

Is the Internet good or bad for us?

Submitted by acohill on Fri, 12/31/2004 - 08:30.

The New York Times (reg. required) has an article summarizing a new study on [the impact of the Internet on our lives](#). As past studies have found, TV is the big loser, with Internet users watching about 17% less television. That's probably not bad news.

The article goes on to say that the Internet is also causing us to sleep less (by 8.5 minutes) and that it reduces contact with family members by 23.5 minutes per day. The researchers acknowledged that they cannot answer the question of whether or not it strengthens or weakens social relationships. That's been a burning question since the rise of the Internet, and many tons of paper was wasted in the mid and late nineties to print handwringing articles about how the Internet would probably turn us all into introverted, pale-faced geeks sitting in our basements in the dark night after night, hanging out in seedy chat rooms.

None of that ever happened, but this study is likely to produce an echo effect of those hysterical articles, using the data that contact with family members is down.

The problem with these studies is I have yet to see one that really tries to find out the other side of the story. I may talk slightly less to my wife face to face, but we are emailing each other all day long. So if you really studied the entire social interaction, you'd probably find we communicate more now than we did ten years ago.

The article estimates that 75% of the country has Internet access now. Unfortunately, we still have some elected leaders in our communities that don't think any of this is important, because they are viewing it through the lens of their own (somewhat limited) experience, rather than trying to look at the community as a whole. When 75% of your constituents are using the Internet, it's not a fad or a luxury for the well off--it's a necessity of daily life. In rural communities, the Internet has broken the chains of rural isolation and dramatically improved the quality of life in areas like shopping. Living in a rural area no longer means long drives (or doing without) to obtain needed items--a couple of clicks online and the products are delivered to your door, or even via broadband, if you don't live near a well-stocked music store, as just one example.

1995 was the year the Internet really took off. Ten years later, we've gone from a tiny number of people who had Internet access back then to 75% of the country--that's the fastest diffusion of a new technology ever. We're on to something here, and I believe it's mostly for the good. We're more aware of world events, better informed on local, national, and international issues, have more control over our time, and have all kinds of new business and work opportunities available to us.

Just one example: despite the sheer awfulness of the tsunami, we all know about it in a way that we never could have even five years ago, to say nothing of ten or twenty years ago. Is the knowing a good thing? Well, charitable giving, propelled by hundreds and thousands of Web sites helping to organize aid, will likely break every fundraising record in the world.

In the face of horrible suffering and pain, the Internet gives us an opportunity to demonstrate our basic humanity and caring for others--an opportunity to rise above our own needs, to rise above political, social, economic, and language differences--and we are doing so.

The Good, the Bad and the Internet

You are a traveler on the Information Superhighway — Like it or Not

You may be a stranger to the Internet, the main artery on the so-called information superhighway. You may not even know what the Internet really is or how it works. You may not even own or use a computer. But even if you don't know a modem from a mouse, the Internet knows *you*. Probably better than you care to be known.

If you have ever applied for a driver's license, worked for the government, gone to college, married, purchased insurance, paid taxes or even just seen a doctor, the Internet system of computer networks, often referred to as "cyberspace," probably contains information about you — detailed information which you probably assumed was cloaked with some sort of privacy or limited in distribution to those for whom you volunteered the information.

Guess again. More likely than not, transactions involving you have found their way without your knowledge or consent to one or more of the thousands of computer networks linked through the omnipresent Internet.

The Internet may contain the most personal of records, such as those maintained by physicians and hospitals. Easy access to that data through computers is supposed to be good for the patient, by furnishing rapid availability in the event of an emergency far from home, quick test results, speedier diagnosis and treatment, and lower medical costs due to rapid exposure of fraudulent insurance claims and avoiding duplicative procedures.

But take the man in California who is neither homosexual nor HIV-infected, yet found himself the unwitting victim of a mistaken report in a computer database that said he was both. Through the Internet, the information was soon accessible to thousands of people and conceivably already in their hands before the error was discovered. Suddenly the spectre of discrimination was present and real, all based on falsehoods proliferated essentially automatically throughout the networks of the Internet. Almost immediately, he was unable to get health or disability insurance. Worse still, he is finding it impossible to get the false report expunged from the database and a correction issued. Even if he does succeed in deleting the false information, the falsehoods already have spread far and wide.

Easy access certainly has its advantages. A serious researcher can reduce by an entire generation the time involved ferreting out extant data on his or her subject. Scientific or humanistic results can be published years earlier because of the data retrieval features of the information superhighway. Lives can be saved, frontiers explored and global communication established.

Users in dozens of countries on every continent — even Antarctica — rely on the Internet as a computerized means to exchange information, receive and send electronic mail, transfer files, conduct business, obtain computer entertainment and news, keep track of their finances and their favorite television shows, shop for clothes, music and even food, participate in special interest computer discussion groups, and on and on and on.

But the Internet's promise of the information superhighway is tempered by perils and temptations for the unscrupulous. For decades, the abuse of computerized information has been of major concern to civil libertarians, and today, after such dramatic advances in both telecommunications and computers, the problem has reached Orwellian proportions. Damaging information can reach 30 million computer users in a matter of hours. Recourse, if any, is difficult, incomplete and often insubstantial.

For all its seeming complexity, the Internet is actually remarkably simple, and each month, between 3 million and 6 million computer users enter the network for the first time. If the telecommunications companies realize their goals, it will be accessible through home television sets in the very near future.

But just as television was not readily understood when it emerged from laboratories and into living rooms some 50 years ago, the Internet, which is unlike any medium seen before, can seem abstract and unfathomable to the uninitiated. But even as television redefined entertainment, the Internet is poised to redefine not only entertainment, but also information, communication and commerce. Even the way each of us conducts the routines of our daily lives.

What Is the Internet?

The Internet is a collection of more than 48,000 interconnected computer networks — a network of networks, so to speak. Essentially, a computer network is a number of computers which are linked and able to pass information one to another to another. Computer networks exist for as many different purposes as the imagination can posit, ranging from automated teller machines to electronic mail that allows co-employees around the world to communicate with each other instantaneously.

Some of the networks linked by the Internet serve computer users in large geographic regions such as the Northeast United States, while many others serve only a single college campus. But however he or she is linked in, a researcher in Japan can log on to a home computer and, by typing in a series of commands, “travel” to files at the University of California at San Diego more easily and much faster than a UCSD student can walk across campus to the library. All for the cost of a local phone call.

Students and instructors can roam the stacks and carrels of the Library of Congress without ever leaving their desks, and have instant access to virtually any book, in or out of print. News seekers can read whole magazines and newspapers from anywhere in the world. Entertainment buffs can read the latest gossip and trivia. Computer users can obtain copies of software and computer games. Shoppers can purchase — and even obtain samples of — everything from music to movies. The opportunities for information, communication, commerce and entertainment are endless.

Although the “information superhighway” description for the Internet is apt — the Internet is chiefly a way to get to “destinations” where information of interest is available — that highway is largely unmapped. The Internet has no comprehensive, user-friendly directory of addresses and features, though many have endeavored to fill this need with printed directories and even an Internet yellow pages.

Many Internet features mirror those we see in everyday life, but are significantly expanded. For example, there are thousands of “Bulletin Board Services” (BBSes) or newsgroups, which are literally computer-generated bulletin boards or news/discussion groups.

On a BBS relating to archery, for example, one would type his way in and find numerous notices or stories regarding archery equipment and activities, perhaps even classified ads. The cyberspace archery buff can also find and join public discussions of archery and related topics. It’s all so very easy. A user “posts” a message on the bulletin board. One or more other aficionados respond and post their answers, and so on. Correspondence is instantaneous and *everyone* gets to see *everything* and can join in if they want. The Internet is a global — and very public — meeting hall.

That’s not the only way to use the “Net”. Use of it for personal electronic mail (“e-mail”) — which doesn’t automatically go to a bulletin board unless someone chooses to post it there — is commonplace. Correspondents for newspapers and magazines regularly include Internet e-mail addresses (how to locate them on the Internet) next to their bylines. Letterhead and business cards now carry them, too.

Computer services including America Online, CompuServe, Delphi, GENie, Prodigy and even Dow Jones provide access to the Internet and offer numerous ways to make traveling through the Internet easy, inexpensive and comprehensive. And as any dedicated Internet user will tell you, cruising the information superhighway is as habit-forming as eating peanuts or potato chips.

The Internet is growing by leaps and bounds, at an estimated rate of 10 to 20 percent per month. Much of Washington is populated by avid Internet users, including Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (georgia6@hr.house.gov) and Vice President Al Gore (vice-president@whitehouse.gov).

The Dark Side

While millions provide and use the services of the Internet for the good it serves and the beneficial potential it promises, the Internet certainly is not immune to the treachery of a small

but insidious number of people who have furnished the Internet with a dark side: privacy invasions, lawlessness, intolerance and theft. Criminals and bigots exist in society, so it comes as no surprise that they also exist on the Internet. But the Internet offers them a new and unique way to hide from discovery and work their frauds and subterfuges from the safe harbor of anonymity.

An Internet user can travel widely in complete anonymity because computer facilities are especially designed for that purpose. An individual can, untraceably, traffic in child pornography, infringe copyrighted works, spread false and libelous information on bulletin boards and read and even answer another person's mail. (See [Hijackers on the Information Superhighway](#) and [Solutions to On-line Lies](#).) The Internet has even become a venue for large-scale criminality — credit card scams, theft of computer files and mail — all the harsh realities of armed robbery, but with a modem instead of a magnum.

Law enforcement is coming to grips with such unlawful conduct and starting to shut it down. (See [A Crime by Any Other Name...](#))

But beyond the issue of outright criminality, there is the equally disturbing problem of privacy invasions. It is one of the hottest — and most sensitive — subjects surrounding the Internet, and one which affects everyone, every day.

Steve Arbuss, a partner with Pircher, Nichols & Meeks in Los Angeles, author and frequent lecturer on computers and the Internet, cites a Government Accounting Office inquiry which found that 37 federal agencies reported that they maintain computer “profiles” on citizens. Shades of the Nixon White House and the darkest days of the FBI, the IRS and other federal agencies. But the efficiency and comprehensiveness of these electronic “hit lists” and “dossiers” is unprecedented.

Extensive federal and state computer databases on individuals and companies would, if merged, result in virtually complete dossiers on every citizen — though any such unification has been opposed by Congress thus far. Already, some agencies, including the departments of motor vehicles in various states and the United States Postal Service, will sell their information to private individuals and companies.

Arbuss says that many people seem to think that privacy is only a concern for those who have something to hide. He also says they should think again. Many studies have found that an alarming amount of extremely inaccurate or misleading computer information exists on private citizens generally. “According to the credit reporting industry itself, five percent of credit reports are inaccurate,” said Arbuss. “Privacy Rights Clearinghouse estimates that this is more like 40 percent.”

Arbuss warns of the result of public apathy and inaction toward ethical use of electronic data. “We could face a loss of freedom and an increased risk of ‘Big Brother’ style totalitarianism,” he says.

Obtaining Safe Passage on the Information Superhighway

The Internet is owned by no one, largely unregulated and essentially unpoliced. There is that small number who use it as a vehicle for anti-social activity and who misuse information on the net, but the answer to such abuse does not lie in censorship or over-regulation.

The only real safeguards lie in the informed, ethical and responsible use of this dynamic and promising medium, and the observance of existing laws by those who use the Internet. Many efforts are already under way to raise awareness, educate users and introduce practical and enforceable ethical standards throughout the worldwide Internet community. (See [Introducing Ethics into the Computer World.](#))

In this way, the Internet can remain a forum for broad, positive and unencumbered use. The only result of a failure to do so would be the imposition of burdensome legal regulations because the law-abiding many have failed to control the abuses of a lawless few.

The information superhighway is a road never before taken. It provides opportunities previously undreamed of. The key is understanding both the positive and negative sides and using the Internet responsibly, ethically and lawfully.

It is a route into the 21st century and should be a hazard-free road for everyone.

To continue reading, click here: [The Evolution of the Internet](#)
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Visit the official [Church of Scientology International site here](#).

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The Internet has made an enormous impact on the daily lives of people worldwide. It has changed the way many people communicate, learn and play.

The Internet has allowed people to send and receive information in seconds rather than days or weeks using E-mail. There is no barrier to doing business or collaborative research across continents. Families can use email to keep in touch in a way that was never possible before.

Instant messengers such as MSN, Skype and many others allow text, sound and video to be transferred worldwide instantly as well as sharing images and other data.

As a research and learning tool, the Worldwide Web offers a vast library of data. Finding information is as simple as entering words into a search engine. Knowledge can be gained in minutes rather than hours and days.

The incredibly rapid transfer of data means that people can travel less. Contact can be maintained from almost anywhere in the world as easily as across a meeting table.

The Internet provides a platform for individuals to publish information, advertising data and commerce sites. No other medium is as accessible to individuals and small businesses.

There are many more benefits that are not mentioned but the Internet is not without its critics. Indeed, there are many problems caused by it. A few examples are mentioned here:

Privacy is being compromised by the ever increasing storage of personal data on servers accessible worldwide. Most data is not at all sensitive but important financial and identity data has been used for fraudulent purposes.

E-mail has diminished the value of personal contact, some people argue. E-mail is so convenient that it has replaced millions of face to face meetings and even more hand written letters.

Although research is now remarkably easy, not all data on the internet is accurate. Individuals are able to generate web sites without any other person reviewing the information posted to the sites. It is often a challenge to separate the accurate information from the dubious data and opinions so often found on obscure web sites.

The Internet can be used for crime as well as legal activities. One of the most publicized activities is that of adults communicating with children. Adults are able to hide behind false identities and have secret conversations online with children. In some cases, great harm has been caused to children in this way.

Many critics will say that social skills are being eroded by online communications. People who would have mixed in society are now found in front of a computer to the exclusion of all other social contact.

The debate about the effects of the Internet on our world will go on for many years. Despite the debate, the Internet will continue to impose itself on the world around us. Like it or not, it is here to stay and society will need to find ways to make use of the technology and be ever vigilant concerning the negative impacts of the medium.

The Internet - Good or Bad?

Allen Harkleroad

I am sitting here at 5:30 am pondering (I start my work day at 4 am) about several things and the value of having the Internet at my disposal is one of them. My question to you is the Internet a "real" value or a "huge" liability? With the commercialization of the Internet things previously unreachable are now available through our personal computers.

Of course there is the good and the bad...

The Bad

- Easy access to pornography (children seem to be able to find it easier than the adults).
- Viruses and malicious software that affect our home and business computers.
- SPAM - Need I say more on this subject?
- Deceptive marketing and scams.
- Online stalking of ourselves and our children.

The Good

- Access to museums and libraries all across the world.
- Instant access to the latest news and events.
- Instant access to friends, family and business associates through email, instant messaging, video conferencing, etc.
- Shop from home without leaving your chair.
- Consumer information on products you are thinking of buying.
- Entertainment - music, movies, books, radio, etc.
- Trivial knowledge.

I have been using the Internet since the late 80's (back before AOL and CompuServe) when the Internet was called ARPANET and this is the first year I actually did any Christmas shopping on the Internet. I could not find several items for my child's Christmas gifts so I decided to look online. Normally when I shop in real stores I go in, find what I want and get out (my wife hates this because she wants to look at EVERYTHING). The Internet allows me to do the same thing without any fuss or having to wait in line (I know you have heard of the wonders of Internet Shopping a hundred times).

I am a very wary shopper/browser and if the site isn't a name brand site I pretty much stay away from them, especially poorly designed websites. I have done a lot of searching on google.com (great search engine - www.google.com) for various items my child wanted for Christmas and found many sites, a good many I clicked right out of because they just didn't look or feel safe and were poorly designed or confusing. Not being much of an online shopper I was amazed when I went to Amazon.com at what all they had. Basically you could find everything on your shopping list there. Amazon.com is not just books any more! You can find books, video games, cookware, movies and more. I was like a kid in a candy store (i even got myself a few items while I was shopping). Of course there are other great stores online (target.com, walmart.com, buy.com, Overstock.com, BestBuy.com, etc.) so basically I never even had to crank up the car to do what I needed to do shopping wise.

Having used the Internet for mainly business I know the value of having almost instant access to information, trends and industry news. For me having instant access to these resources makes the Internet valuable.

I also see the Internet as a huge liability. I am always worried about viruses and malicious software and Spam (our mail server pretty much filters all the spam out and deletes the viruses in email and attachments).

I do worry about my child being on the Internet unsupervised. You never know if they are chatting with a kidnapping pervert, seeing pornography, downloading illegal files or viruses and other bad software. Of course I have Net Nanny installed on my child's computer, it isn't perfect but it is a good piece of software and with a little tweaking blocks 99.8% of harmful content. We do not allow our child to use Instant Messaging or other programs (such as peer to peer software - KaZaA, etc.).

So far our child hasn't downloaded any illegal MP3's or other items (we audit the computer several times a month). Maybe she hasn't found it or learned about it yet, I talk with her a lot about the bad things out there on the Net and she seems to understand about the dangers. So far so good. You can bet though that I never stop worrying about her and her use of the Internet.

Spam and obnoxious advertising are one of the largest liabilities in regards to accessing the world via the Internet. Pop up ads are annoying. I can deal with one per site but some sites open so many windows you just about have to reset the computer to get away from it, although I learned a neat trick to shut them down. Hold down the ALT key and hit the "F4" key it will close the current open window, keep doing it till everything closes (works extremely well on those borderless pop-up and pop-unders that you can't close without clicking them). Of course there is software out there that blocks pop-ups some of them work some cause more problems with your browser than they are worth. It is a trial and error thing to find what works best for you.

There also several devious online advertisers that use software to force you see what they want you to see, the software is oft times hidden in a download or "free" software. I wrote an article on this several months ago and you can find it here in the articles list on this site (My Browsers Home Page Has Been Hijacked). It has some great information on how to protect yourself from these malicious media companies and how to find out if something is installed on your computer and what to do get rid of it. If only congress would enact tough anti-spam laws and laws to protect the consumer from malicious media companies who install software on your computer and make changes to your property (computer) without your permission (in my mind this is criminal and no better than a hacker getting into your system and deleting files).

Most people don't see much of anything except spam and an occasional virus attachment (get some anti-virus software; it is your best protection). Being that we own a Online Hosting/Online Publishing company we see a lot of things the average users do not see; hundreds to thousand hack attempts every day on our servers and network, spammers trying to send spam to the users on our mail servers (get a clue spammers if our mail server rejects you then you need to go away because you aren't going to gain access). If it isn't one thing it is another with the servers.

Of course we use a firewall and intrusion detection system, anti virus and content filters (address locks, host blocks, IP blocks, keyword filters) on our mail servers and even then we still have to keep a watchful eye on things daily. Back in the early 1990's you didn't see hacking attempts or

spam email (i never saw real SPAM till the mid to late 90's, you could leave a FTP (file transfer protocol) site open to the public, now if you mis-configure your server and leave a FTP site open the next days it will be filled to the brim with illegal software (commonly referred to as warez). We know, it happened to us several years ago (sometime in 1996-1997).

One of the servers kept restarting and services like email and web software were failing and we could not figure out why. We started looking at the hard drives to see how much space was free, the main drive was full. So we searched for large and new files and found gigabytes of illegal software and movies on the server. What happened is someone uploaded a lot of illegal software and the drive got so full that the server could not create a temp file so it started shutting down services, if the greedy warez folks (software pirates) hadn't filled up the server we might never had known. Of course we locked down the server FTP access and deleted all the software (we did make a list of what was there and reported the abuse by using our access logs). Nothing ever came of the abuse reports (probably the same sort of lack of response is the reason why home.com is no longer around (one of the recipients of our abuse reports).

I guess you could say that to me the Internet is a love/hate relationship. I love the fact that I can find any information within a few minutes and I love the fact I can make a good living via the Internet but I also hate all the bad things out there that can hurt me, my child and property. Of course it will never get better (most likely worse) and the best we can do is to be aware and protect ourselves. So read up on problems, take action and educate yourself, family and friends whenever possible. Oh and enjoy yourself out there, the entire world is at your fingertips. Maybe one day the government will make spam, hacking, etc. a criminal offense and start prosecuting. It would at least cut down on the barrage hitting us all.

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Is the Internet really a good thing?"

Off the cuff, the vast majority of people living in the U.S. would probably answer that one with a nonchalant "yeah, sure." And, if they live in the Bay Area, perhaps they'd throw in a "whatever."

But bear with me.

Today's conventional wisdom has it that the Internet acts as a powerful force for good (like Superman, *sans* tights) – not just by making communications [easier and cheaper](#) or making businesses [more efficient](#), but also through its (admittedly untapped) potential to address the great socio-economic issues facing the world today – such as [climate change](#) and the [poverty trap](#) faced by people in developing countries.

On the other hand, it's also a fact that the Internet is the go-to destination for [pedophiles](#), [bullies](#), and [con artistes of all e-persuations](#). The fact that it's both ubiquitous and free also makes it a low-cost and powerful tool for Muslim and other terrorists, who use it as a fantastically efficient

machine for fund-raising, propagandizing, and recruiting new members. And every day brings us a fresh crop of articles about new "bad stuff" that wouldn't have been possible if the Internet didn't exist.

Now, this question of whether the Internet is really a good or a bad thing is one that has been floating around the back of my mind (what's left of it, anyway) on and off since we launched Internet Evolution on October 1st. But an incident last week really put it top of mind for me.

Here's what happened:

Back in October I contacted the [Fulbright Program](#) to invite their current crop of post-grad students to enroll on Internet Evolution as volunteer moderators and researchers. (Fulbright scholars are sponsored by the U.S. Department of State; the program enables thousands of overseas students to study in the U.S. every year; it's an example of tax dollars well spent.)

I wanted the Fulbright students involved with our site because they're young, super-smart, and come from all around the world -- thus bringing at least three new layers of much needed perspective to the Internet Evolution dialogue.

In return, CMP, which owns this site, agreed to give the best three Researcher/Scholars paid internships in the summer of 2008. (None of this has been announced yet, incidentally, so if you and the other 95,999 monthly readers of Internet Evolution could keep all this under your chapeaux until we get the press release out, I'd appreciate it.)

We got a huge response to our email to the Fulbrighters -- more than 100 of them joined up (ye shall know them by their posts, which are all marked "Researcher").

And as part of the registration process we asked each of them to fill in a site profile.

And that's when I got a call letting me know that the Department of State recommends that Fulbright Scholars from Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan should not put any information online that could allow them to be personally identified -- including names or photos. Why? Because of the risk of reprisals to their families at home if word gets out that they are participating in an educational program funded by the Satanic States of America.

Now, if you are looking for an example of how the Internet embodies both the potential for good and bad in one IP cloud, it's pretty hard to imagine a choicer one than this, isn't it?

On the pro side: Fulbright students from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan get the chance to engage with some of the leading minds of the Internet on a peer-to-peer level on our discussion boards, and maybe, just maybe, get a low-paid gig in New York City in the summer of 2008 as a reward.

On the debit side of the ledger: If they're not careful, some wacked-out Jihadist might use the Internet to track down their family based on the information they posted on Internet Evolution and maybe, just maybe, kill them.

Obviously we've taken the necessary steps to conceal these students' identities.

But this incident also shocked me out of my usual sluggish white middle class attitude towards the Internet -- which tends to coalesce around working out what to buy on iTunes, or getting annoyed at the way social networking sites are currently conspiring with the blogosphere to convert North America into an [idiocracy](#).

History shows us that every revolutionary technology has ended up being used for execrable activities, and the Internet is no exception. But the question remains, on balance, does it do more good than bad?

Getting a clear answer to that question is tricky. Probably impossible. But here at Internet Evolution, we like to embrace the impossible, make out with it, and then give it a little good natured noogie for luck.

Of course, we'll need your help.

We've set up a simple survey on the site, and we want you to take it.

Step 1: Make a list of all the good things the Internet enables.

Step 2: Make a list of the bad stuff.

Step 3: Dust off your mighty morality abacus (residents of Silicon Valley, don't forget to ask a grownup for help), and tot up which you have more of, good or bad.

Step 4: When you're done, click [here](#) and tell us the result.

— Stephen Saunders, *Insultant*