Is the Internet Changing Social Life? It Seems the More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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Although there has been a tremendous amount of discussion in the popular press about how the Internet is changing all facets of social life, research on the impact of the Internet is only beginning to emerge. A review of the studies reported in this issue suggests that the Internet may have had less impact on many aspects of social life than is frequently supposed. In many cases, the Internet seems to have created a new way of doing old things, rather than being a technology that changes the manner in which people live their lives. As a consequence, the policy implications of increasing Internet use may be less than is often believed.

There is no question that easy access to the Internet, like the introduction of reliable mail service and the invention of the telephone, has changed the nature of people’s connection to others in their social world. Mail made possible connections among people without physical proximity, and the telephone facilitated communication among distant people, making rapid connections possible across long distances. The Internet has created an electronic mail system, merging the speed and flexibility of the telephone with the written character of the mail. People can now write letters that are transmitted virtually immediately throughout the globe.

But has this communication revolution changed the nature of interpersonal and group processes? The research reviewed in this issue makes it clear that the basic nature of people’s relationships with others may have changed less because of the Internet than is often suggested. On the contrary, there are suggestions that the Internet may be a new way for people to do old things. That is, there may be new and useful capabilities associated with electronic communication, and those may have led to changes in patterns of life, but the basic social patterns of

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social life have remained very much the same in spite of these Internet-induced changes. The Internet seems more like a new way to manage long-standing social problems and meet long-time social needs than a transformative technology that has fundamentally changed patterns of either interpersonal or group processes.

Do People Benefit From Internet Use?

Since the primary use of the Internet is communication, we might speculate that the Internet will have positive social consequences in people’s everyday lives, because it increases the frequency and quality of interpersonal communications among people. People with easy access to others ought to feel better connected and more strongly supported by others, leading to happiness and engagement in families, organizations, communities, and society more generally.

On the other hand, the ease of electronic communication may lead to weaker social ties, because people have less reason to leave their homes and actually interact face to face with other people. The Internet allows people to more easily work from their home, to form and sustain friendships and even romantic attachments from their home, to bank from their home, to vote and engage in political and social-issue-based discussions with others in their communities from home, and to pursue other social connections from their home. In this wide variety of ways, Internet communications can potentially displace face-to-face and telephone communications. This is important because psychologists have often described such face-to-face and telephone connections as being of higher quality, when viewed in terms of their contribution to satisfaction and well-being.

These two views describe the potential for gain and loss as the Internet becomes more and more central to the fabric of our society. But which view is correct? An early study by Kraut et al. (1998) articulated the case for concern when it portrayed Internet users as less socially involved and more lonely and depressed. This negative image of the consequences of Internet use is more broadly tested in the articles reported in this issue.

Kraut et al. (this issue) expand upon their own initial sample, as well as considering new subsequently collected longitudinal data, in an effort to explore the social consequences of Internet use. Interestingly, the expanded longitudinal data for their original sample suggest that Internet use has fewer negative consequences than were suggested in their initial presentation, when Internet impact is considered over time. At later time points in an ongoing interaction, they find no negative effects, suggesting that such negative effects disappeared after people’s use of the Internet became far more sophisticated. A second study that also examined the influence of Internet use was more positive in its findings, suggesting that there were small but positive effects of using the Internet on social involvement and psychological well-being. In the current article, Kraut et al. present a more positive image of Internet use than in their earlier work.
The influence of the Internet on interpersonal relations is further examined by McKenna, Green, and Gleason (this issue) and by Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (this issue), who articulate and test a theory of relationship formation on the Internet. In a series of longitudinal and experimental studies, these researchers directly address the argument that the psychological quality of Internet social interaction is lower than is the psychological quality of traditional face-to-face interaction. They find that relationships that develop through the Internet are close, meaningful, and long lasting, suggesting that many of the concerns expressed about the quality and meaningfulness of Internet interactions are unfounded. Further, they find that people bring relationships formed on the Internet into the real world by meeting, talking with, and otherwise connecting with others in other ways and show how the self-concept and social identity play a crucial role in this process.

Perhaps the strongest test of the beneficial or harmful character of Internet communication occurs in the case of adolescent communication, which is studied by Gross, Juvonen, and Gable (this issue). The most striking finding of their study is that adolescents use the Internet like a telephone, rather than as an opportunity to try different personalities and identities. Their study finds that Internet communication is very similar to “traditional means of youth social interaction” (p. 86). As a result, the use of the Internet does not shape psychological well-being in any way that is different from the influence of social interaction via other modalities.

Spears, Postmes, Lea, and Wolbert (this issue) raise fundamental questions about the assumption that there is something “less social” about electronic communications. That view develops from the important “reduced social cues” model (Kiesler, 1986), which labels Internet communication less complete because it lacks important social information. This more anonymous communication is deindividuated. However, the authors suggest that, far from the image of deindividuation often presented in social psychology, a social identity perspective would argue that deindividuating, anonymous communications are likely to be governed by group norms. With the individual less salient, the group becomes more central to decisions about behavior. In other words, the impact of the Internet is likely to be to remove the element of reactions that is keyed to specific others—for example, the self. Ironically, Spears et al. argue that people will be more socially responsive in such situations, not less. In sum, the conditions of electronic communication may in fact enhance the influence of group norms on individuals’ behavior.

Taken together, the findings of these studies support the suggestion of McKenna and Bargh (2000) that “there is no simple main effect of the Internet on the average person” (p. 59). The Internet seems to have value as a tool used by people to overcome particular problems, like social anxiety, but overall patterns of Internet impact emphasize how little long-term impact Internet use, per se, has upon the person, his or her relationships, or psychological well-being. This change in technology, with its resulting changes in the way people live their lives, has not led to changes in well-being or the quality of people’s social relationships. Instead,
it has given people new ways to approach traditional concerns about how to initiate and develop relationships.

These studies do not suggest that the availability of the Internet changes the character or quality of people’s interpersonal lives. However, they raise a deeper and more fundamental question, one that is also raised in McKenna and Bargh’s Real Me model of relationship formation on the Internet. As psychologists, historians, and political scientists, we need to develop and articulate a model within which we can understand the parameters that shape the quality of interpersonal experience. The existence of written mail, the telephone, the Internet, and video conferencing provides a wide variety of alternative interaction modalities to simple face-to-face communication. How does the modality of interaction shape the nature and quality of people’s social relationships, as well as their feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and well-being? And most importantly, what are the elements of interaction that mediate this impact? Is it, for example, the physical proximity of face-to-face communication that matters, or is it the immediacy of the other person’s response? The studies reported in this issue suggest that there is no general impact of Internet vs. face-to-face communication on overall well-being, but they do not provide us with a broader model linking the modality of communication to its social and psychological impact. They do, however, make it clear that such a model is needed to help us talk effectively about the potential social and psychological influence of new technologies.

If we understood the qualities of face-to-face communication that influence the impact of such communication on people and on their social interaction, we would be able to predict in advance the probable influence of any new communication technology. Of course, as the research reported suggests, people make creative use of technology, and that use blunts any simple statements about modality effects. As an example, the McKenna et al. (this issue) research suggests that socially anxious people use the Internet as a way to make initial contact with others. However, they then convert that contact into more traditional face-to-face relationships. They use the Internet, in other words, to deal with specific social deficits, and they incorporate its use into a complex sequence of modalities of interaction. Human creativity defies a simple model of technological influence, because people adapt technologies to help them achieve their goals. Rather than technology’s changing people’s social and psychological reality, in other words, people change their use of technology to facilitate their creation of a desired social and psychological reality. This suggests that efforts to understand the influence of new technologies must view those technologies as means that people can use to achieve their social goals.

**Negotiation and the Internet**

Unlike the literature on social relations and psychological well-being, the article by Thompson and Nadler (this issue) suggests that Internet negotiations
conducted primarily in business environments may present greater difficulties than are found in face-to-face negotiations. Reporting on a broad-ranging program of research, the authors suggest that there are a number of problems when strangers negotiate with each other electronically. To some extent, these problems are linked to the lack of a personal relationship with others. For example, people feel less accountability and connection to the other party in the negotiations and are more likely to engage in actions that burn bridges, to be more emotionally aversive ("squeaky wheel"), and to be more mistrusting of the other party's motives.

Interestingly, however, the biases identified seem to be broader in scope. They are not just linked to the lack of a personal relationship with the other party. Temporal synchrony, for example, is linked to coordination problems associated with the nature of e-mail communication. Temporal synchrony refers to the relationship between the timing of expected responses from others and that of the actual responses. It is of particular importance because it is a true modality effect and reflects something unique about the pattern of communication when enacted electronically. Temporal synchrony is not an issue when people negotiate about the same issues face to face.

This problem with the timeline between communications occurring in an online interaction helps to explain why e-commerce has had trouble and why customer service is such an issue for online businesses. It also helps to explain why purely online business efforts may backfire whereas purely social sites, such as clubs and chat rooms, are doing well. Often, e-retailers are modeling themselves after off-line customer relationships ("traditional businesses") instead of embracing the claim that the face of business is changing and producing a truly new way of interacting facilitated by the new technology of the Internet. Success rates suggest that online companies that have brick-and-mortar counterparts are enjoying greater success than are solely online companies. This may be because people’s interactions with businesses are not changing, so companies are forced to incorporate traditional offline models of customer relationships. The issue is whether the limited change in the form of interaction found with e-commerce occurs because companies cannot think of new ways to relate to people through e-commerce or because people are resistant to changes in their traditional way of doing business and reward companies that have a traditional look with which they are familiar.

How can we reconcile the findings reported by Thompson and Nadler with those described in the other studies in this collection? We can do this primarily by distinguishing the situations studied. The individuals Thompson and Nadler studied were asked to remain strangers who interacted only electronically, whereas studies of relationships find that people develop nonelectronic elements to relationships that they begin electronically or develop electronic elements to supplement real-world relationships. It is unusual for personal relationships to begin or remain solely electronic in nature. As a result, the bulk of the biases discussed in Thompson and Nadler’s research, which are linked to the lack of a real-world relationship,
would be minimized or eliminated in personal relationships. What remains to be seen is whether, in business relationships, people have the same natural tendency to make Internet relationships real by telephoning, or having face-to-face communications, with others. If so, then people have a natural method for counteracting many of the identified biases.

These caveats aside, the findings that Thompson and Nadler report are important because they provide a needed cautionary note to the generally optimistic findings of the studies of relationship development on the Internet. It may be the case that there are arenas—in particular, situations in which people are more task oriented or interests are more in conflict—in which the less social nature of electronic communication may introduce problems or undermine productive interaction. If so, then mechanisms need to be developed to combat such problems.

**The Internet as a Social Equalizer**

Beyond the question of whether the Internet has a generally positive or negative impact upon users is the issue of whether the Internet diminishes or enhances personal or social inequalities. In the case of personal inequalities, the question is whether people can use the Internet to compensate for social skill deficits, such as feeling greater social anxiety or having smaller social networks.

The personal compensation question is addressed by Kraut et al. (this issue) when they consider who benefits from the Internet. Kraut et al. ask whether introverted people use it to compensate for their weaknesses or extraverts use it to magnify their already superior networking efforts and skills. Their findings suggest that it is those who already have strong social networks and skills who benefit the most from the Internet. So Internet access amplifies existing differences in the ability to use social resources, rather than dampening those differences, with “those who are already effective in using social resources in the world” being “well positioned to take advantage of a powerful new technology like the Internet” (p. 69).

The work of McKenna et al. (this issue) suggests the contrary conclusion that Internet connections may facilitate the initial contact among those with social anxiety, with people beginning by investing their sense of “true self” in Internet interactions. In other words, the Internet may help people to compensate for weaknesses in the short term. However, over time relationships formed over the Internet become very close, of high quality, and rooted in real-world connections. Hence, the Internet may facilitate the creation of relationships among the anxious that might not otherwise have occurred because of their lack of comfort with interpersonal situations, but that emerge to look very much like other real-world relationships. The authors conclude that, rather than turning to the Internet as a way of hiding from real life, those who are socially anxious and those who are lonely turn to the Internet as a means of forming close and meaningful relationships with
others in a nonthreatening environment. They then bring these relationships into their traditional, face-to-face, circle of friends and intimates. In this case, the existence of the Internet does provide an avenue for compensatory strategies among the socially anxious.

The findings outlined do not speak to whether the Internet helps socially anxious people learn to be less anxious over time and more able to be social and begin and develop their future relationships off-line initially. In other words, the study does not look at whether, in future interactions, people who have used the Internet to develop relationships are less dependent upon the Internet for the initial stages of their future interactions. But this is a key question for future research. Although the Internet may be a facilitative tool, it may also be a tool that fundamentally changes the way that socially anxious or shy individuals interact in their daily lives. We do not currently know whether people outgrow the Internet and move on to “real” interactions in initial meetings in which they formerly would have shunned direct connections, or whether they continue a pattern of using the Internet to facilitate initial communication in situations in which they feel shy or anxious if they are involved in a “real” interaction.

Other forms of social equalization focus more directly on the equalization of access to resources and information via the Internet. For example, the Internet potentially gives people in remote areas access to otherwise unobtainable resources and to easier communication with others in their community, thus reducing inequalities. Here the Internet may have an equalizing role at the community level. In the past the availability of community resources has been key to having access to information through libraries and local government services. Now people have the ability to bypass local communities and governments and gain access to resources world wide. People can also be involved in discussions and can influence others, even when they are limited by geographical isolation. Internet access can minimize the impact of geography.

As Borgida et al. (this issue) suggest, the degree to which the Internet actually functions as a leveling force depends upon the manner in which it is implemented. If people must buy computers and pay for Internet access, then those who are initially advantaged are able to gain further advantage. If Internet access is viewed as a public resource, and the government implements it, then Internet access diminishes the impact of differences in wealth, skills, and geography.

As the Borgida et al. analysis reminds us, there is nothing automatic or inevitable about the social gains of a new technology. The social consequences of technology depend upon the social context within which the technology is utilized. Just as with earlier communication modalities—the mail, the telephone—impact depends upon implementation. When the American government decided to subsidize mail to remote locations as part of an effort to unite the population, mail then served to provide access to resources for the disadvantaged and the remote. On the other hand, it is the wealthy and already skilled who have most
rapidly bought and taken advantage of the availability of personal computers. Whether the Internet is, in fact, a social-leveling technology depends not upon the technology itself, but upon the political and social framework within which it is implemented.

Why might a government resist the implementation and availability of new technologies? Deibert’s (this issue) discussion of the Internet in China outlines the conflicting feelings that govern the way that a political and social hierarchy deals with Internet issues. On the one hand, the Internet is a potentially powerful engine of growth and education. On the other hand, the heightened access to information and communication with others that the Internet provides empowers people and, as a result, potentially undermines government stability and control. The Internet, from a “cyber-libertarian” perspective, as Deibert writes, will “inevitably stifle government restrictions, destroy hierarchical forms of authority, and free up the exchange of information and ideas worldwide” (p. 143). Deibert recognizes that this is only one possible perspective and that the degree to which effective surveillance and control of the Internet is possible is an evolving issue.

Through the examples Deibert presents, it is clear that the Chinese government is motivated by both views, resulting in an ambivalent and inconsistent attitude toward the Internet. As Deibert points out, “China wants to be able to reap the benefits of new information technology” (p. 145). It also wants to be able to control its use. Of course, this ambivalence is not uniquely focused upon the Internet. The widespread availability of television and cell phones, as well as open and free access to newspapers and books, also potentially pose threats to social and political hierarchies.

As with the communities studied by Borgida and colleagues, the Chinese communities studied by Deibert suggest that the Internet itself is not necessarily a politically empowering technology that lessens differences among people. Whether the Internet has such an impact depends strongly on how it is implemented and controlled by government. In this respect, the Internet joins other technologies ranging from newspapers to cell phones. These technologies hold out the possibility of social leveling but do not automatically have that consequence. If a government is motivated toward social change, it can utilize many technologies in that effort. If it opposes social change, it can implement those same technologies in ways that lessen and even eliminate their transformative potential.

The Internet as a Facilitator of Pathology

The converse of the image of Internet communication as a social-leveling force is presented in the work of Glaser, Dixit, and Green (this issue), who explore the use of the Internet to spread racism and hatred. Their research suggests that people might be less willing or able to exercise restraint and therefore act less morally in
what they view as the anonymous circumstances of the Internet. Similar concerns have been raised in a variety of other arenas, ranging from on-line gambling to the exchange of child pornography (see Fisher & Barak, in press; King & Barak, 1999). In these cases, as well, it has been argued that people are using the Internet to engage in behavior that they would be less willing to engage in if they had to be less anonymous (United Kingdom Department of Trade & Industry, 1997; UNESCO, 1999).

The key question is whether the Internet facilitates such behavior. After all, it occurs often enough outside of the context of the Internet. A typical argument has been made concerning pornography on the Internet, which led the U.S. Congress to pass the Communications Decency Act in 1996. That argument is that the Internet provides access, affordability, and anonymity for those interested in sexual materials. The question is whether these factors contribute to the development of pathological control problems. It is those “out of control” problems that are most clearly psychological problems for the individual seeking access—who loses control over his or her life. They can be distinguished from enhanced access to erotica, which may or may not be a harm to the individual seeking access or for society more generally, even when people pay for sexual material (see Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999).

Glaser et al. (this issue) extend this analysis into the area of hate speech. They do so by studying the members of White racist hate groups. Using a creative experimental methodology, members of the groups were engaged via the Internet in a discussion of a controversial topic, such as interracial marriage. Their comments were later content-analyzed. It was clear that these people were upset by phenomena such as interracial marriage and responded with suggestions that they would engage in violent behavior if they were actually in such situations.

What is missing from concerns about pornography and gambling and Internet addiction and the Glaser et al. (this issue) focus on hate groups is evidence that the Internet is facilitative of pathology (for a similar argument see Grohol, 1999). Clearly people gamble, they look at and read pornography, and at least racists threaten violence when sensitive topics are raised. But is this behavior facilitated by the context of the Internet? What is needed, and in fact called for by Glaser and his colleagues, is an effort to better understand whether and in what way the Internet facilitates pathology.

The Expression of Taboo Perspectives

A second potential group of people whose life might be changed by the Internet are those who have some taboo aspect of their identity, whether the desire to engage in socially frowned-upon practices, the desire to express extreme views, or some other issue. Here the anonymous and impersonal elements of Internet communication might encourage people to live a secret life via the Internet.
Interestingly in this regard, McKenna and Bargh (1998; see McKenna et al., this issue) found that people who initially communicate a taboo identity on the Internet are subsequently likely to both incorporate that identity into their sense of self and to disclose it to real-life friends. This suggests, as Bargh et al. (this issue) argue, that the Internet is a kind of “social laboratory” in which people test their identities before embracing them, instead of being a place to hide from taboo or hidden aspects of the self. If so, this also supports the general argument that the Internet may be important in initial interactions that are then transformed into real-world interactions. In this case people may try out taboo identities on strangers and then later on their friends and family.

Overall

All of the authors in this issue agree that the Internet is changing the nature of work, government, and social relationships. The key question is whether the availability of the new modality of communication represented by the Internet leads to fundamental changes in personal and social life. The findings of the various articles in this issue generally argue that it does not. The Internet provides people with a technology that allows them to engage in activities that they have already had ways to engage in but provides them with some added efficiencies and opportunities to tailor their interactions to better meet their needs. However, there is nothing fundamentally different about the Internet that transforms basic psychological or social life.

In fact, the research presented in this issue suggests that people generally incorporate the Internet into their social “toolkit” and use it in conjunction with face-to-face, telephone, and mail communication to deal with personal and interpersonal issues in their lives. When seeking to begin relationships, socially anxious people use the Internet to lessen the anxiety associated with initial meetings. But as relationships develop they bring them into the real world. When trying out new identities people initially express those identities over the more anonymous Internet and then embrace them and bring them into their real world by telling their friends about them. And in work settings, people naturally supplement electronic connections with the type of personal communications that minimize or eliminate the biases associated with electronic negotiations.

These findings do not minimize the potential impact of the Internet. Rather, they suggest that people are proactive and adaptive with respect to new technologies. They seek ways to use those technologies to more effectively manage their personal and interpersonal concerns. Like other modalities of communication, the Internet offers many such opportunities. The findings outlined in the articles in this issue suggest that people are actively seeking to find and make use of the possibilities offered by the Internet, just as they have embraced telephones, television, cell phones, and the blizzard of new technologies that accompany modern
life. While the modalities of life rapidly evolve, the fundamental issues of life that people are seeking to address remain more constant, with people seeking tools to better live their lives.

References


