

# Searching for Culture—High and Low

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*This article examines the link between finding out about cultural activities on the Web and finding out through other people. Using data from interviews with Torontonians, we show that people first obtain cultural information from interpersonal ties or other offline sources and only then turn to the Web to amplify this information. The decisions about what information to seek from which media can be evaluated in terms of a uses and gratifications approach; the main gratifications identified include efficiency and the availability of up-to-date information. Our findings also have implications for the model of the traditional two-step flow of communication. We suggest the existence of new steps, whereby people receive recommendations from their interpersonal ties, gather information about these recommendations online, take this information back to their ties, and go back to the Web to check the new information that their ties have provided them.*

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## The Social Context of Searching

I've been searching, oh yeah, searching,  
(My goodness,) searching every which a-way. Yeah. Yeah.  
(Sung by The Coasters, written by Lieber & Stoller, 1957)

## The Embeddedness of the Internet in Everyday Life

Once upon a time, like The Coasters, people searched high and low for information. Yet they really only looked low, on the ground. They asked their friends, and they consulted media, from newspapers to telephone directories. When the Internet came along, people began to look high, in cyberspace. Email came first, enabling people to ask their friends for information. Soon, the Internet begat the Web, spawning search engines, from A (Alta Vista) to G (Google), and enabling people to look for information worldwide without involving their friends.

But is the legend of Web immersion correct? Have people switched to looking high in websites for information when they still have friends to talk with, in person and on the phone, as well as through email and instant messaging? We believe that both interpersonal and Web searches continue and are intertwined, because people rarely use the Internet in isolation. Rather, they fit the Internet into the rest of their lives, both routine and extraordinary (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Wellman & Hogan, 2006). Long-time Internet users are moving from the stage of learning what they can do with the Internet into the stage of making choices about how they will use the Internet, including incorporating it into their cultural activities.

Quite a bit of work has already been done studying how people search the Web for information that enhances human capital, such as government and health information (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2002; see also Berger, Wagner, & Baker, 2005; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Hargittai, 2003b; Kalichman, Cherry, Cain, Weinhardt, Benotsch, Pope et al., 2006; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Nettleton, Burrows, & O'Malley, 2005). Less work has been done on what DiMaggio and Hargittai (2002) refer to as "recreational information seeking," including searching for cultural information on the Web. The nature of cultural information may affect how people search for it. On the one hand, most people have limited leisure time and are not likely to spend large amounts of time searching for information about cultural products and activities, particularly if searching is taxing or burdensome. While they might be willing to invest hours in seeking information about serious matters of health or finance, they probably are not going to spend an hour looking for information about a new movie. On the other hand, people who can search efficiently may prefer to use the Web to seek information about culture, both because it offers access to a wider array of information—and thus the potential to maximize the use of leisure time—and because surfing the Web may be enjoyable in its own right for some people.

The value of cultural capital for success in education (e.g., DiMaggio, 1982) and work (e.g., Erickson, 1991) suggests that it is worth considering how people use the Web to approach culture. How do people acquire their cultural capital—their fund of knowledge about culture? One scholar, Bourdieu, has contended that cultural capital is determined by what one absorbs from one's parents at an early age (1984). This would imply that the Web is irrelevant to acquiring cultural capital. However, other scholars have contested Bourdieu's claim, demonstrating that cultural capital continues to accrue through school, experience, and diverse social networks (e.g., Erickson, 1996; Hunter, 1988). Their research suggests that using the Web for cultural purposes may also potentially contribute to cultural capital, either alone or in combination with other factors such as interpersonal ties.

Previous research has shown that information seeking online does not take place in a vacuum, but is influenced by the offline world of social attributes, environmental factors, and alternate information sources. For example, the presence of children (who tend to monopolize the family computer and limit their parents' time on websites) reduces the amount of time people spend using the Web. By contrast,

gender and age have little effect, once other variables are taken into account (Hargittai, 2003a; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001).

To see how people actually fit the Internet into their lives, in this article we study how Torontonians search the Web for cultural activities, and how their offline searches intersect with their Web searches. Our research into the interplay of computer networks and social networks in the search for cultural information and activities is based on lengthy interviews conducted in 2005 with 84 English-speaking adult residents of the East York section of Toronto, Canada (Hogan, Carrasco, & Wellman, 2007; Wellman & Hogan, 2006).

We use information from our interviews to address two key questions.

**RQ1:** What is the relationship between the characteristics of the Web and the types of cultural information that people seek online?

**RQ2:** How do interpersonal ties interact with the Web to influence the types of information people seek online?

### Media Uses and Gratifications

A “uses and gratifications” model of media choice helps inform our consideration of how the characteristics of the Web influence what types of information people seek online versus the types of information they seek offline.<sup>1</sup> The underlying principle of the model is that people will choose media according to their expectations of finding the experience gratifying, and they will continue to use media according to how they perceive previous experiences. Continued use therefore depends upon previous gratifications. The model is concerned with:

(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974, p. 510)

The uses and gratifications model assumes that people are active consumers of media (Katz et al., 1974). It assumes that people make choices about where to go and what to pay attention to. The assumption of an active audience seems particularly well suited to studying a medium designed for active use and known for its interactivity (Morris & Ogan, 1996; Stafford & Stafford, 1998).

We chose the uses and gratifications model to evaluate the role of the Web in relation to other forms of mass media because it can encompass both the characteristics of the media and the characteristics of the user, including social attributes, environmental factors, and skill level.

Previous uses and gratifications research has often grouped media gratifications into two categories: process and content. Process gratifications are gratifications that arise from the performance of the activity, such as unstructured Web browsing. Content gratifications are gratifications arising from acquiring information.

Research by Stafford and Stafford (2001) on Internet gratifications suggests that the two groupings overlap. It also suggests a need for a third category of gratifications: social gratification arising from the opportunities to interact with other people. Several scholars have focused on social gratifications as a unique element of the Internet (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Song, LaRose, Eastin, & Lin, 2004).

While socialization is important as a gratification of Internet use, our focus is narrower. We did not ask how people use the Internet to communicate about culture, but rather how they use the Web to seek information about culture. Thus, we report on possible content and process gratifications rather than social gratifications. While this limits our ability to build a complete uses and gratifications model, it does permit us to expand our knowledge of Web-related content and process gratifications.

### **Flows of Information**

People are not only active in their selection of media but also in their interpretation of what they learn. The theory of the two-step flow of information has been influential for decades in thinking about interactions between mass media and interpersonal relations. The initial conception of the theory stated that most people are not directly influenced by messages from mass media. Instead, opinion leaders filter the messages and influence their followers through social networks. Opinion leaders pay much attention to the media. Nevertheless, opinion leaders are still influenced more by their interpersonal relations than by the media itself (Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Later work suggested that (1) people mostly learn about news events directly from the media and (2) then turn to opinion leaders for assistance in interpreting what they have learned. The process of seeking advice from opinion leaders is especially important when the information requires action (e.g., voting, deciding to use a new technology), or when it requires a change in beliefs because of the introduction of facts that contradict existing beliefs (Burt, 1999; Troidahl, 1966).

The two-step flow of information—learning about events directly from the media, and then turning to opinion leaders to interpret them—is primarily true of events that receive media attention. However, in cases of news or innovations that are less well known, information as well as influence may flow interpersonally. In such cases, the original information often does not come from the opinion leader, but from people who are structurally marginal to the group (Weimann, 1982). Marginal people often have the advantage of being connected to other groups and are therefore in a position to access more information and promote inter-group communication (Burt, 1999; Granovetter, 1983; Wellman, 1988).

The two-step model suggests two ways of looking at interpersonal ties as part of the search process. First, in the context of searching for information, family, friends, and acquaintances are one more type of communication medium that people choose to consult for particular uses—usually interpretation or advice—according to the

uses and gratifications model. Second, in the context of what prompts people to search for various kinds of information, family, friends, and acquaintances may sometimes volunteer information. This, in turn, may lead people to search for additional information from other sources (according to their expected uses and gratifications) that could be useful in interpreting or taking action on the new information.

In the case of cultural information, both processes may operate. Some forms of cultural information—such as information about new movies—are widely disseminated through the media and may lead to a search for additional information. Other forms of cultural information—such as an obscure new music album—are not widely disseminated and may only be learned about through interpersonal ties, which could then prompt further information seeking. Given the vast array of cultural information now available online, all of it could lead back to the Web.

## Methods<sup>2</sup>

Our analysis is based on data collected for the Connected Lives project in East York, an area of Toronto 30-45 minutes from downtown, with a population of 114,240 (Statistics Canada, 2002) residing in houses and apartment buildings. Mobile phone and broadband Internet service are widely available: 84% of interview participants have a computer at home, while 86% have used the Internet at least once. Fifty-two percent of interview participants have broadband Internet access and 18% rely on dial-up, indicating a reasonably high degree of penetration. Only 16% have a home network linking two or more computers.

Eighty-four in-home interviews were conducted between February and April 2005 with 24% of the respondents to our random sample survey of 350 English-speaking adults. The interviews were combined with observations of participants interacting with their communication environments. The interviews were conducted by NetLab doctoral students and took two to four hours in a single session. The interview schedule was developed by our team between September 2004 and January 2005. The response rate for the interviews was 85% of the survey respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in interviews.<sup>3</sup>

Interview participants discussed their general cultural activities, how they select specific cultural activities in which to engage, what cultural products to consume, and the role the Web plays in their cultural consumption. Our selection of high and popular culture activities to discuss was based on Gans (1974). High culture is defined as “the art, music, literature, and other symbolic products that were (and are) preferred by the well-educated elite... [as well as] the styles of thought and feelings of those who choose these products—those who are ‘cultured.’ Popular culture, on the other hand, refers to the symbolic products used by the ‘uncultured’ majority” (Gans, 1974, p. 10). Along with Gans, we reject the pejorative connotation of “mass culture” and use instead the term “popular culture” (see also DiMaggio, 1997).

Information about cultural activities was gathered by having the participants rank a series of cue cards listing cultural activity groups and then asking them to elaborate on the top two of the eight possible activities in which they engaged. The activities the participants were asked about were: reading and writing; television and film; games and sports; music; hobbies; performing arts; national and ethnic heritage; and fine art. These activities were selected as a cross-section of culture-related activities encompassing both high and popular cultural activities prevalent in Toronto.

As this is not a comprehensive list of all possible cultural activities, participants were also given an opportunity to discuss any other common or favorite uses of the Web. We followed up by asking a series of questions about how they gather information and make decisions about the cultural activities they identified as being of interest, including the roles that they play in information gathering, decision making, and engaging in cultural activities. Our focus was primarily on seeking cultural information. However, people sometimes volunteered information about how they use the Internet to engage in cultural activities.

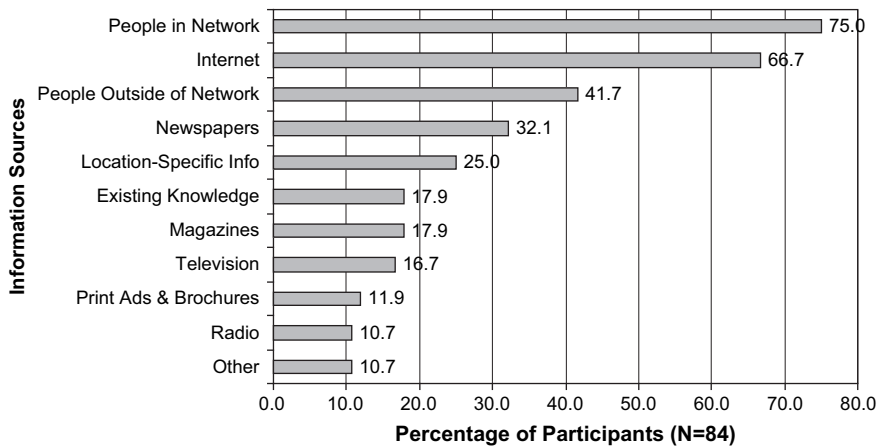
If the interview participants had an Internet connection and were willing, we concluded with in-home observations of how they actually used their computers to search for cultural and health information. The observations included both structured demonstrations of specific skills and unstructured demonstrations of everyday use (see also Hargittai, 2003a). Owing to the great length of many interviews and the time constraints of the participants, observations were only done in 33% of the interviews.

Fifty-nine percent of the total interview participants are women, with a median age of 45. Sixty-eight percent live with partners. Half (51%) of the interview participants have a university degree, while only 20% have a high school education or less. Most people are working-class or middle-class. Household income typically ranges between CDN\$50,000 and \$75,000, with both members of married couples doing paid work. Sixty-two percent of the interview participants are doing paid work.

East York, like all of Toronto, has many residents who are immigrants. Two-fifths (42%) of the interview participants are foreign born. Although not every interview participant was a native English speaker, all spoke the language well enough to be interviewed in English.

## **Uses and Gratifications of the Web**

Two-thirds (67%) of the interview participants report using the Web for seeking cultural information, a rate second only to the 75% who use interpersonal ties with family, friends, and acquaintances for this purpose (Figure 1). Among the other sources of information mentioned are knowledge of favorite authors or directors, helpful sales clerks, bookstores, magazine articles, newspaper reviews and articles, brochures, radio, and television.



**Figure 1** Sources of information about culture  
Question: Where do you get information about [activity named by participant]?

Knowing how the Web fits in the search for cultural information relative to other potential information sources, we can consider when and why people choose the Web by examining the perceived uses and gratifications of the various media. We can also look at what types of information people seek from the Web and how various media interact.

### Content Gratifications

In nearly all cases, when interview participants report using the Internet, they mean the Web. They usually turn to the Web for specific, solution-oriented information rather than broad, general information. The Web is *not* widely used to find out about new and unfamiliar types of culture. Instead, it is used to find out specific details about (or perform specific activities related to) forms of culture that the participant is already interested in, such as finding out when an exhibit is coming to town or buying a ticket. For example, one participant (Elaine, 58) says:

[T]he only time I've gone [to the Web] is when I want to see a movie and I want to see the write up on it. So if I've heard some good about this movie, I'm going to see what the write-up is, and I would go on the Internet for that.

Most of the information about culture that participants seek online is highly focused, and much of it is intended to facilitate access to offline activities. Thirteen percent of interview participants say they look for movie times, tickets, or locations online, but only after they have selected a movie using other sources. Eight percent of participants mention looking up movie reviews online using *imdb.com* (the Internet Movie Database) or watching movie trailers online. By contrast, participants do not say they go online to discover new movies. Similarly, while a few people mention going online to find out when their favorite band was coming to town, no one says he

or she goes online to discover new music.<sup>4</sup> Eight percent of participants say they go to *Amazon.ca* or *Chapters.Indigo.ca*<sup>5</sup> to read reviews and purchase books recommended by friends or family. Yet, none say they seek out new authors who have just begun publishing online or browse the online bookstores for reading inspiration, despite the ingenious software that sites such as *Amazon* have created for this purpose. Most people bring up the same few activities of music downloads, movie information, and book ordering, while more esoteric Web phenomena such as e-zines do not receive any mention. Thus, there is quite a difference between how our interview participants use the Web and how Internet cognoscenti use it to access blogs, vblogs, e-zines, etc.

This focus on using the Web for gaining immediately wanted information is further supported by the sites that we observed people going to in search of culture. The most widely-used sites for cultural purposes are *Toronto.com* (six participants), the Toronto Public Library (four participants), *Chapters.Indigo.ca* (four participants), and *Amazon.ca* (three participants). All of these are Canadian sites. Two provide local information about Toronto, and two are online sites for large book-sellers. The high degree of localism fits well with our finding that people frequently use the Web as a gateway for attending offline cultural activities, especially movies and shows. Using American sites, for example, would not provide access to such local offline activities.

These uses reflect both the characteristics of the users and the characteristics of the Web. Movies, music, and books are all popularly cited by our participants as topics that they seek information about on the Web; they also correspond to the general cultural interests indicated by the participants (Table 1).<sup>6</sup> They may also reflect the structure of mass-market websites, which encourage people to go online for popular pursuits such as movies and music rather than for more arcane activities such as gallery openings (Hargittai, 2007). For example, the regularly used *Toronto.com* site gives both music and movies prominent direct buttons on the main page. By contrast, it groups together in one residual button a wide variety of other performance and fine art activities. The more prominent positioning of music and movies

**Table 1** Cultural activities of interest to study participants

Cultural Activity Area	Percent of Participants who Cite Activity	Percent of Participants Listing this as a Top 3 Activity
Reading & Writing	79.8 (67)	67.9 (57)
Television & Film	76.2 (64)	57.1 (48)
Games & Sports	61.9 (52)	36.9 (31)
Music	60.7 (51)	44.0 (37)
Hobbies	58.8 (41)	29.8 (25)
Performing Arts	41.7 (35)	17.9 (15)
National & Ethnic Heritage	41.7 (35)	13.1 (11)
Fine Art	35.7 (30)	8.3 (07)

probably leads to greater awareness of these activities. Additionally, the button visually reminds users that movie and concert listings are available online, leading to greater use of these services.

Although the main cultural use of the Web for most people is specific information such as movie times, participants also report a wide range of other cultural activities. Nearly every interview participant with a particular passion or hobby uses the Web to search for information about his or her interest. Searches cover an array of topics, including gardening tips, bird watching locations and sightings, online tango lessons, hints on winemaking, information about sailing, knitting, and crocheting patterns, and information about sports equipment. Most people do not turn to the Web for recommendations about cultural activities in which they have a passing interest, but they will go looking for information about cultural activities to which they are dedicated. This is in keeping with previous research showing that when people go online for practical information, they tend to seek either individual facts or remain within well-defined problem areas (Savolainen, 1999). This suggests that the main perceived use of the Web is in supplementing existing cultural knowledge (and existing cultural capital), rather than in seeking new cultural fields.

How does the process of searching for cultural activities online work? Interview participants usually begin with a search engine. Almost half—48%—use *Google* for their searches, a rate that is well above the 30% user rate in the general Internet user population (Sullivan, 2003). The second most frequently mentioned search engine is *Yahoo!*, used by 19% of interview participants. *AskJeeves* and *Dogpile* were mentioned three times each. The participants demonstrated to us a variety of tools they use to make return visits to known sites: bookmarks/favorite lists, the drop-down menu in the location bar of recent sites visited, and search engines.

### Process Gratifications

What processes might lead people to use the Web for cultural purposes, and what limitations and frustrations might lead them away from it? Among the process gratifications mentioned are the speed with which information can be found and the availability of up-to-date information. The process gratifications shown are all related to access to content, which suggests that the process and content gratifications may overlap somewhat.

Participants tell us that one of the big draws of the Web is the rapidity with which sites, especially news sites, are updated. For example, Hannah,<sup>7</sup> 41, says:

I just have to be on top of what's going on.... I'm a news person. I find that the Internet provides such a wealth of information. It's amazing; you feel like you're in the mainstream.

Similarly, Oliver, 55, takes pleasure in the speed of Internet news:

Before I used to subscribe to newspapers; now I don't subscribe to newspapers...I already know the news before the newspaper publishes it. Like what shortwave used to do.

Rapid access to up-to-date news is only partially related to culture, but the same principle can be applied to culture-related news—such as movie times and rock concerts—that people seek online. Of course, this also overlaps with content gratifications: People seek information online because the up-to-date content they want is available there.

Several participants say that finding information on the Web is efficient. For example, Carter, 24, says:

[I'll go online if] I need to look for a schedule for a movie, or if I need to see information about where I'm going like festivals or concerts—things like that. That's faster.

However, not all participants agree with this assessment, suggesting that efficiency is not necessarily a characteristic of the Web, but rather an interaction between the Internet and skill in using it. This is supported by Hargittai's finding (2003a) that general skill in using the Internet is related to better searching.

The temporal order of this skill effect is uncertain. It is possible that people who are more comfortable with Web browsers and downloading will be more likely to go online to search for information about culture. It is also possible that people who go online for cultural activities become more comfortable with using these features through practice. It is probable that the two form a positive feedback cycle, such that people who have some degree of skill and comfort are more likely to go online in search of information about culture, which leads to further improvement in skill.

We found a positive correlation with comfort in using word processors, even though they are rarely used during Web browsing. This suggests that people may be more likely to go online once they are comfortable with basic computer use. These findings are echoed in the uses and gratifications literature, which finds that initial Web use leads to greater self-efficacy, which in turn leads to further use (LaRose & Eastin, 2004).

### **The Disadvantages of Web Searches**

Examinations of the limitations of a particular medium are not a common element in uses and gratifications research. However, many of the Web limitations described by users suggest equivalent gratifications in other media. Since we are interested in how people decide to search the Web for cultural information rather than turning to other sources, this information seems relevant to consider here.

The main limitations participants mention are the difficulty in sorting out the overwhelming quantity of information and the potential unreliability of information found online. Ten participants say Web searching is “overwhelming” and provides “too much information.” Yvonne, 55, says:

I find that searching [the] Internet for information can be quite tedious, time consuming and not quite successful. You can spend hours trying to find one stupid fact and there is too much information, which is really hard to sort out.

Kate, 41, also finds browsing to be overwhelming:

[W]ith the Internet, I also find it's almost too much; it's just very hard to filter it. You know, you look for say a cottage in Muskoka, and you get 4000 things that come up, so to me it almost becomes useless.

Wendy, 57, finds the process of sorting through Web information very frustrating:

The other day I did browse...I hated it. I decided it was a waste, it was too much information, it was advertising, it was frustrating....

Concerns exist about the unreliability of information found online, but they are more tempered. Beth, 54, says:

I guess the only negative—and it's more than a caution than a negative—you have to be careful of the sources of information that you're getting there because there's a lot that are completely unreliable.

Sam, 71, agrees:

Electronic information is there because someone decides they want to share this knowledge, or somebody's selling it. They're not always accurate. Nobody nails them for their accuracy.... There might be a thread of truth in it, but how big a thread? ... It goes back to personal judgment....

Sally, 49, also notes the need for caution:

[T]here's skill involved in finding information online. Because you have to know what you're looking for, you have to narrow your search. You have to know how credible it is, when you go on to search.

Note that these are remarks of caution: None of the participants say that they refuse to use the Web because of unreliable information. This may be because many have criteria for determining if information is reliable. During the observations, many participants reported using one or more of the following criteria when assessing the reliability of a website:

1. *Who is sponsoring the site?* In general, people are more likely to trust government sites, official university sites, and sites run by recognizable organizations (e.g., the Toronto Public Library).
2. *How professional does the site look?* Better designed sites tend to be trusted. People look for sites that look professional and appear to contain relevant information. Overly flashy sites are usually ignored.
3. *Does there seem to be a consensus among sites?* Information repeated on multiple websites is often treated as accurate. On issues related to health, most people look to confirm information they find online with their doctors (Wellman & Hogan, 2006). On issues related to culture, people will sometimes be creative in finding other ways to confirm suspect information. For example,

people researching a digital camera or seeking information about a book will turn to the manufacturer or publisher's site for product information, but they will look for independent review sites and seller sites that publish user reviews before making a final decision.

Consistent with other studies (e.g., Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Stanford, & Tauber, 2003), our research shows a relationship between the characteristics of the Web and the type of information people tend to seek online. Interview participants appreciate the efficiency and timeliness of the Web. They value it because it allows them to keep informed. However, the overwhelming quantity of information appears to leave many people hesitant to begin their search with too broad a query. Instead, they go online in search of relatively simple but important information that is not readily available through their interpersonal networks. This suggests that the information available online is only helpful if people can sort through it to determine what is relevant, and this is most easily done if people know what they are looking for.

### **The Uses and Gratifications of Interpersonal Ties**

Interpersonal ties are the most commonly-used source of information about culture, cited by 75% of interview participants. Like the Web, these ties can be considered in terms of the gratifications they provide.

Our interviews show that while the Web is perceived as useful for looking up specific information, ideas about what to look up usually come from elsewhere. When deciding what book to read, CD to buy, or movie to watch, people tend to turn first to non-Internet sources, of which the most popular is word-of-mouth. The main gratifications that participants associate with acquiring information from other people are sociability, ease of accessing relevant information, and personalized recommendations. These are not the gratifications typically associated with interpersonal interaction. Schutz (1966), for example, identified inclusion, affection, and control as the major needs of interpersonal interaction. The differences can probably be traced to our study's focus on seeking information rather than on general sociability.

Participants say they especially value having opportunities to connect with others while obtaining information. They value both the sociability and the information. For example, Hedda, 54, says:

I really personally only go on the computer when I'm working. And to me to go on the computer, it's always just going to work....I'd rather talk to a human than read a computer screen.

Such interactions typically occur in-person, rather than online or by phone. Only eight participants say that they communicate with people online about culture. Of these eight, three play games such as Mahjong, Scrabble, and cards; two have online

discussions about specific topics such as sports; and one contacts a dance instructor through the instructor's website. Online sociability and online cultural information seeking are separate uses.

However, some participants identify social contacts as a more efficient way of gathering specific information. Vamos, 47, says:

If I need something very particular about Toronto, or Ontario, I email a question to a friend or I phone. Because if I need something very quickly, it's more simple to get the phone, a friend or an organization, and ask him....

Seeing the Web as efficient is associated with the varying degrees of computer skill and experience found among the interview participants. People with less experience tend to have a more difficult time seeking information.

People also value the recommendations they receive through in-person contact. They discuss the ability to receive information about a cultural product or activity that addresses their particular concerns. Petra, 33, finds it helpful to hear from other people about whether cultural products will be suitable for her children:

What people tell me [is more important than ads]. Like *The Incredibles*. We rent this movie. ... But they [the children] didn't like it. The movie was okay for us, but not for children. It's about government...they were waiting for something to happen and finally they get tired.

Participants also value the ability of friends to tailor cultural information to their tastes. They are selective in whom they contact, turning to people whom they know to have similar tastes. Vonya, 68, says:

[T]he only person that I can enjoy the same movies is [my best friend]. Then when I go visit and if I have new movies, I bring them with me, and we usually enjoy them because we seem to have the same [tastes].

One variation on this is learning about new material, a practice that is particularly noticeable among people who have cultural specialists in their network. Olivia, 44, says:

[T]wo of my brothers are musicians. So quite often they'll introduce me to new music.

People whose ties are not cultural specialists also sometimes seek information and recommendations from their networks, while they never turn to the Web for new recommendations. Furthermore, participants may receive unsolicited information from their interpersonal ties. While receiving unsolicited information does not reveal anything about seeking information offline, it may be relevant to the ways that interpersonal ties influence how information is sought online.

Word-of-mouth can work in several ways. Some people actively seek this information, turning to friends with similar tastes to ask, for example, what book they should read next. Patty, 26, is one of these people:

I just said to my family, I wouldn't mind reading some of those classic novels. And so my brother just bought me two books.

However, not all participants are so eager to seek out recommendations from their friends and relatives. Indeed, some were unhappy about the extent to which such recommendations were thrust upon them. Rhianna, 57, says:

I don't quite like everything [my sister] reads. Even though it's nice, I am not into that genre like Nora Roberts. I have read her books, they're nice but I'm not really into it. She likes Wicca and witch stuff; I've already been through that period.

Rhianna's comments reflect what participants say is the main limitation of gathering cultural information through interpersonal ties: Other people do not always have the desired information, and they sometimes will push along undesired information.

The main effect of interpersonal ties on Web searches is that they are a prompt to start searching. Although participants rarely made a direct link between receiving a suggestion from their ties and seeking supplementary information online, the complementary nature of the types of information sought and received from each source suggests that this is happening in some situations.

## Uses and Gratifications of Other Information Sources

Although the Web and interpersonal ties are the most frequently cited sources of cultural information, the participants also rely on a range of other sources of information. Although these were not the focus of our interviews, it is worth highlighting the uses and gratifications mentioned in relation to some of the other media in order to explore the factors that draw people to and from the Web.

### Print

Print is a major source of information about culture, relied upon by 46% of interview participants. Newspaper reviews are a popular source of book titles; mailed brochures are a common source of information about concerts, museums, and galleries; and magazines are a frequent source of information about a wide range of hobbies. Print media can serve as alternative opinion sources. Linda, 51, says:

I read reviews. I like to read the [Toronto] *Globe and Mail* book reviews. I'll read a book review and seek out something that interests me.

Print is gratifying for its familiarity. As Elaine, 58, says:

I grew up with the print material, and as a result I'm most comfortable with print material.

Print is also popular for its efficiency. Brent, 56, says that books can be simpler than other sources:

I find books are much easier to refer to if you know they've got the information. Books are dog-eared; they've got lots of pieces of paper marking places for information that I use regularly.

Carter, 24, agrees:

Usually, what I do is go to the books first, because I know the information. So it's faster for me to just go open the book. When there is more specific information, that I know is not in the books, then I go to the Internet.

The efficiency of books may be related to the stability of the format. Websites have a tendency to change rapidly. This can be very useful when current information is sought but could interfere with efficiency when seeking more in-depth information or refreshing one's memory about older information.

### **Existing Knowledge**

Eighteen percent of the participants rely on existing knowledge for selecting new cultural products and activities. Many people choose movies by director, actor, and genre; select books by known authors; and buy music of a particular performer or time. Vitali, 66, reports:

[I choose CDs] [m]ainly through looking by artists. These three guys [he points to his CDs]—I already have three CDs from them, I like them very much.

The gratification associated with this method is the relative assurance that the cultural product consumed will be to the taste of the consumer, as similar previous products were.

### **Tangible Local Information**

Twenty-five percent of participants rely on tangible, location-based information to select cultural products. They go to the bookstore and scan the shelves for interesting titles, or they drive to the theater and select a movie based on the times of the shows. Kent, 73, likes the scan-the-shelves technique:

I'll just go to the mall and stop at the rack and just take a look at what bestsellers are out and just take a look at the back to see if anything interests me.

We did not study in depth the gratifications associated with location-based searches. However, Cunningham, Reeves, and Britland's (2003) study of CD purchases found that even when people enter a store with a planned purchase, they often use visual cues to prompt new searches, combining purposeful searching with casual browsing. This suggests that some of the gratifications of locational information seeking are the possibilities of stumbling onto something new or being reminded of something one likes but had not thought to seek out. The tendency of the participants to engage in this behavior offline with no mention of the equivalent online tools (e.g., *Amazon's* recommendation service) may be related to a lack of knowledge of efficient ways to browse for material online.

## Conclusions

When searching for information about culture, the participants in this study look first to their families and social networks, specialized governmental and non-governmental organizations (such as Heritage Canada or the Danny Grossman Dance Company), and published and broadcast sources (*Toronto Globe and Mail*; *People* magazine; CBC radio and TV). It is only after they have a recommendation or suggestion—from their interpersonal ties or from elsewhere—that they turn to the Web for information. Then, they usually seek specific information, such as upcoming performances by a favorite band, book reviews, or hotel prices for a summer vacation. This suggests that for many people, the Web tends to satisfy curiosity rather than inspire it.

We identified one exception to this pattern. When the study participants were strongly interested in a topic, whether tango or bird watching, they were more likely to go online in search of general information. This was not universally true, but the pattern was consistent enough to suggest that strong interest may lead to greater online activity in the area of that interest. This would help to explain the wide range of cultural information available online, including webzines, new bands, and a large array of collaborative filtering tools. Although we lack sufficient cases to test this, it is also probable that willingness to spend time looking for general information online will be influenced by the amount of leisure time people have to dedicate to their hobbies.

We identified several process gratifications, including speed, efficiency, and access to up-to-date information. These are all variations on the dimension of keeping informed, a common gratification of Internet use (Charney & Greenberg, 2001). Given that our questions focused on information seeking, it makes sense that many of the gratifications mentioned relate to access to information.

Our identification of gratifications in Web searching is exploratory. We have not focused on identifying social gratifications, as we were concerned with searching for information on the Web. There is a need for research into how online interaction affects cultural information seeking and acquisition.

We also looked at some of the perceived disadvantages of looking for cultural information online. While this is not a standard part of uses and gratifications research, we believe that the findings can aid understanding of when people turn to the Web rather than to other sources. Interview participants were often overwhelmed by the quantity of information on the Web, the time required to sift through the information, and concerns about the accuracy of information found. These concerns suggest that the reason people turn so often to interpersonal ties when seeking cultural information is that other people serve as judges, sifting through their knowledge to find items they believe will be of interest to the questioner, and providing feedback and opinions on the options. Once again, it is notable that people do not use the equivalent online tools for filtering choices. There are several possibilities for this, including lack of awareness of such tools, lack of ability

to use such tools effectively, and lack of trust in the ability of algorithms to replace the filtering abilities of friends.

Our findings about what kinds of information people seek from interpersonal ties and how they use that information to begin Web searches have implications for the two-step flow model. While the uses and gratifications model explains what gratifications lead people to continue to use the Web to search for information, the two-step flow model addresses how they acquire the information that serves as the impetus for their online searches.

As discussed earlier, the two-step model could work in two ways with respect to cultural information. First, opinion leaders could influence people's perceptions of cultural products and activities that they learn about through the media. Second, other network members could pass on information about obscure cultural products and activities, which could lead people to seek out more information. Evidence exists that both of these processes are occurring and that they interact with Web searches.

When evaluating cultural products that receive mainstream media coverage, such as some movies and books, some people turn to their interpersonal ties for opinions and additional information. The information they seek is often specific to their situations and tastes. Thus, the two-step flow holds true here. However, some people then go online to gather further information about the specific information they received from their ties. Even if they do not go in search of other opinions, they can stumble across useful information (e.g., finding *Amazon's* book and music reviews) that they may share with their original sources, thereby creating a spiral of information flow. We did not collect data on the extent to which participants share cultural information, so we cannot evaluate this conjecture. However, it seems likely that this occurs, as even opinion leaders seek information from their interpersonal ties.

Seeking information may at times begin with receiving information. A number of participants mentioned receiving unsolicited recommendations for various cultural products from their interpersonal ties. While we did not hear about any specific instances of people using the Web to search for additional information on such a recommendation, this seems like a clear possibility.

One of the results of the large number of Web users and the nearly unlimited number of possible websites is that all types of information can be found online, from the common to the obscure. While most people do not actively seek obscure information online, those with strong interests in a particular area do so. The average radio listener may not go looking online for the newest indie band, but a dedicated music fan, always in search of the latest sound, appears far more likely to do so. The same dedicated music fan may also go online looking for critical reviews of new albums as a replacement or supplement to music magazines, with the added advantage of being able to listen to samples of the music under discussion and judge for him or herself. This suggests that the Web may play a role in feeding information to people who are opinion leaders about particular topics within their networks.

The Coasters were prescient. Our data show that Internet users search high—on the Web—and low—interpersonally—for information about culture. Whether they

are opinion leaders or not, they are like The Coasters in “searching every which a-way:” synergistically on the Web and interpersonally. Rather than utilizing the Web and interpersonal ties as segregated search systems, people integrate their searches and information, and move back and forth between obtaining and sharing information online and offline. It is not searching one way or another; it is one search. “Like the Northwest Mounties” (Lieber & Stoller, 1957), these Canadians get the information they want.

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## Notes

- 1 See December (1996); Ebersole (2000); Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974); Kindred and Mohammed (2005); LaRose and Eastin (2004); Morris and Ogan (1996); Ruggerio (2000); and Savolainen (1999).
- 2 For a more detailed account of the methods used in the Connected Lives project and the demographics of the population, see Carrasco, Hogan, Wellman, and Miller (2006); Hogan et al. (2007); Kayahara and Wellman (2005); and Wellman and Hogan (2006).
- 3 Despite the 1.5 hour length of the drop-off survey, we achieved a relatively high response rate of 56%. No appreciable differences were found between survey respondents and non-respondents. Survey participants received \$5 in coffee shop gift certificates post-survey. Interview participants received \$20 in cash.
- 4 Sites such as *YouTube.com* and *Yahoo! Videos* were not in widespread use at the time of our interviews.
- 5 A chain of Canadian bookstores with both bricks-and-mortar stores and an online presence, similar to Barnes and Noble in the U.S.
- 6 The popularity of these topics, particularly reading, may reflect a social desirability effect. People speaking to graduate students may have been inclined to focus on cultural

- pursuits that they believed would be viewed favorably, regardless of their actual interests. Unfortunately, it is difficult to avoid this situation in interviews.
- 7 All participant names are pseudonyms.

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