Internet and American Life Project

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Recommended Citation
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Description
Review of Internet and American Life Project / http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/188/report_display.asp

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Posted on October 1, 2006 by Editor

By Jeffrey Barlow

The scholastic path of mankind is littered with academic subjects that no longer exist. In the 19th century, proper young English students (and many American ones) put as much effort into declining Anglo-Saxon verbs as today’s college students spend grinding through their foreign language requirement. Then, it was discovered, Anglo-Saxon as a language not only did not exist but had never existed. The process of studying a cobbled-together pastiche of foreign words and assumed grammar was a means of celebrating and reinforcing the supposed racial superiority of Englishmen. The equivalent field of the 20th Century was probably “futurology,” the study of the future.

Looking back on the wreckage of failed disciplines, one should certainly be cautious at predicting the future of the Internet. After all, one of the sources we refer to below classifies everyone who was on line before 1993 as a “pioneer” of the Internet. Nonetheless, this Pew Foundation Internet and American Life project found at: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/188/report_display.asp makes fascinating reading. Some 700+ respondents, many experts in internet-related studies, or executives from businesses, government agencies, non-governmental agencies, interest groups as well as enthusiastic and highly opinionated amateurs, tackle a cleverly designed series of questions and come to the opinion that:

- A low-cost global network will be thriving and creating new opportunities in a “flattening” world.
- Humans will remain in charge of technology, even as more activity is automated and “smart agents” proliferate. However, a significant 42% of survey respondents were pessimistic about humans’ ability to control the technology in the future. This significant majority agreed that dangers and dependencies will grow beyond our ability to stay in charge of technology. This was one of the major surprises in the survey.
- Virtual reality will be compelling enough to enhance worker productivity and also spawn new addiction problems.
- Tech “refuseniks” will emerge as a cultural group characterized by their choice to live off
the network. Some will do this as a benign way to limit information overload, while others will commit acts of violence and terror against technology-inspired change.

- People will wittingly and unwittingly disclose more about themselves, gaining some benefits in the process even as they lose some privacy.
- English will be a universal language of global communications, but other languages will not be displaced. Indeed, many felt other languages such as Mandarin, would grow in prominence.

Or do they? In fact the experts are split on these issues, with almost as many on one side of these statements as on the other. The great value of this site is that the PDF report of more than one hundred pages can be downloaded, and gives the reader access to substantial quotations from noted experts as they discuss these issues.

A closely related site is Elon University’s “Imagining the Internet” found at: http://www.elon.edu/predictions/ Here there are materials for teachers and a fascinating searchable database of thousands of earlier predictions on the future of the Internet, including 4200 from the early 1990’s. These, of course, are usefully compared with the Pew’s roster of expert opinions.

A third and completely unrelated site is that of an upcoming (October 30, 2006) United Nations-sponsored Internet Governance Forum, found at: http://intgovforum.org/ Here you can read a variety of papers and posted opinions. The “Substantive Contributions” found at: http://intgovforum.org/contributions_for_1st_lGF.htm include dozens of documents created by individuals and interest groups discussing the future “governance of the Internet.”

Taken together, these three sites discuss everything from technological improvements to proposed policy changes for the Internet. Several hours spent in these materials would offer many useful insights into the problems facing the Internet in the present and future, and into a wide range of probable solutions.

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