Users' Metaphoric Interaction with the Internet

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PhD Thesis: Abstract

Metaphors are a necessary component in users' conceptualisation of the Internet. Users make sense of the Internet by describing the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, and in doing so, the technology becomes understandable. Current Internet metaphors are limited, simply because it is too complex to be fully contained by any one metaphor. Furthermore, the ways in which users metaphorically conceive of the Internet may vary according to demographic characteristics and the contexts of use.

There is a paucity of research on Internet metaphors; this research is unique in its user-centric approach to investigate how demographically diverse groups of Internet users utilise visual and textual metaphors in various contexts of use. Q Methodology was used in conjunction with questionnaire data: the Q sorts generated metaphoric conceptions and the questionnaire data indicated the demographic or contextual markers of metaphor use. A total of 244 participants completed an image or text Q sort, plus a 22 multi-item Characteristics Profile Questionnaire. Although a total of eight factors emerged, third-order analysis indicated that just two metaphors dominate users' conceptions of the Internet. The first metaphor is concerned with dynamic, chaotic interlinking; the second depicts the Internet in terms of hierarchical organisation and structural layers. A second bipolar metaphoric dimension is embedded in the factors: one view emphasises the structural components of the Internet, the other is focuses on the *process* of accessing the information. The results also suggest that there are usage and demographic markers in the generation of these metaphors. Furthermore, the metaphors are used to signify multiple layers of meaning, indicating the functional nature of metaphor.

This research is one step towards identifying how user's metaphors mediate Internet use and understanding. The metaphors users adopt to conceive the Internet have important consequences for they ways in which they interact with and understand the technology. This research will help both users and designers comprehend the various spaces of online information, providing understanding and aiding navigation