

Debating the societal effects of the internet

Our Shrinking Social Universe

Reply to Etzioni

By Norman H. Nie and Lutz Erbring

Sometimes ideological or methodological prejudice seems to get in the way of sound judgment and even common sense. Perhaps that is what happened to our colleague Amitai Etzioni who—in the sunset of a distinguished career and presumably against his own better judgment—may have allowed himself to get carried away by adrenaline in his commentary on preliminary findings from our study on social consequences of the internet as reported by the media.

Actually, as behooves a scholar, he did not stop with second-hand media reports but did at least take the trouble of examining some of the more detailed evidence available on our web site—though, apparently, to no avail.

Our colleague seems to have been so eager to rush to judgment that he misread our findings as a message of technophobic doomsday prophets or raving cultural critics. Yet even if that were true, which it is not—we are enthusiastic internet users convinced of the benefits that this new technology holds for society—it would hardly be considered a sign of scholarly conduct or analytic competence to beat the messenger when one doesn't like the message.

Of course, we are delighted to be put in the company of “survey masters” whom he seems to chastise (or grudgingly admire) for “coming up with *post hoc* interpretations of their data,” such as Robert Merton's “discovery” of refer-

Norman H. Nie is director of the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society and research professor of political science, Stanford University. Lutz Erbring is professor of mass communication studies, Free University of Berlin.

ence groups” or Paul Lazarsfeld's “introduction... of the concept of two-step communication and opinion leaders.” Actually, though, he seems to object less to our interpretations of the data than to the fact that we “provided a summary of [our] study to the media, which got front page attention.” In any event, we feel perfectly at ease with our findings and are at a loss how to



take advantage of the “sympathizing” offered by Professor Etzioni (except perhaps to savor it until some future day when our results happen to coincide with his predilections).

Apparently, Professor Etzioni divides the world of research findings (and sources) into two simple categories, based on his personal values and prejudices: (1) findings he likes (which he dismisses as “self-evident and dull” when they come from a source he dislikes); and (2) findings he dislikes (which he tries to either wish away, argue away, deny outright, or if all else fails, discredit when they come from a source he dislikes). In the former category are our findings suggesting that the internet may reduce the time people spend shopping in stores or commuting in traffic; in the latter category are our

findings suggesting that the internet may reduce the time people spend interacting with friends and family or increase the time people spend working.

So what is the message our distinguished colleague seems unable or unwilling to understand? It is, above all, our finding that the more people use the internet, the less time they report spending with “real human beings.” Now, while there may be reasons to dislike that finding because of its implications for the future quality of social life (indeed we are only witnessing the beginnings of the internet's impact), one cannot make it go away by (a) wishing it away, (b) arguing it away, (c) refusing to acknowledge the facts, or (d) attacking those who report it.

It is, of course, ironic that literally within days of his venomous attack, another national study of computer and internet use by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University reported essentially the same (even stronger) results: 58% of their respondents report computers have led them to spend less time with their families and friends, and 46% say computers have given them less free time. Indeed there are reasons why textbooks on scientific methodology emphasize the importance of replication! Thus, we could rest our substantive case here.

However, for the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the details of our study as caricatured by Professor Etzioni, a few additional remarks may be in order.

Specifically, textbooks on methodology also introduce students to the fundamental idea of relationships between

variables. That idea would have been helpful to our distinguished colleague in understanding our findings, and would have saved him the misguided effort of attacking our findings by arguing about the size or characteristics of “groups.” While we did, indeed, simplify our findings for journalistic presentation and public consumption in our press release by focusing on the “group” of regular internet users (those

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spending 5 hours a week or more on the 'net), we also presented our survey results for a more professional or sophisticated audience in terms of relationships between variables: between hours of use (ranging from less than one to more than 10 hours per week) and percent reporting decreases (or increases) in time spent with family and friends (or working at home and at the office, respectively).

We were assuming, of course, that someone of the caliber of Professor Etzioni would know how to read our graphs and tables correctly, and would realize that when a relationship is consistent across the entire range of hours of internet use, the results do not depend on the percentages reported for the “group” of regular users (5 hours or more). He does, in fact, correctly report some of our more detailed results (by hours of internet use), but apparently fails to understand their meaning in terms of a consistent, systematic relationship between hours of internet use and behavioral outcomes.

Why else would he again restrict his argument to “groups” of those who spend 5 to 10 hours (10% reporting less time socializing), or those who spend 10 or more hours (15% reporting less socializing), while ignoring those who spend less than one hour (with 4% reporting less socializing) or 1 to 5 hours (with 8% reporting less socializing), thus evidently failing to recognize the systematic nature of the

relationship on which our conclusions are predicated? Or why would he compare these figures with univariate marginal percentages which are completely irrelevant here

and can throw no light whatsoever on how amount of time on the internet affects behavioral outcomes?

And, indeed, why would he call for a “control group”—a concept that makes no sense in the language of relationships between variables (to say nothing about his quaint suggestion of asking a “control group” of *non*-internet users about how the use of the internet has affected their lives)? Still, after complaining about our failure to include the non-users as a control group, he goes on to complain that we did include them (we did not!) even though they would be contaminated by our internet-based data collection methodology. Professor Etzioni seems either more confused than we thought possible, or simply prepared to dispense with logic just so he can maul us coming and going, or both.

His personal convictions seem so strong, and his methodological insights so weak, that he even tries to hang on to the handful of respondents, who say

they spend *more* time with friends and family—while missing the essential point of asking whether that number, as in the case of spending *less* time, is consistently related to hours of internet use (it is NOT!). And he goes on to make an elaborate argument as to why the internet actually leaves people with more time for social relationships—when in fact they tell us they spend less. So who should we assume has got it right: the great master theorist, or the people speaking for themselves? For our part, we have no doubt whom to believe.

However, we have no intention of extending our response into a seminar on basic social science methodology. We are simply amazed at the remarkable arrogance of this line of reasoning: he knows better than our respondents. Perhaps someone like Professor Etzioni has no need to bother with the tedium, or the logic, of research methodology. He stands above it by virtue of access to a superior source of insight and knowledge—and he does not hesitate to let us in on what that superior source might be: “Everyday experience.” It is “[e]veryday experience” which “...shows that people use the internet... to reinforce existing relations among family, friends, and coworkers; to forge new relationships...; and to join or form communities.” The master knows; our respondents have no idea what they are talking about.

Meanwhile, as the master morphs into a virtual communitarian in cyberspace, the rest of us toil on in the lowly quarries of empirical research. Surprisingly, we love our work. 