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Trends. The Political Psychology of the Psychology of the Internet

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In 1998, researchers affiliated with Carnegie Mellon University completed what became a well-publicized study supporting the hypothesis that Internet users experience higher levels of loneliness and depression than non-users. Now comes a second well-publicized study by researchers affiliated with the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society and the Free University of Berlin supporting the hypothesis that as hours spent on the Internet rise, time spent with friends, family, and shopping at stores decreases--while time spent working at home increases. The findings in both studies have been popularly interpreted as indicating that the Internet poses a dire threat to our social fabric. Before one braces for the social sky to inevitably fall, however, one might consider the following.

Loneliness and depression are often realistic perceptions that are correlated with normative and even normal functioning. There is much in the daily world that merits such socioemotional experiences. To implicitly suggest that a "don't worry, be happy" stance is more appropriate borders on trumpeting a false consciousness that would support keeping the unfortunate in the world in place--including those who benefit from the unfortunate.

As to bemoaning less time with friends and families and other social activities, one might posit that in the zero sum game of a 24-hours-a-day life anytime one chooses to add an activity, one necessarily detracts from another. Second, one might wonder about the trade-off of quantity time with quality time. Is one truly more social in terms of meaningful interaction merely by piling on the minutes and hours? Third, even when significant others are out of sight, are they necessarily out of mind? And if they are not out of mind, cannot one infer that the owner of the mind is still being social--even if flying cyber-solo? Fourth, the results of the new study also support the hypothesis that as Internet use increases, time spent watching television decreases--a potential opportunity for meaningful social activity. This undoubted boon is reported by over four times the respondents that report less time with family and friends--54% to 13%--leading one to wonder whether a 13% endorsement rate is even pertinent to estimates of sociality.

The take on both studies by the mass media (and, often enough by the researchers themselves) do suggest a social threat: that of a social Ludditism that may grow in our current era of globalization and digitalization. (See Internet addiction as diagnostic addiction. (September 3, 1999). IBPP, 7(9); Kraut, R., et al. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist*, 53, 1017-1031; Markoff, J. (February 16, 2000). A newer, lonelier crowd emerges in Internet study. *The New York Times*, p. A1; A15; Stein, D.J. (1997). Internet addiction, Internet psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 154, 890; Two Schools of Thought About the Political Psychology of the Internet. (February 4, 2000). IBPP, 8(5).) (Keywords: Depression, Free University of Berlin, Internet, Loneliness, Mass Media, Online Behavior Analysis, Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society.)