is called chat forums (Kaye and Medoff, 1999). Chat forums allow participants to exchange live, real time messages. In other words, chatters carry on conversations as they would on the telephone, but instead of talking and responding, participants type in messages to which others immediately respond. The exciting part of chat forums is that one can carry on real time, immediate response conversations with people from all around the world.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Virtual community is one of the most commonly used concepts in the literature of the computer-mediated communication (Kaye and Medoff, 1999; Schramm, 1997). Possibly, an increasing number of people are finding themselves in the internet environment everyday. The term 'virtual community' usually makes sense for those who involve with the computer-mediated communications – such as chat/discussion/list groups.

In daily language, the term "virtual" is most often used to refer to that which appears to be (but is not) real, authentic or proper-although it may have the same effect (Schramm, 1997, p. 9). The characteristic of the virtual is that it is able to produce effects, or produce itself as an effect even in the absence of the real effect. Here the term 'community' usually refers primarily to relations of commonality between persons and objects, and only rather imprecisely to the site of such community. What is important is a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas.

According to Schramm, (1997, p.13), a virtual community is the experience of sharing with unseen others a space of communication. Sometimes it is real time communication (chat). Sometimes it is asynchronous and mostly solitary, a sort of textual flirtation that only occasionally aims at any direct confrontation of voices or bodies. Virtual community is the illusion of a community where there are no real people and real communication. Virtual community is people all over the world sitting in front of the computers to communicate with each other.

Howard (1993, p. 5), defines virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The emphasis on the construction of social reality as an effect of mass communication is relatively new. Research results show that media affect the audience conceptions of social reality (Tan, 1985, p. 299).

McQuail (1994) argues that, either the media audience is a mass or an individual, mass media use is a very much a social activity, which is integrated into everyday life and thus into the life of the numerous overlapping social groups to which most people belong. This is true whether or not the actual audience can be considered to be social groups in themselves. Most media use, most of the time, does not constitute a group activity for most people, although it can still have a strongly social character, according to different criteria. These include: sociability of media use; normative controls or systematic social evaluation applied to media content and use; media use in personal and social life; and the structuring of media use activity according to other dynamic principles of social and interpersonal relations – for instance, those based on class, gender, age or social power in general (McQuail, 1994, p. 307).

Why media use is considered to be a social behavior? The answer comes out from McQuail (1994). Media use is a social behavior because:

- Media use is socially and culturally differentiated.
- Media use is governed by formal and informal norms.
- Media use is often structured by patterns of social relations.
- Media use is often integrated into the rest of social life.
- Media use is itself often sociable and a basis for other social interactions.
- People are often strongly attached to chosen media use behaviors (p. 313).

According to Gergen (1985), the social construction of reality is directly related to the individuals and their experiences about the world. Gergen writes that, social construction is based on four assumptions (1985, p. 266):

- The world does not present itself objectively to the observer, but is known through human experience, which is largely influenced by language.
- The categories in language used to classify things emerge from the social interaction within a group of people at a particular time and in a particular place.
- How reality is understood in a given moment is determined by the conventions of communication in force at that time.
- Reality is socially constructed by interconnected patterns of communication behavior. Within a social group or culture, reality is defined not so much by individual acts, but by complex and organized patterns of ongoing actions.
- Rules are important parts of social reality (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 198).

Not only they are formed in the process of interaction, but they also govern interaction itself. Rules generally specify the appropriate behavior related to the media use.

The primary focus of this study was to understand how social reality is created and constructed through virtual communication forms such as chat/discussion/list groups. The questions tried to be answered were:

1. How people communicating in virtual settings associate themselves with other people that they are communicating with?
2. How do they create social reality in those virtual environments?

METHOD

Research Model

This study was based around a survey. As Babbie (1992) wrote, the survey research is the most frequently used mode of observation in the social sciences. According to Frey et al. (1991), survey research is also a model most often used in communication research. It is generally advantageous in terms of economy and the amount of data that can be collected.

Sample (Research Group)

The survey conducted among the members of a specific chat/discussion/list group using internet to communicate with each other. Some of them knew each other in their real lives, some don't. Total number of persons involved in the study was 45.

Data and Data Collection

The respondents' feelings about their relations with others in the virtual environment; the differences in social relations among them while communicating in virtual settings and real life situations were measured.

Self-administered on-line questionnaire was used to collect data. Measurements were made with nominal and interval scales. There were yes-no questions which fitted into nominal levels of measurement. There were also questions in which the options had equal distances between each other (Likert-type scale).

The questionnaire had 20 questions. The first five were demographic questions in which the respondents were asked to provide details about themselves (sex, socio-economic status, the place they live, etc.). There were questions about the internet using habits of respondents and questions about the need felt for using internet.

Some questions tried to ferret out the reasons for respondents choosing this medium to communicate with others. Finally, there were questions about their own assessment of internet as a virtual mass media environment to be in touch with other people.

A special effort was made to make the measurements both reliable and valid. Reliability is defined as the repeatability of the measurement and validity is defined as the suitability of the measurement instrument (Hsia, 1988; Frey et al., 1991; Babbie, 1992; Stempel and Westley, 1989; and Miller, 1991). For the measurement to be considered valid, it has to be reliable as well. These two concepts are interrelated. There are different ways of measuring and/or obtaining reliability and validity (Karasar, 2000).

In this particular study, the validity of the measuring instrument was ensured through panel approach. This is called face validity. With this technique, qualified people are recruited to generate the content or determine that the technique taps the content being measured (Frey et al., 1991, p. 123). In using this approach, the validity of the measurement depends on the credentials of the panel members. For the purpose of this study, three university professors – one social psychologist, one communication scientist, and one methodologist - were employed as panel members. The questionnaire was finalized using their suggestions.

To establish measurement reliability, the internal consistency method was used. It is a single administration test of reliability, which is sometimes better than multiple administration technique, and according to Frey et al. (1991, p. 121), the purpose of this method is to assess the stability of people`s responses to the same or similar items. In this study, one of the questions were asked twice in different parts of the questionnaire to see if respondents gave the same answers to both. The Pearson Product correlation analysis was conducted between that pair of the questions. The ratio was .72. Thus, the instrument was considered both reliable and valid.

Data Analysis

After the collection, the data was coded and entered into files for analysis via SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

The secondary analysis of data was done with descriptive results. In doing so, the following statistical analyses were conducted: frequencies on each single variable and cross tabulations (chi square analyses) on some pairs of variables. The frequencies provided a general view of the data that were collected; whereas the cross tabulations (chi square analysis) gave the level of relationship and their significance if any.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Out of 45 respondents who filled out the online questionnaire: 21 (46.7%) were female and 24 (53.3%) were male. Nearly all of the respondents (93.3%) were ranking themselves in the upper middle level socio-economic level. All of the respondents (100%) were living in one of the three big cities in Turkey. Of these, 21 (46.7%) respondents were married, 15 (33.3%) respondents were divorced, and 9 (20%) respondents were single. According to the frequencies that were run, the following results were obtained:

1. A large portion (86.7%) of respondents started to use internet for only e-mail purposes.
2. Approximately 90% of the respondents reported that they are using internet to talk to their friends everyday.
3. 51.1% of the respondents reported that they were involved in discussion/chat/list groups "to kill time"; whereas 48.9% of them reported that they are using the internet to socialize with others.
4. 27 (60%) of the respondents said they had never seen one of other people in the group in their real lives.
5. All of the respondents feel that they are very close friends with other people in the group.
6. The majority (55.6%) of the respondents reported that they need internet not only to communicate with others but also to socialize.
7. About 80% of the respondents feel themselves more comfortable in communicating with others via internet than any other traditional way of interpersonal communication.

8. Nearly 85% of the respondents found the internet one of the most reliable communication vehicles.
9. All of the respondents reported that they socialize very well with others in this virtual environment.
10. More than 90% of the respondents believe that if there were no internet access, they could never have had so many friends.

As discussed in the previous pages, the internet seems to be one of the most powerful mass media in people`s daily lives. People mostly use internet as an information channel among them.

In this study, the respondents felt that they could create social reality in discussion/chat/list groups. Creation of social reality in those virtual settings would enable them to feel as if they were in a very real environment. Although majority had never seen each other in real life, they felt like, they were very close friends.

Nearly all of the respondents reported that they were very happy with the virtual group that they were communicating with and they felt no need for other forms of friendship in the real life. While it is only through computer network, the creation of the friendship and its continuity were reported to be even better to those obtained in real settings; perhaps mainly due to ease and better planned communication process which brings immersion, interactivity, presence, autonomy and collaboration.

In conclusion, people seem to have very positive feelings about virtual construction of social reality through the internet. However, due to the newness and the importance given to the internet technology in general, there may be halo effect associated with these positive feelings. As a result, people may have overstated their satisfaction with the virtual friendship. On the other hand, the internet seems to successfully fill the vacuum that real life friendships` absence may have justify. In any case, there should be more and in-depth studies conducted to test the effectiveness of internet environment in constructing the social reality. These studies should also examine different academic, social, and economic clusters.

CONTACT ADRESSES AND Email oF AUTHOR

Dr. Sahin Karasar
 Eastern Mediterrane University
 NORTHERN CYPRUS TURKISH REPUBLIC
skarasar@manas.kg

REFERENCES

- Babbie, E. (1992). *The Practice of Social Research*. CA: Wadsworth, Inc.
- Ball-Rokeach, S., Cantor, M. (Eds.). (1986). *Media Audiences and Social Structure*. CA: Sage Publications.
- Becker, L. and Schoenbach, K. (1989). *Audience responses to Media Diversification*. NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Davidson, P., Boylan, J. & Yu, F. (1982). *Mass Media: Systems and Effects*. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Frey, L., Botan, C., Friedman, P. & Kreps, G. (1991). *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods*. NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hsia, H. (1998). *Mass Communication research Methods: A Step by Step Approach*. NJ: Lawrence.

Karasar, N. (2000). *Bilimsel Arastirma Yontemi: Kavramlar, Ilkeler, Teknikler*. Ankara: 3A Ltd/Nobel.

Karasar, S. (1995). University Students` Television Channel Preferences. Unpublished Master`s Thesis. WI: Marquette University Graduate School.

Karasar, S. (1999). Yeni Iletisim Teknolojilerinden Internetin Egitimde Kullanimi: Sanal Yuksekegitim. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation. Eskisehir: Anadolu Universitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitusu.

Kaye, B., Medoff, N. (1999). *The World Wide Web: A Mass Communication Perspective*. CA: Mayfield Publ. Company.

Littlejohn, S. (1992). *Theories of Human Communication*. CA: Wadsworth, Inc.

McQuail, D. (1994). *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*. NY: Longman.

Miller, D. (1991). *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement*. CA: Sage Publications.

Stempel, G., Westley, B. (1989). *Research Methods in Mass Communication*. NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Tan, A. (1985). *Mass Communication Theories and Research*. NY: McMillan Publishing Company.

Schramm, W. *Virtuality, Community, Identity*. In Porter, D. (ed.).