The role of presence in media use changes during Coronavirus lockdowns

[Extended Abstract]

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As the Coronavirus prompted government-mandated lockdowns during April of 2020 a class project was initiated to explore how people's media use habits were changing, especially those related to telepresence. An online survey was created and administered to a diverse but non-random sample (n=189). The respondents were from states across the US with the highest concentration on the East Coast, mostly female, and from a wide variety of age groups. Just over 1 in 10 knew or believed they had had Coronavirus and almost 6 in 10 knew or believed they knew someone else who had had the virus. Most respondents reported not interacting with people outside their household due to the lockdown.

While their overall time spent with media apparently didn't change as the lockdowns began, many respondents indicated that their use of digital media, especially interactive platforms such as video gaming and video conferencing, did increase. In an open-ended question about other media they were using, respondents mentioned passive media such as podcasts, Netflix, YouTube and Tik Tok and interactive media including e-mail, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Instagram, and Zoom, Skype, WebEx, FaceTime and HouseParty. An interesting set of responses included the use of "old DVD's" of workout classes and fitness apps. One respondent wrote, "I am on my phone a lot more, reading a lot more books, video conferencing way more than ever before, and watching a lot of live streams."

Three open-ended questions addressed changes in media use patterns related, indirectly or directly, to presence. The first focused on changes in the content (genre) of media experiences:

> "Thinking about all of your media use now compared to before the Coronavirus, has the CONTENT of your media choices (e.g., types of books, TV programs, games, people you talk to, live-streamed events you attend, etc.) changed? If so, please explain."

Respondents mentioned increased choices involving Church Services, live concert streams, more news outlets, and media that do not involve the Coronavirus. The conflicting responses to news content are reflected in these two respondent comments:

> "The content has changed slightly. I feel like I'm consuming a lot more news now than ever before. I also had never really live-streamed live events too often but now I'm doing that all the time. Even participating in virtual classes and taking advantage of as many of the virtual opportunities as possible."

> "I find that I'm less interested in more news heavy platforms like twitter or Facebook. I would rather scroll through Instagram or TikTok where there are less coronavirus stories to stumble upon."

The second of the three questions focused on social presence:

> "Since the Coronavirus, have any of the media mentioned above helped you to feel more like you were together with the PEOPLE presented in or available through the media? If so, please tell us about these media experiences."

Most responses indicated a positive effect of media that allow users to experience social presence. Some examples:

> "Yes, zoom hangouts have helped."

> "Yes. In KY there are daily tv briefings from the governor. They have made me feel more connected to the governor..."

> "Definitely video conferencing software and ways to watch movies/TV in sync with others. It's nice to do things as a group even if it's just kind of sitting together in silence while we do other things."

> "Yes—mostly because I studied neurology and know that for many, media interactions are a form of socializing. Our brains benefit from hearing/seeing other people, so whether or not I'm consciously engaged in feeling social, I know in general that I subconsciously am."

> "Not really. It's not the same emotionally or physically as actually being there with the person. "

The last of the presence questions focused on spatial presence:

> "Since the Coronavirus, have any of the media mentioned above helped you to feel more like you were in the PLACES presented in or available through the media? If so, please tell us about these media experiences."

Many responses indicated positive spatial presence experiences. Here are a few of the comments:

> "[M]any places have made available their spaces to the public via live streaming-such as zoos, aquariums, etc, so that you get a somewhat similar experience as being there."

> "Vlogs make you feel like you are seeing someone else live their life as well."

> "Not any more than they already did. I've actually watched a [few] videos I've taken myself saved on my laptop from old trips that made me feel like i was there again."

> "Yes, social media in a way. I follow a lot of travel accounts that share links to virtual museum tours or cultural places of importance which I have always wanted to travel to and now I can engage with art, architecture, and history from around the world."

> "Yes, watching old videos of sports events and concerts help me to feel a bit happier and feel as if I'm actually experiencing them live."

The combination of closed and open ended survey questions in this exploratory study revealed interesting changes in people's media habits during the first weeks of the Coronavirus lockdowns, including changes to maintain or increase social and spatial presence. As an exploratory research project conducted in a class setting under stressful constraints, the results are only suggestive, but it seems likely that in situations where social and physical isolation is required for personal and public safety the desire for social and spatial presence, conscious or not, plays a role in media use choices and that the presence experiences that result provide at least some benefits. Future research should utilize wider samples, refined measures and (now that the time-frame of the impact of this pandemic is better understood) a longer-term focus to better understand the role of presence in, and possibly after, similar emergency situations. More broadly, the results suggest the potential for qualitative and quantitative research into the uses and gratifications of the subset of media experiences that evoke spatial, social and other types of presence in both special and normal circumstances.