

Internet and Society

-APRELIMINARYREPORT-

OBJECTIVES

Over the last five years, the revolution in information technology (IT) has resulted in innovations that are having increasingly visible effects on the life of the average American. These developments affect not only how people work, but where they work, how much they work, or with whom they interact face-to-face or electronically. Will future workers continue to share physical proximity with their colleagues, or work largely alone wedded to digital devices with occasional electronic mail or voice communication? What will these changes mean for social trust and social life beyond the family? Will the growing trend of working at home with the aid of IT help strengthen the family or add to the intrusion of the workplace into the home? Will it reduce the hours people work, or increase them by infusing work into every sphere of life, devouring leisure-time and family-life? And how will the Internet affect the role and use of the traditional media?

These same IT innovations are revolutionizing information and entertainment delivery, affecting their production and consumption, transforming our social life and behavior, even our political institutions and the role of citizens within them. Some argue that the new technology of e-mail, on-line discussions, on-demand information, and web-powered information diffusion and interest aggregation will lead to a more informed, engaged, and influential mass public. Will we live in a better informed and connected, more engaged and participatory society—or in a society of lonely ex-couch potatoes glued to computer screens, whose human contacts are largely impersonal and whose political beliefs are easily manipulated, relying on the icons of a wired or wireless society?

The human meaning of these changes remains unclear at present. Some greet these developments with euphoria, others warn of dire consequences. The truth is likely to be somewhere in the middle: Some of the social/political changes will be liberating, some will have little social effect, but others may be harmful or even socially and politically explosive; some may even be perverse—and the most critical ones may well be unanticipated by everyone. For an answer to these questions, we must move from ideological claims to empirical evidence. Our study is an attempt to do just that.

METHODOLOGY (Data collected by *InterSurvey*)

The study is based on data collected using a revolutionary new methodology developed by *Inter-Survey* to conduct surveys over the Internet. Unlike surveys of Internet users or households, which suffer from obvious sample distortions and preclude generalizing results, this new survey methodology is based on a panel of households recruited as a genuine random telephone sample of the U.S. population. In order to use the Internet for the purpose of efficient multi-channel data collection, each household in the sample - with or without prior Internet connection - is equipped with a *WebTV* settop box, with free Internet access and e-mail accounts.

The data for the study were collected in December 1999, from a national random sample of 4113 individuals in 2689 panel households, as a baseline for a continuing research program. Questionnaires were completed independently by each member of a panel household using their television and their *WebTV* controls to answer the questions displayed on the screen. To avoid contamination of results due to the fact that the study was itself conducted over the Internet (all sample households have Internet access, as a result having been equipped with *WebTV*), **the results on Internet use presented in this study are based ONLY on the responses of participants who had Internet access (at home or elsewhere) prior to and independent of the *WebTV* access installed by *InterSurvey*.** The margin of sampling error is about $\pm 1.5\%$ for results from the complete survey, and about $\pm 2.5\%$ for the subset of Internet users.

RELEASE NOTE:

The Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (SIQSS) wanted to bring these study findings to public attention in a timely manner, even though the analysis is preliminary and ongoing. Given the speed at which the Internet is changing, and the length of the peer-review process, these data would be of analytical and historical interest, rather than current interest, if we waited for academic journal publication. It is for these reasons that we are presenting the results in their current form.