

MESSAGING

The single most negative effect of the internet on society is not pornography or online gambling. Nor is it online commerce or the “democratization of intellectual property” (piracy). It is actually instant messaging, or chatting.

Just chatting. How bad can it be? In fact, it may even sound positive. People are communicating, so that has to be a good thing, right?

That would be true if they were actually communicating about anything important. I have seen hundreds of chat logs (and received files folders) and can honestly tell you that I have never seen a single discussion rise above the level of who is boinking who. Maybe my taste in personal discourse is different than the average MSN user, however there are other particularly negative effects of chatting:

- 1) You're sitting on your butt typing, when you could have gone and visited. Not only are you getting fatter and more out of shape, but you are missing out on the face to face. Web cameras make this problem worse, not better.
- 2) Loss of accountability in communications. This one is especially corrosive, because it devalues mutual respect. While chatting, people will say the most outrageous and discourteous things, simply because they are not having to face up to the other person.
- 3) You're pretending to be what you're not. In other words, you're lying. Many users will say things from an anonymous standpoint, or things that are not true because it becomes more of a game when chatting. Chatting allows one to go beyond the boundaries of normal human interaction because it is not as “real” as communicating face to face.
- 4) Chatting discourages the use of correct spelling and punctuation only because of speed considerations. This problem is spilling over into school assignments, where teachers are increasingly seeing textual shortcuts being used for reports. Isn't our society dumb enough already? Have you noticed that I used the word “messaging” when I should have used “messaging”? I'm even getting dumber!
- 5) Chatting is 80% gossip.
- 6) Chatting spreads information that traditionally was very difficult to get, or at least was kept under lock and key. Now your 11 year old can hear about the best way to (fill in the blank) from his friends, acquaintances, people he doesn't even know, or even that pedophile in Winnipeg. I don't think this kind of information is healthy for adults, let alone children.

On a more material level, chatting causes spyware. You didn't think all that chatting was free, did you? Why would Bill Gates spend tens of millions of dollars setting up servers so that you could chat for free? The new Messenger 7 now sports a much more aggressive advertising system, and yes, you will be forced to upgrade to it sooner or later. Messenger Plus is particularly bad for your Windows, it installs a lot of spyware. None of the other companies do it for free, either; they are all in business to make cash.

I am sure that there are workgroups of scientists that use instant messaging to keep each other posted about the results of their latest experiments or what time they are meeting to discuss stem cell policy. However, until my child is one of those scientists, chatting of any kind will not be allowed in my household. I don't use it, the actual software is not on my systems, and my router blocks messaging and is passworded. Additionally, I repeatedly tell them how stupid it all is; it seems to be working, so far. I might be in big trouble in another five years....