Review for *Contemporary Sociology*

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The Internet in Everyday Life

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Somewhere, right now, as I write these words and as you read them, debates and disputes are raging over the ways in which the Internet is transforming our lives. Speculation as the nature and scope of this transformation is rampant; I contribute to it myself whenever I get the chance. This makes it all the more refreshing (and significant) when a voice emerges to bring clarity to the commotion. In *The Internet in Everyday Life*, literally dozens of such voices combine to bring unusual clarity and solid grounding to these complicated, untidy, and often very loud, discussions.

Under the sure-handed editing of Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, leading Internet researchers (mostly sociologists, but also researchers in the areas of communication, political science, economics, psychology, technology, computer science, and library and information sciences) tackle a simple question in a variety of ways: how has the Internet become routinely incorporated into everyday life? They examine, in a sense, the *unremarkability* of the Internet as it becomes "folded into" people's lives at home, work, school, and in leisure activities, and becomes part of people's daily routines. For, as Wellman and Haythornthwaite point out in their introduction, the Internet is no longer seen by most people as a dazzling "bright light shining above everyday concerns" (p. 4); in the short space of little more than a decade it has become firmly embedded in the real-life things that ordinary people do: spend time with one another, shop, play games, go to school, and do their jobs.

This volume is thickly packed with research (both quantitative and qualitative) and findings that touch almost every sphere of everyday life imaginable, from American civic concerns and telecommuting patterns to the online experiences of Japanese mothers and German immigrants. Methodologies – often very original in nature, even ingenious – range from the use of "time diaries" (Nie, Hillygus and Erbring) to national survey data collected by the authors themselves (Katz and Rice). Research reported is generally of very high quality and reliability, and, nearly as importantly, results and interpretations are

readable and well-integrated with the book's overall theme and thesis. Though there are many articles here, they contribute nicely to the whole.

How, then, *do* we use and think about the Internet – and what goes by the wayside we do? We learn here that much of the population uses the Internet; well over 500 million people worldwide and over 170 million in the U.S. These users are more likely to be younger, white, urban, and have higher levels of education and income, than not (p. 13-16), but contrary to prior trends, men and women are now equally likely to be Internet users (in the U.S. and Canada). Interestingly, many of these users do not or can not make skilled or regular use of the Internet, and though the overall number of Internet users is on the increase, about 8 to 11% of users "drop out" from using it each year, for reasons which include loss of access, insufficient interest, cost, and/or time (pp. 18-29).

Those who spend significant time on the Internet must shift at least some time and efforts away from other activities, which may or may not include face-to-face social interaction. Does Internet use increases users' sense of social alienation and isolation and contribute to a meaningful decrease in face-to-face interaction and community? In examining which activities are being displaced by Internet use (and under which circumstances), several of this volume's authors weigh in on this persistent debate. Anderson and Tracy point out that many of the activities displaced by the Internet are marginal to face-to-face interaction – watching television, telephoning, and sleeping among them. Wagner, Pischner and Haisken-DeNew discover that teenage "computer kids" are *less* likely to spend time "hanging around" or "doing nothing" than their counterparts, while continuing to remain engaged in such constructive activities as reading and playing sports. Robinson, Kestnmbaum, Neustadtl, and Alvarez find that Internet users demonstrate a more active lifestyle than non-users, and have more interpersonal contact with their friends (though less with their children). And Haythornthwaite and Kazmer report that when time becomes scarce, online learners tend to drop solitary activities first (such as TV or reading for pleasure), while preserving time with their families as long as possible. A number of studies in the volume reinforce the finding that the Internet is used to enhance social relations through facilitating contact with others both near and far. But there are social costs, to be sure: Nie, Hillygus and Erbring remind us that at some point, time spent with family members inevitably decreases for Internet users (see also pp. 22-23). Whether the Internet contributes to social isolation or helps people create new forms and means of interaction and community is perhaps the central controversy surrounding Internet use, and it is at the core of many of these studies.

Thus are such critical debates illuminated here – with solid data, well-gathered and analyzed, thoughtfully interpreted. Controversies and speculations as to the impact of the Internet are not resolved within its covers – we do not expect them to be – but they are given a much-needed infusion of empirical grounding. Of course, a book filled with up-to-the-minute data and statistics, as this one is, eventually becomes obsolete. As we assess our next steps in evaluating and understanding the Internet, though, these studies provide an excellent template for continued research to build upon, and are sure to inform and inspire those yet to come.

It is, however, its overall thesis – that the Internet needs to be seen as a part of our everyday lives as opposed to something distinct from it or influencing it "from without" – that is perhaps the greatest contribution of *The Internet in Everyday Life*. In an

impossibly short time, the Internet has indeed gone from "a bright light shining above everyday concerns" to an unremarkable, taken-for-granted component of our lives. Yes, this shift occurs whenever technologies become embedded within a society, but this time it has surely been realized in record time, even as the "everyday" uses of the Internet continue to expand. It is a real challenge – for Internet users and for sociologists seeking to analyze these changes -- to keep pace. Work like that done in *The Internet in Everyday Life* is invaluable in helping us see and understand the technological world in which we are immersed. As such, it makes a major contribution to our discipline and our society.