

Internet emerges as social research tool

February 14 2009, by Val Osowski

For the past two decades, the Internet has been used by many as an easy-to-use tool that enables the spread of information globally. Increasingly, the Web is moving beyond its use as an electronic "Yellow Pages" and online messaging platform to a virtual world where social interaction and communities can inform social science and its applications in the real world.

"Although social scientists, engineers and physical scientists have studied the World Wide Web as an entity in and of itself for some time, there is now a growing group of social scientists who are learning how to use the World Wide Web as a tool for research rather than as a subject of research," said Thomas Dietz, Michigan State University researcher and director of the university's Environmental Science and Policy Program.

Today, at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Chicago, a panel of scientists organized by Dietz planned to examine various aspects of using the World Wide Web as a tool for research.

University of Michigan political science professor Arthur Lupia was to kick off the session by discussing how new virtual communities are improving surveys and transforming social science.

"Lupia is one of the world's leaders related to survey research on the Web," Dietz said. "His focus is on learning to use the Web as a way of soliciting people's opinions and getting factual information from them via online surveys."

Adam Henry, a doctoral fellow in the Sustainability Science Program at Harvard University's Center for International Development, was scheduled next to discuss measuring social networks using the World Wide Web.

"Henry is developing very innovative ways to identify networks that are actual face-to-face relationships by tracking evidence streams on the Web," Dietz said. "In other words, it's not simply about who's connected to whom on Facebook or Twitter, but who's doing research with whom in the real world. It's using the virtual world to identify things that are going on in the real world rather than using the virtual world simply to look at the virtual world."

William Bainbridge, program director for the National Science Foundation's Human-Centered Computing Cluster, was to rounded out the presentation with a discussion on the role of social science in creating virtual worlds.

"Bainbridge is studying group formation and social change over time in virtual worlds such as 'World of Warcraft' and 'Second Life' to inform and build on what sociologists have studied for 150 years,"

Dietz said. "He contends that virtual worlds are excellent laboratories for observing and prototyping new social forms that can later be applied to the outside world."

Following the presentations, National Science Foundation sociology director Patricia White was to discuss implications of this research related to the future of social science.

Source: Michigan State University

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