

December 1997

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Recommended Citation

Kraut, Robert; Szczypula, Janusz; Kiesler, Sara; and Scherlis, William, "Communication Versus Information: Alternative Uses of the Internet at Home" (1997). *ICIS 1997 Proceedings*. 47.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis1997/47>

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COMMUNICATION VERSUS INFORMATION: ALTERNATIVE USES OF THE INTERNET AT HOME

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HomeNet is a field trial designed to inform current efforts at offering new electronic services by carefully studying how households actually use the Internet. One goal is to understand the dynamics of social change as it is occurring. In the HomeNet field trial, a panel of families in Pittsburgh received computers and Internet services, including access to electronic mail, the World Wide Web, MUDs, and multi-user games. Through detailed audit data on electronic service usage, quantitative surveys and interviews with family members, the researchers were able to measure the demand for and impact of electronic communication and telecommunication services over time.

This paper concentrates on the contrast between using the Internet as a conduit for interpersonal communication rather than as a mechanism for obtaining information and entertainment. The history of previous household technologies suggests that communication may prove to be the more important use of the Internet and the major determinant of people's commitment to it. The research study operationalized interpersonal communication as the use of personal electronic mail and information acquisition and entertainment as the use of the World Wide Web and analyzed longitudinal data during the person's first year on the Internet. The results show that interpersonal communication is a stronger driver of Internet use than are information and entertainment applications. E-mail was more popular, used in more Internet sessions, and used first in sessions when both e-mail and the Web were used. It was more stable, being used consistently from week to week. In contrast, Web use seemed to be driven by external events. Use of e-mail at one time period led to increased hours connected to the Internet in subsequent periods, while use of the Web led to reduced hours on the Internet. Finally, people for whom e-mail was a large proportion of all their Internet use were more likely to continue to log in to the Internet, while people who were relatively heavy Web browsers were more likely to drop their Internet service. E-mail probably has this power because it is used to support unbounded social relationships, while the Web is used for bounded, instrumental tasks.