



ICTs, social thinking and subjective well-being – The Internet and its representations in everyday life

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Abstract

The spread of ICTs constitutes an intriguing phenomenon for studying the interweaving between ways of knowing, thinking and experiencing new ‘realities’. A suitable framework for investigating this topic is the social representations one, which addresses socially shared structures of knowledge, loaded with emotional features and symbolic values. In the present study, we explore how the internet is represented and how it is related to social well-being.

The number of participants was 101. The components of the representation – information, attitude, representational field – were investigated using a qualitative–quantitative methodology; social well-being (in general, and after the internet entered one’s own life) was measured through Keyes’ scale [Social Well-Being. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(2), 121–140]; levels of practice were also taken into account.

Participants show a medium–high level of social well-being in its various components (integration, acceptance, contribution, actualisation and coherence). A more complex picture appears ‘after internet’, with gains in terms of closeness, contribution, actualisation of society, counterbalanced by diminished trust in people and resort to one’s own group for security and comfort. The representational field opposes an intimate picture to a wider perspective; space to time; functional to experiential features of the internet. Participants take different positions on these dimensions, providing foreseen and unexpected patterns of images and meanings.

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1. Introduction

The spread of Information and Communication Technologies in the last decades of the 20th century constitutes an intriguing phenomenon for scholars interested in the intertwining between ways of knowing, thinking, experiencing new social ‘realities’, on the one hand, and social practices and material supports of these knowledge structures – i.e. their underlying artefacts – on the other. Like the introduction of new devices in the eighties or, even more so, the introduction of printing at the beginning of modern times, the internet, in particular, calls for renewed interest within social sciences in order to better understand the social and social psychological processes involved with the new technologies.

Within a sociological perspective, growing attention has been given to its spread, its success, its integration in everyday life from groups differing in their access, use, practice with the device (cf. Katz & Rice, 2002; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Within a psychological framework, concerns have been expressed as regards its exponential diffusion, with increasing debate as to its costs and benefits, and its risks versus gains, mainly in terms of psychological well-being (cf. Bargh, Fritzsims, & McKenna, 2003; Bargh, McKenna, & Fritzsims, 2002; Döring, 1999; Kraut et al., 2002; Wright, 2000; see also Joinson, 2003; Wallace, 1999). More recently, with this growing research, enthusiastic or concerned positions have slowly given way to recognition of the instrumental role of the device, as a catalyst which potentiates and enhances pre-existing individual trends (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002; Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Hills & Argyle, 2003; McDonough, 2001; Mundorf & Laird, 2002; Sheperd & Edelman, 2001). Similarly, the deterministic assumption of the impact of the internet on social life has been challenged and put aside in favour of a view of the device as a social production (cf. Fisher, 1992; Mantovani, 2001, 2002), in which technology and society co-construct each other (Latour & Woolgar, 1979).

Within this lively debate, being particularly interested in the social aspect of the phenomenon, we consider the theoretical approach of social representations particularly suitable for research. Such an approach focuses its attention on the development of everyday knowledge in order to cope with novelties of a theoretical, ideological and technological nature. Social representations are considered ‘warm’ social structures of knowledge, loaded with emotional features and symbolic values, actively co-constructing the meaning of these new ‘realities’ (Moscovici, 1961/1976, 1989). The internet is no longer a ‘new reality’, it has been on the scene for the last twenty or more years, with a mass level diffusion in the last seven years. Moreover, like previous communication technologies, in western societies it entered everyday life somewhat surreptitiously, and we only became aware of its powerful presence as we got used to it. For these reasons, some scholars raise doubts as to whether it is right to speak of social representations of ICTs and particularly of the internet (Lahlou, personal communication). However, because of the symbolic charge which is linked to it and its position as a social issue at stake on which individuals and groups are fiercely divided, we consider the internet a good candidate for study in this framework. For a topic to become an object of representation, there has to be a *problem, contextualised* in a specific framework, and widely *shared* (Farr & Moscovici, 1984). There has also to be *polymorphism*, with different aspects and voices given by different groups, so that the ‘object’ has a specific value to specific groups (Moliner, 1993). As we already noted, this seems to be the case with ICTs.

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