BOOK REVIEW

The Internet in Everyday Life

Reviewed by Mohamed Taher

This book is a harbinger of a new way of thinking about the Internet: not as a special system but as routinely incorporated into everyday life. The studies presented here begin the tasks of broadening our focus from the Internet to the social worlds in which it is embroiled.

The research in this book focuses on the relationship between the Internet and interpersonal relationships. It speaks to issues about the social consequences of adding the Internet to our daily lives. It explores how the Internet affects social and communal behaviors. The studies address key questions about the impact of the Internet on friendships, civic involvement, and time spent with others. Who is online and who is coming online (and not coming)?

The research presented suggests that the Internet has accentuated a change towards a networked society: a turn toward living in networks rather than in groups. The personalization, portability, ubiquitous connectivity, and imminent wireless mobility of the Internet all facilitate networked individualism as the basis of community. (Publisher)

Work, leisure, socialization, and public and private time are then the issues covered in this book — all under one cover — to examine how the Internet has effected the daily life of today’s global villagers. A glance at the contents page helps to visualize what’s up. The book has five parts: Part I: Moving the Internet out of Cyberspace (Introduction); Part II: The Place of the Internet in Everyday Life (Chapters 1-6); Part III: Finding Time for the Internet (Chapters 7-9); Part IV: The Internet in the Community (Chapters 10-14); and Part V: The Internet at School, Work, and Home (Chapters 15-19).

Going by its geographical coverage, there are mostly general research surveys dealing with the use of the Internet in today’s life. “Comparing Internet Users and Uses Around the World,” by Wenhong Chen, et al. (Part II, pp. 74-113) dwells on global patterns based on sources such as World Employment Report (2001), UCLA Internet Report (2000), OECD’s publication, and so forth. Among the articles that deal with a specific place, there are only six representations: UK, Germany (in Part II),
Blacksburg in Virginia, Netville in Ontario (in Part IV), India, and Japan (in Part V).

The book has 19 articles, of which nine are reprinted from American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 45, No. 3 (November 2001). There is no description to show how the editors solicited the articles to be included in a collection wherein the scholarship ranges from that of graduate students to highly experienced scholars in respective interdisciplinary areas. Including an article on Teleworkers (pages 464-495), people working away from the traditional workplace and discussing everything other than use of the Internet in their daily lives reflects the scope of the book.

Such a random collection of reprints and original articles, however, gives a different picture, if one were to go just by the cover page of this bulky paperback: “This collection of original articles from leading scholars of North America, Asia and Europe moves discussion of the Internet closer to home, showing how the Internet does not exist ‘out there’ but is instead an integral part of daily work and home life.”

Let’s walk through the pages. “Internet Use: A Time Diary Study” by Norman Nie, et al. (Part III, pp. 215-243) presents a variety of data samples and includes a thematic analysis of context of use time constraints; home vs. work use; Internet vs. TV; Internet use and leisure; weekdays vs. weekends; and e-mail and sociability, a closer look; and concludes, “We find that the results from our recent time diary survey offer strong support for the ‘hydraulic’ or displacement hypothesis — and no evidence to support the efficiency hypothesis. On average, the more time spent on the Internet, the less time spent with friends, family, and colleagues. Alternatively, the more time spent on the Internet, the more time spent alone. Even more compelling, perhaps, are our findings regarding location of Internet use (pp. 238-239).”

Analyzing a neighborhood behavior in using the Internet and its effect in the Netville community of Ontario province, “the not so global village of Netville” (Part IV, pp. 345-371), Keith N. Hampton and Barry Wellman summarize their findings: “Contrary to expectations that the Internet encourages a ‘global village,’ those ties that previously were ‘just out of reach’ geographically, experience the greatest increase in contact and support as a result of access to CMC (computer mediated communication) (p. 345).”

A minor error in printing deserves a mention: “Most discussion of the Internet followed three types, making headlines even in reputable newspapers.” While two types are listed (announcements of technological developments and cautionary tails about the evils), the third type is missing (p.4).

Furthermore, cyber worship is now a special theme for the faithful. The book makes just passing reference to religion and church, with no discussion whatsoever on online spirituality, meditation, and devotion. The PEW study of 2001 on religious use of the Internet is missing. This study has extensive details on the use of the Internet by people in everyday life’s spiritual/religious needs (Source: The Web is a Big Draw for Believers and the Curious. Religion Bigger than Auctions, Stocks and Dating, by Marty Beard). In addition, in the book there is no mention of a leading survey agency that specializes in the Internet in American life (i.e., Cyber Dialogue — now it is Fulcrum Analytics).

Nevertheless, the articles, per se, are scholarly, well researched, and genuine. On this content and its scholarship there is no comment at all. I analyzed article citations, just to see the citing and cited behavior. Even from this point of view, the book has excellent scholarly cited material. The editors deserve great appreciation for their hard work in analyzing a significant segment of cyberspace and summarizing it, as well — a knowledge base that was until now in asynchronous mode.

Readers will find some additional reading sources. The earliest study on “Usability of the Internet” by Jacob Nielsen (beginning from 1994) and later articles, “Getting a Grip on Who Uses the Net” (1999), by David Plotnikoff; and What’s the Use? Internet and Information Behaviour in Everyday Life (2001), by Anders Hektor, Linköping: Linkoping University, Tema,
a significant UK-based survey on home and school use of computers also has appeared recently (i.e., “Young People’s Use of ICT at Home and School”) (http://buildingthegrid.becta.org.uk/index.php?resId=589&printerFriendly=1). Additionally, a series of articles in a scholarly journal — Information Society — complement this book.

In the sense of being a valuable collection of highly researched papers, I recommend this book to all academic and public libraries.

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