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Annenberg i-neighbors brings a community closer together

PHILADELPHIA, PA (November 27, 2007) – The Internet can have a positive impact on the strength and growth of a community. Just ask residents of a neighborhood in Savannah, GA.

It was there that, on November 20, residents using the i-neighbors technology were alerted via e-mail to an incident of an armed robbery of one of their neighbors only moments after it happened. The notification took place faster than the police or news media got the word out.

The i-neighbors web based community they were using was developed by Professor Keith Hampton, Ph.D., of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. I-neighbors is a free public resource where people find their geographic neighborhoods online and form corresponding digital communities. The project investigates the circumstances where Internet use affords local interactions and facilitates community involvement.

The November 20 incident was widely reported in the local news. But what was not part of the story is the emergence of evidence, uncovered by Professor Hampton, that the Internet can help strengthen the feeling of community in a neighborhood.

Professor Hampton's work is reported in the October 2007 edition of *Information, Communication, and Society* magazine. In the article, penned by Professor Hampton, the results of a long-term study of neighborhoods where residents used lists of e-mail addresses of their neighbors. The study showed that, in the right context, the Internet can

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help bridge gaps that exist among neighbors and help foster a feeling of community.

The study was designed to determine if the Internet can be part of everyday neighborhood interactions, and under what circumstances can the Internet facilitate the formation of neighborhood social networks.

“While residents of neighborhoods are by definition physically close, temporal, psychological, and territorial barriers often mean that they are not accessible to each other,” Dr. Hampton said. “This study was designed to determine if, given the right circumstances, the Internet can increase the number of local social ties.”

Four neighborhoods were selected – two suburb-style communities (one of which was the “control” group), one apartment complex, and a gated condominium development. All four were in the Boston suburbs. Three of the four were given neighborhood e-mail lists and a neighborhood website.

Surveys at the outset of the study showed suburbs already felt there was a strong sense of community in their neighborhoods, and that they felt the strongest desire to make a contribution to the neighborhood. Over the course of several years, it was found that those communities that already expressed a desire for neighborliness and a feeling of contributing to the community were those that were most likely to communicate with each other via the community e-mail network.

“In situations where there is a pre-existing feeling of community, or the need to maintain community connections, the Internet can prove to be more of a uniting factor than previously thought,” Professor Hampton said.

More information on the study can be found at www.asc.upenn.edu.

About the Annenberg School for Communication

Founded in 1958 through the generosity and vision of diplomat and philanthropist Walter Annenberg, the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania is devoted to furthering our understanding of the role of communication in public life through research, education and service. More information on the Annenberg School for Communication can be found at www.asc.upenn.edu.

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