

SOCIABILITY AND THE INTERNET

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Abstract: While there is a common vision and fear of the Internet being the uniting medium of millions of isolated users, many studies reveal that Internet has a growing role in interpersonal communication, spending spare-time, performing work and utilizing various services. All this raises, with good reason, the question of how the Internet affects social contacts and social capital. We have analyzed the data originating from the Hungarian panel-research (TARKI-ITTK) of the second year of the World Internet Project, and have found that using the Internet does not reduce the level of individuals' social skills. On the contrary, we have concluded that among users and non-users hailing from the same social background (age, gender and status) the users time and time again have higher sociability indices, that, in addition, rise in line with their time spent on the net. Results are encouraging in respect of users with low social capital, as the Internet seems to enable them to increase their social networks and social capital. However, to explain these findings, we still do have to research for the right answers.

Keywords: social capital, sociability, level of Internet use, homophile

The time spent on the Internet increases year by year. The World Wide Web is growing more and more important as a means for spending spare time as well as for reaching various services, and also for work. All this raises, with good reason, the question of how the Internet affects social integration, the cohesion of small communities and the social relations of the individual. Has a new technology arrived again, in the wake of the television that is going to disrupt human relations, that is going to isolate the individual and weaken the norm-transmitting and enforcing role of small communities? The question seems to appear more and more often in the literature of sociology these days (for example Cole and Robinson 2002; Nie and Erbring 2000; Norris 2000, 2002; Putnam 2000; Wellman et al. 2001). Some participants of the debate argue that the Internet is unable to create strong ties between people, therefore time spent on the web decreases the common time reserved for primary groups. In defiance of this, other researches found that users of the Internet spend no less time on cultivating their social relations than those who do not use the web.

We have analyzed the data originating from the Hungarian panel-research (TÁRKI-ITTK) of the second year of the World Internet Project, with respect to the sociability of the net-users, and have found that using the Internet does not reduce the level of individuals' social skills. On the contrary, we have concluded that among users and non-users hailing from the same social background the users time and time again

have higher sociability indices, that, in addition, rise in line with their time spent on the net. This finding allows setting up three different models to represent the relationship between social capital and the use of the Internet:

- According to the first the case is simply that users of the Internet had greater social capital even before encountering the technology than those not yet connected with it, that is, the current non-users, therefore the technology only satisfies their higher needs of sociability.
- The next model states that there is an effect that affects social skills from the direction of Internet use. That is, the older or the more intensive user a certain individual is, the more likely it is that they can raise their social capital through the use of the World Wide Web.
- The third model theorizes that users of the net simply have a higher social capital since today the community of the (Hungarian) users is very homogenous, that is, they have characteristically similar social, economic and domestic backgrounds, and are generally of the same age group as well. The web only strengthens the homophyllic tendencies in their behavior.

SOCIAL CAPITAL, SOCIABILITY, SOCIAL SKILLS

Social capital expresses the social relations and contacts of the individual. It also incorporates characteristics of social organization, like shared norms, trust and responsibilities in the network of a community. Interpreting social capital is possible through multiple dimensions:

1. It expresses a certain social network: friendly meetings, visitations, neighbor-relations, social events, and
2. A certain civic commitment: willingness to participate in communities, expression of opinion, membership-relations, participation in elections and so on,¹ while Barry Wellman and his associates (Wellman et al. 2001) introduce a third element besides network capital and participatory capital, namely:
3. Community commitment, for there is more to social capital than simply covering motivations of interpersonal interactions and willingness to participate in networks, as people in general possess a strong and open attitude towards communities, and are motivated by a need to belong, which can further increase social capital.

Similarly to other kinds of capital, social capital is a resource as well. Therefore, the higher the social capital of its included communities, the more successful a given and the stronger an economy is. In view of this, it is not at all surprising that research concerning the effect of technological advancement on social capital has become so important nowadays. The spread of the Internet and its sociological effects can most easily be compared to those of television, so some sociologists draw a parallel between the unfavorable effects of the two technologies. For example, Nie and Erbring (2000) state that according to research data communities already weakened by television and automobiles are going to wither away completely, ceasing to exist because of the spread

¹ Putnam characteristically emphasizes these two dimensions (Putnam 2000; Wellman 2001: 436).

of the Internet. The most current empirical results, however, seem to indicate that watching television and using the Internet cannot be considered to belong to the same sociological category. The reason for this is that while the former is a passive pursuit, the latter is an active one that stimulates creative, cooperative and networking thinking.

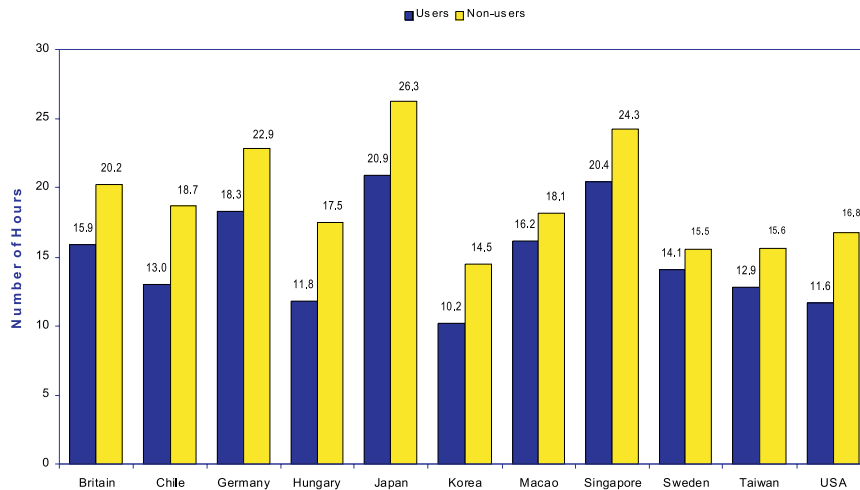


Figure 1. Weekly averages of the hours users and non-users of the Internet spend watching TV

Source: Cole 2003.

While considering the role of the changes inflicted by the spread of television on both lifestyle and time displacement crucial in the decrease of social capital, Putnam sees hope for individuals using the new information and communication technologies to raise their social capital (Putnam 2000, 2002). Professor Wellman articulates more precisely: “Taken together, our results suggest that the Internet is increasing social capital, civic engagement, and developing a sense of belonging to online community” (Wellman 2002: 321).

Having cast a brief but necessary look at the cornerstones of the relationship between social capital and the Internet, it is time we examine in detail whether the Internet increases social isolation in Hungary, and what the social skills of local Internet users are like.

The Level of Social Skills in Hungary

Using the data of the Hungarian WIP of 2002 we have been trying to find out² whether the sociability indices and attitudes of Internet users show significant differences from those of the non-users, and, if they do, to determine the direction and

2 The author would like to thank Csaba Czinner for the help provided in the analysis.

the extent of the difference. Our hypothesis, based on international experience, is that there will be no significant difference between the social relationships of users and non-users, that is, users of the Internet do not prove to be neither lonelier nor more prone to avoid relationships. Furthermore, we also have hypothesized in our research that the length of time using the Internet (i.e.: for how long has one been using the Internet?) has a positive effect on sociability.

The WIP questionnaire includes many questions regarding the level of sociability; therefore it allows us to map the variations in the levels of social skills by factor analysis, not just by considering one or two indices. We have formulated further groups within the group of the Internet users, according to the time spent on the Internet:

Table 1. Groups according to the length of time using the Internet
(How long have you been using it?)

	Proportion in percentages among Internet users
New user (using the net since 2001 or 2002)	26
Advanced user (using the net since 1999 or 2000)	44
Old user (using the net since or from before 1998)	30
N=763	100

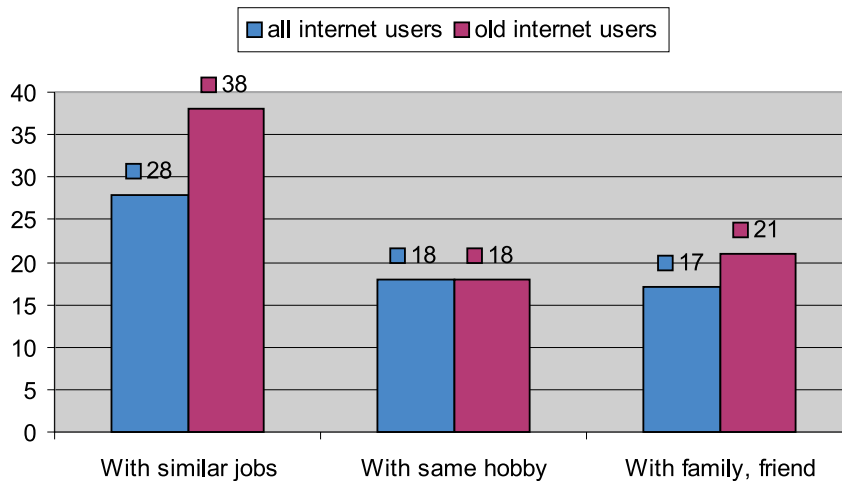


Figure 2. Do you have, because of using the Internet, more frequent contact with people belonging to the following groups?
(proportion of answers indicating the “(a lot) more” category, in percentages)

38 per cent of the Internet users have contacts made through the net. 28 per cent of the people questioned reported having a more intensive contact with others pursuing the same (or a similar) profession, because of their using the Internet. The subjective evaluation of contacting friends, relatives and people who have the same hobby more often can also be said to be high.³

According to the data, 38 per cent of the old users, that is, people who have been using the net for at least 4 years, reported that in their view they socialize more with people who have the same or similar jobs. Additionally, and surprisingly, *we arrived at a higher rate even in the case of formulating the numbers for contacting relatives and friends*. All this seems to illustrate that for the old users the Internet has become more a tool of increasing their bonding social capital, related to their profession, rather than of recreative activities and of spending their spare time.

The data of the WIP indicate that 37 per cent of the users of the Internet agree with the statement that it is easier to make new friends and contacts on the Internet. 18 per cent holds true that since they started using the Internet, *they have several regular relationships*. Proportionally fewer people think that they communicate more with their family and friends since becoming users of the Internet, and even fewer would be willing to discuss their private matters with others on the Internet.

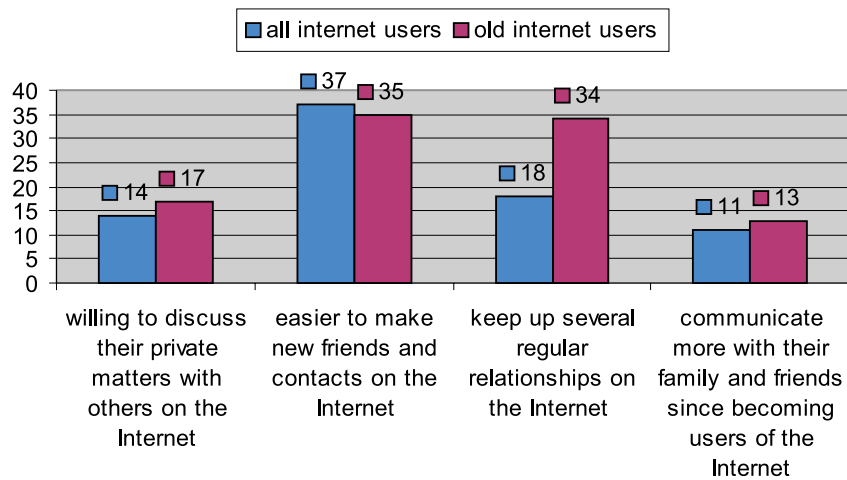


Figure 3. Opinions regarding relationships on the Internet (proportion of answers indicating the “(fully) agree” category, in percentages)

Compared to the average, the rate of old users who keep up several regular relationships on the Internet is remarkably high, 34 per cent.

3 We have registered significantly lower rates for contacting people of similar religions and similar political attitudes; therefore we do not quote these data.

Relatives

During an average week, those not living alone (N=3190) spend 23.26 (conf. int.: 22.55–23.98) hours, that is *23 hours and 16 minutes* together with the other members of their households (pursuing some sport or eating together, talking, and so on: we have not taken time spent sleeping into account). This value is 24.7 hours a week according to the 2001 WIP survey of the USA, which means that it is, in essence, quite similar to the Hungarian one.⁴

There are significant differences in the averages of weekly hours spent actively with family members, regarding age, sex and household size as well.

Table 2. Averages of weekly hours spent actively with household members

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
<i>According to sex</i>			
male	21.07	22.09	23.10
female	23.40	24.39	25.39
<i>According to age category</i>			
14–17 years	16.50	18.73	20.97
18–29 years	19.34	20.68	22.03
30–39 years	21.28	22.73	24.18
40–49 years	19.49	20.80	22.11
50–59 years	20.35	22.07	23.80
60 years or older	29.36	31.53	33.69
<i>According to household size</i>			
2 members	25.60	27.21	28.82
3 members	21.68	23.13	24.57
4 members	19.09	20.14	21.18
5 or more members	20.98	22.51	24.04
<i>According to Internet use</i>			
uses	17.41	18.45	19.49
does not use	23.87	24.74	25.60
<i>Within the group of Internet users</i>			
new user	18.19	20.47	22.75
advanced user	16.70	18.27	19.85
old user	15.20	17.20	19.20

With regards to substantive responses, N=3190.

4 In Japan, however, research arrived at an even higher average for time spent with relatives, namely 31.7 hours a week, which is one hour more than the US result (Mikami 2002).

Use of the Internet seems to have a strong influence on the amount of time spent on members of the family. We do not find higher rates within the group of Internet users though. Quite the contrary, they spend less time with their families. Research in the US produced a similar result: users of the net in the US spend less time with family members. However, this tendency reverses in the case of heavy users (who are online for more than 10 hours a week), as they spend 1.2 hours more with their families compared to the average value. Here in Hungary the tendency does not reverse: similarly to the length of use, even heavy users (who are online for more than 5 hours a week) spend only an average of 17.42 hours a week with their household members. The difference is not dramatic, of course, as users of the Internet are just 4.8 hours short of the average of the non-users regarding time spent with families.

Friends

We asked the entire sample how much time they spend with their friends during an average week (we were interested only in personal contacts). 99 per cent of the respondents were able to provide a substantial answer. The result is 5.89 (conf.int.: 5.59–6.20) hours an average week, which means that they spend 5 hours and 53 minutes a week with their friends in person⁵ (N=3763).

It is by all means notable that the amount of time (12 hours) spent on friends in the case of old Internet users is two and a half times more than in the case on non-users (4.7 hours). Comparing this result with the low amount of time Internet-users spend with their families it seems obvious that this is simply a consequence of the age composition of the Internet-users being younger. Today the group of Internet-users is apparently dominated by youth, for whom it is more important to participate in groups related to their age category because of needs arising from generational characteristics, rather than to participate more in their families.

5 This question resulted 8.6 hours in the USA, and 9.3 hours in Japan, with regard to the entire sample see Cole and Robinson, 2002.

Table 3. Average of weekly hours spent in person with friends

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
<i>According to sex</i>			
male	6.41	6.89	7.37
female	4.66	5.04	5.41
<i>According to age category</i>			
14–17 years	14.77	17.10	19.43
18–29 years	9.88	10.70	11.52
30–39 years	4.30	4.95	5.60
40–49 years	3.39	3.98	4.58
50–59 years	2.78	3.22	3.66
60 years or older	2.88	3.22	3.56
<i>According to household size</i>			
1 members	4.4	5.43	6.21
2 members	4.04	4.57	5.10
3 members	5.62	6.33	7.04
4 members	6.23	6.91	7.59
5 or more members	5.46	6.15	6.84
<i>According to Internet use</i>			
uses	9.51	10.40	11.29
does not use	4.41	4.69	4.98
<i>Within the group of Internet users</i>			
new user	6.93	8.22	9.50
advanced user	9.58	11.12	12.66
old user	10.25	12.01	13.76

Entire sample, N=3763.

Volunteer Organizations

15 per cent of the entire sample declared that they spend some time every week at the gatherings of various social circles, clubs or volunteer organizations. For this social pursuit (N=562) they reserve 3.95 (conf.int.: 3.58–4.31) hours a week (3 hours 57 minutes).

Among those who attend various gatherings of social circles, clubs or volunteer organizations, the participation rate of males, of persons aged 14–29 years and of members of households consisting of 5 or more persons is significantly higher. Internet-users are also over-represented.

Table 4. Average weekly hours spent at social, volunteer gatherings

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
<i>According to sex</i>			
male	3.81	4.39	4.98
female	3.11	3.56	4.00
<i>According to age category</i>			
14–17 years	3.25	4.12	5.00
18–29 years	4.01	4.75	5.48
30–39 years	2.54	3.43	4.31
40–49 years	2.28	3.16	4.04
50–59 years	2.55	3.77	4.99
60 years or older	2.90	3.65	4.40
<i>According to household size</i>			
1 members	3.81	5.46	7.11
2 members	2.75	3.33	3.90
3 members	3.60	4.49	5.38
4 members	3.00	3.51	4.03
5 or more members	2.93	3.52	4.11
<i>According to Internet use</i>			
uses	3.42	3.92	4.41
does not use	3.46	3.96	4.45
<i>Within the group of Internet users</i>			
new user	2.24	3.08	3.91
advanced user	3.74	4.68	5.62
old user	2.79	3.45	4.11

Among those who attend such meetings, N=562.

Rate of Sociability

In order to uncover the difference between the sociability of the Internet-users and that of the non-users, we introduced the rate of sociability. We tried to interpret the characteristics of sociability as widely as possible. We have compressed the total of 13 characteristics into four dimensions through primary component analysis. The commonality of all included variables has proven to be sufficient; therefore none of them had to be excluded from the analysis. The resulting four primary components have preserved 51 per cent of the variance of the original variables.

Table 5. Result matrix of principal component analysis

	Principal components			
	1	2	3	4
Importance of being together with friends	0.610	-0.139	0.178	-0.403
Club, community as information source	0.586	0.185	-0.474	0.152
Time spent in clubs, communities	0.538	-0.130	-0.232	0.363
Time spent with friends	0.509	-0.393	0.178	0.250
Importance of civic activity	0.500	0.159	-0.311	-0.355
Time spent pursuing some kind of sport	0.393	-0.274	0.194	0.307
Family members resolve their differences	0.185	0.677	0.469	0.110
Family members share their opinion	0.228	0.661	0.481	0.103
Frequency of SMS-sending	0.388	-0.437	0.399	-0.213
Time spent with members of the family	-0.035	0.392	0.087	0.329
Importance of participation at religious events	0.269	0.433	-0.579	0.069
Time spent sleeping	0.181	-0.189	0.173	0.434
Importance of friends as information source	0.374	0.266	0.160	-0.415

The result matrix shows that the first principal component can be said to map social affinity and activity most closely. The variable generated this way shows a strong correlation with the importance of being together with friends and with the importance of civic activity (voluntary work) just as well as with the time spent with friends and in clubs. The importance of a local club or community as a source of information also bears a high factor weight. Most other variables expressing sociability (importance of friends as information source, participation at religious events, frequency of SMS-sending, active communication within the family, time spent pursuing some kind of sport) are also present with a positive, though smaller weight. The first principal component therefore is a good measure of both the need and importance of social intercourse and of actual social activity.

The second principal component is more a measure of a conservative attitude: the importance and observance of tradition, family and religion. In this, active domestic communication and time spent with members of the family weigh most heavily, while it correlates negatively with the frequency of SMS-sending. The third principal component can be interpreted as a kind of attitude that prefers single, horizontal types of relationships focusing primarily on objects, while the fourth can be seen as a kind of “narcissistic” trait that aims at placing the individual at the centre of attention. However, the information content of these latter two is rather cumbersome and less clearly interpretable, so we shall just set them aside.

In our further proceedings we thought it properly reasonable to use the first primary component as the rate of sociability for our analysis.

INTERNET USE AND SOCIABILITY

We have already been able to formulate premises for the connection between sociability and Internet use back at the description of the defining characteristics of sociability. With the help of the sociability rate that we now have at our disposal, we can ascertain the existence of a significant difference between the sociability of the groups of users and non-users of the Internet.

Table 6. Rate of sociability according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.47	0.54	0.60
does not use	-0.18	-0.14	-0.11
<i>Within the group of Internet users</i>			
new user	0.20	0.30	0.41
advanced user	0.47	0.57	0.68
old user	0.58	0.70	0.82

The rate illustrates well that the social skill of the Internet users is characteristically (p=0.000) higher than those who do not use the World Wide Web, what is more, the level of this skill rises significantly further among those who have been using the web for a longer period. We see demographic characteristics as an influence on both sociability and Internet use. In order to filter out the distorting effects of these characteristics, we have examined the rightness of the correlation within the various demographic groups as well.

The Correlation of Sociability and Internet Use according to Age Groups

Table 7. Sociability of the 14–17 year-olds according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.70	0.86	1.01
does not use	0.20	0.38	0.56

p=0.001

Table 8. Sociability of the 18–29 year-olds according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.69	0.79	0.89
does not use	0.21	0.29	0.37

p=0.000

Table 9. Sociability of the 30–39 year-olds according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.07	0.19	0.31
does not use	-0.12	-0.04	0.04

p=0.004

Table 10. Sociability of the 40–49 year-olds according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.13	-0.02	0.27
does not use	-0.29	-0.38	-0.21

p=0.000

Table 11. Sociability of the 50–59 year-olds according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	-0.04	0.17	0.37
does not use	-0.33	-0.26	-0.18

p=0.000

Table 12. Sociability of respondents aged 60 or older, according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	-0.30	0.29	0.89
does not use	-0.36	-0.29	-0.22

p=0.043

Even if we segment the sample according to age we can observe a correlation of sociability and Internet use in every age category. We arrived at a more uncertain result in only one case, namely concerning the respondents aged 60 years or older. The reason for this lies in the low number of elements resulting from the not too widespread use of the Internet among older people.

Correlation of Sociability and Internet Use according to Sex

Table 13. Sociability of males according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.42	0.51	0.60
does not use	-0.15	-0.10	-0.04
<i>Within the group of Internet-users (p=0.043)</i>			
new user	0.08	0.28	0.47
advanced user	0.45	0.60	0.76
old user	0.41	0.56	0.71

p=0.000

Table 14. Sociability of females according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.48	0.56	0.65
does not use	-0.22	-0.18	-0.13
<i>Within the group of Internet-users (p=0.000)</i>			
new user	0.20	0.32	0.44
advanced user	0.41	0.54	0.67
old user	0.71	0.91	1.11

p=0.000

It is apparent that regarding sociability user and non-user respondents differ in both the female and the male groups. The sociability of female Internet users is higher than that of the males.

Correlation of Sociability and Internet Use according to Status Groups and Education

Even more obvious differences can be observed in the volume of sociability within the status group we have coined “deprived”.

Table 15. Sociability registered in the “deprived” group, according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.71	0.84	0.97
does not use	-0.37	-0.31	-0.25

p=0.000

Table 16. Sociability registered in the “inactive rural” group, according to Internet use

	conf.int. bottom	mean	conf.int top
uses	0.32	0.53	0.75
does not use	-0.20	-0.12	-0.05

p=0.000

In view of the digital divide all this proves quite thought inspiring, because the data show that in the case of the most disadvantaged classes use of the Internet raises the amount of social capital, a utilizable resource, significantly.⁶

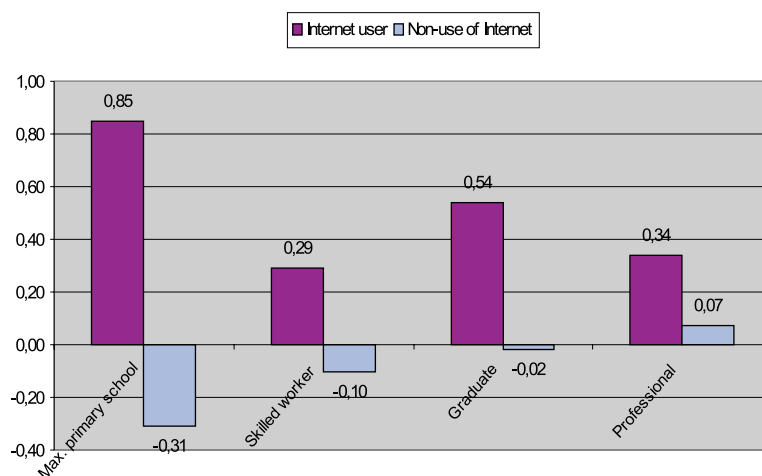


Figure 4. Sociability of groups with various education levels, according to use and non-use of the Internet

6 We have aimed at setting up status groups based on the variables describing demographic and economic status. During the course of our analysis 5 attributes have proven informative in this respect: Education; Settlement type; Economic activity; Net income; Wealth (ownership of certain assets, e. g. a HI-FI tower, a microwave oven)

Based on the above attributes we have distributed the respondents (N=3763) into 5 status groups:

– Deprived: has a low education level, lives in a village or a town, characteristically inactive, has a low income and a bad economic status.

– Rural inactive: skilled worker living in the countryside, has a low income, but an average level of wealth

– Medium level active: is active, has a medium level of education (skilled worker or graduate of a technical college), lives in a smaller settlement, has a relatively good income and wealth level.

– Inactive intellectual: urban, inactive, is characteristically a high-school graduate and has a low income but a medium wealth level (university or college students, for example).

– Elite: urban, university or college graduate, active, has a high income and a high wealth level.

Distribution according to status groups (N=3763)

	%
Deprived	34
Rural inactive	18
Medium level active	25
Inactive intellectual	13
Elite	11

We experience a similar phenomenon just as well if we compare the sociability indices of groups formed according to education levels ($p=0.000$). The change is exceptionally apparent in the case of those who have the lowest education levels, as the index number of the non-users is -0.31 , which sharply contrasts the 0.85 index of the similarly educated users.

Correlation of Sociability and Internet Use according to the Use of the Internet

We have also examined how the index of sociability conforms to the location of the Internet access. Our results definitely emphasize the role of public access points as these significantly attract users who have higher levels of social skills than home users, for example.

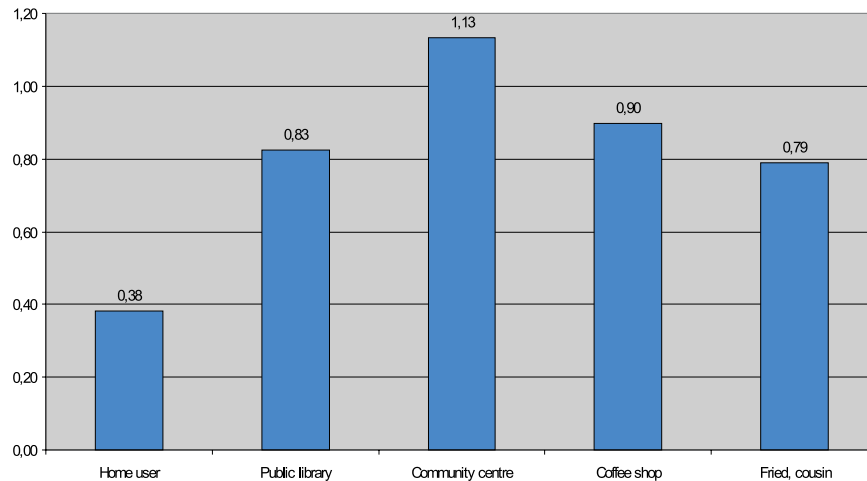


Figure 5. Sociability index according to the location of Internet use

SUMMARY OF THE OBSERVATIONS IN HUNGARY

We can summarize the essence of our findings in the following statement: sociability correlates with Internet use, regardless of sex, age, education and status.⁷ Since we have endeavored to formulate the index number in such a way that a higher rate should imply a higher social skill level, the previous statement can be complemented by observing that users of the Internet have characteristically higher

⁷ We have examined the correlation of Internet use and sociability in all five status groups, but have decided to publicize only the results of the first two groups here. It must be noted, however, that the sociability indices of the net-users were significantly higher in the rest of the status groups as well.

social skill levels than non-users. In only one dimension have we found an unfavorable result regarding Internet users: they, in contrast with non-users, spend significantly less time with the members of their family. In 2002, users of the net spent 4.8 hours less a week with their families than non-users, which means 0.7 hours less in daily distribution. In Hungary, as opposed, for example, to the situation in the US, this tendency does not change, not even in the case of heavy users, who also do not spend more time with their families than the average. In our opinion this is most probably explainable by the underlying age composition of the group of the Hungarian Internet users, which is inclined more towards the younger generation. Youth, in turn, can be naturally assumed to seek the company of their own generation, preferring that to the cultivation of their relationship with their families. All this, of course, provides a basis for those who emphasize the disruptive effects of the Internet on social relationships and underline its fostering isolation.

Our analysis illustrates clearly that regarding social capital using the Internet intensively and for a long time has no detrimental effect. Quite the contrary: using the Internet increases the amount of social activity, and this holds true not only regarding the differentiation between users and non-users, but within specific groups formed according to age, sex, and status as well. That is, if we look at, for example, the age group of 50–59 year-olds, which is composed of both users and non-users, we cannot help but notice that the measure of civic activity, the rate of community commitment, and the amount of time spent with friends and on sport are rather higher among the users of the Internet than among the non-users, what is more, the users' view of the community as a source of information is also characteristically more positive. The data according to which the Internet may appear as a resource by which the most disadvantaged classes can effectively broaden their contact networks and raise their social capital is definitely hope-raising.

It seems that experienced, more extensive (that is, non-biased) and lengthier use of the Internet as a tool of both communication and contact-establishment can help raise social capital. What this means is that finally we have proof – the many promises aside – that use of the Internet has important advantages. We should be more careful about our wording, though, as this statement could be proven really true only if we had the means to examine whether today's experienced users began using the Internet specifically because they had already had a more widespread social network at their disposal (the diffusionist approach that we consider to have great explanatory force would suggest this) or whether their social capital has increased purely because of their using the net. Which model endures more efficiently? Did experienced users start using the Internet because they had already had higher social skills whose higher needs could be perfectly satisfied by the net? Or is it the case that lengthy use of the Internet has a beneficial effect on communicative and contact-making competences?⁸

To truly answer these questions, we would have to compare the current users with their former selves from before they started using the net, instead of contrasting them with social strata whose members are currently unwilling or unable to deal with the Internet. As this is not possible at this time, we will only be able to answer the original

8 Of course it is possible to envision a third, mixed model, in which both assumptions prove true.

question by analyzing the sociability indices from the time series surveys of either currently new users who have been using the net for up to one year so far, or those non-users who are considering becoming Internet users these days. For this analysis, the third year of the WIP may provide a proper basis.

In order to answer the question right now we could only examine and compare the social skill levels of users and non-users coming from the same, or from very similar socio-economic backgrounds. This process, however, has delineated a clear picture. Regardless of whether a group was formed according to generational segmentation, to educational background, or even to status, it was always the Internet users who turned out to have higher sociability indices. Additionally it must be noted again that, among the users old ones (online for 4 or more years) always have even higher scores.

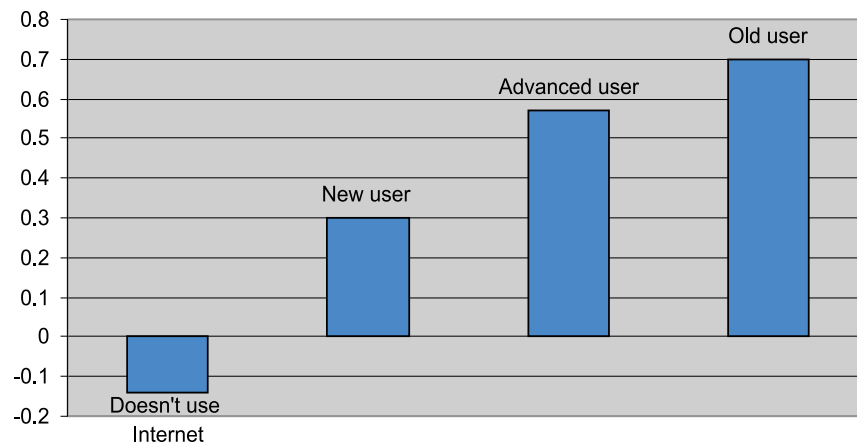


Figure 6. Levels of social skill according to Internet use

All this leads us to think that there exists an effect that affects social skills from the direction of Internet use. It would not be a well-defendable position to claim that whereas all people possessing an inherently high sociability index and hailing from any generational, educational or status group managed to find and utilize the Internet, especially in such an early state of its spread, those possessing lower levels of social skills were forced or chose freely to ignore it completely.

Therefore it seems that we will have to settle for a hypothetical model that assumes the existence of an effect that, arising from the use of the Internet, increases both social capital and the levels of social skills. This model appears to contrast sharply the mechanism which claims that the experienced users of today started using the Internet because of their inherently and significantly higher sociability skills.

However, based on international experience, it is our opinion that there may exist a third explanation. According to this, Hungarian Internet users have higher social capital simply because their present community is very homogenous, that is, the background of the users regarding age, family, social and economic standing is characteristically similar. Since people are, by default, trying to establish contact

mostly with others hailing from similar cultural and social backgrounds, the Internet proves an excellent tool for social network building, as today the users are characterized by socio-economic homogeneity rather than heterogeneity. The Internet simply intensifies the homophilic tendencies in the behavior of its users. This cultural homogeneity cannot yet be broken up as people with characteristically different socio-economic backgrounds cannot be reached on the Internet. It is not a coincidence that it was the users' level of communication with relatives and close friends – that is their bonding social capital – that increased primarily and most perceptibly because of their utilizing the Internet. In the current phase of the research this explanation seems to be the most acceptable for us. Nonetheless, it is our hope that the analysis of the time series data of the WIP will provide us a chance to develop a much clearer picture of the effects that the Internet has on sociability.

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