Fear and Loathing in the Internet Age: Debunking Unfounded Fears About the Safety of Internet Use

A Response to Verrgeer and Pelzer's, "Consequences of media and Internet use for offline and online network capital and well being. A causal model." Journal of Computer Mediated Communication (2009), 15, 189-210.

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Throughout time the advent of new information technologies has generated unrealistic public concerns as a Luddite tradition of demonizing modern technologies as dangerous and evil. Introduction of new media technologies has generated significant public concerns that media adoption would lead users (typically young users) to become alienated and disengaged. For example, television viewing and video game use raised public concerns about their influences on increased violent and anti-social behavior. Despite limited evidence to support these dire concerns, these assumptions have become part of a public consciousness that demonizes the use of these media (and slows communication progress). Rigorous media effects research has not validated most concerns, with evidence in the case of television and video game use illustrating that they can often have positive educational and developmental benefits, particularly for children. The benefits or detriments accrued from media use are actually largely dependent on the uses to which the media are put, and are strongly moderated by media users' communication skills, competencies, and ethics.

Computer use is a current variation on the theme of assumed "evil media" to receive unfounded public condemnation. Popular movies, such as Kubric's award-winning "2001: A Space Odyssey" portrayed "Hal" the controlling computer as malevolent and dangerous. This popular cinematic and literary theme of "evil" computing has become a stereotype that many people have just assumed to be true. Current popular "wisdom" assumes that Internet use will inevitably alienate users from others and reduce their social influence. Verrgeer and Pelzer's (2009) research begins to point out the folly in these unfounded assumptions, and shows, in fact, that Internet use can actually expand social networks and increase social influence.

Verrgeer and Pelzer (2009) conducted a telephone survey study in the Netherlands where they compared Internet-users and non-users. The survey was administered in 2005 using random-digit-dialing to generate a 44.6% response rate and a sample of 810 adults. Of those respondents, 714 were non-Internet users (offline) and only 96 were Internet users (online). (I suspect that if this survey was conducted today it would

generate a much greater proportion of Internet users, given the rapid adoption of this new communication technology). The researchers compared Internet users and non-users on measures of perceived social support, loneliness, and social network connectedness (communality). They also conducted sub-group comparisons based on television viewing, age, education, and gender. For the Internet users they compared the kinds and the amount of time spent on the Internet. Results from this survey were analyzed with structural equation modeling and placed in a causal model indicating that there are significant differences between the influences of television use and Internet use on social network participation. While television use does not appear to impact the amount of time spent in social networks or the size of social networks, Internet use had a direct positive relationship on participation in and size of (offline) social networks. (Interestingly, in this study, the researchers only examined web searching on the Internet and not more communicative uses of computers, such as the use of email and social network messaging. I suspect that more communicative uses of the Internet would result in an even more pronounced positive influence on social network size, use, and influence).

The findings in this research add support for some of my own work that suggests that the use of new ehealth communication technologies (such as health related web portals, search engines, tailored health information programs, telemedicine applications, electronic health records, and even the exchange of email messages between health care consumers and providers) can have very positive influences on health care consumers' access to relevant health information and can potentially improve media users' health outcomes, even for the most vulnerable and at-risk consumers (Kreps, 2002; Kreps, Gustafson, Salovey, Perocchia, Wilbright, Bright, & Muha, 2007; Neuhauser & Kreps, 2003). In fact, this program of research has motivated calls to develop new ehealth media applications specifically for vulnerable consumers to both reduce the digital divide and decrease negative disparities in health outcomes (Kreps & Neuhauser, 2010). I am heartened to see research like the study conducted by Verrgeer and Pelzer (2009) that debunks unfounded negative assumptions about the evil influences of new media applications. Research like this can help increase recognition of the potentially important communication and social influence benefits of designing and disseminating relevant, culturally sensitive, and easy to use computer-based information systems that can help users achieve important goals. We should not allow unfounded fears of new information technologies inhibit the development and productive use of powerful new forms of communication to achieve public good!

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