



New Media and Social isolation الميديا الجديدة والعزلة الاجتماعية

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Received: 2./3/2017

Accepted: 2./2/2017

Published: 30./3/2017

Abstract:

These research paper adds new insights into an ongoing debate about the extent of social isolation in Algeria. A widely reported study argued that Algerians have become more socially isolated, the size of their discussion networks has declined, and the diversity of those people with whom they discuss important matters has decreased. They depicted the rise of the internet and mobile phones as one of the major trends that pulls people away from traditional social settings, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, and public spaces that have been associated with large and diverse core networks

Keywords: social isolation, Internet, technologies, New media

ملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتسليط الضوء حول النقاش الدائر عن مدى انتشار العزلة الاجتماعية في الجزائر الامر الذي اصبح منتشرا على نطاق واسع حيث أكدت الدراسات مؤخرا ان الجزائريين أصبحوا أكثر عزلة اجتماعيا، وحجم شبكات تواصلهم ومناقشاتهم قد انخفض، وانخفض التواصل بين أفراد المجتمع بشكل ملفت للانتباه على وجه الخصوص الانترنت والموبايل، الاشخاص الذين يستخدمون التكنولوجيات الجديدة، مثل الانترنت والهاتف المحمول، حيث أكد علماء الاجتماع ان الفرد يتأثر بمثل هذه الوسائط التي قد تلعب دورا في دفع الافراد للنزوح نحو العزلة الاجتماعية.

كلمات مفتاحية: العزلة الاجتماعية، الانترنت، التكنولوجيا، الميديا الجديدة

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this research paper, we are trying to understand how technology and other factors are related to the size, diversity and character of people's social networks. But we face a challenge. If we were simply to compare the social networks of people who are heavy users of technology with those who do not use technology, we would have no way of knowing whether any differences we observe were associated with demographic or other differences between these groups, rather than with their differing patterns of technology use. That's because some demographic traits, such as more years of education, are associated with larger core social networks. And those with more formal education are also more likely to use technology.

To deal with this challenge, we use a statistical technique called regression analysis, which allows us to examine the relationship between technology use and network size while holding constant other factors such as education, age or gender. Thus, most of the results reported here are not shown as simple comparisons of the behavior of groups on our key measures, which is the typical approach of Pew Internet reports. Rather, the findings compare the social networks of people who use certain technologies with demographically similar people who do not use the technologies. For example, (McPherson, 2006, pp. 353-375) we use regression analysis to compare the average size of the social network of a demographically typical Algerian who uses the internet and has a cell phone with an Algerian who shares the same demographic characteristics but does not use the internet or a cell phone.

Another common type of analysis in the report estimates how much more likely a certain outcome is (such as having at least one person of a different race or ethnic group in a social network) (Smith, 2008, p. 18) for people who use certain technology compared with people who do not, all other things being equal. For example, holding demographic characteristics constant, the regression analysis finds that a person who blogs is nearly twice as likely as a demographically similar person (e.g., the same sex, age, education and marital status) who does not blog to have someone of a different race in their core discussion network.

As with all studies that use data collected at only one point in time, none of the results we report should be interpreted as explanations of cause and



effect. We cannot say from these findings that internet and mobile-phone use cause people to have bigger, more diverse networks. We can and do say that technology use is often strongly associated with larger and more diverse social networks.

2. Are Algerians more socially isolated?

Our survey results challenge the finding that an increasing number of Algerians have no one with whom they can discuss important matters. However, our findings support existing research that suggests that the average size and diversity of core discussion networks have declined. Our findings show:

- ✓ Compared to 1985, there has been small-to-modest change, rather than a large drop in the number of people who report that they have no one with whom they can discuss important matters. 12% of Algerians have no discussion confidants. Few Algerians are truly socially isolated. Only 6% of the adult population has no one with whom they can discuss important matters or who they consider to be “especially significant” in their life.
- ✓ The average size of Algerians’ core discussion networks has declined since 1985; the mean network size has dropped by about one-third or a loss of approximately one confidant.
- ✓ The diversity of core discussion networks has markedly declined; discussion networks are less likely to contain non-kin – that is, people who are not relatives by blood or marriage; although the decline is not as steep as has been previously reported.

3. Is internet or mobile phone use related to smaller or less diverse core networks?

- ✓ Use of newer information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as the internet and mobile phones, is not the social change responsible for the restructuring of Algerians’ core networks. We found that ownership of a mobile phone and participation in a variety of internet activities were associated with larger and more diverse core discussion networks: (Wyatt, 2000, p. 111)
- ✓ Larger core discussion networks are associated with owning a cell phone, and use of the internet for sharing digital photos and instant messaging.



On average, the size of core discussion networks is 12% larger amongst cell phone users, 9% larger for those who share photos online, and 9% bigger for those who use instant messaging.

- ✓ Whereas only 45% of Algerians discuss important matters with someone who is not a family member, internet users are 55% more likely to have a non-kin discussion partners.
- ✓ Internet users are 38% less likely to rely exclusively on their spouses/partners as discussion confidants. Those who use instant messaging are even less likely, 36% less likely than other internet users, or 59% less likely than non-internet users to rely exclusively on their spouses/partners for important matters.
- ✓ Those who use the internet to upload photos to share online are 61% more likely to have discussion partners that cross political lines.
- ✓ Maintaining a blog is associated with a 95% higher likelihood of having a cross-race discussion confidant. Frequent at home internet users are also 53% more likely to have a confidant of a different race.
- ✓ When we explored the size and diversity of people's core networks – their strongest social ties that include both those with whom they “discuss important matters” and those they consider “especially significant” in their life – there continued to be a strong, positive relationship between the size and diversity of people's closest social ties, mobile phone use, and participation in a range of internet activities.
- ✓ Mobile phone users and those who go online to use instant messaging have larger core networks. Mobile phone users' core networks tend to be 12% larger than non-users, and those who use instant messaging have core networks that are an average of 11% larger than those who do not.
- ✓ Mobile phone users, general internet users, and especially internet users who go online at home more than once per day, share digital photos online, or exchange instant messages have more non-kin in their core networks. The diversity of core networks tends to be 25% larger for mobile phone users and 15% larger for internet users. However, some internet activities are associated with having an even larger non-kin core networks. Compared to other internet users, those who frequently use the



internet at home tend to have an additional 17% non-kin, those who share photos average 12% more non-kin, and those who use instant messaging tend to have 19% more non-kin.

4. Is internet use leading to less face-to-face contact with our closest social ties or with local social ties?

- ✓ Whereas most studies of core social networks focus exclusively on face-to-face contact, this analysis looked at the many ways that people maintain social networks using communication media. When those other kinds of interactions are taken into account, we find: (Wyatt, 2000)
- ✓ In-person contact remains the dominant means of communication with core network members. On average, there is face-to-face contact with each tie on 210 out of 365 days per year. (Katz, 1955)
- ✓ Mobile phone use has replaced the landline telephone as the most frequently mediated form of communication – 195 days per year.
- ✓ Text messaging has tied the landline telephone as the third most popular means of contact between core ties – 125 days per year.
- ✓ Cards and letters are the least frequent means of social contact – 8 letters or cards per year.
- ✓ When available, other ICTs supplement these dominant modes of communication: email (72 days per year), instant messaging (55 days per year), and social networking websites (39 days per year). (Abraham, 2009, pp. 29-65)
- ✓ Contrary to the assumption that internet use encourages social contact across vast distances, we found that many internet technologies are used as much for local contact as they are for distant communication.
- ✓ In-person contact, landline telephones, mobile phones, and text messaging (SMS) are used most frequently for contact with local social ties. Cards and letters are used most extensively with distant social ties.
- ✓ Email, social networking services, and instant messaging promote “glocalization” – that is, they are used as frequently to maintain nearby core social ties as they are used to maintain ties at a distance.



5. Are core network members also our “friends” on social networking services such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn?

- ✓ Social networking services, such as Facebook, provide new opportunities for users to maintain core social networks. Core ties can be highly influential in decision making and exposure to ideas, issues, and opinion. This makes core network members prime targets for marketers and interest groups who may want to use social networking services to influence decision making about consumer products or political opinion.
- ✓ A majority – 71% – of all users of social networking services have listed at least one member of their core network of influentials as a “friend” on a social networking service.
- ✓ The use of social networking services to maintain core networks is highest among 18-22-year-olds. Thirty percent of 18-22-year-olds use a social networking service to maintain contact with 90% or more of their core influentials.

6. Is internet use related to less interaction with neighbors or lower levels of participation in local voluntary associations?

- ✓ Contrary to the argument that internet use limits people’s participation in the local community, local institutions, and local spaces, our findings show that most internet activities are associated with higher levels of local activity (Katz, 1955, p. 54). However, we find some evidence that use of social networking services (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn) substitutes for some level of neighborhood involvement.
- ✓ With the exception of those who use social networking services, internet users are no more or less likely than non-users to know at least some of their neighbors. Users of social networking services are 30% less likely to know at least some neighbors.
- ✓ Internet and mobile phone users are as likely as non-users to talk to their neighbors in-person at least once per month. And, they supplement their local contact with email. 10% of internet users send emails to their neighbors.



- ✓ Users of social networking services are 26% less likely to use their neighbors as a source of companionship, but they remain as likely as other people to provide companionship to their neighbors.
- ✓ Internet users are 40% less likely to rely on neighbors for help in caring for themselves or a family member. Those who use social networking services are even less likely to rely on neighbors for family care, they are 39% less likely than other internet users, or 64% less likely than non-internet users, to rely on neighbors for help in caring for themselves or a family member.
- ✓ Internet users are 26% less likely to rely on their neighbors for help with small services, such as household chores, repairs, and lending tools, but they remain as likely to help their neighbors with the same activities.
- ✓ Owners of a mobile phone, frequent internet users at work, and bloggers are more likely to belong to a local voluntary group, such as a neighborhood association, sports league, youth group, church, or social club. (Wellman, 1990, p. 88)
- ✓ When the internet is used as a medium for neighborhood social contact, such as a neighborhood email list or community forum (e.g., i-neighbors.org), participants tend to have very high levels of local engagement.
- ✓ 60% of those who use an online neighborhood discussion forum know “all or most” of their neighbors, compared to 40% of Algerians.
- ✓ 79% who use an online neighborhood discussion forum talk with neighbors in-person at least once a month, compared to 61% of the general population.
- ✓ 43% of those on a neighborhood discussion forum talk to neighbors on the telephone at least once a month, compared to the average of 25%.
- ✓ 70% on a neighborhood discussion forum listened to a neighbor's problems in the previous six months, and 63% received similar support from neighbors, compared to 49% who gave and 36% who received this support in the general population.



7. Is internet use associated with “cocooning,” or a withdrawal from public and semipublic spaces?

- ✓ Public spaces, such as parks, libraries, and community centers, as well as “third places” highlighted by analyst Ray Oldenburg, such as cafés and restaurants, are an important source of exposure to diverse ideas, issues, and opinions – as well as meeting places for interacting with social ties. Contrary to concerns that internet use leads to withdrawal from public spaces, we generally found that internet use is associated with engagement in such places. (Wyatt, 2000)
- ✓ Compared to those who do not use the internet, internet users are 42% more likely to visit a public park or plaza and 45% more likely to visit a coffee shop or café.
- ✓ Bloggers are 61% more likely to visit a public park than internet users who do not maintain a blog, or about 2.3 times more likely than non-internet users.
- ✓ The findings also show that internet access has become a common component of people’s experiences within many public spaces. We asked respondents who had visited public spaces whether they had access the internet there in the past month. Examining all visits to public and semipublic spaces, we found that a significant proportion of people accessed the internet either through a cell phone, wifi network, or some other means at these locales: (Mutz, 2006, pp. 19-20)
- ✓ 36% of library patrons.
- ✓ 18% of those in cafés or coffee shops.
- ✓ 14% who visited a community center.
- ✓ 11% of people who frequented a gardens .
- ✓ 8% of visitors to public parks and plazas.
- ✓ 6% of customers at fast food restaurants.
- ✓ 7% of customers at other restaurants.
- ✓ 5% of people who visited a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple.

8. Are internet and mobile phone use associated with more or less diverse personal networks?



- ✓ When the diversity of people's full social network was measured, we found the expected: that participation in traditional social milieus, such as neighborhoods, voluntary groups, and public spaces, accounts for much of the diversity in people's social networks. However, we also discovered that internet use, and in particular the use of social networking services, are independently associated with higher levels of network diversity. (Cohen, 2004, pp. 76-84)
- ✓ Compared to those who do not use the internet, most people who use the internet and use a social networking service, such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn, have social networks that are about 20% more diverse.

Newer information and communication technologies provide new settings and a means of communication that independently contribute to the diversity of people's social networks.

This Pew Internet Personal Networks and Community survey is the first ever that examines the role of the internet and cell phones in the way that people interact with those in their core social network. Our key findings challenge previous research and commonplace fears about the harmful social impact of new technology:

Algerians are not as isolated as has been previously reported. We find that the extent of social isolation has hardly changed since 1985, contrary to concerns that the prevalence of severe isolation has tripled since then. Only 6% of the adult population has no one with whom they can discuss important matters or who they consider to be "especially significant" in their life.

We confirm that Algerians' discussion networks have shrunk by about a third since 1985 and have become less diverse because they contain fewer non-family members. However, contrary to the considerable concern that people's use of the internet and cell phones could be tied to the trend towards smaller networks, we find that ownership of a mobile phone and participation in a variety of internet activities are associated with larger and more diverse core discussion networks. (Discussion networks are a key measure of people's most important social ties.) (Marsden, 1987, pp. 22-31)



Social media activities are associated with several beneficial social activities, including having discussion networks that are more likely to contain people from different backgrounds. For instance, frequent internet users, and those who maintain a blog are much more likely to confide in someone who is of another race. Those who share photos online are more likely to report that they discuss important matters with someone who is a member of another political party.

When we examine people's full personal network – their strong ties and weak ties – internet use in general and use of social networking services such as Facebook in particular are associated with having a more diverse social network. Again, this flies against the notion that technology pulls people away from social engagement.

Some have worried that internet use limits people's participation in their local communities, but we find that most internet activities have little or a positive relationship to local activity. For instance, internet users are as likely as anyone else to visit with their neighbors in person. Cell phone users, those who use the internet frequently at work, and bloggers are more likely to belong to a local voluntary association, such as a youth group or a charitable organization. However, we find some evidence that use of social networking services (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn) substitutes for some neighborhood involvement.

Internet use does not pull people away from public places. Rather, it is associated with engagement in places such as parks, cafes, and restaurants, the kinds of locales where research shows that people are likely to encounter a wider array of people and diverse points of view (Katz, 1955). Indeed, internet access has become a common component of people's experiences within many public spaces. For instance, of those Algerians who have been in a library within the past month, 38% logged on to the internet while they were there, 18% have done so in a café or coffee shop.

People's mobile phone use outpaces their use of landline phones as a primary method of staying in touch with their closest family and friends, but face-to-face contact still trumps all other methods (Mutz, 2006). On average in a typical year, people have in-person contact with their core network ties on about



210 days; they have mobile-phone contact on 195 days of the year; landline phone contact on 125 days; text-messaging contact on the mobile phone 125 days; email contact 72 days; instant messaging contact 55 days; contact via social networking websites 39 days; and contact via letters or cards on 8 days.

Challenging the assumption that internet use encourages social contact across vast distances, we find that many internet technologies are used as much for local contact as they are for distant communication.

9. Conclusion:

This Internet Personal Networks and Community survey is the first ever that examines the role of the internet and cell phones in the way that people interact with those in their core social network. Our key findings challenge previous research and common place fears about the harmful social impact of new technology: (Erickson, 1997, pp. 99-102)

- ✓ Algerians are not as isolated as has been previously reported. We find that the extent of social isolation has hardly changed since 1990, contrary to concerns that the prevalence of severe isolation has tripled since then. Only 6% of the adult population has no one with whom they can discuss important matters or who they consider to be “especially significant” in their life.
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- ✓ Social media activities are associated with several beneficial social activities, including having discussion networks that are more likely to contain people from different backgrounds. For instance, frequent internet users, and those who maintain a blog are much more likely to confide in



someone who is of another race. (Straits, 2000, pp. 23-40) Those who share photos online are more likely to report that they discuss important matters with someone who is a member of another political party.

- ✓ When we examine people's full personal network – their strong ties and weak ties – internet use in general and use of social networking services such as Facebook in particular are associated with having a more diverse social network. Again, this flies against the notion that technology pulls people away from social engagement. (Wellman, Different Strokes From Different Folks, 1990)
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