

Sociology of the Internet: Effects of Social Technology on Policing

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The Internet provides virtual space for both activities and relationships. In many cases, the parallel to physical space is compelling. This short essay lays out some of those parallels, some differences, and some implications for police and policing.

In 1998, Kraut and colleagues (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay & Scherlis, 1998), published an interesting paper entitled, "Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being?" The question mark is still with us.

Kraut et al. (1998) found that, "... greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness." (p. 1017). These authors were appropriately cautious about generalizing their findings.

The article has attracted a fair amount of interest – it has been cited in more than 700 publications in the ensuing years. While some of the underlying issues have not been laid to rest, more recent research seems in general to support the earlier conclusions, e.g., "Longitudinal analyses from a large national panel of Americans suggest that using the Internet may lead to declines in visiting with friends and family. This effect is largest for those who initially had most social contact,

i.e., the extroverts."(Shklovski, Kraut & Rainie, 2004).

The above should not shock; time spent doing one thing generally is time that cannot be spent doing something else. At the very least, it is likely that the more time we spend on the Internet, the less time we spend building connections with our household members and our neighbors. Given the connections between community and crime prevention, it should be clear that our increasingly networked society creates the potential for vulnerability to crime.

Happiness, too, is threatened by the Internet and other rapidly changing features of modern life. For example:

"One of the key insights of happiness studies is that people have a very hard time being content with what they have, at least when they know that others have more. Today, technological change is so rapid that when you buy something, you do so knowing that in a few months there's going to be a better, faster version of the product and that you're going to be stuck with the old one. Someone else, in other words, has it better. It's as if disappointment were built into acquisition from the very beginning (unless you're buying a 70-inch plasma screen, in which case you should be fine for at least a couple of years). There's no way to circumvent this drooping of the spirit, which creates dissatisfaction in the heart of the modern consumer." (Surowiecki, 2005, unpaginated).

Few police prefer to work with or “serve” unhappy people. Increasingly, thanks to the Internet and other rapidly changing domains, that will be our lot.

The above putative effects of the Internet are the tip of the iceberg. Consider the following, as they apply to policing:

1. How are the anchoring effects of reference groups, perceived normality, mores and norms affected by participation in virtual “communities”?
2. How are identities, privacy, confidentiality, secrecy, the “personal” affected by such participation?
3. How do communities and networks morph as we shift from physical to virtual realms – and back? Dimensions one might consider include formal/informal, dynamic/static, adaptive/maladaptive behavior, the mutual influences of physical and virtual interaction, etc?
4. What are the implications for life and for policing of the differential use of the Internet by different social strata, e.g., the Pew datasets?
5. Technology increasingly is the way the world works, but like the physical world the virtual world filters both passively (effort required) and actively (banning, expulsion, triangulation, etc).
6. When we talk about the “global” (economy, migration, etc), what is the virtual equivalent? Is the Internet a solution to problems of jurisdiction or just another problem?

7. Is the Internet a conduit or [social] process? If it is process, it is not content-neutral. Rather, it shapes what passes through it. Consider how that might influence social relationships, both temporally and qualitatively. Also consider whether the Internet can function as a “safety net” versus merely as a set of “knowledge resources”

8. Huntington’s (1993) clash of civilizations has implications for the digital world as well. Consider again both conduit and [social] process.

9. The *umwelt* of the line dog has changed markedly. Cops have always been about relationships, including relationships with other cops. Increasingly, those relationships are becoming virtual rather than physical and external to the organization or organizational unit. Those new relationships enhance the flow of information. Information breeds power. Power to the line dogs will likely affect power relationships within the agency but also have implications for training and other professional development, cultural change, and officer marketability.

References

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