

## Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet

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*Does the Internet promote or impede social connections and trust? Using surveys from the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life, I show that Internet users are not social isolates. They tend to have slightly wider social circles than nonusers, but their Internet communications are largely with people they know. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Internet users are no more trusting of strangers (but not less trusting either) than nonusers. However, trusting people are more likely to believe that they have little to fear from the Internet. They are more open to shopping on the Internet and are less likely to believe that their privacy will be violated on the Web; they are also less likely to use a false identity on the Web. The social connections that people make on the Internet do not promote trust—indeed, there is some evidence that chat rooms may bring together mistrusting people.*

**Keywords** Internet, social capital, trust

Alex Salcedo, a 13-year-old boy from Kensington, Maryland, was hit by a car near his home. He went into the intensive care unit at a local hospital, was put into an induced coma, and the prognosis was not good. His father created a Web page so that the family could keep apprised of his medical condition. Almost immediately, the family began getting messages of goodwill and prayers from as far away as Venezuela and Mozambique. The Web site received 66,000 hits, with 2,000 messages posted. Alex did not recover, but an online community formed, with a company providing a service to other families

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in crisis, (<http://www.medicalstatus.com>); St. George, 1999). This is the good Net, a caring place where people give of themselves with no expectation of anything in return.

Kevin, a hospital security guard in Idaho, logged on to the Internet for the first time in 1995 in the hospital library. He accidentally discovered a pornography site and kept coming back to this and similar sites. “Eventually,” *U.S. News and World Report* writer Joannie Fischer wrote, “the online sexual world came to take the place of any real-world contact with women.” He eventually fell into a trap set by his employers and “now lives under the constant monitoring of his wife and his boss” (Fischer, 2000, p. 43). This is the bad Net, a place that denies reality and takes people away from whatever real-world social ties they have made.

Which is the real Internet, the good Net or the bad Net? This is a high stakes question because each side sees the World Wide Web as the possible solution or the villain in the drama of the decline of community. In many Western societies, and especially in the United States, there is a concern that citizens are becoming disconnected from each other. We no longer join groups, we don’t socialize with each other, and, above all, we don’t trust each other as much as we did in the past (Putnam, 2000). Supporters of the good Net approach see wired communications as bringing people back together in the spirit of those who helped the Salcedo family come to terms with its tragedy. Adherents of the bad Net theory see the Internet as accelerating the decline of civic engagement and good feelings.

Putnam (1993) referred to a “virtuous circle” of trust, group membership, and informal social ties that has become known as “social capital.” Social capital helps make society and its government run more smoothly. But it is in shorter supply now than it used to be. During the 1960s, Americans began to withdraw from participation in all sorts of civic groups—from the traditional service organizations such as the Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, and the League of Women Voters as well as bowling leagues and card-playing clubs. They socialized less with friends and neighbors and voted less often.

The “inevitable result” was that we became less trusting of one another (Putnam, 2000, chap. 8). In 1960, 58% of Americans believed that “most people can be trusted” (as opposed to saying that “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people”). By the 1990s, barely more than a third of Americans trusted each other, according to national surveys such as the General Social Survey and the American National Election Study. Americans have lost their sense of community. We don’t mix with each other as much as we used to, and we don’t trust each other. We have become more balkanized, our public life has become more contentious, and our national institutions (especially the Congress) struggle to compromise on even the most basic public policy questions.

The principal villain in the decline of social capital is technology, especially television but perhaps also the Internet (Putnam, 2000, chap. 13).<sup>1</sup> I (and others) have exonerated television as the cause of the declines in civic engagement and trust elsewhere (Uslaner, 1998; see also Newton, 1999; Norris, 1996, 2000, 2001). I show in this article that the Internet is *not* to blame either (see also Norris, 2000, 2001; Shah, 1998). I shall examine the connection between the Internet, trust, and civic engagement, using a 1998 survey by the Pew Center for the People and the Press and a 2000 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Briefly, I find no evidence for the claim that people who have stronger social support networks in the “real world” avoid the Web. There is also little support for the argument that the Net is a haven for people who don’t trust others. Nor is there any evidence that people who spend time online are less likely to trust others.

## Civic Life in the New Technological Era

The ultimate payoff of civic engagement is the trust it engenders with our fellow citizens. As Putnam (1993, p. 90) argues: "Participation in civic organizations inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors." Technology, especially television (but perhaps also the Internet), can lead us away from socializing into our private worlds. Watching a lot of television keeps us inside our homes and away from the civic organizations and social connections that generate trust. Heavy TV viewing also leads us to believe that the real world is as "mean" and violent as the programs we see on television, so it makes us less likely to trust strangers (Gerbner et al., 1980). Television produces misanthropes who see the world as a dark and threatening place and whose "Friends" are fictional characters whom you will never be asked to help out. The ultimate television viewer was Chauncy Gardner, the character in Jerzy Kosinski's novel, *Being There*. Gardner had no social ties and thought the television world was the real world.

That's the old technology. Today there are even more mistrusters, and civic engagement has dropped further. The new culprit seems to be the Internet. Even more so than television, the Internet may be a lonely place. We hear stories of people who become addicted to the Net, who spend their hours in front of a computer screen and ignore their families and dissociate themselves from friends. Television programs may make you think that the world is mean. The Internet will show you just how nasty folks can be.

When you enter an Internet chat room, you can hide your identity, "flame" other people, and "troll" first time visitors to a Web site. The Net can be a dangerous place, where "charities" solicit funds for nonexistent causes (Abelson, 1999), scoundrels feign love for lonely hearts, and unscrupulous hackers uncover your credit card numbers. The newsmagazine *U.S. News and World Report* (2000, p. 36) published a special investigative report suggesting that "the amount of bad stuff out there is truly staggering"—adoption scams, stalking complaints, rigged auctions, and even "the first Internet serial killer." We picture the Internet version of Chauncy Gardner as a loner sitting in front a keyboard, mouse, and monitor playing "Doom" (or whatever gamers do these days). This is the bad Net.

It would be easy to ignore these horror stories if there were not serious academic research supporting the view of the Internet as a haven for social isolates. At a minimum, Nie and Erbring (2000) report that heavy Internet users report that they have cut back on their social ties. Net use leads people away from social contacts and toward staring at their monitors in not-so-splendid isolation. Heavy Internet users *become* more depressed, lead more stressful lives, and have fewer friends, even though they may start out as well off psychologically as the rest of us (Kraut et al., 1998).

Yet, this is just one face of the Internet. Others see the Net as the great opportunity to rebuild our lost sense of community and trust. People come together on the Net through e-mail lists, affinity groups, support groups, and chat rooms. The Internet connects people from all over the world and may be, as Hauber and Hauben (1997, p. 5) argue, "a grand intellectual and social commune in the spirit of the collective nature present at the origins of human society."

The Internet also lets us connect with people with shared interests whom we otherwise would not meet. The Internet is the great leveller of class and race barriers, which have proven to be strong disincentives to effective participation in American society (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Our Net contacts may come from different backgrounds or live far away from us (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1997). All sorts of good things

happen on the Net, including opportunities to volunteer (Maloney, 1999) and many different types of support groups. Some are simply outlets to share information. Others provide forums for people to connect with each other, such as USENET chat groups and the now-famous WELL, the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, which established itself as the counterculture on the Web (Rheingold, 1993). And others even serve as forums for people to help each other in times of crisis and grief (St. George, 1999). When people go online, they feel less restrained in interacting with strangers than they would in daily life (Tranvik, 2000, pp. 13–14).

Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001, pp. 150–152; see also Shah, 1998) argue that people who use the Internet for information (primarily exchanging e-mails) are slightly more likely to get involved in their communities and are significantly more likely to trust other people compared to people who use the Net for other reasons (ranging from chat rooms to buying goods to doing research to not connecting at all). Younger people who communicate with others are especially likely to trust others and to participate in their communities.

The Internet may well be the route to *restoring* our frayed social ties (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). While some studies see the Net as a mean place, others see it as a ray of hope. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported survey results showing that Internet users have *wider* social networks than people who do not connect to the Web (Raney, 2000; Robinson et al., 2000). Moreover, these online connections often lead to “real-world” friendships (Blanchard & Horan, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As computer literacy and Internet access grow, Americans should reconnect with each other, thus forming the base for a new era of trust. This is the good Net. Which is the real Net?

### **The Net: Who Goes There?**

I offer a third perspective: The Internet neither destroys nor creates social capital. There are both altruists and scoundrels on the Net, just as there are in everyday life (cf. Bimber, 2000; Wallace, 1999, p. 190). Indeed, the Internet, like television, mirrors everyday life. What people do online is pretty much what they do offline: They shop, they get sports news and weather, they plan their vacations, and, most of all, they contact people they already know through e-mail. At least one survey (Cole, 2000) and a time-diary study (Robinson et al., 2002) suggest that Net surfers socialize with others about the same amount as other people. The Net is not a threat. But it is not Nirvana either.

The major reason why the Internet is not the “new new thing” of trust and civic engagement is that much of the current discussion of the “virtuous circle” of trust, civic engagement, and socializing is misplaced. Trust in other people is trust in strangers, people who are different from yourself. Trust is essential for a civil and a cooperative society, but it does *not* depend upon your life experiences—whether you visit friends and relatives, join civic organizations, watch television, or surf the Internet. Instead, trust reflects an optimistic world view and a belief that others share your fundamental values. You learn trust from your parents, mostly when you are young. Elsewhere, I show how trust in others stems from an upbeat world view and is transmitted early in life from one’s family rather than later in life from one’s friends and civic groups (Uslaner, 2002, chaps. 4–5). If trust does not stem from social interactions—joining groups, participating in politics, and all sorts of informal socializing—there is little reason to presume that new technologies will fare any better in engendering faith in others.

You are not likely to become more trusting of people who are different from your-

self by interacting in clubs or in coffee klatches with people like yourself (Uslaner, 2002, chap. 4). Nor are you likely to become more trusting through online communities. In each case, your social interactions occur with people who share your interests. There is no reason to presume that online support groups will do a better job of creating trusting attitudes than will choral societies or playing cards, two of Putnam's key civic associations.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, there is little reason to presume that the Internet will make social butterflies out of homebodies. The Net does make communication easier, so it would hardly be surprising that people with lots of friends and large support networks will use the Internet more than loners. They have more people to talk to. However, these impacts should not be large. The Net is not transformative.

Much of the debate over whether "online communities" are really communities (cf. Etzioni & Etzioni, 1997; Galston, 1999; Rheingold, 1993) is misplaced—for two distinct reasons. First, we may expect too much of technology. Putnam's indictment of television may have been too hasty, as other research has shown (Newton, 1999; Norris, 1996, 2000, 2001; Uslaner, 1998). Bimber (1998) argues more broadly that there is little reason to expect a link between technology and civic engagement: With each new technology, from the post office to the telephone to television and the Internet, more and more people have access to information that would make it easier to participate in civic life. Yet, participation rates have contracted, not expanded, as information resources proliferate. The Internet can provide a forum for participation. It will not necessarily lead to more people getting involved. As Yogi Berra, the American baseball player and mangler of the English language, said: "If the people don't want to come out to the ballpark, nobody's going to stop them."<sup>3</sup> The same holds for the Internet: Joiners in the "real world" are the online activists. Whatever has happened to communities and trust—throughout the Western world, not just in the United States—is not likely the fault of the Internet or any other medium.

Second, communities, whether online or offline, generally don't build trust in strangers. They can't. Most of our group memberships and informal socializing take place with people very much like ourselves. And there is no way to get from trust in people like yourself to trust in strangers (Rosenblum, 1998, pp. 45, 48; Uslaner, 2002, chap. 5).

We may be more willing to make contact with "strangers" in online communities (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), but are these people we don't know, who may live in another part of the country or even the world, really "strangers"? From e-mail (the most widely used part of the Internet) to chat rooms to support groups, going online involves communicating with others. Trust develops between people of divergent backgrounds, whereas the Net excels in bringing together people who already have something in common—be it family ties, friendship, working in the same office, political views, or needing the same kind of medical information and/or psychological support. And many (most?) of these online communities are composed of transients—people who stop by to gain some information, get or give some moral support, and then go their own way (Galston, 1999, p. 52). They have little expectation of meeting the same people elsewhere in the wired world. What is perhaps the most widely visited *interactive* site, the auctioneer ebay, is based upon the premise of one-shot online meetings that are commercial transactions rather than social networks.<sup>4</sup>

Are you likely to meet different types of people in a USENET group discussing politics than you are in a "real life" group? Hill and Hughes (1997) suggest not. Online as well as offline, we are most likely to connect with people very much like ourselves. Preece's (1999) community of people with sports injuries are all interested in athletics.

If we do make different types of connections online, it may well reflect an initial reservoir of trust rather than an acquired set of values. Stolle (1998) argues that trusting people may be more likely to get involved in their communities, reflecting a “self-selection” effect. The Net may consume trust, rather than produce it.

Trust is not irrelevant to the Internet. Far from it. Going online does not make people either more or less trusting, but trust shapes how people interact with each other. Trusting people are less likely to fear getting involved with strangers. In everyday life, trusters are less likely to lock their doors at night and to use guns to protect themselves. They are more likely to volunteer, give to charity, and invite strangers to their home (Uslaner, 2002, chaps. 2, 5). On the Net, trusting people should see others as nice folks who won’t exploit them—so they should be less worried about violations of their privacy. They should be more likely to interact with strangers when there is no evidence of shared interests on the Net. And they should shun the “seamier” aspects of the Web, such as hiding their true identity. More generally, there is little reason to believe that people who trust others will be more or less likely to use the Internet.

Much of the “evidence” on the causes and effects of Internet use is anecdotal; this makes it easy for people to offer alternative accounts of who goes there. Yet, more and more of it is systematic. A small survey by Kraut et al. (1998) and a much larger one by Nie and Erbring (2000) found “mean world” effects. The subjects in each of these surveys were given computers *on the condition that they regularly logged on to the Web*. We don’t know what effects the “forced” use of the Web had on people.<sup>5</sup> The Nie and Erbring (2000) study asked people whether their social interactions increased, decreased, or stayed the same but provided no baseline for the overall level of activity. If heavy Net users had less time for social interactions *but still were more active than the nonconnected*, there would be no way for us to know that from the Nie-Erbring study (from Stanford University).

The Cole (2000) study (from UCLA) shows no strong differences in social interactions between Net users and the unconnected, and these results are from a random sample of the American population, like the Pew surveys. This is more reasonable, but the published results from both studies so far have been bivariate. The studies by Shah and his colleagues (Shah, 1998; Shah et al., 2001) did use multivariate analyses. However, they used the DDB Needham Lifestyle Surveys, which are not random samples of the public. And their measure of “trust” was whether respondents see people as “honest.” Honesty may *seem like* trust, but in the one survey that asked both questions (the 1972 American National Election Survey), the correlation between trust and honesty was just .345 (tau-b; see Uslaner, 2002, p. 72).

Thus, there is clearly the need for more systematic testing. And that is what I set out to do here.

## What the Data Tell Us

What is the connection between trust, socialibility, and Internet usage? I analyze data from two surveys: a 1998 survey of technology use by the Pew Center for the People and the Press and the 2000 Trust and Privacy Survey of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The 1998 poll is the “gold standard” of surveys of Internet use. It includes many good questions about Web usage and social connections, as well as the generalized trust question. The 2000 survey has many more questions on Net usage, including a large number that might (and do) depend upon the sense of solidarity with others reflected in the generalized trust question. The 2000 survey, however, has no measures of

social support networks. So the statistical models for the 2000 survey are not directly comparable to those for 1998. Each set of results is compelling in its own right to obviate the problems of comparability.

The linkage of Internet use with trust is the key question for determining whether the Net is good or bad (or neither). Questions of sociability are interesting in their own right—but it is unclear whether they are linked with generating trust. There is ample reason to be skeptical. Nonetheless, evidence for either sociability or social pathologies on the Web can at least alleviate or confirm the fears about the Internet. Does Internet use lead to social isolation, so that trust can never develop? Or might it lead to the creation of new communities that might provide more fertile grounds for trust?

The 1998 survey asked 2,000 Americans a variety of questions about going online, as well as about their social networks and their trust in others and in government. (Alas, neither survey asked questions on group membership, which is a key element of social capital.) I estimated 18 models using ordered probit analysis. These models allow me to determine which factors best predict different forms of Internet use. Each model contains many factors that might lead to more Internet usage,<sup>6</sup> but I focus on trust and measures of sociability (“How wide is your social support network?” “How often do you visit family members?” and “How frequently do you call friends?”). The results are presented in Table 1, which is split into four sections: frequency of use, sociability online, concerns about security, and what people do online. To save space, I only report the significance levels of the ordered probit coefficients. When a cell is blank, the coefficient is nonsignificant. A negative sign for significance level indicates that the coefficient is negative.

The results clearly show that the Internet is neither the tool of the devil nor the new Jerusalem—which heralds the renaissance of a national sense of community and trust in one another. For most types of general use of the Internet—using e-mail; getting information on health, business, sports, and stocks; expressing your views online; and buying goods online—trust either doesn’t matter at all or doesn’t matter much. Surprisingly, e-mail users are more likely to trust others, and people who get stock quotes online are ever so slightly more likely to trust others. These relationships are not strong. Beyond that, general use of the Internet is connected neither to trust nor to sociability. All sorts of people go online to seek information: the trusting and the misanthrope, the sociable and the recluse.

There is little reason to expect that simply going online either taps or drains sociability (or trust). Kraut et al. (1998) and Nie and Erbring (2000) argue that people who spend a lot of time online are the misanthropes. But the Pew Center survey offers little support for this view. People who use their computers a lot, who spend a lot of time online (both in real time and how often they connect), and who *say that they spend too much time on the Net* are no less trusting than people who don’t go online at all. Neither the Internet nor television remakes people’s personalities (Uslaner, 1998).

The picture of heavy surfers as loners is also wrong: The heaviest users of the Internet have *wider* social circles and support networks. People with large support networks were more likely to be online yesterday, more likely to go online often, and less likely to say that they are online “too much.” People who visit their family often are more likely to use e-mail (perhaps to contact the same family members) and to spend a lot of time on the computer. People who believe that the Internet helps them keep in touch (as opposed to isolating them) are significantly more likely to use e-mail, to go online often, to visit chat rooms, to get health information, to buy goods, and to seek out sports news. Much of the time, however, the size of support networks simply doesn’t

**Table 1**  
Summary of effects from 1998 Pew Technology Survey

	Trust	Support	Visit family	Call friends	Keep in touch	Paper	Watch TV	TV news	TV time	Trust government	Other significant variables
Frequency of use											
Use e-mail	.05	-.10	.10		.0001	.05					Age, student
Computer time			.05			-.05			.001		No religion
Online yesterday		.05									
Time online					.0001			.01		.01	Male, student
Often online		.05									Family income, age
Too much online		-.01									Male, single
E-mail: more communication									.01		Single
Sociability online											
Chat online	-.10				.01						Age
New friend	-.05						.10				
Give views online						.05					Student, not self-employed, single
Concerns about security											
Worry: privacy	-.0001				-.0001					-.01	
Worry: medical records insecure											
Worry: virus	-.01	-.01			-.05				.01		Male
What people do											
Health information					.0001		-.05			-.10	Male, single, no religion
Buy goods					.01						Age, male, income, single, no religion
Sports news					.05	.10				-.10	Male, own home, single
Business news							.05				Male
Stock quotes	.05								.05		

matter at all. The Internet, then, does not herald a new spirit of community. Rather, it is an additional outlet for people who already are connected to other people (Katz & Aspden, 1998).

Net usage is largely determined by demographics. The anecdotal profile of the Net surfer is a young male libertarian—and this is pretty much what we see in Table 1. Young male students, generally single and often with no religion (and sometimes distrusting government), are the heaviest users of the Net. In a few cases, such as how much time one spends online and whether one buys goods on the Internet, income matters. Overall, feeling comfortable with the Net (believing that it helps keep you in touch) and demographics overwhelm social ties and trust as predictors of Net use. There is little evidence in this survey that Internet users shut themselves off from other people—or from other forms of media, either. Net users are also generally more likely to spend a lot of time watching television and to read a newspaper regularly (cf. Norris, 2000, p. 117; Robinson et al., 2000, 2002).

There are two exceptions to this general pattern. First, a new innovation of the Internet—chat rooms—offers some hope that people of different backgrounds might get together and learn to trust one another. But here, of all places, we see some evidence of misanthropy. People who visit chat rooms or who make new friends online are no more or less sociable than anyone else. They don't have bigger or smaller support networks and are no more likely to visit relatives or call friends. Yet, they are *less trusting* than others (cf. Shah et al., 2001, p. 149). Perhaps people who make friends online, often anonymously, feel uncomfortable with meeting “real” strangers. And many, maybe most, chat rooms are marked by a dominant worldview or ideology—and dissidents often find out rather rudely that they are not welcome (Hill & Hughes, 1997; Wallace, 1999, pp. 101–102). People who frequent chat rooms seem to trust only people like themselves and fear people with different views.

Second, people who mistrust others fear the Internet much as they accept all sorts of other conspiracy theories. They worry about their privacy generally and in particular about the security of their medical records and downloading viruses. Trusters see the Internet as more benign. Trusting people believe that they can control the world and have faith that science will solve our problems (Uslaner, 2002, chap. 4). They see the Internet as an additional tool that gives them leverage over their world (Wallace, 1999, p. 173).

Overall, then, the 1998 Pew technology survey does not suggest a strong linkage between Internet usage and generalized trust. Misanthropes seem to worry about their security on the Web, as they do elsewhere (Uslaner, 2002, chap. 5). There is some evidence that people who socialize with friends and family connect to the Web more (and are likely to connect with many of the same people). And people who go to the Net for their social life—making new friends or visiting chat rooms—feel that most people are not trustworthy.

Overall, the 1998 Pew technology poll suggests that the Internet neither creates nor destroys social capital. Simply using the Internet does not distinguish trusters from mistrusters. There is some modest evidence that people with larger support networks go online more often, but they are not distinctive in their Internet usage otherwise. There are a few exceptions that seem to support the “bad Net” view: Mistrusters are more likely to make new friends online and ever so slightly more likely to go to chat rooms. This may reflect mistrusters' misanthropy—their willingness to make new connections when they can hide their own identity (see below) and to substitute vicarious friendships for real ones. Mistrusters are also more likely to worry that the Internet will intrude on

their personal space. They are worried about privacy issues and even that their computers might become infected. Yet, none of these results imply that worrying about privacy or even getting a virus would make people *less trusting*. They only suggest that people who worry about others' motives offline also fear being tricked online.

### **The Evidence Updated: The 2000 Trust and Privacy Survey**

The 2000 Trust and Privacy Survey, with 2,117 respondents (Fox, 2000), has many more questions on Internet usage, but no questions on socialibility. Here I focus on the connections between trust and 43 measures of Internet use in the survey. The models, which are more sparse than for the 1998 survey, are estimated by either ordered or simple probit analysis.<sup>7</sup>

The 43 measures are divided into four groups again: one for time online and using e-mail, a second for security concerns, a third for privacy issues, and a fourth for what people do on the Web. In Table 2, I summarize the results of the 43 probits, again focusing on significance levels of the coefficients. But this is too quick and unsure a method of investigating impacts. So in Tables 3 and 4, I report the probabilities derived from the probit analyses for the Internet variables that had significant coefficients for trust. Unlike regression analyses, the probit coefficients have no straightforward interpretations. The standard way of estimating impacts in probit is to estimate the probability that the dependent variable takes on a given value for both trusters and mistrusters, letting all other variables take their "natural" values.

Finally, in Table 5, I resolve an anomaly from Table 2. In Table 2, it seems that trusting people go online less than misanthropes. To see whether this finding is robust, I run a two-stage least squares regression, which permits reciprocal causation between frequency online and trust. This resolves the anomaly: Trust does not shape frequency online, nor does how often one surfs determine trust.

The easiest way to summarize Table 2 is that, once again, demographics are the key determinants of Internet use. Once more, most of the effects of time watching television are positive. But here the rationale isn't quite so compelling in all cases. Many of the most interesting questions in this table bear little relationship to media exposure. They do tap trust, and generally in predictable ways.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (1998, p. 1) reported that Internet users who had not made an online purchase were worried about credit card security. The Pew Trust and Privacy Survey in 2000 shows a high level of distrust of strangers: 61% of respondents say that you can't be too careful in dealing with people. And mistrusters are *very* concerned about the Internet. They see it as a threatening place where hackers might steal your credit card number, businesses will get personal information, Web dealings will not be private, others will know where you have been on the Web, you might download a virus, and others will learn private things about your life. In turn, they tend to limit their interactions. They don't respond to e-mail from strangers—even though they are *more* likely to say that they have received an offensive e-mail from a stranger. They respond in kind, being *less* likely to use their real name on the web and *more* likely to use fake identifications and e-mail addresses on the Web.

Trusting people show just the opposite profile. Offline, trusting people overall see the Web as a place occupied with many trustworthy people and companies. They have no desire to hide their identity. Trusting people are more tolerant of people of different races and religions and of minorities that have faced discrimination. They have more favorable attitudes toward immigrants and are more likely to favor open markets. Online,

**Table 2**  
Summary of significant predictors from 2000 Pew Trust and Privacy Survey

Dependent variable	Trust	TV time	Significant predictors
Time spent online		.10	Education, Black (-), male
Frequency online	-.10	.05	Male, retired, divorced/separated (-)
Read e-mail online		-.05	Age (-), education, female
Worry business gets personal info.	.0001	-.10	Black (-), age (-), divorced/ separated
Worry others get credit card number			Black (-), single
Concerned hackers get credit card no.	-.001	.10	Female, single, age
Confident Web dealings private	.0001	-.05	Black (-), age (-)
Worry others read e-mail			Education (-)
Worry others know Web site visits	-.05		Unemployed (-), male, single (-)
OK for companies to track visits			Age (-), student, single (-), male
Companies must ask permission	.10	.05	Black (-), unemployed, female, single (-)
Worry download virus	-.01		Unemployed (-), Black
Concerned rumors on stock prices	-.05	-.10	Black
Concerned bad medical advice			Student, Black, female
Concerned others learn about you	-.10		
Concerned others use fake identity		.10	Female, single
Willing to use real name on Web site			Female
Have used real name on Web site	.10	.10	Age (-)
Ever used fake identity on Web	-.05		Education, male, age (-)
Ever used fake e-mail address	-.10		Age (-), read newspaper, male, education
Sent encrypted e-mail			Male, education, age (-)
Sign name on medical Web site		.10	Read newspaper, Black, male, retired (-),
Sign name on dating site		.05	Education, Black, male, single (-), unemployed
Use credit card for telephone orders	.001	.05	Read newspaper, Black (-), single (-), divorced (-)
Use credit card on Web		.05	Education, male, Black, read paper, retired (-)
Use online calendar for appointments		-.10	Education, female
Reply to e-mail from stranger	.05		Male, age (-)
Got offensive e-mail from stranger	-.05		Black (-), education
Made new friend on Internet			Age (-), single, divorced/separated
Visit chat rooms online		.10	Age (-), single, education (-)
Use online dating services			Single, divorced/separated
Participate in auction online			Black (-), male, retired (-), divorced/separated (-)
Use online banking	-.10		Student (-), age (-), read paper (-), male, single (-)
Ever clicked on ad on Web			Male, age (-), Black, read newspaper
Get news online			Student, education, male

(Table continues next page)

**Table 2**Summary of significant predictors from 2000 Pew Trust and Privacy Survey (*Continued*)

Dependent variable	Trust	TV time	Significant predictors
Get financial news online			Education, male, unemployed (-), retired, age (-)
Get product information online		.05	Single (-), male, read newspaper
Get travel information online			Education, female
Get medical information online		.05	Female, Black, single (-)
Get political information online			Education, retired (-), unemployed, divorced/separated
Get government information online			Education, retired (-), read newspaper, single (-), unemployed (-)
Go online for fun			Education
Ever buy product online		.05	

*Note.* Entries are significance levels from probits and ordered probits, with signs of probit coefficients.

trusters respond to e-mails from strangers and receive fewer offensive missives from people they don't know (either because it takes more to offend them or they get on fewer lists with people who write nasty notes). They worry less about what others might learn about them and don't fear that others will invade their personal lives or spread lies. They are more likely to demand that companies ask permission to get personal information, but they will use their credit card numbers for phone orders (though, surprisingly, there is no difference for Internet orders).

On matters not related to privacy and security, there is little that separates trusters and mistrusters on the Net. Trusting people are no more likely to go online to get information of any sort, or even to buy products. They are no more prone to go to the Web for fun or to spend lots of time on it. There is one exception: how often people go online. There is a modest negative relationship between trust and how often people go online. I shall revisit this below.

In Tables 3 and 4, I present the probabilities of some of the significant variables in Table 2 for trusters and mistrusters. For the simple probits in Table 3, the interpretations are straightforward: 63.1% of generalized trusters say that they use their real names on the Web, compared to 55.7% of mistrusters, for a difference of 7.4%. This percentage difference is called a probit "effect." We see similar effects for ever having used a fake ID on the Web and having replied to e-mails from strangers—and slightly larger ones for using a credit card on the phone and receiving an offensive e-mail from strangers. The effect is somewhat less for whether companies should ask permission for personal information on the Internet. This is not surprising, since the issue is more consensual and also less prone to personal worries. In Table 2, trusters are (perhaps surprisingly) less likely to use Internet banking. Here we see the difference is about 5%. Overall, on matters of privacy, trusters are between 7% and 10% more likely to give strangers (and companies) the benefit of the doubt.

The interpretations for Table 4 are somewhat more complicated, since each of the dependent variables is categorical. I have divided the table into four columns of data, since most of the Internet questions had four categories. Frequency online and time

**Table 3**  
Simple probit probabilities for trust: 2000 Pew Trust and Privacy Survey

Dependent variable	Careful	Trust	Change in probability
Use credit card on phone	.559	.647	.088
Use real name on Web site	.557	.631	.074
Ever used fake ID on Web	.308	.232	-.076
Replied to e-mail from stranger	.236	.307	.071
Received offensive e-mail from stranger	.329	.235	-.094
Companies on Internet should ask permission for personal information	.837	.874	.037
Used Internet banking	.178	.131	-.047

online have seven and eight categories respectively, so I report the extreme categories. A total of 18.5% of trusters *never* go online, compared to 14.9% of misanthropes; 18% of trusters, compared to 22.1% of misanthropes, go online several times daily. For time online, there are few significant differences.

We see more pronounced differences for privacy concerns. Mistrusters are 12.4% more likely to be *very* concerned that businesses have access to their personal information (and 4% less likely to be not at all concerned). They are almost 20% more worried that Web dealings are not private (combining the last two categories) and 8% less likely to dismiss a worry that someone might know which Web sites they have visited. Mistrusters are 8% more likely to worry a lot about downloading a virus and almost 15% more likely to be very worried about hackers getting their credit card number. The differences in concern for false rumors on stock prices and learning about people on auctions are smaller: 5% to 6%. These differences probably reflect lower participation rates in stock trading online (just 11% of the sample) and taking part in auctions (16%).

Perhaps people don't participate in these activities because they are concerned about security, though the data in Table 2 don't provide much support for this argument. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that people who already mistrust others will be particularly concerned about Internet security and privacy. Since most Americans don't trust each other, this is a potentially worrisome feature for the growth of online business and investing. While it seems at least a bit curious that people will do business on the Internet even as they worry about its security, it doesn't take much imagination to think what type of scare might drive people away from e-commerce, or perhaps Web sites more generally.

These findings suggest that many Americans see the Web as more threatening than welcoming. There is a reservoir of suspicion that technologies beyond our control, often beyond our comprehension, are intruding on our personal lives, with less than benign intentions. This makes sense when we realize that mistrust reflects a pessimistic world view and a feeling that things are beyond our control (Uslaner, 2002, chaps. 2, 4). And these worries go well beyond our own personal fears. Almost 60% of Americans worry that others might learn about them from online auctions, even though just 16% have ever taken part in such an auction.

The growing opportunities for socializing on the Web are not havens for caring people looking to bond with like-minded folk. Forty-three percent of people who have

**Table 4**  
Ordered probit probabilities for Trust: 2000 Pew Trust and Privacy Survey

Variable	Category					
Frequency online						
Careful	Never	Rarely	.024	Every day	.256	Several times daily
Trust	.149	.185	.028		.239	.221
Time online						
Careful	None	Less than 15 min	.028	3-4 hours	.045	4 hours or more
Trust	.482	.451	.028		.050	.058
Concerned business gets personal info.						
Careful	Very	Somewhat	.242	Not too	.055	Not at all
Trust	.660	.536	.298		.084	.043
How confident Web dealings private						
Careful	Very	Somewhat	.427	Not too	.307	Not at all
Trust	.064	.143	.525		.234	.203
Worry someone might know Web sites visited						
Careful	A lot	Some	.240	Not very much	.274	Not at all
Trust	.094	.063	.197		.264	.392
Worry about virus from downloading						
Careful	A lot	Some	.379	Not very much	.263	Not at all
Trust	.201	.126	.332		.300	.242
Worry hackers get credit card number						
Careful	Very	Somewhat	.099	Not too	.099	Not at all
Trust	.503	.357	.130		.130	.133
Concerned about false rumors on stock prices						
Careful	Very	Somewhat	.218	Not too	.202	Not at all
Trust	.292	.231	.204		.209	.288
Concerned others learn about you from online actions						
Careful	Very	Somewhat	.281	Not too	.186	Not at all
Trust	.327	.277	.275		.199	.205
						.249

made new friends online have used a fake ID, compared to just 19% of people who have not made a new friend ( $\phi = .232$ , Yule's  $Q = .511$ ). Thirty-eight percent of folks with new online friends have used a fake e-mail address, compared to 15% without such friends ( $\phi = .247$ , Yule's  $Q = .555$ ). We see a similar dynamic for chat rooms, with almost identical percentages and measures of association.<sup>8</sup> This pattern even holds for using online dating services: 20% looking for love used fake e-mail addresses, compared to just 6% who did not seek a mate ( $\phi = .185$ , Yule's  $Q = .560$ ).

We should not mistake socializing with trusting. One is neither the cause nor the effect of the other. Misanthropes have friends and family too—and it seems that many of their friends are online. Deception is easy on the Internet. Recall the cartoon in *The New Yorker* where a canine sits in front of a computer and mumbles to another dog: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” The ability to hide your true identity gives mistrusters a defense mechanism on the Internet that is not so easily available in real life.

Some forms of Web use make us vulnerable to people who would deceive us. People visiting auctions are twice as likely to use a false e-mail address as those who don't visit auctions ( $\phi = .142$ , Yule's  $Q = .388$ ). If you are prone to mistrust others, the Internet will prove you right.

Yet, this is just a partial view of the Internet. Sixty percent of all respondents have never gone to chat rooms *or* made new friends online. Only 15% of all respondents have used a fake ID and have gone to chat rooms or made new friends online. Most people who use the Internet log on for such mundane reasons as getting e-mail (87%) or obtaining information on government (51%), travel (37%), or medical conditions (36%). We are most likely to exchange e-mail with people we already know well, so e-mail can help foster the “good Net.” Going online for information doesn't involve two-way communication. So you can't be “exploited” by mistrusters (assuming that the information is correct).

Most of the time, then, the Net is neutral. It neither creates social bonds nor destroys them. It does not build up trust or destroy it. To make the point more clearly, I conducted a two-stage least squares analysis of trust and frequency of going online. Here I seek to determine whether trusting people go online less often or whether going online frequently makes people less trusting, as the “mean world” thesis would have us believe. I chose frequency of going online for this analysis because trust had a significant effect on it in Table 2. I report the two-stage least squares model in Table 5.

The Pew Trust and Privacy Survey does not have the range of variables that I have generally included in models for trust. The survey is particularly lacking in measures of optimism and control. I thus include one measure of optimism (satisfied with the direction of the country) and a surrogate often used as part of a trust scale, whether one believes that most people are fair.<sup>9</sup> Aside from that, the model includes the standard demographics, dummies for region (we know that the southern states have lower levels of trust and many midwestern states are higher in trust), how much time the respondent watches television, and a series of measures of Internet use, including how often one goes online. Finally, I use a measure of whether the respondent knows what a “cookie” is as an additional measure of education. Some other models for trust (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Gerbner et al., 1980; Putnam, 1995) have argued that people who watch a lot of television become less trusting. I have found that once measures of optimism and control are added to the mix, especially in simultaneous equation estimations, the effects of television viewing vanish (Uslaner, 1998). But the present survey has no good measures of optimism, so I include the amount of television respondents view in the equation.

**Table 5**  
Two-stage least squares estimation for trust and frequency online:  
2000 Pew Trust and Privacy Survey

Independent variable	Coefficient	T ratio (significance)
Equation for trust in people		
Frequency online	-.054	-.919
Time online	-.001	-.045
Visit chat rooms	-.032	-.523
Make new friend online	-.009	-.126
Been cheated when buying online	.139	.908
Credit card ever stolen	.006	.093
Concerned others give fake ID	.022	1.031
Know what cookies are	.080	1.286*
Most people are fair	.359	6.320***
Satisfied with direction of country	.125	2.223**
Age	.001	.430
Education	-.015	-.813
Family income	.018	1.070
Black	.122	1.399*
Student	.028	.458
South	-.133	-2.169**
Midwest	-.114	-1.438
Time watching TV per day	-.035	-2.115**
Constant	.326	.203*
Equation for frequency online		
Trust in people	-.527	-.987
Read newspaper	-.269	-1.128
Time watching TV per day	.112	1.475*
Education	.055	.646
Student	-.046	-.163
Unemployed	.759	1.870**
Black	.178	.462
Gender	.052	.218
Retired	.893	1.640*
Single	-.188	-.592
Divorced/separated	-.255	-.360
Family income	.158	2.351**
Age	-.011	-.955
Ever buy at auction	1.160	3.988****
Ever buy stocks	.888	2.438**
Constant	.899	.96

$N = 327$ ,  $R^2 = .050$ ,  $RMSE = 2.759$ .

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

The equation for time online includes trust, other media consumption, demographics, and two key reasons why people go online: to go to auctions and to buy stocks.

The results of the two-stage least squares estimation are clear: Going online a lot does *not* make you less trusting. Nor does how much time you spend online, whether you visit chat rooms, make new friends, have been cheated when you bought something, have your credit card stolen, or are concerned that others will use fake identities. Internet usage does not destroy trust, but it doesn't create trust either. No matter what you do online, you don't become more (or less) trusting. The model suggests that the more you watch television, the less trusting you'll be—but this result is not sustained in other surveys with better measures of optimism and control. The two measures of optimism and control are by far the best predictors of trust. Of the other predictors, only the dummy variables for South and Black reach significance.

Trusting people are also no more or less likely to go online frequently than misanthropes. Indeed, the main reason why people go online frequently is to buy things, either at auctions or from stock brokers.<sup>10</sup> Some other demographics also matter: People who watch a lot of television also go online more frequently, as do the unemployed and retired (who have more free time at different hours of the day) and people with higher incomes.

### Good Net, Bad Net

Overall, there are no grounds for proclaiming a “good Net” or a “bad Net.” Most uses of the Internet are rather mundane. Most people don't go online looking to build a sense of community—or to destroy it. Yes, there are plenty of opportunities to deceive on the Web. The Internet is filled with pornography, but it didn't invent sex, and nobody is forcing folks to visit these sites (or others that sell Viagra to dogs or let children gamble). And yes, there are more opportunities on the Web to give to charities, to find volunteering opportunities, and to give solace to others. But that isn't the whole Internet either. Perhaps if the surveys had included questions on these activities, which *are linked to trust* (Uslaner, 2002, chap. 5), I might have found more evidence for the “good Net.” The World Wide Web is very much like the world. It makes things better in some ways and worse in others. But it is not transforming. If you want to make a revolution, you have to go offline.

The Internet, then, is not a reservoir of social capital. As in everyday life, there are places where trust matters, and there are even more places where it doesn't. Trust matters most when people fear the unknown and worry that this new technology can come back to haunt them. And there is little evidence that the Internet will create new communities to make up for the decline in civic engagement that has occurred over the past four decades in the United States. Yet, there is even less evidence that the Internet is pushing people away from traditional social ties or making them less trusting. The following is a brief summary of what I have found regarding the Internet, trust, and social ties:

- Trusting people are generally not more likely to use the Internet than mistrusters.
- Mistrusters may substitute virtual friends on the Internet for “real-life friends” (although these relations are not strong).
- As trust makes people willing to take risks offline, trusters are more willing to take risks online (such as entering their credit card number or replying to e-mails from strangers). Mistrusters worry about their privacy from both businesses and people who might learn about them online. They are more likely to use fake

names and phony e-mail addresses, and they worry about the quality of information they find online. However, all of this behavior online fits with what we know about the suspiciousness of mistrusters offline (Uslaner, 2002, chap. 5).

- Social ties have little effect on Internet usage overall. The major exception is that people with larger support networks spend more time online. This is hardly surprising, and it does not indicate that the Internet makes people more sociable. Rather, it shows that people use the Internet to connect with people they already know.
- Negative or positive experiences online have no effect on people's trust in others. Spending a lot of time online neither increases nor decreases trust. Even people who have had bad experiences online—or who worry that others might try to exploit them—do not become less trusting. People who make new friends online don't become more trusting either. Experiences on the Internet, like most events in adult life, do not affect trust.
- The principal determinants of trust are demographic: Young, highly educated White males are the Americans most likely to use the Internet (in a variety of ways). While the impact of television viewing on Net usage is inconsistent, most of the time people who use the Internet are also plugged into their television sets (see also Norris, 2000).

The message of these findings is the Internet is not a threat to our society or its moral fiber. Regulating the Net won't solve our social problems or save our children from evil influences. Children develop trust in others by learning from—and emulating—their parents, and not from what they (don't) see on television or on the Web. And how much one trusts others as a child largely determines how much one trusts others as an adult. Yes, the world *may* seem a more dangerous place on television or on the Web. And the Internet makes such mean sites more readily available than the everyday world (or even television). But this does not mean that the Net (or any other form of media) poses a real threat to most families. By itself, it is neither a threat to civil society and sociability nor a panacea.

## Notes

1. Putnam (2000, pp. 170–171) is agnostic about the positive or negative effects of the Internet, even as he is convinced that television leads people away from social contact.

2. See Uslaner (2002, chap. 5) for evidence that neither of these activities, nor any other form of group membership or informal socializing, leads to more trusting attitudes.

3. Cited at <http://www.yogi-berra.com/yogiisms.html>. Accessed March 5, 2001.

4. If there were more frequent interactions, people could buy and sell without the need for an intermediary auctioneer.

5. Examining only those people who go online may lead to erroneous conclusions, especially since most people don't spend a lot of time on the Internet. The Kraut et al. (1998) survey only had 169 respondents, and most of the correlations were rather low.

6. I use other variables to ensure that the relationships between Internet usage, on the one hand, and trust and sociability, on the other hand, are not spurious. The other variables are age, gender, being a student, family income, owning your own home, being self-employed, being single, having no religion, how much time you watch television each day, how often you read a newspaper, whether you trust the federal government, and whether you believe that the Internet helps keep people in touch with one another.

7. There are more than 43 questions on the survey (as there were more than 18 in 1998). I

selected those that were of greatest theoretical relevance to trust. The models included trust, time spent watching television, newspaper readership, education, student, unemployed, race, gender, retired, single, age, and a dummy variable for being either divorced or separated. The survey also asked about income, watching television news, and whether one watches television other than news at all. However, these variables were highly collinear with the others and were dropped from many analyses, so I excluded them from all models. I used simple probit analysis for dichotomous variables and ordered probit analysis for dependent variables with three or more categories.

8. The coefficient for trust in the probit analysis for the 2000 Pew Trust and Privacy Survey was not significant, while the coefficient for trust in the 1998 technology survey was significant at  $p < .10$ . This is *not* attributable to an attenuation of the relationship between going to chat rooms and trust—since the simple correlation was *higher* in 2000 than in 1998. It seems that the constellation of controls may be the reason for an insignificant coefficient in the 2000 data.

9. See Uslaner (2002, chap. 3) as to why the fairness question should *not* be part of a trust scale. It seems to be a workable substitute for a measure of optimism and control.

10. The variable frequency online is the *number of times a day you go online*, while the variable time online is *how much time each day you spend online*.

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