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## Web skeptics, take note: The sky hasn't fallen

### Internet doesn't destroy relationships, a new study finds, it strengthens them

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The initial warnings about the Internet's creep into modern lives were dire: Communities would crumble because people would be chained to their computers.

But a new study by Canadian researchers suggests the Web actually expands and strengthens relationships.

"The Internet is adding on to community rather than destroying it," said Barry Wellman, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto who co-wrote the report. "There were a huge number of people running around saying the sky was falling a few years ago. What we found is the sky isn't falling, that life is going on and quite happily."

The study, which was released yesterday, examined Americans' Internet habits and found that computer users have larger social networks than non-users. And, perhaps surprisingly, people who use e-mail actually have more phone and face-to-face contact with their friends, families and associates.

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"The current generation of e-mail users is communicating much more often than recent generations and possibly more often than any previous generation since people huddled in caves with only conversation to pass the nights away," says the study, which was funded by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Heavy e-mail users have more than twice as much land-line phone contact within their social networks and three times as much cellular phone contact than people who do not use e-mail, according to the report.

"E-mail supplements, rather than replaces, the communication people have with people who are very close to them -- as well as . . . with those not so close," the report says in noting e-mail's key role in maintaining ties between acquaintances.

Prof. Wellman, who was asked by the Pew organization to get involved with the research, said the conclusions are "highly similar to what we'd find with Canadians."

The reason e-mail breeds increased communication, the report suggests, could be because, as the old maxim goes, one thing simply leads to another.

For example, an e-mail exchange between colleagues about a complex issue might spark a phone call to continue the discussion. Or friends could use e-mail to arrange a night at the movies.

"There's an ecology of media and they all fit together," Prof. Wellman said.

E-mail -- which is the Internet's most popular application -- has long been extolled for helping far-flung friends and relatives stay in touch because it is convenient, inexpensive, unobtrusive and fits seamlessly into busy modern lives.

While social networks were once geographically based -- people's lives revolved around local friends,

neighbours and co-workers -- they are now much more dispersed. (The report looked at other Internet applications, including instant messaging, weblogs and webcams.)

Take Jeffrey Boase, a University of Toronto doctoral student in sociology who also co-wrote the report. Most mornings, Mr. Boase talks to his girlfriend in Japan by webcam.

The pair, who met three years ago in Kyoto, were initially friends but their romance heated up over e-mail. Their relationship became serious during a fall visit and is now sustained by long webcam conversations.

"It's interesting -- we started with e-mail when we didn't know each other as well and then the more we got to know each other, we moved to the more rich form of communication," he said.

However, the report, which is primarily based on the findings of a telephone survey of 2,200 American adults done in February and March of 2004, also found the "great bulk of ties" nurtured by the Internet were among people living in the same city, Prof. Wellman said.

"That's where our lives are. We still are physical beings, we're not just computer bits. We're still atoms, we still have physical needs," he said.

But despite the Internet's deep reach, the survey found that the most common mode of communication remains the land-line telephone and personal interaction.

The study also found that Internet users are more likely than non-users to get help from their contacts.

As well, nearly one-third of adult Americans said the Internet had played a key role in dealing with at least one recent major life decision.

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