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Abstract

Mass communication theories are utilized to shed light on a challenge faced by the Canada Revenue Agency. The author leverages established theories to propose a new one – The Theory of Unrealistic Expectations. He explains that if people can see a network, they are far more likely to have realistic expectations about how long it will take for them to move through the queue or get service. For example, people who use highways that are jammed with traffic on holiday weekends know that their journey will take a long time and they will likely make an accommodation by leaving early. That is not the case when the network can't be seen. The author uses this theory to reflect on why many people who file their taxes online do so at the last minute, thus creating challenges for the Canada Revenue Agency.

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Introduction

An E-mail user sends a message and knows that in most cases, it will be received within seconds. The user often has an expectation that a response will also come within seconds.

A popular rock 'n' roll band is coming to town and multiple, would-be concert goers all try to buy tickets online as soon as they go on sale. Instead of tickets, some of them will receive a message that their orders cannot be processed at that time. They can't understand why the application does not have unlimited capacity. These are examples of expectations of the capabilities of 21st century electronic communications.

The Theory of Unrealistic Expectations attempts to explain how the age of instant electronic communication has resulted in the expectation of instant access and response without regard for potential barriers.

When it comes to things or situations that can be seen, people tend to be more understanding. For example, if you plan to get out of a major city and drive north to cottage country on the Labour Day long weekend and you intend to leave on the Friday night, you know that the main highway in the area will be jammed with northbound traffic. Despite the multiple lanes and limited access design of the highway, you know you will be travelling slowly. You know this with absolute certainty, without being told, and you would be surprised if the highway wasn't jammed.

The questions are: How do you know? Why do you have that feeling that is beyond mere suspicion or anticipation; i.e., a strong and genuine expectation?

There are three principal reasons for this faith in the fallibility of the highway system on long weekends in the summer and for your expectation of failure resulting in delay.

First, you know that many people – travelling in their cars, just like you – will all have to take the same route at the same time. There's no choice on timing; everyone gets the same days off on a long weekend. You know there will be more cars than the highway can accommodate, because the

highway was built to handle two-way traffic flow on an average day. On a long weekend, most travellers will be trying to go the same direction at the same time: for example, the bulk of the traffic on the highway will flow in one direction on Friday and the opposite direction on Monday.

Second, you know through past experience that the highways will be overloaded. You have been travelling by car on long weekends for years, and the highways are always crowded with traffic. It's been that way since cars, highways and long weekends were invented. It's the lead item on the TV news in cottage country every holiday weekend. The police start warning motorists of the potential danger of long weekend highway traffic several days in advance.

Finally, when you get to the highway that will take you to cottage country, you receive visual evidence to confirm your expectations: you can see all the other cars trying to go in the same direction as you. You can see the physical limitations of the road network and you accept them.

Given that knowledge you choose one of two options: you leave work at noon on Friday in order to start your journey before traffic volume builds; or you resign yourself to a long, slow trip. You have no expectation that you will be able to drive at 120 kph.

However, when the network can't be seen, expectations change.

In an era of broad access to high-speed Internet, expectations of users are extremely high. Whether it's an e-mail to a friend or buying rock concert tickets online, instant response and access is expected.

The problems faced by Canadian taxpayers trying to file their federal income tax returns electronically just before the deadline in April, 2008, will be the principal example discussed in this article.

Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)

Information on the Canada Revenue Agency's web site tells us that it has two main functions: the administration of tax laws for the Government of Canada and for most provinces and territories; and, various social and economic benefit and incentive programs delivered through the tax system.

The *Canada Revenue Agency Annual Report to Parliament* (2007) is tabled in Parliament by the Minister of National Revenue, pursuant to the statutory requirements of the *Canada Revenue Agency Act*. Selected statistics from this document give an indication of the volume of business conducted by the Agency.

The total amount collected in the reporting year exceeded $346 billion – averaging more than $1.3 billion every working day including:

- $110.6 billion in personal taxes
- $37.7 billion in corporate taxes
- More than $52 billion on behalf of Canada's provinces, territories, and First Nations
- More than $17 billion in Employment Insurance (EI) premiums

The CRA also distributed more than $15.2 billion in benefit and credit payments distributed to more than 11 million entitled Canadians. It also processed 25 million individual tax returns, more than half of which were filed electronically.

In the CRA's *Summary of the Corporate Business Plan 2008-2009 to 2010-2011* (2008), as part of its commitment strengthen service delivery, the Agency says it will "increase online and self-service tools" (11) and "encourage wider use of electronic filing" (12).

The Agency commits to improve its information technology (IT) capabilities. "To achieve operational excellence and maintain Canadians' trust, we must sustain our strong focus on ensuring that our IT solutions are robust, secure, available, reliable and recoverable" (17), and then lays out a

seven-point plan outlining how that commitment will be met. The Agency had also used print and broadcast advertising to encourage taxpayers to file online.

The result was that a record number of Canadians accepted the Canada Revenue Agency's invitation to visit the agency's web site and file their 2007 tax returns electronically in late winter and early spring of 2008.

However, as the filing deadline of April 30, 2008, for individual returns approached, taxpayers attempting to file electronically via the Canada Revenue Agency's web site during peak usage periods sometimes encountered a problem: the system would not allow them to log on. In some cases the delay could last for hours. With just three days to go before the deadline, the agency expected more than 1.2 million taxpayers to attempt to file electronically. Technical difficulties were attributed to the significant volume of hits to the CRA's web site.

More people were trying to use the system at the same time than had ever been anticipated by its developers. The system could function 362 days a year without problem, but it was not built to handle the volume of traffic that arrived on the three days leading up to the filing deadline. The question is: why would E-filers think it could handle unlimited demand?

Let's revisit the three reasons for realistic expectations of traffic congestion on long weekends in the summer and apply them to the Canada Revenue Agency's problem.

1. Timing – Unlike the cottage-bound motorists on the long weekend, who are all limited to the same days off for their travels, electronic filers had weeks to file their taxes. However, 1.2 million of them waited until the last three days before the deadline. Two conclusions are possible here. Either they believed that most other people would already have filed their taxes, or they believed that the Canada Revenue Agency's system had unlimited capacity to accept electronic tax returns. Stated another way, they had no reason to believe that the system *didn't* have unlimited capacity.
2. Past experience – Electronic tax filing was still relatively new. It would have been the first time that some people had filed electronically. For many it would have been only the second or third time. Contrast that with the number of times any one of them would have travelled on a holiday weekend.
3. Visual evidence – Unlike the weary travellers, the e-filers could not see the "traffic" they were facing. As far as they knew, the "road" was clear. They never stopped to consider that they couldn't see the "road". If they could have seen all the other users trying to file at the same time, it is unlikely that they would have had the expectation that they could file at the last minute without consequence. This is the most important reason: when communicating electronically, people do not take into consideration what they cannot see. They expect instant response and instant access when communicating via computer.

Literature Review

Since Harold Innis died in 1952, shortly after writing *The Bias of Communication* (1951), it is unlikely that he envisioned a time when government tax collectors would be able to inform the citizenry what it owed to the government in the form of income taxes and then collect payment without the necessity of face-to-face contact. The majority of the 25 million individual taxpayers in Canada files electronically or has a professional tax preparer do it for them through the Canada Revenue Agency's web-based applications Netfile and Efile. Yet this ability to administer a massive tax collection system and benefit delivery program from remote locations, which was operationalized more than 50 years after Innis's death, certainly seems to fit under Baran and

Davis's (2008) contemporary interpretation of Innis' ideas that "the development of media technology has gradually given centralized elites increased power over space and time" (219). While Innis may have been writing about telephones and telegraphs, the theory still applies, although the power over space and time now flows both ways: the government can gather information and money without sending out a single tax collector; but taxpayers also have the ability to file their taxes without ever leaving home. It is impossible to say if Innis had any inkling of the frustration that would result when people started to adopt the latest technology in large numbers, all at the same time.

Personal computers did not exist when Marshall McLuhan wrote *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* in 1964. Electronic tax filing was still almost 40 years away, yet McLuhan (1964) could well have been commenting on the unrealistic expectations of digital age citizens when he wrote the following:

> Nowadays, with computers and electric programming, the means of storing and moving information become *less and less visual* and mechanical, while increasingly integral and organic. The total field created by the instantaneous electric forms *cannot be visualized* any more than the velocities of electronic particles can be visualized (emphasis added). (188)

Equally relevant are McLuhan's comments on his most famous and oft-quoted expression, "the medium is the message". In the introduction to the second edition of *Understanding Media*, McLuhan (1964) says by way of clarification that "any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment. Environments are not passive wrappings but active processes" (12). This is an accurate description of the technology and processes used in the electronic filing of income tax returns. While it is still necessary to gather receipts and T1 forms and do some calculations, the rest of the *experience* of filing has changed for those filing electronically. They no longer prepare an envelope of information which they drop in a mail box. Instead, when they are finished preparing their tax form on their PC, they simply hit "enter".

What would McLuhan have thought of electronic tax filing? Not much, in all likelihood. While Baran and Davis (2008) take issue with the notion posited by some academics and critics that McLuhan was overly optimisitic about modern media technology and where it would lead, McLuhan himself seemed unequivocal when talking to journalist Robert Fulford in 1966 in a segment recorded for the television program This Hour has Seven Days and recounted in *Marshall McLuhan: Understanding Me* (2003). In response to a question from Fulford about what kind of a world he would prefer to live in, McLuhan replies that he'd like to live in any period that didn't have constant change. "I am absolutely opposed to all innovation, all change, but I am determined to understand what's happening because I don't choose just to sit and let the juggernaut roll over me. Many people seem to think that if you talk about something recent, you're in favour of it. The exact opposite is true in my case" (101). Even making allowances for the possibility that McLuhan was overstating his position in a somewhat playful rejoinder of his critics, his position seems clear.

Finally, a plausible case can be made that John Dewey's arguments on pragmatism could inform the theory of unrealistic expectations. According to Baran and Davis (2008) pragmatism was "a school of philosophical theory emphasizing the practical function of knowledge as an instrument for adapting to reality and controlling it" (85). Dewey's work, much of which was done in response to early propaganda theory, was based on the idea that public education was "the most effective means of defending democracy against totalitarianism" (85).

Dewey's work in this area can be seen as having great relevance to the electronic world of today. Evans (2000) points out that Dewey "held that a well-educated democratic community has both the

capability to control technology and use it to enhance the life of all, rather than the life of the few, as well as an ethical or moral imperative to do so" (319).

Apply that thinking to the Canada Revenue Agency's **My Account** application. Available only on the Agency's web site, **My Account** allows taxpayers to track their refunds, check their benefit and credit payments and their Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSP) limits, set up direct deposit and make other changes to their personal tax information. The ability to maintain up-to-date information is in the hands of the taxpayer who is no longer dependent on agency personnel for information about their personal account. Such applications may not be e-democracy as envisioned by futurists, but there should be no doubt that it is an important step.

Incorporating the Theory of Unrealistic Expectations into Planning

Canada Revenue Agency data show that that the popularity of electronic tax filing has increased every year since it was introduced. This knowledge, along with recent filing season experience, allows the Agency to plan for future filing season traffic volumes and make decisions about the IT infrastructure that supports the affected applications. The Agency could also consider public relations and marketing activities that would attempt to convince taxpayers using the affected applications to change their behaviour, i.e., file their tax returns earlier.

It would not be the first organization to do this. The strategy was adopted by Canada Post years ago to deal with increased volumes of letter mail in December resulting from people sending Christmas cards.

Information on the Corporation's web site illustrates the business challenge Canada Post faces during the pre-Christmas season. In 2005 Canada Post processed 38 million pieces of mail on an average day. On December 19, 2005 the volume rose to 48.2 million pieces, an increase of 22 percent.

Canada Post advertising campaigns have conditioned Canadians to mail their Christmas cards early if they want to ensure delivery before Christmas. It's a brilliant strategy that has put the onus on Canadians to make the system work, i.e., if we don't mail our Christmas cards before a certain date, it's our fault if they don't arrive on time.

All organizations that deal with audiences via online applications must determine what level of system slowdown risk is acceptable, and whether the upgrades required to ensure greater or unlimited access are worth the expense.

Provincial officials responsible for the cottage country highway referred to earlier have obviously decided that the highway functions as intended most of the time, and that spending billions of dollars to widen the highway and ensure that it functions equally well on long summer weekends would not be a prudent expenditure.

Opportunities for Future Research

Several questions could be posed by researchers: What is the scope of this phenomenon? Is this a widespread phenomenon, common to organizations catering to a large subscriber/user base? If this is an emerging problem, what are the implications for the future if organizations continue to rely increasingly on web-based applications to facilitate functions there were previously manual in nature?

Researchers in human behaviour might also want to inquire into what leads people to have more rational expectations when they have visual evidence in front of them, versus when they have no visual evidence, which is the case with online applications.

Conclusion

It is difficult to predict how long the theory will continue to apply to web-based applications. Technological advances may mitigate the problem of multiple users without significant spending on infrastructure upgrades. History has shown that information technology keeps getting better, faster and cheaper. That's in stark contrast to the highways discussed in the earlier example. Highways can be made wider and smoother, but there has been no change in basic road building technology in decades.

It should be pointed out that web-based applications are not the first example of communications technology leading to unrealistic expectations of unlimited access. For many years it was difficult to get a long-distance telephone line on Christmas day or Mother's Day. As with the Canada Revenue Agency's online tax filing applications, callers could not see the other users trying to make calls. As in the cases of both the highway to cottage country and the Canada Revenue Agency's IT systems, the long distance phone system had adequate capacity most of the time. Cellular telephone technology and the deregulation of long distance telephone service helped ease Christmas and Mother's Day long distance telephone problems. Ironically, so did the internet. However, the problem hasn't been entirely eliminated: just ask anyone who has ever tried to vote by telephone for their favourite performer on Canadian Idol, only to get a busy signal. Until technology advances do allow communications systems, be they telephone or internet-based, to provide unlimited peak-period service without delays, we may all have to heed the advice of the Canadian Idol host to "Keep dialing!"

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