Contradictory spaces: negotiating virtual spaces of consumption

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Abstract
Purpose – The internet driven information revolution is frequently cited as one of the key drivers (re-)shaping contemporary consumption. In particular, the internet has been seen as disrupting established conventions in professional services. Poplarly, it has been viewed as a liberating medium, a mechanism by which consumers and citizens have been able to challenge the authority of the professional establishment. Yet for consumers, the internet can equally be viewed as generating new uncertainties and challenges in terms of negotiating a new settlement with professionals and reconfiguring the service encounter. The purpose of this paper is to explore experiences of consumers with the use of internet derived information in respect of complex professional services and the impact of such information utilisation on the format of the service encounter.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirical data is generated through interviews with professionals (n = 24) and consumer focus groups (n = 10/53).

Findings – The paper argues that the multi-faceted nature of the internet creates informational “spaces” which present both opportunities and threats to consumers in renegotiating the service encounter. Balancing the paradoxes created by these informational spaces is at the core of the challenge confronting contemporary service consumers. Irrespective of the nature of that space, the effect is to create a driver for change, challenging the established practices of both consumer and professional to reshape the service encounter.

Research limitations/implications – Focus group research does not enable a judgement about the prevalence or distribution of behaviours among consumers. Nevertheless, this paper advances understanding of contemporary consumption practices and provides a new perspective on nature of consumer utilisation of information within the consumption process.

Practical implications – It is inevitable that professionals and service organisations will be required to respond to a complex and rapidly evolving set of consumer behaviours and rethink approaches to the delivery of professional services.

Originality/value – The paper addresses an emergent phenomenon and provides unique insights into the changing dynamics of consumption practices in the contemporary knowledge economy.

Keywords Internet, Empowerment, Electronic commerce, Customer service management, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction: consumers, the information revolution, and service consumption

The internet driven information revolution is frequently cited as one of the key factors (re-)shaping contemporary society. Set within the context of wider social changes, the core of this revolution is a fundamental expansion of individual consumer access to information resources. In particular, the internet, with its unprecedented breadth of interconnected information, offers consumers new spaces to access specialist product and market information which has conventionally been confined to organisations and professionals operating within that market (Milligan and Gordon, 2002). Alongside such access to information, the internet has also created space for consumers to collectively interrogate information and generate new information. Reflecting such capability the internet has variously been predicted to change not only patterns of consumption but also working practices, lifestyles, personal relationships and even sense of community (Tambyah, 1996; Jolink, 2000). Yet many of these predictions have subsequently proved, along with some of the more high profile internet companies, to be at least premature. What is clear, however, is that the internet has a number of critical capabilities and recognising these capabilities facilitates understanding of how, and where, the internet will ultimately impact on contemporary consumption practices. One of the critical areas where the internet has been perceived as disrupting established conventions is in the consumption of complex professional services where the core of the service product is information and expertise (Beck, 2001).

At a societal level, the internet has been characterized as a space through which citizens, specifically what Clarke et al. (2005) refers to as “citizen-consumers”, can become more self-reliant. Popularly, it has been viewed as a liberating medium, a mechanism by which citizens have been able to challenge the authority of professional and political establishments. The work of David (2001) in the context of health care exemplifies this notion that unprecedented access to information via the internet has empowered consumers and radically altered consumption relationships:

One of the main forces within the e-environment is consumer empowerment. With greater access to more readily available sources of information than their forefathers, consumers are assuming an increasingly active role [...] Instead of being passive recipients of judgements and treatments handed out by the medical community, consumers will be actively involved in managing their own healthcare. They will demand a better quality of life, better care, personalized treatment, convenience, choice, and value for money (David, 2001, pp. 6/7, emphasis added).

Yet there is extensive debate across professional services as to whether this is anything other than a metropolitan, middle class urban myth, and indeed whether the internet has not created a new monster which may in reality undermine consumer autonomy and reinforce dependence on professionals, albeit in a very different form (Newholm et al., 2006). The central thrust of this debate is around the quality of information available to consumers in an unregulated environment, and the capacity of consumers to handle the available information.

For proponents of informational empowerment such as David (2001), the unregulated, indeed anarchic nature of the spaces created by the internet is precisely what empowers consumers in that the lack of restrictions position consumer generated experiential information as comparable to professionally generated technical information. Conversely, from the professional perspective this “misleading”
experiential information is a bar to properly informed and genuinely empowered consumers (Impicciatore et al., 1997; Flanigan and Metzger, 2000). This rests on a concept of professional knowledge skills as necessary to the “correct” interpretation of information. From the competing consumer perspective, any restraint on content might be seen as a return to professional monopoly that would run counter to broader social changes. The description of the impact of the internet on medical services by Ham and Albetri (2002) as “being akin to the translation of the Bible from Latin into English” is a powerful analogous image of the potential disruptive capabilities of the internet and the implications for the professional priesthood.

In the case of complex services such as medicine and law, traditionally characterised by the exercise of professional authority, what Foucault (1980) refers to as a “regime of truth”, based in part on informational asymmetries and exclusive possession of specialist skills (Friedson, 1986), this implies a fundamental challenging of established patterns of organising the delivery of services. In particular, such change in information access implies a renegotiation of the established nature and format of the service encounter in such services. At the core of this challenging of professional dominance within the service encounter is the capability of the internet to create spaces outwith the service encounter, separate from both the professional and the organisational servicescape, where consumers can acquire, verify and interpret information. The internet can as such be viewed as representing a new service forum, a parallel environment within, and through which, consumers can contest the service domain with professionals and potentially reshape the format and dynamic of the service encounter.

For some consumers this will offer valued opportunities to assert power over professionals and set the terms of engagement, for others it will pose questions as to the nature of their role, and for some it will generate doubts and uncertainties. There is a fundamental danger in implicit assumptions that consumers will exhibit similar views towards the disruption of the “established church” of professionalism arising from the internet, or at least will be facing in a common direction. Rather, evidence suggests an increasing fragmentation of consumers and growing diversity of patterns of behaviour in engaging with professionals in the service encounter (Laing et al., 2005a). These diverging behaviours reflect differences in attitudes towards professionals among consumers (and towards consumers among professions), ranging from the sceptical to the convinced, and differences in behaviour in the consultation, spanning the active choice-maker to compliance with the professional service offering (Laing et al., 2008). Against this backdrop, the objective of this paper is to explore consumer interpretations of the virtual spaces created by the internet and the impact of such interpretations, and associated utilisation, of these spaces on the evolving nature and configuration of the professional service encounter.

**Conceptual framework: information and the service encounter**

The concept of the service encounter is central to the marketing of services, and indeed constitutes the focal point of marketing activity within service industries. Reflecting the inseparability of production and consumption, the service encounter represents the actualisation of the service, that is, the intersection of service capacity and demand. Carlzon (1987) graphically describes the service encounter as “the moment of truth” where the service is actually delivered. More specifically Suprenant and Solomon
(1987) defined the service encounter as being “the dyadic interaction between the customer and the service provider firm”. The service encounter can consequently be viewed as the juncture at which the consumer can evaluate the service offering and where the service supplier can attempt to manage the consumer perception of the service (John, 1996). However, rather than simply being an exchange relationship, the service encounter encompasses a complex multi-dimensional process of social and economic interaction, with the balance between the dimensions varying according to the specific service setting (Gabbott and Hogg, 1998). As a consequence, of the complex nature of the interactional processes, the dynamics and management of the service encounter have attracted significant academic attention over the past two decades (Czepiel et al., 1985; Czepiel, 1990; Arnould and Price, 1993; Bitner et al., 1994; Grove et al., 1998). The primary focus of this research has been on the process of interaction between the consumer and the service provider in terms of the management of the service delivery process. This is exemplified in the prominence of the “servuction” model (Langeard et al., 1981), the concept of “servicescapes” (Bitner, 1992) and in particular the “dramaturgical” model of the service encounter (Grove et al., 1992).

The deconstruction of the service encounter into its constituent elements under the “dramaturgical” model has in particular been instrumental in shaping the conceptualisation of the service encounter. Similarly, the distinction between the visible and invisible dimensions of the service delivery system, as well as the process of inter-consumer interaction, within the “servuction” and “servicescape” models has reinforced the focus on the process and context of consumer-service provider interaction in the service encounter literature. Such emphasis on the process and context of consumer-service provider interaction reflects the centrality of information provision by the service provider to the consumer within the service encounter. Service providers, in particular professional service providers, have conventionally been viewed as enjoying not only unique access to technical information but also the cognitive tools to utilise that information. The consumer, by contrast, does not possess either such access or ability to utilise that information creating a dependent relationship (Jadad, 1998). The consequence of such informational dependency is the construction of the service encounter in terms of the dyadic consumer-provider interaction occurring within the organisational parameters of the service organisation.

The internet has transformed the informational landscape within which service consumers operate, offering those consumers who engage with this media access to a level of specialist technical information that was formerly the exclusive preserve of service professionals. Although consumers have always had access to certain levels of technical service information, this has primarily been “authoritative” in nature, that is, produced or verified by professionals rather than being “independent”, that is, controlled by consumers. However, such conventionally information sources are characterised by relatively high acquisition search costs in terms of identifying and acquiring information and lack the searchability and interactivity of internet based information, as well as the immediacy of access to such information. In the context of the dynamics of the service encounter, of greater significance than the uni-directional information provision capacity of the internet is the capability of the internet to facilitate bi and multi-directional information exchange. Critical is the unprecedented capacity of the internet to distribute, and in turn facilitate the consumption of, heterogeneous information across diverse communities. Specifically, the internet
facilitates close interaction between disparate groups of consumers across national boundaries through the creation of virtual discussion forums or computer mediated communities. It is in the provision of social space (Preece, 2000), thereby facilitating the detailed exchange of information expertise and experience, via computer mediated communities that the internet is differentiated from conventional sources of information on which service consumers have relied in negotiating the parameters of the service encounter.

The conventional conceptualisation of the service encounter focused as it is on the interactions between the consumer and the service provider, and among consumers within the organisational servicescape (Harris et al., 1995; Davies and Baron, 1999), does not adequately reflect the evolving consumer-professional interactions in such information and communication rich environments. Rather there is a need to adopt a perspective which views the service encounter as more than just the activities of the service professional, but also the self-directed self-service activities of the consumer occurring independently of the service organisation within the virtual spaces of the internet. In this, the independent role of the consumer may extend to encompassing the “diagnosis or determination of priorities and the identification of an appropriate course of action” (Mills and Moshavi, 1999). That is, within contemporary internet enabled environments the consumer has the scope to function as a self-directing actor within the service delivery process, sharing in the collective design of the service product as a result of their independent engagement with informational resources and linked communities of interest over the duration of the service consumption process. Such potential reconfiguration of the format service encounter is ultimately dependent on consumer exploitation of the capabilities, of the virtual spaces, of the internet.

Across these virtual spaces of the internet, consumers face choices and challenges. Challenges not only in assessing and assimilating information, but also in understanding the nature and dynamic of particular online spaces (Kozinets, 2002), and in balancing social pressures for empowerment (Newholm et al., 2006) with the need for reassurance in the face of individual vulnerability. The “balancing paradigm” of consumer satisfaction posits that consumers constantly try to address a number of paradoxes in any consumption environment (Mick and Fournier, 1998). Satisfaction derives from the degree to which they are successful in that ongoing process of balancing. Utilising this perspective, professional service consumers need to resolve a number of paradoxes arising from the utilization of virtual spaces. These can be typified in healthcare for example as balances, as shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taking control</th>
<th>Accepting responsibility</th>
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<td>Acquiring information</td>
<td>Accepting uncertainty</td>
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<td>Allopathic medicine</td>
<td>Alternative therapy</td>
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<td>Illness management</td>
<td>Health promotion</td>
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<td>Abstemious health</td>
<td>Indulgent consumption</td>
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Figure 1. Paradoxes in healthcare
Shankar et al. (2006, p. 1021) note that, confronted by “hyperchoice” in financial service markets, consumers have to balance between empowerment and paralysis. Similarly, the greater use of information by consumers in legal services, especially for example in self-help programmes, is seen as empowering consumers but also “harnesses the productive capacity of consumers” (Giddings and Robertson, 2003, p. 102). Thus, as they take control they also paradoxically produce more of the service themselves.

Given this balancing act, these virtual spaces of consumption not only offer potential opportunities for seizing control of, and hence customizing, the professional service encounter, but also equally confront the consumer with the challenges of accepting risk and personalized responsibility. The internet thus can be characterized as offering not only the spaces of opportunity which have been central to its contention as driving unprecedented consumer empowerment, but also equally encompasses spaces of challenge which confront consumers with uncertainty and risk. It is in that the nature of such spaces that they may disable users’ ability to form adequate judgments regarding the credibility of participants, the affiliation of sites and the veracity of the information. For consumers engaging with the internet, this ongoing tension between the internet being a space of support and being a space of confusion requires a personalized balancing of these countervailing forces, reflecting the circumstances and characteristics of the individual consumer.

Methodology: mapping consumer information use
The data underpinning this paper forms part of a broader programme of research into the impact of changing access to information on the consumption of professional services. To investigate this theme the research examined the nature of service consumption in three professional service settings: investment management, legal counsel and healthcare. This cross-sector comparison ensured that the results reflected the underlying evolution of consumer behaviour rather than sectoral peculiarities and facilitated identification of differing patterns of consumption. The selection of these services reflected a significant component of the service product being information and expertise, the existence of extensive technical service information on the internet and the evolution of service specific online communities in all three settings. Although these services share significant common characteristics, they differ along key dimensions including: qualification requirements to practice; centrality of professional codes of conduct; professional versus managerial control; scope to conduct online; level of consumer emotional investment; and private versus public sector provision. Hence, although all three services can be defined as professional, they differ in the degree of “professionalisation”.

The research was structured around two inter-connected phases, a qualitative phase involving interviews with professionals and focus groups with consumers, and a quantitative phase involving a large-scale survey of consumers (n = 1004). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight professionals in each of the services studied (n = 24). The professionals were not compensated for their participation. They were identified through the relevant professional associations (British Medical Association, Law Society, Investment Management Association) as representative opinion formers with an interest in the changing nature of the professional discourse, the impact of informed consumers on professional roles and the nature of that profession in contemporary society. The interviews were structured...
through use of a standard interview protocol allowing comparison across interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The professional interview data informed the issues explored within the second element of the qualitative phase, the consumer focus groups. This paper draws specifically on data from the consumer focus groups.

Subsequent to the professional interviews ten focus groups were conducted in six locations: two each in Aberdeen, Bristol, London, and Manchester and one each in Milton Keynes and Glasgow. Participants were recruited and compensated through a specialist fieldwork company with the requirement that each had, within the last 12 months, consulted a qualified professional and made related use of the internet in at least one of the three service settings. Comprising female \( n = 26 \) and male \( n = 27 \) participants, participants ages ranged from 18 to 61 and from unemployed to professional. None was employed in legal, financial or healthcare services. Drawing on data derived from the professional interviews as well as the underpinning literature the key themes explored in the focus groups encompassed:

- reasons for seeking information;
- what types of sites and forums were used;
- timing of information use within service encounter;
- perceived value of information;
- use made of data;
- experiences of service consultations;
- role and behaviour of professional; and
- perceptions of service outcomes.

In addressing these issues participants were asked to relate experiences they had had with professionals and their use of information in both addressing the underlying need which prompted the use of the professional and in their subsequent dealing with that professional. Other participants were encouraged to comment on and discuss these experiences to increase the richness of the data and ensure relevant subjects were covered from the consumers’ perspective.

Data from the professional interviews was utilised as discussion prompts. The focus groups lasted between 70 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Interview and focus group datasets were coded using QSR N6 software and analysed by two researchers for recurring themes as well as contradictions across interviewees and sectors. Specifically, all text units were categorised in relation to their assessment of the meaning, as distinct from any prior theory. Seven general data categories derived from the conceptual literature were used to facilitate analysis. These were: professional as; consumer as; consultation as; environment as; profession as; officialdom as; internet as. Further, categories and subcategories were developed progressively within these categories from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The themes developed depended on assessing their importance, depending on the number of relevant entries in a category and the diversity of consumers contributions. The themes developed therefore arise from the categories developed by the research team. As such the qualitative data represents a two-level scheme namely specific
“emic” consumer understandings nested in general “etic” analytical themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 61).

Discussion: spaces of opportunity
At the core of the idea that the internet is transforming service consumption and reconfiguring the nature and format of the professional service encounter is its capability to enable consumers to perform tasks and undertake roles in which they were previously unable to engage. Popularly cited among these capabilities include the opportunity to form geographically unconstrained communities and undertake effective comparison of competing offerings. Within the specific context of professional services, it is possible also to see the internet as creating an environment where consumers are able to generate the confidence to challenge professional knowledge and hence judgement. Collectively these capabilities can be seen as creating an environment that offers the opportunity for the consumer to gain control of the service encounter.

Space for community
Consumer communities are not a new concept, what is new is the potential of the internet as a social space to facilitate communities that transcend traditional social or geographical boundaries, enabling consumers to communicate with individuals with whom they would not normally have contact (Muinz and O’Guinn, 2001). Among professional service consumers this communal space is articulated as offering the opportunity to share lived service experiences as part of the coping with the challenges of understanding the service experience and the opportunity to create global communities of shared interest and experience (Hogg et al., 2004). The power of the individual story is a central feature of these communal spaces, offering consumers an experiential alternative to technical information:

 Well, one of the things, there is a guy who is actually 10 years older than me and he’s gone through exactly the same thing as me, so we were just chatting, talking [...] he’s ten years further down the line than I was two years ago, so I was telling him what was happening and the pain I was getting, what tablets I was on, and you know what stage will I go through, and he was giving me his experiences as it happened to him ten years ago [...] It’s a web site in America (Manchester 1 Female – Health).

Alongside such experiential coping support is the role of this space in addressing gaps in the provision of technical information from professionals; an explicit recognition of the bounds of professional knowledge. There is a recurring sense of consumers attempting to exert control over the service professional based on a better understanding of the long-term implications of the situation faced by the individual consumer:

 [...] because when he was first born they (the doctors) didn’t have a clue what his prospects would be. It’s only sort of when you go onto these groups and talk you sort of discuss with people that have got similar conditions, you suddenly see what, you know, he’s going to achieve (Bristol 2 Male – Health).

The differing bases of knowledge across consumer and professional communities are exemplified in the discussions characteristic of these social spaces. Alongside the already highlighted importance of experiential information is the perceived depth of...
knowledge possessed by consumers in respect of a highly specific issue compared to professionals with a more generic knowledge base:

People who are going through the same thing will trust somebody else who is going through the same thing, or has gone through the same thing, more than they will a GP, I certainly would. Most GPs are jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none (Manchester 2 Male – Health).

The internet as a communal space, arguably characterized by a free flow of information, while providing consumers with unprecedented opportunities for information acquisition and interrogation, raises important questions in relation to the nature, veracity and orientation of such information. Not only is there the risk of consumer reliance on unverified information impacting on decision-making and the service outcome, but if the information which consumers gather is judged to be biased by professionals, to lie outside the professional “truth-regime” (Foucault, 1980) the client-professional interaction will be affected, forcing the consumer into a changed relationship with the professional. The internet as a space for community cannot be seen as an unambiguously advantageous domain, rather the consumer is confronted with a set of challenges, with balancing a set of paradoxes.

**Space for comparison**

For consumers the breadth of informational resources available on the internet creates an unprecedented space for comparison. Although retailing has been characterised as the sector which has been revolutionised by the internet (van der Poel and Leunis, 1999) the capacity of the internet to enable consumers to compare offerings is, if anything, more significant in respect of professional services. Reflecting the core of service products being information and expertise, (Mills and Moshavi, 1999) the internet with its ability to present comparative information, along with facilitating the emergence of consumer communities of expertise, has significantly facilitated consumer choice in a market conventionally characterised by informational asymmetries. In this, the internet offers the consumer the opportunity for confirmation, or not, of service professionals advice at minimal financial or time cost. Critically this offers not only the opportunity to challenge the professional but also to seek confirmation of veracity of the advice provided:

I would trust what I was told [by a professional] but I would maybe then go back and seek some sort of confirmation or more information from the Internet. I guess I've been quite fortunate, I haven't had any instances where me or someone in my family has been told A, and then we find out on the internet or from some other source that the information was incorrect. So generally the internet has confirmed what we've already been told (Glasgow 1 Male – Legal).

The internet not only provides space for comparison following a consultation, but also equally enables consumers to explore potential alternatives in advance of the service encounter. This, more than the post hoc comparison, highlights the scope for consumers to challenge service providers in terms of the provision of alternatives, alternatives that may on occasions lie outwith the disciplinary bounds of the profession:

I didn’t want to have steroids and there was a bit of conflict going on there [...] I’m thinking, well hold on, its convenient for a quick fix but I tend to look at the long-term effects [...] so a lot of the times I'm sort of like looking on the internet for other ways or alternative measures
like homeopathic which, again, my GPs not to keen on. It’s that battle. I tend sort of go to him knowing my back-up plan (London 1 Female – Health).

Such behaviour cannot be seen as uniform (Newholm et al., 2006), with this pre-consultation comparison of options presupposing an ability to use available information effectively. In professional services it is evident the ability to engage with service providers on an equal footing, both socially and in the use of the language, is critical to consumers ability to use the internet’s comparative capacity to shape service provision. In the absence of such cultural capital, the utilisation of the comparative space of the internet has limited efficacy in enabling consumers to challenge professionals (Henry, 2005). Where consumers possess the cultural capital they are able to use the comparative capacity of the internet to challenge service providers and negotiate enhanced service options:

I’ve gone on the Internet and I came up with a really good rate and I armed myself, got all the print offs, and I sat down with him [my financial adviser] and he was a bit flabbergasted that I’d done this because we normally just sit down and talk about what period of time we want to take the mortgage on and blah blah blah, and he actually went away and came back with an unbelievable rate. So I gave him competition, he came back with 3.5 per cent over two years. I mean it was brilliant (Manchester 2 Male – Financial).

This existence of such comparative space in itself is insufficient to rebalance the service encounter. Rather such rebalancing is dependent on consumers having the confidence to challenge professional advice and judgement. In part this is linked to cultural capital, but the internet itself is described by many consumers as creating the confidence to question service providers.

Space for confidence

Although current policy discourses praise the semi-self-sufficient responsible consumer, given the residual memory of paternalistic narratives of consumer-professional relationships, having the confidence to challenge a professional and the associated advice, in however modest a manner is a key factor shaping consumers ability to wrest control of the service encounter from the professional. A recurring theme among service consumers is the scope the internet offers to develop the confidence to confront service providers. At the core of this confidence building space is the ability of consumers to gather information, ask questions anonymously, and reflect on implications of advice free from the interference of professionals. Reflecting the importance of cultural capital in shaping behaviour, a recurring theme is that of anonymity, with the internet offering anonymous space for “vulnerable” consumers to ask the questions they would feel unable to explore in the face to face encounter:

[...] its sometimes better to sort of have that anonymity, you know. I hate that word. You’re not actually face to face with someone and you can look up all this stuff without any embarrassment or sort of feeling silly and sometimes its probably easier because you, when your face to face with someone, sometimes you get all chocked up or you can’t get out what you’re trying to say, in the heat of the moment you sort of forget what half of what you’re trying to say, so it gives you that time really (Bristol 1 Female – Health).

It is not, however, simply the “vulnerable” consumer for whom the internet offers space for confidence. There is awareness among a broad cross-section of consumers of the pressures, both financial and temporal, in the service encounter. In publicly funded
health care settings there is an evident sense of “private constraint” (Walsh, 1994) on the part of service users with such ideas inhibiting their behaviour in terms of the amount of time they have with the professional. Equally, there is a clear perception in private sector service settings that there are real financial costs associated with questioning professional advice as is evident from the following dialogue:

Marie: “You also get the feeling when you go home that you’ve got no pressure. You’re not doing face to face. You can sit there at your own free will, taking your time, reading what you want to read and there’s no pressure”

Louise: “But at the doctor’s, it’s as if you’ve got one chance and one hit because you’ve got to make the five minutes count”

Sean: “Same with financial because you know time is money with them. So at home on the internet you can spend as much time as you want and we all spend hours and hours” (Manchester 2 Male/Female – Health/Financial).

The internet offers consumers off-line space away from the service provider to assimilate to, and respond to, professional advice. In many circumstances this does not reflect vulnerability on the part of the consumer but rather a grounded, if occasionally cynical, understanding of the motivations and disciplinary perspective of professionals. The building of confidence is in part dependent on the confidentiality of such spaces and the opportunity for genuine autonomy:

[...] and everybody [financial advisers] is going to try to sell you something and the thing I like about the net is obviously it’s at my leisure, I can see all the [financial] details, I can try and consume it, I can even take a print-off and I can sit and digest it at my leisure without any pressure to buy or accept deals in front of me. I’ve always found that any time I went to see an adviser, they were just interested in getting me to sign, they would say this is the best deal you can get (Aberdeen 2 Male – Financial).

By providing such confidential space where the consumer can operate independent of the professional, the internet has a significant role to play in engendering the consumer confidence that is critical to the ability of consumers to take effective control of the service encounter. Such consumer narratives, even allowing for variation in cultural capital and patterns of engagement with service professionals (Laing et al., 2005b; Newholm et al., 2006) represent the dominant portrayal of the internet as a liberating and empowering space that offers the possibility of transforming the service consumption experience. Yet the essential paradox at the core of the internet is the fostering of fears and uncertainties alongside and in parallel with such empowerment.

Discussion: spaces of threat

For many, if not all service consumers the internet is a Janus faced environment. On the one side it offers freedom and opportunity, on the other it stokes fear and uncertainty. The threatening dimension of the internet co-exists with and intermingles with opportunities in consumers utilisation of the internet. These twin faces of the internet are not the preserve of distinct groups, the technophiles versus the technophobes, or the cultural elite versus the marginalized. Rather they are reverse faces of the same spaces for the same consumers. The space for community is also the space for anxiety, the space for comparison is also the space for ambiguity, and the space for confidence
is also the space for alienation. For consumers engaging with complex professional services the internet presents the ultimate forum for balancing paradoxes.

**Space for anxiety**

Set within a political and cultural milieu that questions the authority of professionals, professionals advice to consumer not to consult the internet may all too readily be discounted as an attempt to preserve professional hegemony of the service encounter. Yet the internet has the capacity to sow doubts and anxiety in the minds of consumers as a result of the volume and complexity of information which can be accessed. Inextricably linked is uncertainty over the source and authenticity of information. While Pagliari and Gregor (2004) suggest that the risk of harm to patients as a result of the use of internet information maybe over-emphasised, the diversity of internet based health information raises fundamental concerns over the quality of such information and the impact of such information on patient choice and behaviours. Where consumers lack the expertise to contextualise and to assess highly complex information, the risk is that the consumer will be unnerved, and far from being better placed to challenge the professional will be more dependent on the professional to draw them back from the brink:

[...] started searching the net and then I saw all these scenarios about what she had wrong with her knee and that she was going to be flat on her back for six months, she’d have to have heel surgery, her leg opened up [...] I spent like three months waiting to see the consultant and I was panic stricken [...] I had all this information in my head that I found off the internet, and if I hadn’t looked I wouldn’t have been so worried (Manchester 2 Female – Health).

Even where virtual communities have the capacity to generate communal expertise and facilitate understanding of technical information, the dynamic and nature of such communities can be highly unsettling for the consumer. For the novice participant, the language and practices of the community may effectively exclude and generate a sense of disconnection, further heightening anxieties. This is particularly striking in cross cultural communal spaces where the cultural norms and service expectations may differ widely:

[...] my experience sort of two or three years ago, was not very good. I had an irregular heartbeat caused by stress and I went onto an American discussion group and they were so over the top about it and they were talking about all this stuff and they were getting bits of their hearts zapped away and I was absolutely petrified of this. So I did actually stop using that (Bristol 2 Male – Health).

Such communities pose real challenges to consumers in assessing the quality of information, the credibility of advice generated, and the motivations of contributors. Specifically, anonymity strips individuals of their “status trappings” (Garrison, 1994) and encourages frankness, allowing the development of what Tambyah (1996) calls the “net self”. While this points to the democratic and relational nature of the internet, it also exposes the anarchic nature of the medium: freedom from control can also mean freedom from accuracy. Even for highly socialized consumers, engaging with virtual communities pose particular challenges in terms of identity, credibility, power and control given the absence of many of the cues available in “real-life” contexts, leaving consumers adrift in an environment of uncertainty and ambiguity.
Space for ambiguity

Professional services are by their nature complex and characterised by esoteric language. The interpretation of such information requires judgement anchored in an understanding of the disciplinary field. A recurring theme among professionals is the lack of understanding on the part of consumers of the underpinning principles of the discipline, be that physiology or finance, which not merely constrains their ability to take control of decision-making but can generate negative outcomes as a result of inappropriate decisions (Laing et al., 2005b). This is compounded by the frequent variance among professionals themselves, even when operating within a common disciplinary paradigm, as to the most appropriate options in addressing specific conditions or cases. When coupled to the sheer volume of information virtual spaces offer, the consumer is faced with sifting complex information, for which they lack the requisite knowledge base, while weighing up differing perspectives and advice. It is unsurprising that consumers report internet derived information as being highly ambiguous and generating significant uncertainty:

The amount of information out there is staggering and it’s very technical information, that generally speaking is in a language that we’re not used to using because it’s not designed to be used by us [...] Unless you go to a specific site like the Alzheimer’s Society where they’re actually interacting with the end-user, if you like, but it’s finding that information instead of finding some paper that’s been written by some professor in America that’s so specific you can’t scratch the surface of it (Glasgow 1 Female – Health).

This proliferation of alternatives is exacerbated by discussions within community spaces. In such spaces the range of perspectives presented both extends beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries to embrace a greater diversity of (alternative) opinion, and lacks clear clues as to the underlying standpoint of contributors:

If you submit a question to a forum, you’re then getting so many different people’s opinions back and you never know quite, quite which one to go by and which one is necessarily the right one to go with [...] once you start questioning it’s very hard to then work out whether you should believe any of them and ask anything more than someone else’s opinion, and there are so many opinions that you may as well go with your own (London 1 Male – Legal).

Not only does this diversity engender further ambiguity and uncertainty but also pushes consumers towards relativism, that one viewpoint is not inherently more valid than another. Such “de-prioritisation” of perspectives manifests an assumption that all contributors validate their perspective, with the conventional justification of professional status not automatically being sufficient to convince consumers (Lyotard, 1984). The challenge facing consumers operating in such information rich spaces is to select appropriate information and triangulate this with a range of other information sources:

[...] you have to be really careful to pick out bits, and it’s almost like piecing it together from the different pages. You can’t take just one as that’s what I’m going to go on, because another site may say something slightly different and another site may say some people say this and some people feel that. You need to pick out certain pieces of information and facts and whatever from several different sites I think (Bristol 2 Female – Health).

This ambiguity can be seen as a contributory factor in undermining professional authority. By highlighting the existence of divergent opinions among professionals,
the internet contributes to the awareness among consumers that professionals within a disciplinary field do not automatically hold uniform views but rather that professional advice may have varying degrees of heterogeneity and perspectives that may once have been seen as certain are in fact contested (Elam and Bertilsson, 2003). Such uncovering of professional disagreement alongside recognition of the bounded nature of advice and the impact of budgetary or commercial pressures contributes to a diminution of trust in professionals, and a sense of alienation.

Space for alienation
The utilisation of the multiple virtual spaces offered the internet by consumers has seen a diversity of consumer narratives evolving semi-independently of established professional discourses. Conventionally consumer narratives drew primarily on the professional discourse for its construction and consequently were closely aligned with, and indeed mirrored, that discourse. However, drawing increasingly on the independent sources of information, and critically independent consumer mediated means of knowledge construction, within this virtual space there is evidence that these consumer narratives are increasingly diverse and distinct from the professional discourse. The consequence is a clash of cultures and an emergent sense of alienation. In the context of healthcare, Thomson (2003, p. 103) has expressed this eloquently:

The patient as consumer desires to produce his/her own medico-administrative identity through interaction with physicians, nurses and technologies. […] Yet these post-modern currents inevitably collide with the more intractable, modernist features of the medico-administrative system.

Although professionals have reacted to these changes, with notable exceptions, these responses have often been slow, limited and only reluctantly conceded, reflecting the innate conservatism of professions (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003). Such grudging response to the interests of consumers further undermines consumer confidence in professional values and the validity of the professional discourse (Abernethy and Stoelwinder, 1995).

This emergent sense of alienation is anchored in increasing awareness and questioning of the constraints on professionals and the limits to the professional discourse as a result of consumer engagement with the virtual spaces of the internet. A number of constraining factors are consistently articulated by consumers as contributing to a sense of alienation. In certain professional settings the role of professionals as gate-keepers places clear bounds on the extent to which consumers can use information to gain control over the service encounter, generating dissatisfaction and erosion of belief in the professional discourse:

The doctor could say well, I think that’s wrong, then you’re up against the wall, the internet is saying this, but you’re saying this. You’ve still got the doctor’s decision, at the end of the day your still up against the barrier of they’ve got to make the last decision. You cannot get something without them saying so (Bristol 2 Female – Health).

In both public and private sector service settings this gate-keeping function is associated with diminished professional autonomy, from either the state or corporate interests, with this generating increasing scepticism of professional advice and a reinforced perception of the need to acquire independent information to hold professionals to account:
I would say that, you know, some of the information that they're telling me is perhaps not true, and they're not being quite so open as they should be, because it all comes back to money (Bristol 2 Male – Legal).

They’ve got huge lists. They don’t want to discuss anything with you. You know what? They just give you a prescription and go. And that’s why you then start looking, people will then look, you know, all right, where do I get this information because the doctor hasn’t told me, didn’t explain to me, didn’t take enough time to listen (London 2 Male – Health).

The notion of consumer choice inevitably sits uneasily with the maintenance of coherent professional discourses. Consumers desire to extend the range of service options beyond the established disciplinary boundaries is a recurring theme in emerging alienation of consumers. The unrestricted nature of the internet spaces and the colonisation of such spaces by quasi-professions has dramatically increased consumer exposure to alternative conceptualisations of service. Professional responses being constrained by the parameters of the professional discourse of necessity consistently draw consumers back into a narrower service range, proscribing options which the consumer sees as valid:

I’ll leave him things to read and he’ll give me back his comments. I find that useful because he’s aware that I’m not accepting blindly what he says […]. Look, you see, he’s confined to BMA medicine. You know, he makes it very clear that he’s not going to go beyond, he’s going to say, look, forget it […] if you do it too regularly you’ll have to go off my list. Not in a threatening way. Meaning if you’re questioning his clinical judgement (London 2 Male – Health).

The differing perceptions of what constituted valid options appears to be a key factor in this sense of alienation with many consumers embracing broader definitions of what is valid and acceptable than professionals. What is striking from accounts of consumer-professional interaction is that the rejection by professionals of options advanced by consumers did not in itself lead to a sense of alienation. Rather it was the manner in which the professional participated in the encounter that is critical. The idea of respect, of being listened to, appears central to whether consumers accept the professional discourse and submits to the authority of the professional:

I think we don’t tend to investigate if we find we are respected. You know, if you’re speaking to a medical professional, you can tell in some respects, they either think it’s rubbish, but they respect the right to have it. You back off because you think this person is listening to me (Glasgow Male – Legal).

This emphasis on the dialogue of the encounter as critical to consumer alienation draws out the importance of consumers having a perception of control within the professional consultation. The willingness of professionals to step away from established paternalistic modes of operation, when appropriate, and negotiate a more egalitarian encounter in the face of consumer exposure to diverse and contradictory information represents a sustainable mode of engagement which potentially integrates the internet as a space of enhancement rather than as a space of alienation and disruption for those consumers seeking active participation in decision-making.

Discussion and conclusion
The transformation of the informational landscape confronting consumers has been extolled as creating the conditions for a fundamental reshaping of consumption
practices, and in turn a renegotiation of the service encounter. There is a tendency to portray this renegotiation as characterised by a common evolutionary direction towards the empowerment of consumers and the rebalancing of the service encounter in favour of the consumer. The corollary is a decline in the influence and power of professionals, with the internet driven information revolution posing threats to professionals commensurate to the opportunities being accrued by consumers. However, while acknowledging that the format and dynamic of the service encounter is undergoing a significant reconfiguration, emerging data would suggest a more ambiguous and more nuanced balance of outcomes. Rather consumer empowerment is conditional and ambiguous, and in place of a common trajectory of development, consumption practices are increasingly fragmented (Newholm et al., 2006; Laing et al., 2008).

In understanding the evolving nature and configuration of the service encounter, for consumers the opening of the virtual spaces of consumption of the internet has been in equal measure an opportunity and a threat. The internet is variously characterised by consumers as space for community, for comparison and for confidence building, enabling them to gain greater control of encounters with professionals. Alternatively and sometimes concurrently, the internet is characterised as an ambiguous space threatening alienation from professionals and inducing anxiety as to the role expected of consumers. The erosion of the established conventions of the service encounter while a new settlement has yet to evolve has confronted consumers with need to balance a set of informational paradoxes in negotiating increasingly individualised and idiosyncratic encounters. The paradoxes confronted by consumers in balancing the informational spaces opened by the internet are summarised in Figure 2.

The fragmented and multifaceted nature of internet spaces has played a central role in destabilizing professional discourses, the patterns of consumer-professional interaction, and ultimately the configuration of the service encounter. Innovative consumers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spaces of Opportunity</th>
<th>Spaces of Threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td><strong>Anxiety</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing gaps in technical information from professionals</td>
<td>Sources and authenticity of information as well as motivations of contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of emotional support based on ‘lived experience’</td>
<td>Language and practices, especially in cross-cultural settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking of service options to personal values and lifestyle</td>
<td>Freedom from control equally implies freedom from accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comparison</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ambiguity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-active exploration of service alternatives</td>
<td>Volume and diversity of information available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation (or not) of professional advice and service provision</td>
<td>Lack of consumer disciplinary knowledge base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending choice beyond disciplinary boundaries</td>
<td>De-prioritisation of competing perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Alienation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anonymity to ask questions without professional censure</td>
<td>Divergence of consumer and professional discourses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy from professional disciplinary perspectives</td>
<td>Undermining confidence in professional values and discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom from time and financial constraints</td>
<td>Association of professionals with state or corporate interests and resource constraints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.** Balancing paradoxical spaces
by confronting service professionals with empirically anchored challenges are forcing a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of service consumption, both in respect of the specific encounter and in the practice of the encounter generically, thereby affecting all consumers (Laing et al., 2005b; Newholm et al., 2006). Consumer exploration of the spaces created by the internet reshapes consumer-professional relationships whether or not the parties to a specific service encounter are themselves internet users. It is a “changing space” both in terms of being itself dynamic, and in that it changes “real” spaces by affecting the conduct of the substantive service encounter. Opportunities are always presented by a disjuncture in civil society such as that engendered by the internet driven information revolution. Some consumers will relish the pervasive plurality of the internet spaces, some will be profoundly uncomfortable with the greater ambiguity that inevitably accompanies this, and some will be disabled by the informational challenges. Most consumers across the range of service encounters will experience the internet as profoundly paradoxical space. This seems to be the probable trajectory whether or not individual consumers plan or choose that course.

References


Further reading


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