

Television Versus the Internet for Information Seeking: Lessons From Global Survey Research

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Using different kinds of media to seek information can affect the ways consumers engage in political participation. The expansion of Internet use across the world has given rise to the idea that television is nearing its end, and thus new participatory behaviors may be expected. However, there is no global perspective concerning such claims. This study tests such claims by analyzing actual media use around the globe for information seeking. Using data from Wave 6 of the World Values Survey (WVS) across 56 countries, this study finds that more people use television daily for information-seeking purposes compared to the Internet. This is also true for individuals who use the Internet daily; however, the reverse is not true—even for developed countries. Therefore, it appears that television still takes the lead across many countries when it comes to seeking information regarding everyday political life. This study also includes a commentary on the type and content of questions included in global surveys. Implications for research and policy are also discussed.

Keywords: global media, surveys, Internet, television, information seeking

Individuals around the globe rely on the media to gain information concerning social and political lives. However, with changing media dynamics in terms of increasing digitization and the use of the Internet, we remain curious as to which media are accessed and by whom. This is because different media, such as television and the Internet, offer unique and differing potentials to their users in terms of information gained, which in turn affect civic engagement, political participation, and the building of social capital (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Thus, in terms of policy making, the knowledge to understand media use from the global perspective is incredibly important. However, much of the research using national-level representative samples concerning the effects of media use on individual and group participation in social life emerges from the United States (see Krueger,

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2002; Pasek et al., 2006) and/or Western Europe (John & Morris, 2004). Subsequently, many debates that pit television against the Internet are based on research that focuses primarily on user behavior in the United States. In terms of our basic understanding of global media use, we remain largely ignorant. The questions we must ask are which media are being used around the world by individuals to gain information, and how does these media's use occur in tandem with each other?

In this study, I use data from the World Values Survey to expound on the use of television and the Internet around the world. This is particularly useful in laying the groundwork of behavior regarding using media for information consumption. I then explicate current problems with survey research in this area and things we as media and communication researchers can do to make it better—particularly from a policy point of view.

Television Versus the Internet: Outreach and Effects

In 2013, a provocative article published by *TIME* predicted the demise of television: "Television is now being disintermediated by the Web, just as print was. The transition has taken longer; television was starting from a bigger, richer base. But now that the technology is maturing, the shift will speed up" (Faroohar, 2013, p. 2).

The notion that television is being replaced by the Internet is often a point of discussion on various media and scholarly platforms (Katz, 2009; Lotz, 2014), with assertions abounding that television is increasingly a less dominant medium for information and entertainment purposes (Morrison, 2014; Naughton, 2012) or is changing significantly in form and use (Katz, 2009; Lotz, 2014). Evidence for such a phenomenon often comes from research and inquiry in the United States (see Lotz, 2014) and is devoid of large-scale global understanding. Increasing Internet penetration; expanding digital content such as Netflix, Amazon, and HBO; a decrease in prices of digital content; and the constant availability of content to users are often cited as reasons why television is increasingly out of vogue (Faroohar, 2013). It is evident that such TV-versus-the-Internet debates can falsely equate the use of digital content for entertainment with information seeking via news or political analysis. This false equation is amplified by the fact that many of the analyses are not always informed by representative surveys that use probability methods to gather data, and which can represent populations of interest. Evidence demonstrates that the use of nonprobability samples cannot be considered equivalent to probability samples even via the use of weighting procedures (Pasek, 2016). Regardless, there seems to be an implicit assumption that the Internet (particularly in the developed world) is set to replace television. Is this assertion global in terms of information seeking? And if yes, to what extent?

Before answering the above questions, it is pertinent to explicate the importance of them. In recent years, much research and theory has been developed pertaining to the role of the Internet and how it affects individual participation in political and social lives (Clark, 2012; Liu, 2012; Norris, 2001; Poster, 2001; Swigger, 2013; Towner, 2013; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Yao, 2008). Attention to the subject gained particular salience after the so-called Arab Spring, which emphasized the central role social media played in protests and group organization (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). An important aspect to the research on media and behaviors, such as political participation and

civic engagement, is concerned with the differing effects of various media. Heavy television use has been found to be adverse for building social capital and civic engagement, whereas book reading and moderate television use are strong predictors for social trust and civic engagement in the United States (Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009). Bakker and de Vreese (2011) performed a similar study using a representative sample of young adults in the Netherlands and found that Internet use positively predicted political participation; however, the same effects were weaker for traditional media. Unlike Romer et al. (2009), the authors found no effects for duration of use but did for the type of media. A study on Belgian teenagers found effects for certain Internet-based activities (e.g., participation in online forums, chatting with strangers) to be predictive of political participation, but the duration of use was not a significant predictor (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Longitudinal analysis concerning Internet use and civic engagement also found a positive correlation between the two (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003).

Another reason why we must consider patterns of media use around the world is to deal with the issue of conflation of constructs. Different phenomena that might co-occur, such as increasing use of the Internet and declining status of television as the most popular medium, are confused as dependent processes, suggesting that the rise in the former is somehow contributive to the latter (Nie & Erbring, 2000). Although such a claim might have some validity, it requires serious rethinking and, of course, retesting.

As mentioned earlier, much of the research on media use and its effects on attitudes and behaviors concerning civic engagement and political participation stems from the United States and parts of Europe,² and hence are not indicative of broader global patterns. Second, the proposition that Internet use will take over television comes with an underlying assumption that our information about the state of global media is exhaustive—yet this is not entirely true. In fact, we know very little about global media and need systematic reconsideration from theoretical and methodological points of view.

Data

To understand patterns of media use for information-seeking purposes, this study uses data and questionnaires from the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 6 to investigate the role of television and the Internet in 56 countries around the globe.

Findings

A majority of respondents who completed Wave 6 of the WVS use television news daily for their information at 74.7% ($N = 86,343$), compared to 30.1% ($N = 85,793$) who say they use the Internet daily for the same purpose (see Table 1). Moreover, 45.9% say they never use the Internet for daily information purposes (see Table 1). Interestingly, 78.6% of people who say they use the Internet daily also say they use television daily for news, but the reverse is not true, whereas only 30.1% of daily television users use the Internet regularly.

² Research conducted in the United States and elsewhere should be interpreted with caution, especially when trying to understand consumption patterns. Nonprobability sampling techniques can create flawed interpretations (see Pasek, 2016).

Table 1. Frequency of Use Concerning the Internet, Television, Radio, Mobile Phone, and E-mail as Sources of Information (Overall Percentage Across 56 Countries).

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never
Newspapers	31.2	22.8	9.3	12.2	24.6
Internet	30.1	11.7	5.4	6.8	45.9
Television	74.7	13.6	3.7	3.4	4.5
Radio news	42.7	15.9	7.5	9.8	24.0
Mobile phone	42.3	9.9	4.9	6.8	36.1
E-mail	21.4	10.8	6.1	8.2	53.5
Talk with family or friends	51.5	24.2	7.3	5.0	11.9

Note. Newspapers ($N = 86,178$); Internet ($N = 85,793$); television news ($N = 86,343$); printed magazines ($N = 84,899$); radio news ($N = 86,087$); mobile phone ($N = 85,833$); e-mail ($N = 85,649$); talk with family and friends ($N = 86,049$).

Even in many developed and technologically advanced countries covered by WVS, among the people who say they use the Internet daily, a large percentage also say they use television daily for information purposes. For instance, this percentage for the United States is 62.9; Sweden is 71.9; Australia is 78.6, Germany is 76.9, South Korea is 83.1, and Japan is 94.6³ (see Table 2).

³ These are conditional percentages. Mutually inclusive percentages—that is, people who say they use the Internet and TV daily include the United States (34.1%), Sweden (50.9%), Australia (37.6%), Germany (40.5%), South Korea (48.9%), and Japan (33.4%).

Table 2. Multimedia Use.

Country	Daily television viewers who use the Internet daily (in %)	Daily Internet users who use television daily (in %)
Argentina	38.8	77.8
Algeria	40.8	84
Armenia	20.6	87.6
Australia	48.3	78.6
Azerbaijan	20.4	93.8
Bahrain	26.4	48.9
Belarus	29.4	70.5
Brazil	39.9	81.2
Colombia	23.0	85.8
Chile	41.7	80.7
China	22.2	74.3
Ecuador	23.1	82.7
Egypt	7.3	90.7
Estonia	55.2	84.9
Georgia	33.4	86.8
Germany	50.9	76.9
Ghana	18.3	77.6
India	13.7	71.6
Japan	35.4	94.6
Jordan	25.8	76.2
Kazakhstan	22.9	81.5
Kuwait	69	63.3
Kyrgyzstan	18.2	82.4
Lebanon	49.6	67.3
Libya	37.2	82
Malaysia	26	78.3
Mexico	20.4	72.3
Netherlands	64.5	79.5
New Zealand	53	81.9
Nigeria	11.5	79.9
Pakistan	4.1	68.8
Palestine	31.6	77.6
Peru	22.4	87.4

Philippines	13.1	91.7
Poland	41.3	83.5
Qatar	59.5	75.7
Romania	28.8	79.1
Russia	29.9	82.2
Rwanda	23.7	77.9
Singapore	56	70.5
Slovenia	40	77.2
South Africa	18.3	88.4
South Korea	59.7	83.1
Sweden	69	71.9
Taiwan	48.2	86.7
Thailand	19.3	88.4
Trinidad & Tobago	22.3	83.9
Tunisia	33.4	83.9
Turkey	33	89.6
Ukraine	21	69
United States	55.6	62.9
Uruguay	24.7	80.1
Uzbekistan	6.1	81.1
Yemen	11.7	84.8
Zimbabwe	29.2	78.6

This suggests there is a divide between countries. Some do not use the Internet to gain information because they are dependent on television, but for those who have high Internet use, television use also remains popular. This is an important finding, given prior research on the impact of types of media on elements of political participation and civic engagement (Pasek et al., 2006; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). This goes to show that television remains a popular choice regardless of Internet use—therefore, both media are coexisting.

Other popular media include radio (42.7%) and mobile phone (42.3%)⁴ for daily information use. These data indicate a multimedia approach to getting information where talking with family and friends is also important.

⁴ Here, mobile phone should be interpreted with caution as the phone may not support data or the Internet. People may be using mobile phones to communicate with family and friends to find information in their surroundings.

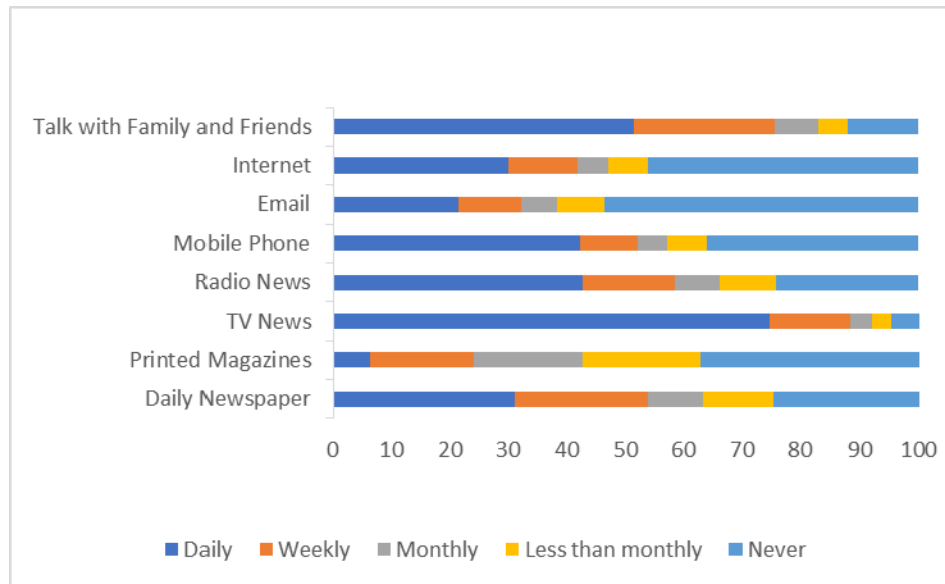


Figure 1. Individual preferences for information outlets across 56 countries.

It is not surprising that television news remains more popular than the Internet for information-seeking purposes or is used along with the Internet (see Figure 1.). There are potentially two main reasons: cost and infrastructure associated with the Internet and properties of television as a medium. Internet and data are still expensive. For many countries, a substantial percentage of earned income can go into buying data compared with television, which is cheaper to consume (see the report by the International Telecommunication Union, 2015). Television has a sense of familiarity for audiences because channels become household names. It also does not require active input on the user's side, except for flipping channels. Information in the form of news or talk shows flows from one side to the other without effort from audiences. Moreover, there is a social dynamic to it—families and friends can sit together and watch television anywhere, from homes to bars, as they relax (Sachiko, Toshiyuki, & Emi, 2010).

Moreover, there is a problem with telecommunication networks. For instance, the United States may have 5G, but many parts of India still use 2G network technology. This means it is relatively easier to have one desktop per family than to have five smartphones, each with its own costs and lower quality data support. From a survey research point of view, a respondent who has one desktop with an Internet connection might say that she has "access" to the Internet, but it does not mean that the respondent is using the Internet for news or other information-seeking activities. Researchers need to make clear distinctions among concepts such as "access" and "use," where the former may not indicate the latter.

Here it is important to distinguish the purpose behind using a particular medium as seeking information and whether someone has access to media. Internet users self-select different kinds of websites, online services, applications, gaming, social media, and streaming, and so do those who watch television. Consider a Pew survey that asked American workers their reasons for using social media. A

majority said “to take a mental break from work” followed by “connect with family and friends at work” (Pew Research Center, 2016b, p. 2). A survey from poor urban Indian women also indicated similar reasoning, as a majority of them used social media to maintain existing ties (World Wide Web Foundation, 2015). These data hint at the ways people use social media and the Internet. It also indicates how different media are being used to fulfill different kinds of needs around the world, and our analyses need to exercise caution when claiming how certain media are dying or that certain media are antecedents to behaviors such as a political protest. These pieces of information should make us think about what Internet use means around the globe.

A Brief Note on Survey Questions in WVS

Researchers have used data from WVS to produce insights into media and its effects on culture and communications (Norris & Inglehart, 2009), political attitudes and participation (Nisbett, 2008; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), information (Temin & Smith, 2002), and technology (Norris, 2001). Although many scholars turn to WVS (and Afrobarometer) to understand media use and its effects, it is interesting to note that these surveys only incorporate items regarding media type/sources and usage (frequency of use). Questions concerning media perceptions, versatility, and type of use are remarkably absent. Consider WVS, Wave 6 (June 2012):⁵

People learn what is going on in this country and the world from various sources. For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you use it to obtain information daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or never.⁶ (Options: daily newspaper, printed magazines, television news, radio news, mobile phone, e-mail, Internet, talk with friends or colleagues)

I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence, or none at all?⁷ (Among a list of options, only two relevant media are television and the press.)

Using typical questions on the mere source and frequency of media usage is not enough to understand how users relate with the media and what effects the media have on attitudes and actions from a causal point of view. This is because the purported effects on participation or any other behaviors is not recorded temporally. This is especially problematic if we consider the media to be one of the important tools of political change and/or of creating mass protests (such as the Arab Spring). One may argue that surveys such as WVS (or Afrobarometer) are only concerned with attitudes and values and therefore are limited in their approach toward media effects. This in itself should be a sign for academics

⁵ The survey's master file is available at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>.

⁶ These items are from master survey codebook. Surveys are usually edited to fit or account for particular countries.

⁷ This question, however, asks confidence in the media: It can also be considered a measure of trust. Are trust and confidence equal? That is a theoretical question beyond the scope of the current study.

and policy makers interested in global media effects to develop tools of their own that could collect survey data periodically from across the world. Failure to develop such tools that incorporate interesting, relevant, thought-provoking questions regarding media use, perceptions, and related behaviors is a missed opportunity. By not generating such a data systematically, we rely on post hoc rationalizations or gross generalization in case of events such as surprise election results or a decline in voter turnout in a particular country. Much of these can be better explained if prior wave-based surveys record a population's opinions over time.

Making Global Media Survey Research Better

So how do we make survey questions better for understanding how media affect populations? Survey research on global media use can increase its scope by incorporating elements that allow survey takers to rank their preferences in terms of various media/technology use. These could also note the criteria on which these media are rank ordered or are given preferential weights to criteria such as ease of use, effectiveness, and costs. Surveys can also include questions about what users consider as important media tools and if any of these media have the perceived potential to create an impact. This can solve the problem of equating a medium's expansion in a country or region (e.g., mobile phone subscriptions) with the knowledge/potential users have of that medium/technology.

The presence of versatile questions have several benefits: (a) they are useful in creating priors from which better posterior knowledge can be created over time, (b) they can potentially offer alternative data analysis possibilities, and (c) in event of major social or political changes, evidence from established surveys can help with detailing causality and ultimately reduce hindsight bias and post hoc explanations.

Another important matter to note while analyzing survey data is the incorrect use of regression-based models that may have flawed causal models and gross generalizations (Nisbett, n.d.). Further, putting several variables together in one regression equation can lead to misleading results and subsequently dubious interpretations (see Achen, 1985, 2005). Statistical techniques such as regression cannot be used to establish causation. However, usage and frequency of media use can be correlated with other variables, such as perceptions of government performance, age, and values, but they cannot predict the latter, nor could other variables predict the former, literally, unless the rules of causality are established. In simple terms, correlation does not imply causation.

Implications for Policy and Research

According to a recent study by Pew Research Center (2016a), smartphone ownership and Internet access is on the rise around the world, yet we do not know much about the kinds of uses there are and subsequently remain ignorant about their consequences. By kinds of "kinds of uses" I refer to information seeking for politics, meeting and talking to strangers, and keeping in touch with family and friends, to name a few. Adding to this lack of knowledge is the issue that increasing smart phone ownership does not guarantee the closing of the digital divide, where recent estimates claim that up to 60% of the world still remains off-line (World Bank, 2016). This creates a difficult situation for researchers and policy makers as they must look into how they study the role of media, technology, and its purported

effects around the world. As we go forth in our roles as researchers, policy makers, or simply consumers, we must remember several things when it comes to the state of global media use for information seeking.

First, the importance of television as a popular medium must not be discounted. It is valued not only in developing countries but also in many developed countries, as the data indicate. It is a medium that brings people together, whether the context be a lounge, classroom, or a bar, and is quite rightly dubbed a "relaxing" medium (Sachiko et al., 2010). Initiatives and policies that encourage citizen participation in state matters and activities surrounding social and cultural events should consider television as an important outlet for campaigns and education.

This being said, the study of global media consumption patterns and effects needs to take into account contextualization and multimedia use by individuals including media such as radio, mobile phone, and interindividual connections such as families and friends. Further, new media (and other online platforms) may also be subject to issues of self-censorship (see Sleeper et al., 2013), which may affect their potential to contribute to political participation and civic engagement over time. Researchers and policy makers should consider these along with any optimistic notions of any media's potential.

And finally, researchers, academics, and anyone seriously interested in understanding media patterns and media use around the world must consider investing time into developing periodic surveys that include versatile questions regarding media use and perceptions around the globe.

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