

# The Internet Use and Community Involvement in Tehran Iran

Nader Razeghi ,Seyedeh Zeinab Taghavi

**Abstract**— This is exploring the impact of the internet on local community involvement in Tehran, Iran. It investigates how the internet changes community involvement and argues that the Internet has created new forms of community involvement instead of local community involvement. This study has employed quantitative research methods. The sample for this research was drawn from the population of Internet users, namely people who accessed and used the Internet in Tehran, Iran. The results of the study indicate that there was no significant correlation between the amount of Internet use and local community involvement. People who spend more time online (high Internet user) do not have a greater local community involvement than people who use Internet less of the time. By contrast in terms of type of Internet use and social capital the study found that people who used the Internet for local news and reading newspapers online were more involved in the local community. The study illustrated that the Internet encourages people to some extent to become involved in the national or global community.

**Index Terms**— Internet use, Community Involvement, Social Capital, Tehran, Iran.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, we have entered into the internet age, and the internet day by day has much more effect on our society. The internet is extending all over the world. With the rapid growth of internet use in recent years for sociologists, it is impossible to ignore the effects of the Internet on society.

It is possible that the Internet will have greater impact on society than television did(Wellman and Hampton 1999; Birnie and Horvath 2002) but currently most research has focused on its significance in advanced capitalist nations in Europe, America and the Far East (for instance, in the case of UK, Woolgar 2001). However, its influence goes to every nation: The Internet has magically entered Iranian society.

Based on recent statistics the number of Iranians who use the Internet reached is over 9 millions by the end of September 2007. The present study investigates relationship between the internet use and local

community involvement in Tehran Iran. Researcher interested in whether internet use increases or decreases local community involvement?

## A. Literature review

According to theoretical literature, it can be identified and conceptualised a number of different approaches in which the effect of Internet on communities:

## II. THE INTERNET TRANSFORMS COMMUNITIES

One view is that by creating new form of online interaction and enhancing offline relationship and through its variety of information and communication tools(Quan-Haase, Wellman et al. 2002), the Internet provides the means for inexpensive and convenient communication with far-flung communities of shared interest. Coupled with the Internet's low costs and often-asynchronous nature, this leads to a major transformation in social contact and civic involvement away from local and group-based solidarities and towards more spatially-dispersed and sparsely-knit interest-based social networks(Wellman, Haase et al. 2001,P:434). Some writers have examined the emergence of virtual community (Baym, Kiesler etc).For instance, Baym in his study examine that technology in the form of Internet is certainly no threat to fan culture networks also are far more than medium of transmission or a rich topic for new jokes. Communities in the Internet exist in asynchronous time and without shared location. As a result they rely more than ever on the traditionalisation of communicative practice(Baym 1997).

Some writers see virtual communities supplementing 'physical' communities, e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Reid 1991 and 1994; Curtis, 1992 Baym 1996. Most of them focused on the formation of virtual communities and compare the social formation which arises online with aspects of wider term "community".

Rheingold<sup>1</sup> who is write about the virtual community on 1993 and 2000 argued that after more than one decade of discussing and debating the social impact of virtual community, "questions about the social impact of digital media must be part of a boarder debate that encompasses many communication tools and more than the past five years of history. Communication technologies, from alphabets to Internets, have been changing the nature of

**Nader Razeghi**, Assistant professor of sociology at the University of Mazandaran, Mazandaran, Iran  
**Seyedeh Zeinab Taghavi**, Faculty member at ACECR, Iran

<sup>1</sup> - His views changed during 1993 and 2000 He argues, "The Well changed in the years after I wrote about it. A new owner provoked an abortive revolution and creation of a virtual community owned by its users" (Rheingold 2000,p:325)

communities for nearly ten thousand years, although we didn't know anything about the way communication tools influence minds and communities until recently. Now that the social impact of Internet communication is sinking in, a key question is how to use what we know and learn what we need to know in order to influence events in our favour"(Rheingold 2000). He points out that most relationships formed in cyberspace continue in physical space, leading to new forms of community characterized by a mixture online interactions(Wellman, Haase et al. 2001). Strangelove (1994) points out that this online communication creates new possibilities for the development of community:

"The Internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication people talking with each other, people exchanging e-mail... The Internet is mass participation in fully bi-directional, uncensored mass communication. Communication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows and thrives. The Internet is a community of chronic communicators"(Strangelove 1994,p:11).

Scholars who see the Internet, central role in everyday life argue that it increase communication offline as well as online. In this view the Internet not only affords opportunities to contact friends and kin at low cost, it also enhances face to face communication, and people become more aware of each other and their needs and stimulates their relationships through more frequent contact(Wellman, Haase et al. 2001).

### III. THE INTERNET SUPPLEMENTS COMMUNITIES

The second view argues new technology is less of a central role in shaping social trends. Although; it is blended into people's life(Wellman, Haase et al. 2001,p:440). This technology the same as old model of communication technology integrated into rhythms of daily life, as Flanagan and Metzger argue Internet as multidimensional technology used in a manner similar to other, more traditional technologies(Flangan and Metzger 2001,p:153; Wellman, Haase et al. 2001). " Thus the Internet provides and additional means of communication to telephone and face to face contact"(Preece and Editor 2002,p:2)

Internet interaction such as email chat rooms and instant messaging provides a good starting point for extending community development(Wellman, Haase et al. 2001,p:438).

The supplement argument suggests that the Internet's effects on community will be important but evolutionary like telephone has been(Swickert, Hittner et al. 2002,p:438-9). In the other words the Internet is another means of communication to facilitate existing social relationships and follows patterns of social tie and social networks. People use the Internet to maintain existing social contacts by adding electronic contact to telephone and face-to-face contact. Further, they often continue their hobbies and political interests online. This suggests that the Internet helps increase existing patterns of social

contact and civic involvement (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002; Chen, Boase, & Wellman, 2002).

Bromberg 1996, Mickelson, 1997; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Silverman, 1999; Winze berg, 1997 they argued that the main role, which the Internet may play in influencing individuals relationships, is that the Internet and online activity might serve to facilitate an individual's feeling of social support(Hamman 1999)

Robin B. Hamman in his study, find out that users are motivated to use America Online (AOL) by the need to do research for academic or business and users to communicate with others within their pre-existing offline, friendships, social networks and communities(Hamman 1999).

### IV. THE INTERNET DIMINISHES COMMUNITIES

In general, this view argues for an inverse relationships, that the internet fosters a decline in social capital(Wellman, Haase et al. 2001). In this view although the internet has entertainment and information capabilities it draws people away from family and friends. Further more the internet by facilitating global communication and involvement, it reduces interest in the local community(Putnam 2000,p: 172).

As Putnam argued the internet is a powerful medium for the transmission of information among physically distant people(Kavanaugh and Patterson 2001,p:497), but he argued that a diversity of macro-level social situations served to decrease the amount of social capital in U.S. communities during the past century(Kraut, Lundmark et al. 1998,p:1017).

The Home Net project,<sup>2</sup> a longitudinal study, which is a seminal investigation in negative social impact of internet, reported that the Internet was associated with declines in participants communication with family members in the household, decline in the size of their social circle, and increase in their depression and loneliness(Hampton and Wellman 2003,p:280). A panel survey of internet users, which have done by internet users interviewed online using Web TV also supported argument that the Internet damages social relations and community involvement. Nie and Erbring found that of Internet users: 5 percent spent less time attending "events" 9 percent spent less time with family, and 9 percent spent less time with friends. Their conclusion of study was that "the more hours people use the Internet, the less time they spend in contact with real human beings"(Nie 2001,p:423).

Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (SIQSS), and Kaiser Family Foundation and Kennedy School of Government (NKK) study found that 58% of all adult Americans reported that computers led people to spend less time with friend and family(Anderson and Tracey 2002).

<sup>2</sup> This research examined the social and psychological impact of the Internet on 169 people in 73 households during their first 1 to 2 years online.

## V. METHODOLOGY

Based on theories researcher wanted to see which of these three approaches worked in Tehran. Does the internet transform, supplement or diminish communities? Does internet uses decrease the local community involvement? The sample of this research was drawn from the population of internet users, people who access and use the internet in Tehran, Iran. There are two main reasons for choosing Tehran as a base for this study. First of all the Internet is more accessible and popular in Tehran than anywhere else in Iran because Tehran is the capital city of Iran. More than 50% of Iranian internet users are from Tehran. Because of lack of internet users addresses the best place for finding population to study was internet cafes, and people who use the Internet in Internet cafés in Tehran. I carried out a random sample selected in multistage sampling, with 207 questionnaires used for final analyse of data.

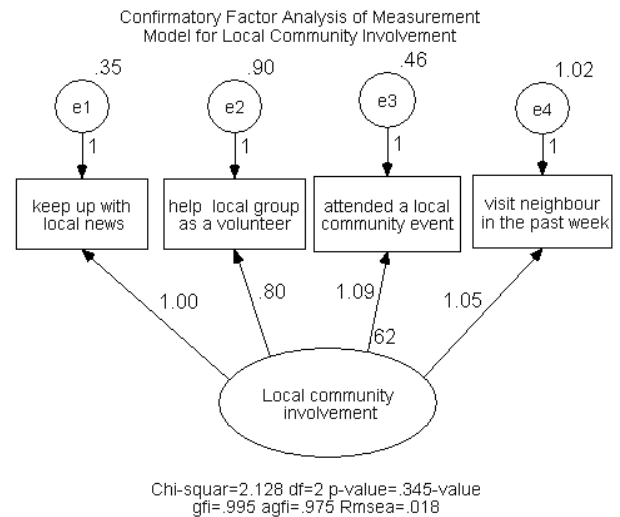
### A. Measures

Internet use was measured by how many hours a week do they uses the Internet.

type of internet use was measured by asking how they use internet for, such as send and receive email, Engage in chat Entertainment e.g. Play games listen to or download video or audio clip, Scientific activities search articles, books, online libraries, Financial (e.g. buy, sell, banking online), Doing work for job, Education (e.g. communicate with teacher, take online courses, Get news on national events Get news on global events, Get news on local events, Express your ideas and opinions on the web Looking for new friend Reading newspaper online

Local community involvement was measured through four items: how often they are keep up with local community news. How often do they help out in a local group as a volunteer? How often have they attended a local community event in the past 6 months (e.g., mosque, school concert, craft exhibition)? How often have you visit their neighbour in the past week? Response for all items ranged from Everyday, A few times a week, A few times a month, A few time a year, More rarely and Never

Although the items to measure the community involvement have been used in many social capital studies, there were some changes in the construction of items for use in this study measuring of the validity and reliability, which were crucial. To establish construct validity the researcher used exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. In exploratory factor analysis, total variance explained by items is equal 61.00%. The items have been loaded as observed variables, and can be measured such as for latent variables (community involvement).



The model fit specifications descriptively and inferentially show an acceptable and good model fit indices. All the coefficients indicate that almost perfect fit for measurement model of local community involvement this is confirmed by a goodness of fit  $GFI^3=.995$  and adjust goodness of fit index  $AGFI^4=.975$ .from inferential point of view, the model chi-square =2.128 df=2, p=.345 is quite compatible with the data.

### B. Findings

The average age of the respondents was about 24 years old this means the most internet users in Tehran are young people. The study shows that 76.3 % of the respondents were under 25 years old in contrast only about 11 % of respondents were older than 30 years old. The youngest internet user of this study was 15 and the oldest internet user was 49 years old.

In this study, 62.6 percent of participants were male (132 male) and 37.4 percent of respondents were female (79 female). More than 70 % of respondents were single and 29.4 % were married or engaged

About 47 % of the participants (internet users) in this study were qualified in college or under college, 33.6 % Bachelor degrees and 19.4 % of respondents were graduate and postgraduates degree level.

In this study on average the respondents use the internet about four years. The shortest length of time a respondent used the internet was 1 year and the highest was 10 years. The study shows that about 36.5 % have been online for two and four years respectively, whereas only 3.8 5% of internet users have been online for eight and ten years.

The average respondents spent 11 hours per week online. Low internet usage was 1 hour per week and heavy internet usage was 63 hours per week.

As data shown, about 77 % of people stated that they never or little or very little kept up with their local community news. The majority of respondents reported

<sup>3</sup> GFI is the Goodness of Fit Index. GFI varies from 0 to 1 GFI should be equal to or greater than .90 to accept the model. By this criterion, the present model is accepted.

<sup>4</sup> AGFI (adjusted Goodness of Fit Index) is a variant of GFI, which uses mean squares instead of total sums of squares in the numerator and denominator of  $1 - GFI$ . It, too, varies from zero to one value. AGFI should also be at least .90. By this criterion, the present model is accepted.

that they have not attended any local community events. (37.4 % Never and 28.4very little)  
 15.6% of the respondents reported they never visited their neighbours. Only 16.1% visited their neighbours every day. Data demonstrated that most people had participated in local voluntary groups (4.7 % every day 16.4% weekly 29.95 % monthly 26.5% yearly). As we can see; only 20.9 % reported that they had never participated in any local voluntary groups.

**C. Internet use and Community involvement**

The results of the study demonstrated that people who spend more time online (high Internet user) do not have a greater local community involvement than people who use Internet less of the time. Furthermore, there are no significant differences between people who used Internet for more years than people who used it for a smaller period of time in terms of community involvement.

**Logistic regression low and high community involvement and demographic variables**

Variables	$\beta$	Sig.
<b>Qualification</b>		
High school & College (base)		
Graduate	-1.188	.019
Postgraduate	-.416	.428
<b>Sex</b>		
Male (base)		
Female	-1.327	.008
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single (base)		
Married	.658	.0250
<b>Age</b>		
16-25 (base)		
25-35	-1.164	.119
35 and +	.084	.934
<b>Internet use</b>		
Low user(base)		
High user	-.273	.524
<b>Length of Internet use</b>	.105	.361
<b>Constant</b>		
	-1.123	.028
<b>R2</b>	<b>.14</b>	
<b>N</b>	<b>207</b>	

Note: *Low* users <7 hours per week; *High* users >7 hours per week

By contrast, gender plays a significant role in high community involvement. Males have been more involved in their local community rather than females in Tehran. Table shows that married people were significantly more likely involved in local community than reference category singles. Also, the level of a person’s qualifications is significantly related to high community involvement. People who are qualified up to high school and college are more likely to become involved in their local communities than are graduated people. The study did not find any significant associations between age groups and local community involvement.

**D. Community involvement and type of Internet use**

The main concern here involves ascertaining how the type of Internet use affects the degree of local community involvement.

**Regression model for the type of Internet use and community involvement**

Type of Internet use	$\beta$	T	Sig.
Financial e.g. buy, sell, banking online	.154	2.095	.038
Education e.g. communicate with teacher, take online courses	-.055	-.680	.497
Engage in chat	.069	.876	.382
Reading newspaper online	.265	2.790	.006
Send and receive email	.188	2.544	.012
Entertainments e.g. play games listen to or download video or audio clip	.009	.108	.914
Get news on national events	-.350	-2.490	.014
Get news on global events	.013	.112	.911
Get news on local events	.259	2.698	.008
Looking for new friend	.091	1.207	.229
Express your ideas and opinions on the web	-.209	-2.539	.012
Scientific activities search articles, books, online libraries	-.048	-.540	.589
Doing work for your job	-.072	-.904	.367
(Constant)		5.125	.000
R2	.158		
N	207		

I have concluded that the type of Internet use does have an appreciable effect on local community involvement. I have based this supposition on many studies and theories that have argued that people who use the Internet for entertainment, for example, playing games, listening to, or downloading video or audio clips, are less involved in local community involvement.

As we can see in the table above there is significant correlation between the type of use such as for reading newspapers online and getting news on local events and the local community involvement. We find that people who use the Internet for local news are more involved in local community since there was a positive correlation between Internet use for getting local news, reading newspaper online and local community involvement. Moreover, the study demonstrated that spending time on the Internet for sending and receiving email has a positive effect on local community involvement. The most significant finding that I would like to emphasise is that people who were active on the Internet and expressed ideas and their opinions on the web had less community involvement.

## VI. DISCUSSION

This paper measured Internet use by how many hours a week people use the Internet and where they usually log on to the Internet. Also, we investigated the type of Internet use by asking how they use the Internet for activities such as sending and receiving email, engaging in chat, entertainment e.g. play games, listening to or downloading video or audio clips, scientific tasks such as searching books, online libraries, financial (e.g. buy, sell, banking online), doing work for job, education (e.g. communicate with teacher, taking online courses, and getting news on national events or news on global or local events). The Internet can also be used to express ideas and opinions on the web, to look for new friends and also to read newspapers online. The study demonstrated that most Internet users in Tehran are young and the average age is about 24 years old. The study found that the Internet users in Tehran used the Internet on average about 11 hours per week. They used the Internet on average about 5.5 hour per week at Internet cafés, 0.78 hours per week at the office, 2.19 hours per week at university and 2.60 hours per week using the Internet at home.

The study did not find any significantly different usage of the Internet in terms of age, gender, and marital status. Lack of association between these variables and the Internet use shows that theories about the digital divide has been narrowing in the case of Tehran. However, there was positive association between the level of education and the amount of Internet use. There was direct correlation between better educated people and those more interested in using the Internet.

The study illustrated that the number of hours online per week increased with the number of years using the Internet. In other words, people who had used the Internet for many years have been online more and used the Internet more.

The Study has shown that using email (sending and receiving email) took high priority for Internet users in Tehran. The most common activity among the Internet users in Tehran was email (sending and receiving emails). About 97% of respondents in this study typically used email; only 3.3% of Internet users did not use email. As it can be seen the work of Nie & Erbring, 2000; UCLA CCP, 2000 work on U.S. Internet users and the work of National Statistics Omnibus, 2000 on the UK's Internet users; work of Katz and Aspden, 1997; Katz et al., 2001; and Wellman et al.2001.

By contrast, the research indicates that more than 78% of Internet users never used the Internet for financial purposes. As we can see, using the Internet for financial purposes is relatively low in Tehran. However, using the Internet for buying online is one of the most popular Internet activities in the developed countries such as America and United Kingdom. For instance, more than 48% of Internet users in the UK used the Internet for buying online financial or investment activities.<sup>5</sup>

The study found that younger people are engaged more in chat. The age ranges of between 15-25 use the Internet more for chat rooms and various forms of entertainment. Also, single people were more interested to use the chat services. The more erudite and qualified were less interested to use Internet for chat purpose. The study did not find any significant differences between gender and Internet activities in Tehran.

The findings in this study have shown that there was no significant correlation between the amount of Internet use and local community involvement. Both qualitative and quantitative data did not show any effect on local community involvement. The results argue strongly against the "Netville" study by Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman, which shows that living in a wired neighbourhood with access to a high-speed local network encourages greater community involvement, expands, and strengthens local relationships with neighbours and local community. It is also in opposition to Andrea Kavanaugh et al, views who have argued that Internet facilitates civic and social participation by providing pervasive local resources online and by connecting people to local communication and discussion channels, public and non-profit organization leaders and members, and other social and civic contacts. Perhaps, it is related to the actual structure of the communities and the associated circumstances.

In addition, the study has tried to explore relationships between several types of Internet use and local community involvement. The study found that people who used the Internet for local news and reading newspapers online were more involved in the local community. Indeed, patterns of Internet use significantly linked to community involvement. Thus, most previous studies concentrated merely on the amount of Internet use and community involvement while overlooking patterns of Internet use which this Study has endeavoured to address. This is an important variable for an in-depth understanding of community involvement.

The qualitative data illustrated that the Internet encourages people to become involved in the national or global community. The Internet helped people to participate in communities, which were based on their interest or the region that they come from. Indeed, the Internet extends the circle of community involvement in non-local activities.

Many participants (in the qualitative data) reported that the Internet has helped them to communicate with the outside world. This connection enables them to see beyond the social boundaries of their local community. In this regard, the medium of the Internet stimulates both empathy and compassion for people from various communities around the world. The Internet has helped them a great deal to know and understand these other communities, especially in respect of shared interests and ideas and to make them more informed of them as well. Many interviewees reported in their responses that they are members of many mailing lists and news groups, as well as active members of various communities on the Internet.

<sup>5</sup> Source: National Statistics Omnibus Survey (U.K.)  
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/> or see the work of

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