THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNET IN FORMING OF THE PUBLIC OPINION AND ITS INDISPENSABILITY FOR CONTEMPORARY ECONOMY: AN ONLINE SURVEY

Petar Kurečić
University North, Department of Journalism, Koprivnica, Trg Žarka Dolinara 1, Croatia
petar.kurecic@unin.hr

Petar Miljković
University North, Department of Media Design, Koprivnica, Trg Žarka Dolinara 1, Croatia
petar.miljkovic@unin.hr

Petra Bagarić
University North, Department of Journalism, Koprivnica, Trg Žarka Dolinara 1, Croatia
petra.bagaric@unin.hr

ABSTRACT

The presence of the Internet in everyday life of a significant part of the world’s population has become a reality. Among the younger populations in developed countries and emerging economies, as well as in the respectable number of developing countries, the permeability of the Internet (as well as mobile networks, thereby giving access to the Internet practically permanently) has reached well over 70 percent or in some cases close to 100 percent. Social networks have become an omnipresent aspect of life for hundreds of millions of people. Digital economy has enabled “the Fourth Industrial Revolution”, as current development in business that is performed dominantly or exclusively over the Internet is often referred to. Aware of these developments, we have decided to perform an online survey (the choice of the type of survey and the media serves as a pointer of the importance of the Internet) about the different aspects of the Internet use, mainly focusing on the importance of the Internet for receiving information, forming of opinions and attitudes, as well as its importance for certain business activities and/or performing everyday duties at some person’s job. We have used Google form as a survey method, combining single and multiple choice questions, as well as one question with Likert scale, and guaranteed the anonymity of the responders by not collecting their e-mail addresses. We have shared our questionnaire on Facebook and via e-mail, and kindly asked our Facebook friend as well as our colleagues to share it further.
Certain questions were used as test questions, to show the importance and power of the social networks contrary to the “traditional” way of sharing data, such as e-mail. We conclude that, despite their clearly shown ubiquity and importance, the Internet and social networks, still have a lot of space for spreading, especially among the middle aged and elderly population.

Key words: the Internet, internet (online) survey, Google forms, social networks, public opinion, digital economy.

1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The presence of the Internet in everyday life of a significant percentage of the world’s population has become a reality. In developed countries, and especially among the younger population in developed countries and emerging economies, as well as respected number of developing countries, the penetration of the Internet (as well as mobile networks, thereby giving access to the Internet practically permanently) has reached well over 70 percent or in some cases close to 100 percent. Social networks have become an omnipresent aspect of life for hundreds of millions of people. Digital economy has enabled “the Fourth Industrial Revolution”, as current development in business that is performed dominantly or exclusively over the Internet is often referred to. Aware of these developments, we have decided to perform an online survey (the choice of the type of survey and the media serves as a pointer of the importance of the Internet) about the different aspects of the Internet use, mainly focusing on the importance of the Internet for receiving information, creating opinions and attitudes, as well as its importance for business activities and/or performing everyday duties at some person’s job. According to Techopedia, an online survey is “a questionnaire that the target audience can complete over the Internet. Online surveys are usually created as Web forms with a database to store the answers and statistical software to provide analytics. People are often encouraged to complete online surveys by an incentive such as being entered to win a prize.”  

The Internet has become a place of business and social life a long time ago. It has been about since the Internet has become widespread, and the rise in its permeability has never stopped. From the studies we have consulted, we would like to emphasize the ones that studied the attitudes towards online shopping, the role of brands in shopping of tourism services, the gender factor in online tourist services shopping, the effectiveness of marketing channels, the use of social networks and the social capital among young population in Croatia, and the problems of Internet use in general, that can lead to Internet addiction.

Through our survey, we also tried to compose our questions to address some of the issues investigated by the papers that we are mentioning here.

1 https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27866/online-survey.
Huseynov and Özkan Yıldırım (2016) have studied the attitudes toward online shopping of university students in Ankara, Turkey. Internet users’ concerns toward online shopping were assessed by considering financial issues, product quality issues, refund issues, product delivery issues, security issues and privacy issues. Findings of this study guide online retailers which factors to focus on in order to develop successful marketing strategies for online consumers.

Moisescu and Bertea (2013) analyzed potential (not actual) customers of tourist services, comparing same-respondents answers in two scenarios (buying online from a known travel agency but with which they had never had any previous experience as customers, and, respectively, buying online from an unknown travel agency), and two sub-scenarios (prices similar to or lower than competition), regarding five specific types of risks (financial, performance, social, privacy/security, technical), and overall perceived risk. When it comes to buying online from travel agencies, higher brand awareness means lower perceived risks, while a lower pricing positioning strategy involves higher perceived risks by new (potential) customers, the results showed.

Kim, Lee, and Chung (2013) identified factors that affect trust in online tourism shopping, including transaction security, navigation functionality, and cost-effectiveness. It examines the effects of these factors on trust and the relationship between this trust and repurchasing intentions. An online survey of Internet users who had shopped online for a tourism-related product or service within the past year was conducted. Gender had a significant moderating effect i.e. the thought processes of males strongly affected the influence of cost-effectiveness on trust and the impact of trust on repurchase intention in comparison with females.

Juščius, Labanauskaitė, and Baranskaitė (2016) tried to determine which marketing channel was the most efficient. The authors have analyzed and described the efficiency of each online marketing channel. Quantitative research method was used to analyze the efficiency of online marketing channels. A survey of Lithuania’s internet users reveals the most acceptable (efficient) online marketing channels.

Krolo and Puzek (2014) analyzed the association between the usage of internet social networks (in the example of Facebook) and the participatory dimensions of social capital of youth in Croatia. The research used R.D. Putnam's operationalized participatory dimensions of social capital as well as theories of internet social networks as potential agents of social capital. The research was conducted via online survey in 2012 on a convenience sample of Croatian youth (number of responders was 577). The results indicate there is a consistent link between the usage of internet social networks and the number of memberships in non-govern mental organizations and civil activism.

2 The authors have the following conclusions: WEB 2.0 is a very powerful online marketing tool. Social networks and blogs are equally useful. Company news on social networks is followed by 43% internet users and 42% of respondents read blogs. In most cases they are living in suburbs (55.6%), most seldom – people living in rural areas (40%). 40% of respondents favored the companies that are active in the social networks. The most popular social network in Lithuania is Facebook.com (83.4%). Other social networks are not very popular.
Chiang and Su (2012) analyzed the causes of problematic Internet use through an online survey, where 1094 samples were collected. The conclusions are the following: First, novelty, security, and efficiency increase users’ online trust. Second, information and efficiency enhance users’ sharing and anonymity online. Third, greater trust in Internet environments leads to an increase in a user’s cognitive bias toward online behavioral responsibility and Internet addiction. Fourth, a user’s attitude toward online sharing further increases the cognitive bias toward online copyright. Fifth, a user’s attitude toward anonymity increases cognitive bias toward online copyright, online behavioral responsibility, and deepens Internet addiction.

2 METHODOLOGY

We have used Google form as a survey method, combining single and multiple choice questions, as well as one Likert scale question, and guaranteed the anonymity of the responders by not collecting the e-mail addresses. We have shared the survey on Facebook and via e-mail, and kindly asked our colleagues to share it further. We offered no prizes, and clearly stated that the results will be used only in scientific purposes, excluding any commercial use. Thus, we relied on the interest, good will and altruism of the responders, to provide us with answers. Hence we are aware how precious the time is today, and relied on the kindness and altruism of the responders, we tried to keep the questionnaire as simple as possible, in order to maximize the number and honesty of the responses, by minimizing the time and effort needed to fill the survey and submit it. A question about the use of social networks (with a simple yes or no answer) was used as a test question (hence the form was shared mainly via Facebook) to show the importance and power of the social networks contrary to the “traditional” way of sharing data, such as e-mail. Only one question (the last one), about the social networks they use, demanded the responders to write the names of the networks, and the answering to that question was not obligatory. Over the course of eight days, starting on November 25th and concluding on December 3rd, 2017, we have collected a total of 134 responses to our survey, which was comprised of 20 questions. The questionnaire was made up of four sections. Four questions (gender, age, activity status, and income level) were posed first, to determine the structure of the respondents. Then, the questions about the economic value of the Internet and the use of online shopping were posed. The third section of the questionnaire addressed the use of internet and social networks in information gathering. The last question of the questionnaire was excluded from the results. It was of descriptive nature i.e. the responders had to write which social networks they use. However, hence the questionnaire was mainly shared over Facebook; it was rather obvious that the majority of the responders use it, as well as some other social networks, but on a much lower scale. Question number 19, addressing the use of social networks (Do you use social networks, possible answers yes or no) was left in the survey results, although it was also obvious that the answer will overwhelmingly be positive, hence the survey was shared on
Facebook. Nevertheless, the survey was also shared via e-mail to colleagues. Therefore, the result was not excluded, to show the reach and speed of information sharing over Facebook.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results that we have collected show that the Internet has become truly ubiquitous, at least among our responders. We gave our responders either the single choice or multiple choice answers, with only one question requiring a descriptive answer: Which social networks do you use? We used Likert scale in the question number 7: “What is the quality of good and service bought over the Internet, compared to the same bought in “general sales” i.e. in the stores?”

The answers to the questions determining the structure of the responders were as follows:

Figure 1: The structure of the responders by gender

Figure 2: The structure of the responders by age (years)
The second section of the questionnaire comprised the questions that targeted the use of the Internet in the economic activities of the responders:
Figure 5: Have you ever sold anything over the Internet? (One answer was not submitted)

Figure 6: What do you buy over the Internet (most frequent)? (Multiple choice question)
Figure 7: What is the quality of goods and services bought over the Internet, compared to the same goods and services bought in “general sales” i.e. in the stores? (Likert scale was used, 1 – the goods bought over the Internet are much worse, 10 – the goods bought over the Internet are much better)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Return policies</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery to home address</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time saving</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity in shopping</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variety of supply</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower price</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 8: What is your main motive for online shopping? (Multiple choice question, four answers were not submitted)

- Lower price: 78; 56%
- Variety of supply: 72; 44%
- Time saving: 93; 44%
- Delivery to home address: 75; 44%
- Return policies: 19; 44%
- Anonymity in shopping: 8; 44%

Figure 9: Do you consider the regulations for online-shopping to be good enough?
Figure 10: Do you make payments (shopping, money transfers) over the Internet? (Multiple choice question)

- Yes, through online banking: 74
- Yes, by credit cards: 65
- Yes, by PayPal: 69
- Yes, by credit cards: 18
- No

Figure 11: Do you use the Internet to perform your everyday duties (job related activities)?

- Yes, every day: 91
- Yes, 3-4 days per week: 15
- Yes, 1-2 days per week: 17
- No: 11

Figure 12: What are the risks of the Internet use? (Multiple choice question)

- None: 7
- "Social network addiction": 66
- The loss of time for leisure due to overexcessive...: 69
- Invasion of privacy: 80
- Personal data theft: 94
After the second set of questions, the third section of the questionnaire was focused on the importance of the Internet and social networks in gathering information and forming of the public opinion:

Figure 13: Which sources of information do you use? (Multiple choice question)

Figure 14: Which source of information do you use the most?
Figure 15: How much time (daily) do you spend on the Internet informing yourself?

Figure 16: Which source of information do you consider *least* biased?
4 CONCLUSION
We conclude that, despite their clearly shown ubiquity and importance, the Internet and social networks, still have a lot of space for spreading, especially among the middle aged and elderly population. We also conclude that online shopping has become ubiquitous among the younger population that uses social networks and informs itself mostly over the internet portals and social networks. There is a clear generation gap among our responders, hence the people of over 45 years of age were mostly not reached or declined to answer, and considering that the questionnaire was mainly shared over Facebook, confirming that the majority of the people using Facebook are younger than the average of population in Croatia (the average is about 42 years of age). Nevertheless, the power of the Internet should not be underestimated, but used wisely. The social network community, or to put it simply “Facebook community” shares certain habits and patterns of behavior when it comes to online shopping (the majority uses it), selling goods and services over the Internet, making payments over the Internet (the overwhelming majority is making payments of different types over the Internet), and informing themselves primarily over the internet portals and social networks. Due to the fact that social networks, Facebook particularly, enable rapid permeability, reaching hundreds of thousands or millions of users through sharing, as well as enabling two-sided communication i.e. feedbacks from users in real time, it is difficult to imagine that any significant company or institution that is in any ratio dependent on the market, can afford itself not to be present and active on social networks.

Social networks community trusts the internet portals and social networks the most, considering them to be least biased when compared “traditional media”, and publications, whether in paper or online form. Television and radio stations are also not trusted much by the social network community, especially if these are financed and/or controlled by the national or local government.

5 REFERENCES


