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Хребтов Ю. – ст. гр. СП-21

Тернопільський національний технічний університет імені Івана Пулюя

SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON OUR SOCIETY

Науковий керівник: к.філол.н., ст. викл. Боднар О.І.

The Internet can be considered one of the greatest inventions of all time and although people use it for many purposes, communication is probably the most important, in the sense that it is the most popular. For a long time psychologists and sociologists had been studying how technological context influenced interpersonal relationships and of course such important tool as the Internet could not be ignored. So, how exactly the invention of a worldwide online network has changed our communication?

Some studies show positive results. The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and the Imaging the Internet Center at Elon University recently interviewed 895 technology experts, stakeholders and critics as part of a series of surveys about the evolution and social impact of online technologies. Eighty-five percent of them thought that the Internet has been mostly a positive influence in their social worlds. Online platforms, for instance, have reduced the costs of communicating and minimized the impact of barriers like time and geography. The Internet, they said, has also made it easier to keep in touch with people and discover common interests that in the end enhance our relationships.

There are also a lot of less optimistic forecasts. Many are concerned that the ease of information has also brought with it a large amount of hoaxes, money schemes and fallacies. Less difficult communication can also lead to weaker social ties, because people will have less reason to leave their homes and interact face-to-face with other people. The Internet allows people to more easily work from their home, to form and sustain friendships and even romantic attachments from their home, to bank from their home, to vote and engage in political and social issue based discussions with others (from home).

However, the most detailed and large-scale studies show mixed results. One of the most interesting is the series of experiments at the Carnegie Mellon University. The research team was headed by Robert Kraut and Sara Kiesler. They decided to investigate the difference between comparatively light and heavy Internet users. In all three studies people who used the Internet heavily reported larger increases in daily life stress. Internal analyses did not reveal a single stressor or source of stress that increased with Internet use. One explanation is that the Internet introduces more activities and social obligations into users' lives, and the increased time pressures add stress to what had been a slower-paced life. The first experiment HomeNet-1 had also shown showed that greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in the size of their social circle and increases in their depression. However, in HomeNet-2 and 3 the situation was reversed. In the end the research team came up with a "rich get richer" theory which proclaimed that having more social resources amplified the benefits that people got from using the Internet. Among extraverts, for example, using the Internet was associated with increases in community involvement and self-esteem. The reverse trends were found for introverts. However, even such answer did not make the situation completely clear. While extraverts were communicating more, the communication itself could be either beneficial or harmful.

In the end, my conclusion is that the Internet is a versatile tool that is decisively changing our society, but can't be treated as a completely positive or negative factor. It gives us more choice, giving people more ways to communicate or more ways to avoid contact depending on what the user is looking for.