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A better connection

The Internet isn't crowding out other activities, a study finds. Instead, it's becoming woven more deeply into our lives, helping us do the same things -- communicate and make decisions -- in more effective ways.

By Michael Hill

Sun reporter

Originally published March 5, 2006

Back when personal computers first started to appear, there were predictions that we were witnessing the dawning of yet another Age of Aquarius.

Maybe it was the fledgling computer industry's proximity to San Francisco that caused many early proponents to foresee the electronic Web binding us together in worldwide e-community, blurring distinctions based on nationality, ethnicity, race, sex, age or the other factors that divide us. Next thing you know, as the lyrics go, peace would guide the planets, and love would steer the stars.

Then Bill Gates became a gazillionaire and online pornography turned out to be the Web's big money-maker. That cosmic vision got a bit cloudy.

Indeed, soon enough the pendulum swung and the spread of the Web began to be seen as something nefarious, trapping our youth into lives of sullen indolence, removed from human interaction, turned into depressed zombies by the mesmerizing power of these interactive screens. To paraphrase lyrics of an earlier generation, there was trouble in River City and

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that starts with P and ends with C and that stands for trouble!

Not surprisingly, the truth turns out to lie somewhere in between.

A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that although the Web and e-mail may not have led to universal peace and understanding, neither have they driven Americans into lives of desperate solitude. Indeed, the study found that this technology has helped people expand and solidify their social networks.

Along the way it has grown to provide an increasingly important forum for seeking out information about health care, personal finance, jobs, homes and relationships. Millions of Americans are routinely using this tool to more effectively research important life decisions.

Rapid growth in the numbers of Americans using the Internet for a wide array of day-to-day chores reflects the growing power of high-speed home connections and the increasing sophistication of software used by public and private sites to conveniently provide basic services.

Which is not to say the Internet has taken over the American household.

"It adds on to other forms of communication rather than replacing them," says Barry Wellman, a sociologist at the University of Toronto who was one of the authors of the study, titled "The Strength of Internet Ties." It is available at www.pewinternet.org/.

The study found that people use the Internet to maintain and enhance their contact with other people, both those that they know well and not so well.

Its unique ease of use - a message can be sent quickly like a telephone call but read at one's leisure like a letter - allows users to maintain contact with a wider variety of people than before. It also reduces the differences in contacting those who live nearby and those who live far away.

"Contrary to fears that e-mail would reduce other forms of contact, there is 'media multiplicity': The more contact by e-mail, the more in-person and phone contact," the study found. "As a result, Americans are probably more in contact with members of their communities and social networks than before the advent of the Internet."

So much for the image of the pasty-faced nerd who cannot tear himself away from the computer screen, content only with his online world.

"We still have bodies and we use them if we need to borrow a cup of sugar or need help digging out of the snow," Wellman says. "So we do not do all things on the Internet. What we find is that people are always cycling from the 'net to e-mail to an instant message to a cellphone to a wired phone to face-to-face communication."

Wellman was illustrating his point, talking over the phone to answer a query that first arrived via e-mail.

"It is rare that a person only uses one means of communication," he says. "Typically, you might send someone an e-mail, then get on the phone with them, then, if you are nearby, go out for a cup of coffee."

Wellman points out that e-mail is often preferred for conveying concise information in a hurry. "You can send a quick message, just one word, without going through all the social amenities."

These findings jibe with what John Robinson, a sociologist at the **University of Maryland, College Park**,

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has found.

"It's never as good as the optimists have it nor as bad as the pessimists think," Robinson says of the impact of new technologies, whether the automobile, telephone, or computers and the Internet.

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An expert on the way people use time, Robinson found that access to e-mail and the Internet has not really changed the way Americans while away their hours.

"The impact is far below what television had when it appeared on the scene," he says. "The Internet is not that disruptive a medium. It doesn't change life so much as it amplifies it."

Robinson says that this is in line with the advent of most new technologies. For instance, the automobile was supposed to reduce commuting time - no more walking or waiting for the bus and enduring its many stops - but instead just allowed people to move farther away and spend the same amount of time commuting.

The washing machine was supposed to reduce the amount of time spent on household chores but instead allowed people to buy and soil more clothes, while raising the level of expected cleanliness.

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Robinson - using surveys conducted by the Census Bureau that ask people to go over their previous day in detail, giving an hour-by-hour account of their life - has found that the Internet has a similar impact on people's daily lives. Time now spent e-mailing or instant messaging might have earlier been spent talking on the phone or writing letters.

The Pew study, which was conducted in February 2004, also found that "about 60 million Americans say the Internet has played an important or crucial role in helping them deal with at least one major life decision in the past two years."

People were asked if they used the Web to get information about decisions such as buying a car, choosing a school or treating a medical condition. Almost a third of them had, which was a one-third increase since 2002.

But, as Robinson points out, this again does not mean a change in their use of time. Hours spent researching and shopping on the Internet might previously have been spent reading newspapers or catalogues, or phoning friends for advice.

"It's like people making the switch from land lines to cell phones; the amount of time spent talking on the phone has not changed, it's just they have a different access to it," he says. "Very generally, we find that technology does not change the use of time very much - it just changes the way things get done. People who have microwaves don't spend any less time cooking, they just make more complex dinners."

So it is with research on the Internet: it might allow its users to get information more efficiently, but the result is that people expect to get more information, so they spend the same amount of time researching. It's not enough to get the specifications for the car you might buy; now you need the invoice price and, if it's a used car, a complete title history.

Wellman says that there is one danger in the reliance on the Internet for research - the lack of discrimination in the information available. It has not passed through the filters required of most information available in previous media - a publisher who decides to print a book or an editor who approves a story for a newspaper.

"We need to train people in logic and the evaluation of evidence," he says. "It's pretty easy to know how to point and click a lot."

Robinson says the one exception to the rule that new technologies do not cause a major alteration in time usage was the appearance of television in most households a half-century ago.

"With TV, you are carving two or three hours a day out of people's time. That's monstrous," he says. "With the Internet, we are talking a couple more minutes spent with media. ... It's just impossible to overemphasize

the impact of television compared to other things."

What is not known - and neither Wellman nor Robinson knows of anyone studying this - is whether e-mail and chat rooms and other forms of computer communication are in any way different than previous methods of social interaction.

Do these electronic messages - which are somewhere between the deliberation of a letter and the spontaneity of speech - lead to a different kind of intimacy than that seen in other ways of making human contact? And what will these studies look like when their subjects are not adults who learned to use the Internet, but today's children and teens who are growing up using it, looking at it the way today's adults view telephones?

Robinson says he doesn't know, but he points out that in a recent social survey of 3,000 people, there were five who had met their marriage partners through the Internet. That might not sound like much, but he notes that it could be a significant percentage of those in the study who got married in that period.

"TV doesn't do anything quite like that," he says.

In any case, computers seem to be taking the same route as previous technologies - electricity, the telephone, radio, television. They start out as fascinating inventions dominated by hobbyists, the inventors and tinkerers who like fooling around with such things.

With computers, those were the people who read the technology sections of newspapers and magazines and bought the gizmos advertised there. It is not surprising that as the technology matured, such sections began to disappear and that many of the once-exotic gizmos are now available at Wal-Mart.

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As people begin to get used to a technology, they are no longer that interested in the bells and whistles but instead focused on its utility. When fully mature, a technology simply disappears into the background, like the stove or refrigerator in your kitchen - once a marvel, now completely taken for granted.

"Computers, e-mail and the Internet have become normal and boring in some ways. But boring turns out to be very important, in the way that the phone became boring," Wellman says. He points out how quickly wired computer usage has spread to 75 percent of American computer-using households.

"It's just a part of life now," he says. "We used to ask people how long they were online each day. Now they don't know what that means. It's on. They might glance at a page now and then. Or they might be using it intently. They turn it on at 8 in the morning and turn it off at midnight."

Internet's impact

Here are eight major areas where the Internet is

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playing a growing role in American life. The figures estimate how many Americans relied on the Internet in making a major decision:

- CAREER TRAINING: about 21 million.
- MANAGING OTHERS' ILLNESS: about 17 million.
- CHOOSING A SCHOOL: about 17 million.
- BUYING A CAR: about 16 million.
- MAKING A FINANCIAL DECISION: about 16 million.
- FINDING A PLACE TO LIVE: about 10 million.
- CHANGING JOBS: about 8 million.
- MANAGING PERSONAL ILLNESS: about 7 million.

These estimates are based on the findings of two daily tracking surveys on Americans' use of the Internet conducted for the Pew Internet and American Life Project. One survey was fielded from Feb. 17, 2004, through March 17, 2004, and involved interviews with 2,200 adults ages 18 and older. An earlier survey was fielded from February 21, 2004, through March 21, 2004, and it involved interviews with 2,201 adults. Both surveys have a margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points.

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