**What Is the Internet Doing to Relationships?**

**Does the internet degrade friendship, kinship, civic involvement, and social capital?**

One of the great debates about the internet is what it is doing to the relationships that Americans have with friends, relatives, neighbors, and workmates.

On the one hand, many extol the internet’s abilities to extend our relationships — we can contact people across the ocean at the click of a mouse; we can communicate kind thoughts at two in the morning and not wake up our friends. Back in the early years of the internet, some prophets felt that the internet would create a global village, transcending the boundaries of time and space. As John Perry Barlow, a leader of the Electric Frontier Foundation wrote in 1995:

With the development of the internet…we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. I used to think that it was just the biggest thing since Gutenberg, but now I think you have to go back farther (p. 36)…. I want to be able to completely interact with the consciousness that’s trying to communicate with mine. Rapidly… [w]e are now creating a space in which the people of the planet can have that kind of communication relationship. (p. 40)

On the other hand are those who fear that the internet causes a multitude of social and psychological problems. Several psychologists have claimed to treat people with “internet addiction.” For example, in 1999, David Greenfield adapted a diagnostic tool from a gambling addiction questionnaire, substituting “internet” for gambling. This approach ignores the positive benefits of being involved with the internet: Compare a statement such as “I am gambling too much” with one such as “I am communicating on the internet too much.”

**Does the time people spend online damage their social connections?**

In February 2004, a reporter asked one author (Wellman) to comment on the deaths of four supposed “cyber-addicts” who spent much time online in virtual reality environments. The reporter lost interest when Wellman pointed out that other causes might be involved, that “addicts” were a low percentage of users, and that no one worries about “neighboring addicts” who chat daily in their front yards.

A more pervasive concern has been that the internet sucks people away from in-person contact, fostering alienation and real-world disconnection. For example, Texas broadcaster Jim Hightower worried that:

…while all this razzle-dazzle connects us electronically, it disconnects us from each other, having us “interfacing” more with computers and TV screens than looking in the face of our fellow human beings. (quoted in Fox, 1995, p. 12)

Similarly, when the “Homenet” study in Pittsburgh found that internet newcomers were somewhat more stressed, it was front-page news. The media paid much less attention to the follow-up report that found much of the stress does not continue as people become used to the internet.[3](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2006/01/25/what-is-the-internet-doing-to-relationships/)

The assumption underlying fear about what the internet is doing to relationships is that the internet seduces people into spending time online at the expense of time spent with friends and family. As a result, Americans may be sitting at their computer screens at home and not going out to talk to our neighbors across the street or visiting relatives. There are worries that relationships that exist in text — or even screen-to-screen on flickering webcams — are less satisfying than those in which people can really see, hear, smell, and touch each other.

**There are four key aspects to the question of the internet’s impact on relationships.**

The debate about the impact of the internet on social relations is important for four reasons:

* There is the direct question of whether relationships continue to flourish in the internet age. Are there the same kinds of ties — in both quantity and quality — that flourished in pre-internet times? Do people have more or fewer relationships? Do they have more or less contact with friends and relatives? Does the ability of the internet to connect instantly around the world mean that far-flung ties now predominate over neighborly relations? More broadly, does internet contact take away from people’s in-person contacts or add to them?
* There is the associated question of whether the internet is splitting people into two separate worlds: online and offline. Originally, both those who worshipped the internet and those who feared it thought that people’s online relationships would be so separate from their existing relationships that people’s “life on the screen,” as Sherry Turkle put it in 1995, would be different from their “real life.” Is this the case? Or is the internet now an integral part of the many ways people relate to friends, relatives, and even neighbors in real life? Can online relationships be meaningful, perhaps even as meaningful as in-person relationships?
* Do people’s relationships (on- and offline) provide usable help? In other words, do they add to what social scientists now call interpersonal social capital? Such help could take the form of giving information or emotional support, lending a cup of sugar, or providing long-term health care. It is easy enough to give information on the internet. And while it is impossible to change bedpans online, it is easy to use the internet to arrange for people to visit and help. Robert Putnam’s influential *Bowling Alone*(2000) provided a fair amount of evidence that American social capital declined from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s. However, some scholars dispute his evidence. For example, Claude Fischer (2005) argued that the ferment of the 1960s was an unnatural high point of social involvement. Moreover, if people are not going to churches, the Lions Club, or scouting groups as much, has civic involvement died? Or, are they finding such group activity online, through chat rooms, listservs, and group email? And is the quality the same when people pray online rather than in churches (see Campbell, 2005)? In the 1990s, instead of nostalgia for the small-town community of *Pleasantville,*people dreamed of traveling to *Cheers,*the pub “where everybody knows your name.” Where do they find community now?
* To what extent is the internet associated with a transformation of American society from groups to networks? Myth has it that in the old days (à la Pleasantville)*,*the average American had two parents, a single boss, and lived in a friendly village or neighborhood where everyone knew their names. Yet a variety of evidence suggests that many North Americans no longer are bound up in a single neighborhood, friendship, or kinship group. Rather, they maneuver in social networks. The difference is that a person’s network often consists of multiple and separate clusters. It could well be that most of a person’s friends do not know each other, and even more likely that neighbors do not know a person’s friends or relatives. Moreover, rather than neighborhood communities like Pleasantville or its urban equivalents, most of a person’s relationships are spread widely across cities, states, and even continents. And instead of a single community that provides a wide spectrum of help, it appears that most relationships are specialized, for example, with parents providing financial aid and friends providing emotional support. The internet supports both sparsely connected, far-flung networks and densely connected, local groups. The environment of one-to-one ties through email and instant messaging can transform groups into networks because the internet easily supports groups through one-to-many emails, listservs, chatrooms, blogs, and the like. Yet are such groups single all-encompassing Pleasantvilles, or is it more likely that they are just pieces of complex social networks?

**Research points to the positive social networking effects of connectivity.**

As these questions continue to be debated, research is showing that the internet is not destroying relationships or causing people to be anti-social.[4](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2006/01/25/what-is-the-internet-doing-to-relationships/) To the contrary, the internet is enabling people to maintain existing ties, often to strengthen them, and at times to forge new ties. The time that most people spend online reduces the time they spend on the relatively unsocial activities of watching TV and sleeping. Moreover, the relationships maintained through online communication only rarely are with an entirely new set of individuals who live far away. Instead, a large amount of the communication that takes place online is with the same set of friends and family who are also contacted in person and by phone. This is especially true for socially close relationships — the more close friends and family are seen in person, the more they are contacted by email.

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If Americans do not live in a single community group, but in fragmented networks, we need to understand this phenomenon. Do people now operate as part of tiny, simple networks or large, complex ones? Do they rarely see their friends? Are they enjoying or being overloaded by an abundance of communication? Are the new, internet-enhanced social networks providing social capital to help us get things done, to make decisions, and to help us cope?

It is to these questions about the nature of today’s social networks that we now turn.