

How logging on helps make us more social: Nobel prize scientists say web's networks and access to information help bring people closer

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Body

The commonly held belief that the internet is turning an entire generation into solitary web-junkies is a myth, according to new research. The findings may offer succour to parents worried that social networking sites such as Facebook are reducing their children's participation in school sports and cultural activities.

In a paper to be presented to a gathering of Nobel prize winners later this month, three influential economists claim their work demonstrates the internet is actually making us more socially active.

Stefan Bauernschuster, Oliver Falck and Ludger Woessmann of the Ifo Institute in Munich reject the claim that the internet isolates people socially and erodes the traditional foundations of society. "There are no indications whatsoever that the internet makes people lonely," Bauernschuster said. He explained that their study revealed that a broadband connection at home positively influences the social activities of adults as well as children.

The three economists found that once adults had access to broadband, their attendance at theatres, cinemas, bars or restaurants actually increased. They also found evidence that far from curtailing children's extracurricular experiences, a broadband internet subscription at home increased the number of children's out-of-school social activities, such as sports, ballet, music, painting lessons, or joining a youth club.

"With the help of the internet it is much easier to maintain contact with other people and to make plans to meet in the real world," the economists write.

"In addition, the internet conveys diverse information on leisure time and cultural offerings as well as on (local) politics and voluntary commitment. Moreover, the internet facilitates reserving and buying tickets for events."

The economists claim their work provides evidence that most people use the internet to search for information and to communicate rather than for entertainment. They found 95% of people used the internet to search for information while 89% used it for email.

"Evidently the information and communication function of the internet dominates over its passive entertainment function," Falck said. "For this reason, the internet seems to foster rather than destroy social participation of adults and adolescents."

The research comes in the wake of an Ofcom survey that shows Britain's burgeoning love affair with new technology. The survey found that 60% of teenagers said they were highly addicted to their smartphones, with 7%

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of them claiming they now spend less time socialising with their friends as a result, compared with 4% of adults. In addition, 6% of teenagers said they also spend less time playing sport now they have a smartphone while 15% said they were reading fewer books as a result.

But the economists' findings, to be presented at the Lindau Meetings, an annual gathering of Nobel prize winners and leading academics, later this month, suggest the internet can be a force for good socially.

The three write: "The internet is qualitatively different from the television in that its main function is not so much one of passive entertainment. At least in some areas of social engagement, the main function of the internet seems rather one of active information and communication - which the internet provides in an individualised form at any time - that is conducive to social interaction."

Captions:

Children who use Facebook and other social networking sites are likely to have a richer span of friends, though they are also more at risk of becoming addicted to using their mobile phones. Rex

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