connecting communities: on and offline

The Internet is no longer a separate world for the techno-savvy. Tens of millions of people around the world now go online daily. Rather than isolating users in a virtual world, the Internet extends communities in the real world. People use it to connect in individualized and flexible social networks rather than in fixed and grounded groups.

The 2004 documentary film *Almost Real* tells true-life Internet stories. For some characters, the Internet provides an escape from human interaction. A recluse living alone on an abandoned North Sea oil rig runs a data storage haven supposedly free of government interference. An antisocial 8-year-old boy hides from his schoolmates through home schooling and the Web. Meanwhile, the Internet brings other people together. A man and woman in a bondage and domination relationship communicate daily over webcams thousands of miles apart. And teenagers socialize by incessantly playing a cooperative online game.

These stories are fascinating but misleading because they describe people whose social lives are wholly online. Few people dedicate most of their waking lives to the Internet. The Internet usually supplants solitary activities, like watching television, rather than other forms of social life. Most uses of the
Internet are not “almost real,” but are actual, quite normal interactions. The Internet has become an ordinary part of life.

Consider my own use. I have received several email messages in the past hour. Friends confirm dinner for tonight. Even though it is the weekend, a student sends a question and expects a quick answer. So does a graduate student from Europe, with an urgent request for a letter of recommendation. Cousin Larry shares some political thoughts from Los Angeles. I arrange to meet friends at a local pub later in the week. My teenage niece avoids email as “for adults,” so I send her an instant message. And one of my most frequent correspondents writes twice: Ms. Miriam Abacha from Nigeria, wanting yet again to share her millions with me.

In addition to communication, the Internet has become an important source of information. To check facts for this article, I use Google to search the Web. It is too rainy to go out and buy a newspaper, so I skim my personalized Yahoo! News instead. My friend Joe is driving to my house for the first time and gets his directions online from MapQuest.

The Internet has burrowed into my life, but is not separate from the rest of it. I integrate offline and online activities. I email, chat, web search and instant message—but I also walk, drive, bike, bus, fly, phone and send an occasional greeting card. I am not unique. Both the exotic aura of the Internet in the 1990s and the fear that it would undermine “community” have faded. The reality is that using the Internet both expands community and changes it in subtle ways.

digital divides

Between 1997 and 2001, the number of Americans using computers increased by 27 percent—from 137 million to 174 million—while the online population rose by 152 percent. Nielsen NetRatings reported in March 2004 that three-quarters of Americans over the age of two had accessed the Internet. Many used the Internet both at home and at work, and about half went online daily. Instant messaging (IM) has spread from teenagers to adults in growing popularity, with more than one-third of all American adults now IM-ing.

A decade ago, the Internet was mainly North American, and largely the domain of young, educated, urban, white men. It has since become widely used. About one-third of users live in North America, one-third in Europe and Japan, and one-third elsewhere. India and China host many users, although the percentages of their population who are online remain small. China now has the second largest number of

An 18-year-old girl uses her laptop and an Internet connection to create a personalized music CD for a close friend. She and her acquaintances tie their Internet shopping and browsing to local friendships through online messaging, phone calls and meeting in person.
Internet users, growing from half a million in 1997 to 80 million in January 2004. Although the proliferation of computers is no longer headline news, 41 million PCs were shipped to retailers and customers worldwide in the first quarter of 2004. As more people go online, the digital divide recedes. Yet even as the overall percentage of people online rises, differences in usage rates persist: between affluent and poor, young and old, men and women, more and less educated, urban and rural and English and non-English readers. Moreover, there are substantial international differences, even among developed countries. For instance, the digital divide between high-income households and low-income households ranges from a gap of more than 60 percentage points in the United Kingdom to less than 20 percentage points in Denmark. In the United States, 79 percent of relatively affluent people (family income of $75,000 or more) were Internet users in September 2001, when just 25 percent of poor people (family income of less than $15,000) were online. And while the gender gap is shrinking in many developed countries, it is increasing in Italy and Germany as men get connected at a higher rate than women. Moreover, the digital divide cuts several ways. For instance, even among affluent Americans, there was a 31 percentage point gap in Internet access between those with a university education (82 percent) and those with less than a high school education (51 percent).

Digital divides are particularly wide in developing countries, where users tend to be wealthy, students, employees of large corporations or people with easy access to cybercafes. The risk of a “digital penalty” grows as Internet use among organizations and individuals becomes routine. Those without access to the Internet will increasingly miss out on information and communication about jobs, social and political news and community events.

The many who are using the Internet and the many more who will eventually use it face the question of how the experience might affect their lives. Fast messages, quick shopping and instant reference works aside, widespread concerns focus on the deeper social and psychological implications of a brave new computer-mediated world.
hopes, fears and possibilities

Just a few years ago, hope for the Internet was utopian. Entrepreneurs saw it as a way to get rich, policy makers thought it could remake society, and business people hoped that online sales would make stock prices soar. Pundits preached the gospel of the new Internet millennium. For example, in 1995, John Perry Barlow, co-leader of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said, “We are in the midst 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.”

The media generally saw the Internet as a weird, wonderful and sometimes scary thing. The cover of the December 1999 issue of Wired depicted a lithesome cyber-angel leaping off a cliff into the glorious unknown. Major newspapers unveiled special Internet sections, and new computer magazines became fat with ads, advice and influence. The meltdown of the dot-com boom in March 2000 snuffed out many dreams of a radiant Internet future. The pages of Wired magazine shrank by 25 percent from September 1996 to September 2001 and another 22 percent by September 2003. Revenue and subscription rates also plummeted. The editors ruefully noted in February 2004 that their magazine “used to be as thick as a phone book.”

The advent of the Internet also provoked fears of personal danger and the loss of community. News media warned of men posing as women online, cyber-stalking, identity theft and dangerous cyber-addiction. As recently as March 2004, computer scientist John Messerly warned that “computer and video games… ruin the social and scholastic lives of many students.”

Much of the hype and fear about the Internet has been both presentist—thinking that the world started anew with its advent—and parochial—thinking that only things that happened on the Internet were relevant to understanding it. Yet, sociologists have long known that technology by itself does not determine anything. Rather, people take technology and use it (or discard it) in ways its developers never dreamed. For example, the early telephone industry marketed its technology simply as a tool for practical business and spurned the notion that it could be a device for sociability. Indeed, telephones, airplanes and automobiles enabled far-flung communities to flourish well before the coming of the Internet.

Technologies themselves neither make nor break communities. Rather, they create possibilities, opportunities, challenges and constraints for what people and organizations can do. For example, automobiles and expressways make it possible for people to live in sprawling suburbs, but they do not determine that people will do so. Compare the sprawl of American cities with the more compact suburbs of neighboring Canada. The Internet’s low cost, widespread use, asynchronicity (people do not have to be connected simultaneously), global connectivity, and attachments (pictures, music, text) make it possible to communicate quickly and cheaply across continents and oceans. For example, emigrants use email to chat with family and friends back home and visit Web sites to learn home news. Yahoo! India Matrimonial links brides and grooms in India, Europe and North America. In countries with official censorship, emigrants use email to gather news from back home and post it on Web sites for information hungry readers. Thus, the Internet allows mobile people to maintain community ties to distant places and also supports face-to-face ties closer to home.

community online and offline

Online communication—email, instant messaging and chat rooms—does not replace more traditional offline forms of contact—face-to-face and telephone. Instead, it complements them, increasing the overall volume of contact. Where some had feared that involvement in the Internet would detract from “real life” ties with friends and relatives, intensive users of email contact others in person or by phone at least as frequently as those who rarely or never use the Internet. People who frequently use the Internet to contact others also tend to be in
frequent contact with people in other ways (even after taking into account differences of age, gender and education). Extroverts especially benefit from its use, simply adding another means of communication to their contact repertoire. For example, a 2001 National Geographic survey reports that North Americans who use email to discuss important matters do so an average of 41 times per month, in addition to having an average of 84 face-to-face discussions and 58 phone discussions. Those who do not use email to discuss important matters have about the same number of monthly face-to-face discussions, 83, but only 36 phone discussions. Thus, those who use email report 183 significant discussions per month, 54 percent more than for those who do not use email. The result: the more email, the more overall communication.

This is not surprising, because the Internet is not a separate world. When we talk to people about what they do on the Internet, we find out that the majority of the people they email are people they know already. They are keeping in touch between visits, often by exchanging jokes, sharing gossip or arranging to get together. If they email someone they have not already met in person, they are frequently arranging a face-to-face meeting. Telephone calls also get intermixed with emails, because phone chats better convey nuances, provide more intrinsic enjoyment and better accommodate complex discussions. Andrea Baker’s book Double-Click reports that few cyber-dates stay online; they either proceed to in-person meetings or fade away. People also bring to their online interactions such offline baggage as their gender, age, family situation, lifestyle, ethnicity, jobs, wealth and education.

Email is not inherently better or worse than other modes of communication. It is just different. Emails are less intrusive than visits or phone calls and often come with useful attachments, be they baby pictures or maps to someone’s home. The spread of high-speed (“broadband”) Internet access makes it easier for people to integrate the Internet into the rest of their lives without long waits. By April 2004, 39 percent of U.S. Internet users had broadband at home and 55 percent either at work or home. Broadband means that people can always leave their Internet connection on so that they can spontaneously send emails and search Web sites. Broadband connections also make it easier to surf the Web and download large image, music and video files.

The longer people have been on the Internet, the more they use it. Most Americans—and many in the developed world—have online experience. According to the Pew Internet and American Life study, by February 2004 the average American had been using the Internet for six years. Internet use is becoming even more widespread as home users get

This neighborhood protest against the United States’ military campaign in Iraq was one of many organized by both word-of-mouth and Internet communication.
access to broadband networks and as access proliferates from desk-bound computers to small portable devices such as “third-generation” mobile phones and personal digital assistants (Palm, Pocket PC). Yet, these small-screen, small-keyboard, lower-speed instruments are used differently than computers: to contact a small number of close friends or relatives or to coordinate in-person meetings. Far from homogenizing people’s communications, Internet technology is used in different ways by different people.

the internet globally and locally

A decade ago analysts believed that as the rest of the world caught up to the United States in Internet use, they would use it in similar ways. Experience shows that this is not always so. For example, in Scandinavia and Japan, people frequently use advanced mobile phones to exchange email and short text messages. Their Internet use is much less desktop-bound than that of Americans. Teens and young adults are especially heavy users of email on their Internet-connected mobile telephones. Time will tell whether young people continue their heavy mobile use as they get older. Manuel Castells and his associates have shown that people in Catalonia, Spain use the Internet more for information and services than for communication. They extensively search the Web to answer questions and book tickets, but they are much less likely to exchange emails. This may be because many Catalans live near each other and prefer to meet in cafés at night. Mobile phones sit beside them, ready to incorporate other close friends and relatives into conversations via short text messages. Many developing countries exhibit a different mode of use. Even if people can afford to connect to the Internet from their homes, they often do not have reliable electrical, telephone or broadband service. In such situations, they often use public access points such as Internet cafés or schools. They are connecting to the Internet while their neighbors sit next to them in person.

Such complexities illuminate the role the Internet can play in specifically local communities. The issue is whether the Internet has fostered a “global village,” to use Marshall McLuhan’s phrase, and thereby weakened local community. Some intensive and engaging online communities do exist, such as the “BlueSky” group of young male friends who appear to live online, as described by Lori Kendall in her book Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub. Yet, they are a small minority. Despite the Internet’s ability to connect continents at a single bound, it does not appear to be destroying local community.

For example, in the late 1990s Keith Hampton and I studied “Netville” near Toronto, a suburban housing tract of middle-priced single-family homes. The teachers, social workers, police officers and technicians who lived there were typical people buying homes to raise young families. The community was exceptional in one important way: As part of an experiment by the telephone company, many residents were given free, high-speed Internet access and became members of a neighborhood email discussion group.

When we compared those who were given this Internet access with those who did not receive it, we found that those on the Internet knew the names of three times as many neighbors as those without Internet access. The “wired” residents had been invited into the homes of an average of 4 neighbors, compared to 2.5 for the unwired, and they regularly talked with twice as many neighbors. The Internet gave wired residents opportunities to identify others in the neighborhood whom they might want to know better. Email and the discussion group made it easier for them to meet fellow residents who were not their immediate neighbors: the wired residents’ local friends were more widely dispersed throughout Netville than those of the unwired. The email discussion group was frequently used to discuss common concerns. These included household matters such as plumbing and yardwork, advice on setting up home computer networks, finding a local doctor, and skills for hire such as those of a tax accountant or carpenter. As one resident commented on the discussion group: “I have walked around the neighborhood a lot lately and I have noticed a few things. I have noticed neighbors talking to each other like they have been friends for a long time. I have noticed a closeness that you don’t see in many communities.”

Not only did these wired residents talk to and meet one another more, they did most of Netville’s civic organizing online, for example, by warning neighbors about suspicious cars in the development and inviting neighbors to social events such as barbecues and block parties. One typical message read: “For anybody interested there is a Sunday night bowling
league looking for new people to join. It’s lots of fun with prizes, playoffs and more. For both ladies and gents. If interested e-mail me back or give me a call.”

These community activities built bonds for political action. When irate Netville residents protested at City Hall against the developer’s plans to build more houses, it was the wired Internet members who organized the protest and showed up to make their voices heard. Others grumbled, just like new residents of housing developments have often grumbled, but the Internet supplied the social bonds and tools for organizing, for telling residents what the issues were, who the key players were and when the protest would be.

The Netville experience suggests that when people are offered an easier way of networking with the Internet, the scope and amount of neighborly contact can increase. Evidence from other studies also shows that the Internet supports nearby relationships. For example, the National Geographic Society asked visitors to its website about their communication with friends and relatives living within a distance of 30 miles. Daily Internet users contacted nearby friends and relatives 73 percent more often per year than they contacted those living further away.

At the same time, the Internet helped Netville’s wired residents to maintain good ties with, and get help from, friends and relatives who lived in their former neighborhoods. The evidence shows that Internet users are becoming “glocalized,” heavily involved in both local and long-distance relationships. They make neighborly contacts—on- and offline—and they connect with far-flung friends and relatives—mostly online.

“networked individualism”

As the Internet has been incorporated into everyday life, it has fostered subtle changes in community. In the old days, before the 1990s, places were largely connected—by telephone, cars, planes and railroads. Now with the Internet (and mobile phones), people are connected. Where before each household had a telephone number, now each person has a unique email address. Many have several, in order to keep different parts of their lives separate online. This change from place-based community to person-based community had started before the Internet, but the developing personalization, portability and ubiquitous connectivity of the Internet are facilitating the change. By April 2004, 17 percent of American users could access the Internet wirelessly from their laptop computers and the percentage is growing rapidly. As wireless portability develops from desktops to laptops and handheld devices, an individual’s whereabouts become less important for contact with friends and relatives.

The Internet and other new communication technologies are facilitating a basic change in the nature of community—from physically fixed and bounded groups to social networks, which I call “networked individualism.” These technologies are helping people to personalize their own communities. Instead of being rooted in homes, cafés and workplaces, people are becoming connected as individuals, available for contact anywhere and at anytime. Instead of being bound up in a neighborhood community where all know all, each person is becoming an individualized switchboard, linking a unique set of ties and networks. In a society where people rarely know friends of friends, there is more uncertainty about who will be supportive under what circumstances, more need to navigate among partial social networks and more opportunity to access a variety of resources. The Internet provides communication and information resources to keep in closer touch with loved ones—from new friends to family members left behind in international migrations.

recommended resources


Wellman, Barry, and Caroline Haythornthwaite, eds. The Internet in Everyday Life. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000. We present a score of original research articles documenting many of the ideas presented in this article.

http://www.pewinternet.org. The Pew Internet in American Life studies have carried out a large number of surveys on Internet use in American life.

http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk. This is a British scholarly network doing a variety of mostly qualitative analyses of Internet and society.

http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk. This site is an interactive statistical database that makes it relatively easy to analyze a variety of surveys about the Internet and American life.

http://www.worldinternetproject.net. This site contains the reports of survey researchers in many nations on the nature of the Internet and society.