

X Isolates or Socialites? The social ties of internet users

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The advent of the internet has been one of the biggest developments in the history of communications technology. Like the railways and the telephone before it, the internet has helped to make the world a smaller place, making it easier to undertake both business and pleasure with individuals and organisations located far away. At the same time it has enabled individuals to acquire from the comfort of their office or front room access to both a hive of information and a wide range of commercial services, activities that previously would have necessitated a trip to the high street. Seemingly the internet has both made it easier to maintain contact with our fellow human beings, especially those who do not live locally, and at the same time reduced the need to engage in social contact with others in order to conduct the everyday business of commercial or private life.

These apparently divergent features of the internet have resulted in a lively debate about whether its advent has strengthened or weakened the social bonds and ties between individuals. One school of thought argues that it has had a beneficial impact. It points out that the internet makes it much easier to get into contact with individuals who have similar interests to oneself, irrespective of where they live, thereby making it possible to create 'virtual communities'. Contact with friends and relatives who live some distance away can more easily be maintained too – using not just words but also exploiting the ability to send photos, video clips and scanned images via the internet too. These apparent consequences derive principally from the opportunity afforded by e-mail to communicate asynchronously and to do so at no greater cost with someone half way round the world than with a neighbour living next door (Hauben and Hauben, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Horrigan, 2002; Wellman, 2001).

These arguments though do not address the possible impact of the internet on face-to-face communication. It is often argued that face-to-face communication helps develop bonds of trust and reciprocity between individuals in a manner that no other form of communication can achieve (Putnam, 2000, though for a dissenting view see Uslaner, 2002). Such bonds, fostered by and embedded in

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social networks, provide a stock of 'social capital' that helps make societies, healthier, more caring and more efficient. Thus whether or not the internet makes it easier for people to organise face-to-face meetings rather than just maintain electronic contact with those living far away is a vital question. Certainly those who are optimistic about the impact of the internet think it does. After all it can be used to make an appointment to meet a friend in the local pub or to advertise and encourage people to attend a communal social activity. Moreover, friends initially made on-line may subsequently be met face-to-face. In short, the ability to engage in 'online' social activity could help to stimulate greater 'offline' social activity too (Hampton and Wellman, 2002; Robinson et al, 2000; Shah et al, 2001) – with consequential beneficial impacts on the stock of social capital

On the other hand 'online' activity could serve to displace 'offline' activity. Those engaged in a virtual network may spend less time participating in their local social networks. Even if they are not particularly predisposed to withdraw from face-to-face contact, time spent on the internet is time not spent doing something else, and one of the activities that might be displaced is socialising with friends and family (Nie and Erbring, 2000; Nie, 2001). Similar arguments have been indeed previously made about the growth in the second half of the twentieth century of television watching (Steiner, 1963, Putnam, 2000); but whereas watching television can in fact be turned into a communal activity, using a computer is usually a solitary activity. Indeed it has been argued that the solitary nature of internet use may result in people becoming lonely and depressed, thereby undermining their ability to form or sustain friendships (Kraut et al, 1998).

In this chapter we examine which, if either, of these perspectives appears to be correct so far as Britain's experience of the internet to date is concerned. In particular we are interested in the impact of the internet on, first, face-to-face social interaction with family and friends and through involvement in community organisations, and, second, on the incidence of social trust and social capital, phenomena that, according to Putnam at least, are engendered by such social face-to-face interactions. In so doing we bring a fresh body of evidence to a debate that is so far largely dominated by data from North America (though see Gardner and Oswald, 2001), the generalisability of which to the rest of the world is far from certain.¹

The chapter thus falls into two main parts. In the first part we look at whether users of the internet are more or less likely to engage in social activity with friends and family, and whether or not they are more or less likely to join or get involved in the activities of community organisations. In short, this section asks what impact if any does access to the internet have on the degree to which people in Britain are engaged in face-to-face interaction? In the second part we

¹ Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004), for example, note that the use of the internet to facilitate socialising is far lower in Catalonia than in the United States or Hong Kong. Meanwhile involvement in communal organisations has long been a more important feature of civic life in the USA than in Britain.

ask what impact, if any, the advent of the internet has had on the stock of social capital, whether through its influence on face-to-face interaction or otherwise. In particular we consider whether those who use the internet are more or less trusting of their fellow citizens than others, and whether they feel able to call upon their neighbours when in need – that is how they might feel in certain everyday situations where the existence of social capital might well help to overcome life's difficulties.

However one important issue that we will have constantly to keep in mind is that users of the internet are not representative of the British public at large. If, say, we find that users of the internet are more likely to socialise with friends than non-users this alone does not demonstrate that access to the internet encourages face-to-face contact. It may simply be the case that the kind of people who use the internet are the kind of people who are more likely to socialise with friends anyway – and that this was true even before they had access to the internet. We thus use both multivariate analysis that takes into account the difference between the social character of internet users and non-users, and looking at trends over time amongst different categories of internet users, to try and unravel the direction of the relationship between internet use and socialising, membership of organisations, social trust and social capital.² But as a prelude to our two analyses we should examine the demographic profile of internet users nowadays, and how this has changed over recent years.

Who uses the internet?

Five years ago users of the internet still constituted no more than a minority of British adults, comprising just one in three of the population (see Table x.1). Now a clear majority use the internet – just over three in five. The growth in use has been entirely fuelled by an increase in the proportion of people who have access to the internet at home.³ Less than one in ten use the internet despite not having access at home, a figure that has changed little over the last five years. Indeed as many people (37 per cent) now live in households that have broadband access to the internet as five years ago lived in households with any kind of access to the internet (36 per cent).

Table x.1 Growth of internet use

	2000	2003	2005

² For a more extended discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches see Curtice and Norris (2004).

³ Note that these figures exclude use of the internet for work purposes. In fact in 2005 just 2% said that they used the internet at work but did not use it for any other purpose. These respondents are regarded as users of the internet in later analyses in this chapter.

	%	%	%
Access at home and use internet	26	41	53
No access at home and use internet	7	9	8
Total users	33	50	61
Access at home and don't use internet	9	10	8
No access at home and don't use internet	57	40	31
Total non-users	66	50	39
<i>Base</i>	2293	4432	4268

Nevertheless those with access to the internet remain highly unrepresentative of British society as a whole. Users of the internet continue to be disproportionately younger and well educated, while male users continue to outnumber female ones somewhat (see Table x.2). Indeed, while there is some evidence that those aged between 35 and 54 have been catching up to some degree with younger people in their level of internet use (something we would expect to happen eventually anyway as younger people enter middle age), the level of use remains very low (at less than one in five) amongst those aged 65 and older. Indeed the difference between older people and younger people in their level of internet use is even wider now than it was five years ago. Equally the internet revolution seems largely to be leaving those without any education qualifications behind too.

Table x.2 Social profile of internet users

	2005	Bases	Change since 2003	Change since 2000
Gender				
Men	60	1901	+7	+20
Women	54	2367	+6	+26
Age				
18-24	80	330	+6	+22
25-34	79	627	+10	+28
35-44	74	870	+9	+34
45-54	68	713	+17	+32
55-64	47	730	+11	+26
65+	18	996	+3	+13
Highest educational qualification				
Degree	90	681	+6	+18
HE below degree	74	521	+6	+27
A level	77	604	+8	+28
GCSE A-C	63	817	+10	+33
GCSE D-G	48	381	+10	+28
None	19	1166	+7	+10

Thus so far the rapid growth in internet use has done little to reduce the so-called 'digital divide' in Britain (see also Bromley, 2004). For our purposes in this chapter it means that we have to continue to bear in mind that if, say, younger people are more likely than older people to spend time with friends then it is probably going to be true too that internet users are more likely to spend time with friends than non-users – and that this could simply be because internet users are disproportionately young rather than because of anything to do with their use of the internet itself. We have if possible to take into account the socially unrepresentative nature of internet users before drawing any conclusions about the impact of the internet itself.

Indeed this understates our difficulty. If the internet does have any impact on the degree to which people interact with others face-to-face, we might expect its effect to be most evident amongst those who have been using the internet longest. It is they after all who have been 'exposed' to the internet for the greatest period of time, while in practice they also tend to spend more time on

the internet than do other users.⁴ Yet it is this group that is the least socially representative of all. For example, we can establish from Table x.2 that while overall more men use the internet than women, those who have started to use the internet over the last two years comprise more or less equal numbers of men and women. Equally, the educational profile of more recent internet users is if anything slightly skewed towards those whose highest qualification is a GCSE or its equivalent - whereas graduates are strongly over-represented amongst those who have been using the internet for five years or more. MJ – are these points about new users separate from the table? Is it using self-reported length of time for internet use.

THESE POINTS HOLD HOWEVER YOU DO THE ANALYSIS (WHICH OF COURSE THEY SHOULD!). BUT HAVE CHANGED WORDING SLIGHTLY TO MAKE CLEAR BOTH THE LAST TWO SENTENCES ARE SUPPORTED BY TABLE X.2 - JC_

Meeting Friends and Family

One approach to trying to determine whether the internet has an impact on the amount of time that people spend talking face-to-face with other people is to ask people themselves (Nie and Erbring, 2000, see also Dutton et al 2005). Doing so reveals that there is a widespread impression that the internet can have a deleterious impact on face-to-face contact. Overall no less than 44 per cent agree that ‘using the internet a lot makes people less likely to go out and talk to other people’ while only 24 per cent disagree. However, support for this proposition is lower amongst longer-term users of the internet than it is amongst the remainder of the population. Only 40 per cent of those who have used the internet for five or more years agree with it compared with 48 per cent of non-users and – intriguingly – 52 per cent of those who have used the internet for less than two years. Equally those who use the internet most heavily, that is for five or more hours a week (other than for work) are less likely to agree too, with only 37 per cent doing so.⁵

⁴ Those who have used the internet for five or more years claim on average to spend 6.3 hours a week on the internet (other than for their work). In contrast those who have used the internet two or less years on average spend only 3.3 hours a week on the internet, while those who have been internet users for between two and five years spend 4.7 hours a week.

⁵ There is however widespread recognition of how the internet may be put to use to keep in touch with people you would not otherwise meet. No less than 70 per cent agree (and only 10 per cent disagree) that ‘the internet helps people keep in touch with people who they could not normally talk to very often’. This perception is even more common amongst those who have used the internet the longest and amongst those who use it most.

The problem with this approach however is that internet users may not be aware – or perhaps may prefer to conceal – the impact that their use of the internet is having on themselves and fellow users. A better approach is to ask people how often they spend time socialising with friends and family, and then try to establish whether there are any differences between the answers given by those who use the internet and those who do not (after, of course, taking into account what we have seen are their distinctive social characteristics). We thus asked all respondents to the 2005 *British Social Attitudes* survey how often they spent time with, first, members of their family or other relatives (excluding any with whom they actually live) and, second, family. Overall, such socialising appears to be quite common. As many as 61 per cent said that they spent time with other family members around once a week or more, while 60 per cent said they spent time with friends. Britain is evidently not an atomised society in this respect at least.

Table x.3 Time spent with family and friends, and internet use

	Length of internet use			
	Non-user	Less than 2 years	2-5 years	More than 5 years
% who spend time each week with...				
Family/Other relatives	65	62	63	53
Friends	54	62	64	62
Base	1064	249	626	707

Even so, at first glance at least there appears to be some sign that long-term users of the internet are less likely to spend time with other family members. As Table x.3 shows, only just over half of those who have used the internet for more than five years say that they spend time weekly with other family members compared with nearly two-thirds of the remainder of the population. However, this is an example of where we have to bear in mind the distinctive social profile of long-term internet users. Disproportionately consisting of graduates, many of whom sell their labour in a national rather than a local labour market, members of this group are particularly likely to live some distance from other relatives. Only 24 per cent say that most of their relatives and family members live in the same local neighbourhood or area as themselves while as many as 45 per cent say that most live elsewhere. In contrast, at 42 per cent and 31 per cent respectively, the equivalent figures for those who do not use the internet at all exhibit the reverse pattern. And, unsurprisingly, those who say that most of their relatives live close by are far more likely to say that they

spend time with them weekly (84 per cent do so) than are those whose relatives largely live further away (34 per cent). When this pattern is taken into account the relationship between long-term use of the internet and time spent with relatives simply disappears.⁶

Moreover there is little evidence to support the argument that those who spend most time on the internet are particularly less likely to spend time with friends. Amongst those who use the internet for five or more hours a week, 56 per cent say they spend time weekly with friends only a little below the 60 per cent figure reported by those who spend no more than an hour a week. Such difference as does exist is again easily accounted for by the fact that the friends of heavier users of the internet are more likely to live further away.

Meanwhile, it will be noted from Table x.3 that if anything it is those that do not use the internet who are less likely to say they spend time at least once a week with friends. In fact the difference is not statistically significant. In any event it simply reflects the markedly older age profile of internet non-users and the fact that older people in general are less likely to spend time with friends. Moreover, those who spend most time on the internet are almost just as likely to say they spend time with friends weekly (62 per cent) as are those who spend least time (64 per cent).

Table x.4 Trends in time spent with family and friends by internet use 2003-5

% who spend time each week with...	Non-users in 2003 / Non-users in 2005 / Used less than 2 years in 2005			Users in 2003 / Users for more than 2 years in 2005		
	2003	2005	Change 2003-2005	2003	2005	Change 2003-2005
Family/Other relatives	66	64	-2	61	58	-3
Friends	60	56	-4	67	63	-4
Base	1369	1313		1378	1333	

We in fact asked exactly the same questions about how much time people spend with family and friends in the 2003 *British Social Attitudes* survey, as indeed we did also our questions about use of the internet (Curtice and Norris, 2004). We can therefore compare our results in 2005 with those obtained two years earlier.

⁶ This comment is based on the results of a logistic regression of whether a respondent reported spending time with relatives weekly or not where apart from length of internet use respondent's social background as well as distance lived from relatives were included as independent variables.

In particular we can compare our 2005 results for all those who have been using the internet for two or more years with those for everyone that was using the internet two years earlier in 2003. If we assume that few people stop being internet users once they have started, then these two groups constitute the same set of people.⁷ At the same time we can also compare the figures in our 2005 survey for those who either do not use the internet at all or who have only done so for less than two years with those for all those who in 2003 were not internet users at all. If the internet makes a difference to the amount of face-to-face contact that people have then the difference between the 2003 and 2005 readings for the first of these two groups - that is the one that has used the internet longest - should be dissimilar to the equivalent difference for the other group (one consisting of those with little if any experience of the internet)

Table x.4 undertakes this comparison. In the first column we show the proportion of all non-users of the internet in 2003 who in that same year said that they spent time with family and friends each week. In the second column we show the equivalent 2005 figure for those who in 2005 were either not users of the internet or had been users for less than two years. The third column shows the difference between these two figures. The remaining columns then undertake the equivalent analysis for those who were internet users in 2003 and those who by 2005 had been users for more than two years. The crucial point to note from this table is that while there has been a small decline in time spent with family and friends in both cases this decline is more or less exactly the same amongst longer-term internet users as it is amongst short-term or non-users. There is no apparent evidence here of the internet having had any impact in either direction on the incidence of face-to-face interaction.

Joining In

We now turn to a second potential indicator of the degree to which people interact with others. This is involvement in a community organisation, an important means by which social capital is generated according to Putnam. Moreover, as previously noted Putnam has argued that the advent of television has helped bring about a decline in such involvement – and has suggested that the same might indeed be true of the internet (Putnam, 2000: Chap 13). Putnam's claim about the impact of television is itself far from uncontested (Uslaner, 1998; Newton, 1999; Norris, 1996; Norris 2000), so whether or not the internet is implicated needs to be considered carefully.

In order to acquire a measure of involvement in community organisations we presented respondents with a card that listed a wide range of types of organisations ranging from an environmental group to a sports club to a group

⁷ Indeed the proportions who in our 2005 survey fall into our three categories of length of use are not dissimilar to what we would expect given the growth of internet use over the last 5 years as detailed in Table x.1. 30% said they had used the internet for five or more years, 24% for between two and five years and 9% for two years or less.

for older people such as a lunch club.⁸ While some of the kinds of organisations that we listed (such as trade unions) might be national in scope rather than necessarily local, all were ones that would usually be expected to have a network of local branches. Membership of them was thus likely to provide an opportunity to interact face-to-face with other members. In any event, having presented respondents with the card we then asked them:

Are you currently a member of, or do you regularly join in the activities of, any of the organisations on this card?

It should be noted that our question asked respondents to identify any organisation of which they were a 'member' and not just any in which they were active (irrespective of whether or not they were formally a 'member'). However, many of the kinds or organisations that we listed were ones, such as a sports club, where most members would be expected to be active. We thus anticipate that in practice those who indicated one or more memberships are relatively likely actually to be active in a local community organisation.

Overall, just over half (54 per cent) indicated membership of, or involvement with, at least one of our kinds of organisations. Some, of course, belonged to more than one, but as the average respondent only belonged to one organisation multiple memberships were not common. But more importantly, as the first row of Table x.5 shows, those who have been users of the internet for more than five years were most likely to say they were a member of at least one organisation (66 per cent did so) while non-users were least likely (just 43 per cent). Of the various kinds of organisations that we listed, only in the case of social clubs/working men's clubs, women's organisations and groups for older people were non-users of the internet more likely to be members. There seems little reason here to fear that the advent of the internet has undermined community activism.⁹

Indeed, if anything our evidence would seem to support the claim that access to the internet makes it easier for under-resourced community groups to organise effectively (Etzioni, 1993; Tsagarousianou et al, 1998; but see also Bimber, 1998). Certainly, as we can see from the remaining rows in Table x.5 the longer that someone has been a user of the internet the more likely they are to report both that they are aware that at least one of the groups to which they belong uses the internet to keep in contact with its members and that they themselves use the internet to keep in touch with groups to which they belong. Perhaps the longer that someone uses the internet the more likely it is that the online world stimulates them into offline activity.

⁸ Full details of the list may be found at Q392-406 in the face-to-face questionnaire to be found at Appendix III at the back of this book.

⁹ We might note too that those who use the internet for five or more hours a week are no less likely than those who use it for one hour a week or less to claim membership of at least one community organisation.

Table x.5 Membership of Organisations by Length of Internet Use

MJ – suggest you copy this table and put bases in the relevant cells and then put it as a footnote which I'll convert to an endnote later

	Length of internet use			
	Non-users	Less than 2 years	2-5 years	More than 5 years
% member of at least one group	43	55	55	66
% use internet to keep in touch with group(s) they belong to	-	8	14	24
% say any group(s) they belong to uses internet to keep in contact	13	23	32	44
<i>Bases</i>	1317	292	715	843

We do though of course need to remember the distinctive social profile of long-term internet users. They are disproportionately well-educated, a group that in general is more likely to get involved in local organisational activity (Curtice and Seyd, 2003; Pattie et al, 2004). On the other hand they are also disproportionately younger - not a group known for its community involvement. Indeed, when we undertake a multivariate analysis of the relationship between internet use and membership of at least one organisation while taking into account the varying propensity of people in different social groups to be members (details of which can be found at Table x.a1 in the appendix to this chapter), we still find that length of internet use is significantly associated with membership of an organisation.

Still it may be that people's propensity to join and get involved in community organisations irrespective of their use of the internet is not adequately taken into account by our measures of social background. Perhaps those who were first to become internet users were simply the kind of people who have always been more inclined to be 'joiners' (Uslaner, 2004). We would feel more secure in arguing that using the internet actually increased involvement in community organisations if we could demonstrate that such involvement is greater amongst longer-term internet users now than it was in the past.

Table x.6 Membership of Organisations by Internet Use 2003-2005

	Non-users in 2003 / Non-users in 2005 / Used less than 2 years in 2005			Users in 2003 / Users for more than 2 years in 2005		
	2003	2005	Change 2003-2005	2003	2005	Change 2003-2005
Member of at least one group	46	48	+2	61	64	+3
Base	1656	1609		1641	1558	

Table x.6, however, suggests that this is not possible. Undertaking exactly the same kind of analysis we performed earlier in Table x.4 it shows that there has indeed been a three point increase since 2003 in the proportion of longer-term internet users who are members of at least one group. But at the same time a similar two-point increase has also occurred amongst those who are still non-users or who have only started to use the internet within the previous two years. It thus seems quite possible that longer-term internet users have always been more involved in their community rather than that access to the internet has resulted in them becoming substantially more active.

Social Trust and Social Capital

We now turn to the second main task of this chapter, that is to establish what impact, if any, the internet has had on the stock of social capital. First we look at the incidence of a phenomenon that is thought to be vital if social capital is to be maintained and created, that is the degree to which people trust each other. We asked two questions to assess this. The first of them is perhaps the best known indicator of 'social trust', being a question that has been asked regularly on the General Social Survey in the US and analysis of which played a key role in Putnam's claim that social trust and social capital have declined in that country (Putnam, 2000). It reads:

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

Those who are inclined to trust their fellow human beings are expected to answer that they think most people can be trusted. Meanwhile our second question asks:

How often do you think that people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance and how often would they fair?

Try to take advantage all of the time
Try to take advantage most of the time
Try to be fair most of the time
Try to be fair almost all of the time

Those who tend to trust others would be expected to say that people try to be fair most or almost all of the time.

Table x.7 shows that in fact the proportion who answer these questions in a manner that suggests they are inclined to trust other people has changed little in recent years. Around 45 per cent have consistently said that ‘most people can be trusted’ – an apparent decline in 2002 had been reversed by the time of our most recent survey. Indeed not dissimilar figures of 43 per cent and 44 per cent respectively were also obtained by the first two rounds of the World Values Survey in Britain, conducted earlier than the surveys in Table x.7, that is in 1981 and 1990 respectively (Hall, 1999?). Only a much earlier reading, taken as long ago as 1959 by Almond and Verba’s *Civic Culture* study, has ever produced a markedly higher figure of 59 per cent (Almond and Verba, 1963).

Of course this still means that on this measure rather less than half seem inclined to trust others, However, on our alternative measure a clear majority have consistently said t people are either mostly or almost always fair in their dealings with others; indeed this proportion is now at a record high of 66 per cent. In short, whatever impact the internet may have had on how trusting are those who use it, there is evidently little reason to believe that Putnam’s claims about the decline of social trust have any validity in Britain (Hall, 1999).

Table x.7 Trends in Social Trust 1997-2005

	1997	1998	2000	2002	2004	2005
Most people can be trusted	42	44	45	39	Na	45
<i>Base</i>	1355	2071	2293	2287		3167
People try to be fair most of the time	Na	57	56	Na	55	66
<i>Base</i>		1724	2008		1756	2646

Na: Not asked

Equally there seems little reason to believe that the stock of social capital has declined in recent years. One of the advantages of living in a society where for the most part people trust each other is that they feel able to turn to others when they are in trouble or need help – thereby making it easier for them to overcome such difficulties when they do occur. To tap how far people feel able to turn to others for help – and in particular those living immediately around them – we asked three questions

Suppose you found your sink was blocked, but you did not have a plunger to unblock it. How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour to borrow a plunger?

Suppose that you were ill in bed and needed someone to go to the chemist to collect your prescription while they were doing their shopping. How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour to do this?

Suppose the milkman called for payment. The bill was £5 but you had no cash. How comfortable would you be asking a neighbour if you could borrow £5?

In each case the answers offered to respondents were ‘very comfortable’, ‘fairly comfortable’, ‘fairly uncomfortable’ and ‘very uncomfortable’. Table x.8 shows for various occasions over the past seven years the proportion that has said they would feel ‘very comfortable’ doing each of these things.

Table x.8 Trends in Indicators of Social Capital 1998-2005

% feel very comfortable asking neighbour...	1998	2000	2003	2005
To borrow plunger to unblock sink	53	60	53	52
To collect prescription when ill	47	54	45	40
To borrow £5 to pay milkman	18	22	18	19
<i>Base</i>	<i>2071</i>	<i>2293</i>	<i>3299</i>	<i>3167</i>

Not surprisingly people are most likely to feel comfortable asking a neighbour to borrow a plunger, while they are by far the least likely to feel comfortable asking to borrow £5 to pay the milkman. Doubtless in the latter

case to the fear of refusal is added the embarrassment of having to admit not having any cash to hand. But in each case there is no consistent evidence of a continuous secular decline in the proportion who say that they feel 'very comfortable'. True there is some evidence of decline since 2000, but the proportion feeling very comfortable in that year was apparently particularly high. In the case of borrowing a plunger and borrowing £5 to pay the milkman at least, at just over half and under a fifth respectively the proportion who feel very comfortable is much the same now as it was in 1998. Only in respect of asking a neighbour to get a prescription does the most recent reading, at 40 per cent, seem particularly low as compared with earlier years.

Still even if the overall stock of social trust and social capital shows little decline perhaps the internet has had some impact on those individuals who have been using it. If it has then it would appear to have been a beneficial one. True table x.9 reveals there is no consistent relationship between length of internet use and the proportion that feel that people try to be fair most or almost all of the time. But the longer that someone has been using the internet the more likely it is that they say that most people can be trusted.

Table x.9 Social trust and length of internet use

	Length of internet use			
	Non-users	Less than 2 years	2-5 years	More than 5 years
% most people can be trusted	38	40	50	53
<i>Base</i>	1317	292	715	843
% people try to be fair most/almost all of the time	65	61	65	68
<i>Base</i>	1064	249	626	707

Moreover, this latter relationship is not simply the result of the distinctive social character of those who have used the internet longest. Certainly if we undertake a multivariate analysis of whether our respondents felt that most people can be trusted rather than feeling that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people, those who have used the internet for two or more years are significantly more likely to say that most people can be trusted than are those who are not internet users. (Further details can be found in the appendix to this chapter). Indeed although as we would anticipate from Putnam those who belong to at least one group and those who spend time at least once a week with friends are more likely to say most people can be trusted, both of which

qualities we saw earlier are more common amongst longer-term user of the internet, this relationship between internet use and trust still remains in place even when these factors are taken into account too.¹⁰

However when we look at how levels of social trust have changed over time amongst different categories of internet users, we do not get any confirmation that levels of social trust have increased particularly markedly amongst those who have used the internet longest. In table x.10 we perform much the same kind of analysis that we first undertook at table x.4 except that we can undertake our analysis over a five year period rather than a two year one. Thus in the first three columns of table x.10 we show for 2000 the level of social trust (on both our measures) amongst those who were not using the internet that year, the equivalent figures for 2005 amongst those who in that year were either not internet users at all or who had been using it for less than five years, followed by the difference between the these two figures. In the final three columns we undertake the equivalent analysis for those who were internet users in 2000 and th those who had been users for five or more years in 2005.

We can see that on our first measure the level of social trust held steady between 2000 and 2005 amongst both groups. Meanwhile although the proportion who feel that most or almost all people try to be fair rose between 2000 and 2005 by eight points amongst longer-term internet users, it rose by even more amongst those who were either non-users or had only used the internet for a shorter period of time. We thus cannot safely rule out the possibility that those who have become internet users were more likely to trust others even before they started to use the internet,, and that indeed their willingness to interact with others over the internet is but a reflection of their pre-existing higher level of trust.

Table x.10 Social Trust by Internet Use 2000-2005

	Non-users in 2000 / Non-users/ Used less than 5 years in 2005	Users in 2000 / Users for more than 5 years in 2005
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¹⁰ As many as 51 per cent of those who belong to at least one organisations say that most people can be trusted compared with just 39 per cent of those who do not belong to any organisation. Equally 49 per cent of those who spend time with friends once a week say that most people can be trusted, whereas only 39 per cent of those who spend time with friends less often that this do so. This of course does not necessarily mean that spending time with friends or being involved in the activities of an organisation necessarily make people trustful; it may be those who trust others are more likely to spend time with friends or to get involved in organisations.

	2000	2005	Change 2000- 2005	2000	2005	Change 2003- 2005
% most people can be trusted	42	42	0	52	53	+1
<i>Base</i>	1595	2324		684	843	
% people try to be fair most/almost all of the time	53	64	+11	60	68	+8
<i>Base</i>	1390	1939		613	707	

In any event there is not any evidence that the higher level of social trust amongst longer-term internet users translates into being more likely to have a stock of social capital to draw upon in time of need (see table x.11). Indeed, so far asking a neighbour to collect a prescription is concerned longer-term users of the internet are actually less likely to say that they would feel 'very comfortable'. In fact multivariate analysis (not shown) reveals that this is for one very simple reason – because younger people (who are more likely to be internet users) are far less likely to say they would feel very comfortable asking a neighbour to collect a prescription. Thus, for example whereas as many 57% of those aged 65 plus say they would feel very comfortable only 22% of those aged 18-24 would be. Perhaps in part this is because an older person may be more likely to think that a neighbour would accept they might need help if they are ill, but doubtless also it reflects the fact that younger people are more likely to be geographically mobile and thus less likely to know who their neighbours well. Indeed, much the same pattern is also true in respect of our other two indicators of social capital and that in fact once we take the differences in their age composition into account those who have used the internet for five years or more are in fact significantly *more* likely than those who do not use the internet at all to say that they are very comfortable asking a neighbour to borrow either a plunger or £5 to pay the milkman.

Table x.11 Indicators of Social Capital by Length of Internet Use

Length of internet use

% feel very comfortable asking neighbour...	Non-users	Less than 2 years	2-5 years	More than 5 years
To borrow plunger to unblock sink	51	54	54	52
To collect prescription when ill	47	45	38	34
To borrow £5 to pay milkman	21	19	17	16
<i>Base</i>	1317	292	715	843

Again however looking at trends over time amongst different categories of internet users does not sustain any claim that long-term internet users are more likely to feel comfortable asking their neighbour to borrow something simply because they are an internet user. Table x.12 shows what proportion of those who are now long-term users felt very comfortable asking a neighbour to borrow something during the course of the last five years and how this compares with the equivalent trend amongst the rest of the population. In fact if anything the proportion who feel very comfortable asking to borrow something has fallen rather more over the last five years amongst those who are now long-term internet users than it has amongst the remainder of the population – though even here the pattern is not entirely consistent

Table x.12 Indicators of Social Capital by Internet Use 2000-2005 MJ I still need to sort this one out properly

	Non-users in 2000 / Non-users / Used less than 3 years in 2003 / Non-users / Used less than 5 years 2005	Users in 2000 / Users 3 or more years in 2003 / Users 5 or more years in 2005
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% feel very comfortable asking neighbour...	2000	2003	2005	Change 2000-2005	2000	2003	2005	Change 2000-2005
To borrow plunger to unblock sink	60	53	52	-8	62	54	52	-10
To collect prescription when ill	56	46	43	-13	51	41	34	-17
To borrow £5 to pay milkman	23	18	19	-4	19	17	16	-3
<i>Base</i>	<i>1595</i>	<i>2412</i>	<i>2324</i>		<i>684</i>	<i>815</i>	<i>843</i>	

Conclusion

Our analysis has certainly failed to implicate the internet of responsibility for any significant erosion of social ties in Britain. We have been unable to demonstrate that longer-term or heavy use of the internet leads people to spend less time face to face with friends and family, to be less likely to get involved in local organisations, or to distrust other people. If anything the picture we have found is one that suggests that internet users are more likely to be socially connected, not less. In particular they seem more likely to be joiners and to trust other people.

However it is doubtful whether we should interpret our data to mean that access to electronic connections stimulates social connections. Given the difficulties there are in demonstrating that differences between the social ties of internet users and non-users are a *cause* of the differences we have found rather than a *consequence*, we would want to be able to demonstrate both that these differences still exist when we control for as wide a range as possible of other possible influences on the strength of someone's social connections, and that when we compare internet users non-users over time that a distinctive trend

towards stronger social ties is evident amongst the former. Not once in this chapter have we been able to demonstrate that both these patterns are evident.

In truth it would appear to make more sense to regard the internet as a facility that people integrate into their social lives according to their pre-existing motivations and preferences – and as something that perhaps then makes it easier for them to act effectively on those motivations and preferences - rather than as something that changes social lives (Wellman et al, 2001; Katz and Rice, 2002; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Technological change does not necessarily change human beings - but human beings certainly shape how technological innovations are used.

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Appendix

The following tables show the results of two logistic regression analyses to which reference is made in the text. In each case a variable was only included in the model if overall it was significantly associated with the dependent variable at the 5 per cent level. Social class is measured using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, about which further details may be found in the appendix to this book.

Table x.a1 Logistic Regression of Organisational Membership

Member of at least one group v. not a member of any group

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age Group		
18-24	-0.89*	(.17)
25-34	-0.95*	(.15)
35-44	-0.69*	(.14)
45-54	-0.35*	(.14)
55-64	0.02	(.14)
(65 plus)		
Highest Educational Qualification		
Degree	1.53*	(.16)
Higher below degree	1.01*	(.15)
'A' level	1.16*	(.14)
GCSE, A-C	0.72*	(.13)
GCSE, D-G	0.67*	(.15)
(None)		
Social Class (NS-SEC)		
Professional/Managerial	0.13	(.11)
Intermediate	-0.10	(.13)
Small employers	-0.36*	(.15)
Supervisory/Technical	-0.04	(.12)
(Routine/Semi-routine)		
Internet User		
5+ years	0.57*	(.13)
2-5 years	0.24*	(.12)
Less than 2 yrs	0.42*	(.15)
(Non-User)		

N=3052. Nagelkerke $R^2 = 13\%$. * = significant at the 5 per cent level
Coefficients are simple contrast coefficients. In each case the category in brackets is the reference category.

Table x.a2 Logistic Regression of Social Trust

Most people can be trusted v. cannot be too careful in dealing with people

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Gender		
Male	0.28*	(.08)
Age Group		
18-24	-0.68*	(.17)
25-34	-0.55*	(.15)
35-44	-0.34*	(.14)
45-54	-0.14*	(.14)
55-64	-0.20	(.13)
(65 plus)		
Highest Educational Qualification		
Degree	0.94*	(.15)
Higher below degree	0.39*	(.15)
'A' level	0.49*	(.14)
GCSE, A-C	-0.18*	(.13)
GCSE, D-G	0.29	(.15)
(None)		
Social Class (NS-SEC)		
Professional/Managerial	0.34*	(.11)
Intermediate	0.29*	(.13)
Small employers	0.19	(.15)
Supervisory/Technical	-0.20	(.13)
(Routine/Semi-routine)		
Ethnic Origin		
Black/Asian	-0.39*	(.15)
(White)		
Internet User		
5+ years	0.29*	(.12)
2-5 years	0.36*	(.12)
Less than 2 yrs	0.08	(.15)
(Non-User0)		

N=3022. Nagelkerke $R^2 = 9\%$. * = significant at the 5 per cent level.

Coefficients are simple contrast coefficients. In each case the category in brackets is the reference category.