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COMS 245

Media Richness Theory

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The theory I decided to do my project on was media richness theory, the reason behind this is that it encompasses today’s technology with what are studying here in the way of communication theory. As I am a computer guy and I am intrigued with the latest technologies of the day, I felt this would be a good project to show how the advancements in the world today can help us to better communicate with one another across different kinds of media. However, it is not enough just to explain how to communicate across different media, it is also important to know what the limitations of the media are and how that can affect proper communication between parties. So as I researched this theory I learned a few things about this theory I did not expect, I assumed it dealt with only electronic media however, what I learned that it encompasses all forms of communication and that the main point about this theory is not the media is crosses, it also deals with how rich the communication is to the receiver once it crosses over that media.

What I hope the class can take away from this theory is that it is just as important to decide over what media one wishes to communicate over as it is to construct a proper message, to maintain proper non-verbal cues, or to present the message in a proper manner. I want to impress on the class that when they decide to communicate with someone when they cannot be face-to-face with them that they need to ensure that the message is a rich as possible so there is no misunderstanding or miscommunication between the two parties. I think the most important thing for the class to understand is that the world is changing ever so fast and not to take for granted or to underestimate the importance of the various media used to communicate with others. The most important point of all is to know which media to use at any given time; sometime e-mail is not the right or proper way to go or video conferencing may be too formal
and unnecessary when a letter could have done a more effective job. That being said, let us now
turn our attention to media richness theory.

Today the world is changing ever so fast, now you no longer to fly across the country, or
the world, to meet with a potential client or, to attend a college course. The advancements made
with technology and especially, those that have to do with video transmissions, allow one to
communicate with virtually anyone, virtually anywhere. This new means of communication has
lead to the theory of media richness. The goal of this theory is to create a framework that can
describe a communications medium by describing its ability to reproduce the information sent
over it (Draft & Lengel, 1984). In other words the less sophisticated means of electronic
communications, such as the telephone, will not properly transmit all forms of communication
such a non-verbal cues. In order to transmit these other, less vocal forms of communication, one
would need to use a more superior form of electronic communication such as video
conferencing. Every theory has to have its start, and this one is no exception.

Media richness theory is based on contingency theory and information processing theory
(Galbraith, 1977). One aspect of contingency theory has sought to formulate broad
generalizations about the formal structures that are typically associated with or best fit the use of
different technologies (Wikipedia, 2008). Information processing theory operates within a six
step model or approach. First is presentation that states the message recipient must first be
presented with the persuasive message. The next step is attention which states the recipient must
pay attention to the message in order for it to produce attitude change. Third is comprehension
which is the overall position the message advocates and the arguments provided to support the
position must be comprehended. Fourth is yielding which states that the recipient must yield to,
or agree with, the message content that has been comprehended if any attitude change is to be detectable. Fifth is retention that states the recipient must retain, or store in memory, his/her changed attitude if this change is to persist over a period of time. Finally behavior is what the recipient must behave on the basis of their changed mind (McGuire, 1968)

R.L. Draft and the Macintosh Corporation came up with the idea of information richness theory in 1981 in an attempt to show organizations how computers could enhance communications within an organizational environment. Three years later in 1984, R.L. Draft and R.H. Lengel would propose the theory of media richness and how it applies to organizations. Their contention was that “organizational success is based on the organization’s ability to process information of appropriate richness to reduce uncertainty and clarify ambiguity” (Draft & Lengel, 1984). In other words, in order to succeed as an organization, the flow of communication must be clear, concise, and above all understandable. Over the next several years, Draft and Lengel would continue to propose and enhance their theory of media richness, it was not until 1990 that they suggested that the richer the medium used to transmit a message, the more clear and less ambiguous the delivery.

This theory would be furthered advanced in 1990 when Trevino, Lengel, Bodensteiner, Gerloff, and Muir proposed, “This article proposes a new thesis about the role of individual differences in managers’ media choice behavior” (1990). In other words, depending on the media used by managers depends on how effective they are in communicating with their employees about their assigned tasks. It was also in 1990 that Rice and Rook explored job categories and organizational levels and communication channels, including email (1990). As technology has advanced, this theory is constantly being reviewed and retooled to fit in our modern, technology
rich, world we find ourselves in. In fact, media richness theory is no longer limited only to business organizations; today this theory can be applied to educational institutions as well as individuals in order to communicate between friends, families, students, and teachers. Next we will look at how media richness theory is being used today, the technologies, and the media that are in place to convey messages from recipient to receiver.

The several of forms of communication have changed over the years from letters, manuscripts, smoke signals, the telegraph, carrier pigeon, the post office, the telephone, radio, television, cell phones, email, instant messaging, and finally video conferencing. How we communicate is just as important as the form of media we use to communicate over. We will look at the various ways in which to communicate with others starting from the highest or “richest” form down to the lowest. Face to face communication is considered the “richest” form of communication since one is not only able to hear what a person has to say but, they one is also observe the non-verbal cues of communication that are always present when communicating with another person or persons. Video conferencing would the next best form as one is able to hear and see the communicator however; this is not in real-time do to the limitations in various media forms in which the signal carries over. Anyone who has sat in a compressed video class here at Ohio University Southern will no doubt admit while this is a good way of having a class with a professor who is at another campus, the time delay between what is said and what is received as well as the delay in the video feed, can sometime frustrate students and professors alike while trying to communicate with one another.

For an almost real time communication, one can always use one of the various instant messaging programs that are available for desktop computers on the market. With the use of a
web cam and a microphone, one can also turn their instant messaging program into a makeshift
or home video conferencing system. While one can type with one another, this is still not a true
real time communication as each party is subject to the speed in which the other party can type
and their ability to use proper grammar, instead of instant messaging talk, and their ability to
spell properly. This is cheap and easy way for family, friends, and co-workers to communicate
with one another.

Next in line would be the telephone or cell phone, while one is not able to view the other
person or persons with whom they are communicating with, it is real time communication since
when you speak they hear and vice versa. One major problem with telephones is that non-verbal
communications are not transmitted and, depending on the quality of the phone call, certain
voice inflections are also not communicated between the parties. Telephone conversations would
be considered the less desirable form of near real time communication since there are some many
things that cannot be transmitted over the phone. The only thing below the telephone would be
instant messaging without a webcam or microphone since nothing at is then transmitted across
the media except for keystrokes.

Emails fall far below on the media richness scale since it is not real time, it cannot
transmit non-verbal communication cues, and it does not carry over its media one’s voice or
inflection. The same is true with letters sent via the post office however, unlike emails; it can
take several days or weeks for the recipient to receive the correspondence. The telegraph and
carrier pigeons have not been in use for several years and as such, are not considered within the
context of the media richness theory however, if they were, the telegraph would rank just below
emails and the carrier pigeon would ran above the letters respectively.
It is not enough to know how rich a media is or what the advantages and disadvantages of using each, one must also ensure that the media used is a near perfect match to the task being proposed. In fact Draft and Lengel argue that media capable of sending “rich” information, such as face-to-face meetings, are better suited to equivocal tasks, where there are multiple interpretation for available information, while media that are “less” rich, such as computer-mediated communication, are best suited to tasks of uncertainty such as where there is a lack of information (Denis, Valacich, Speier, & Morris, 1998). However, all theories are subjective to their fair share of detractors and critics and media richness theory is not exception, next we will look at a critique of the media richness theory.

The major concern with media richness theory is that it was developed without consideration of new electronic media and the many social factors that can influence media selection, communication processes, and outcomes. The results of this stream of research have not been completely convincing. In a number of cases, managers have made different choices than those predicted by media richness theory (Carnevale, 1981; Kinney and Dennis, 1994; Kinney and Watson, 1992; Valacich, Paranka, George and Nunamaker, 1993; Valacich, Mennecke, Wachter, and Wheeler, 1994).

One explanation behind the lack of empirical support for media richness is that the task-media fit is insufficient in explaining media choice. Many researchers have thus concluded that media choice is also affected by factors beyond the richness of the medium itself. For example, Markus (1987) proposed that there is a need for a critical mass of users required before a medium will be widely used. Individuals are less likely to use a medium until a sufficient number of their colleagues also use it, especially those with whom they already communicate (Rice, Grant, Schmitz & Torobin, 1990). The availability of the medium to the message sender
(Rice & Shook, 1990; Zmud et al., 1990) and ability of the sender to use that medium (King, Hartman & Hartzel, 1992) are also key to its selection. Media also have socially defined characteristics that may be important (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz & Power, 1987), although empirical evidence is mixed. Rice and Aydin (1991) concluded that socially defined effects "in a complex and changing arena of ongoing organizational activities, can play no more than a small role in influencing attitudes" (p. 241). Clearly, media choice appears to be affected by a plethora of factors (Rice, 1992).

A second explanation addressing the problematic findings is related to the theory guiding the matching of media to task characteristics (e.g., equivocality, analyzability) is flawed. That is, matching medium to task does not improve performance. A task, as operationalized in the various examinations of media richness, is actually a very high level construct composed of many sub-elements or processes (McGrath, 1991). For example, in Daft and Lengel's (1986) terms, resolving a task of equivocality means developing a shared framework for analyzing the situation, populating the framework with information of a shared meaning, and assessing the results to arrive at a shared conclusion for action. Each of these steps may have different media needs, such that even tasks of uncertainty may include steps that require “rich media” (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1993).
References:


