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Online World As Important to Internet Users as Real World?

USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project Finds Major Shifts
in Social Communication and Personal Connections on the Internet

Is the online world as important to Internet users as the real world?

Large numbers of Internet users hold such strong views about their online communities that they compare the value of their online world to their real-world communities, according to the sixth annual survey of the impact of the Internet conducted by the USC-Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future.

Among a broad range of findings about rapidly-evolving methods for online communication, the 2007 Digital Future Project found that 43 percent of Internet users who are members of online communities say that they "feel as strongly" about their virtual community as they do about their real-world communities.

"More than a decade after the portals of the Worldwide Web opened to the public, we are now witnessing the true emergence of the Internet as the powerful personal and social phenomenon we knew it would become," said Jeffrey I. Cole, director of the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future.

"The Internet has been a source of entertainment, information, and communication since the Web became available to the American public in 1994," said Cole. "However, we are now beginning to measure real growth and discover new directions for the Internet as a comprehensive tool that Americans are using to touch the world."

The findings about online communities and more than 100 other issues are published in the 2007 Digital Future Project, the comprehensive annual examination of the impact of online technology on America.

The project surveys more than 2,000 individuals across the United States, each year contacting the same households to explore how online technology affects the lives of Internet users and non-users. It also examines how changing technology, such as the shift from Internet access by modem to broadband, affects behavior.

The 2007 Digital Future Project found that Internet use is growing and evolving as an instrument for personal engagement – through blogs, personal Web sites, and online communities.

Online communities: a catalyst for connection and activism

Online communities and offline action -- The Digital Future Project found that involvement in online communities leads to offline actions. More than one-fifth of online community members (20.3 percent) take actions offline at least once a year that are related to their online community. (An "online community" is defined as a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only.)

Social activism – Participation in online communities leads to social activism. Almost two-thirds of online community members who participate in social causes through the Internet (64.9 percent) say they are involved in causes that were new to them when they began participating on the Internet. And more than 40 percent (43.7 percent) of online community members participate more in social activism since they started participating in online communities.

Online communities: daily use -- A significant majority of members of online communities (56.6 percent) log into their community at least once a day.

Member interaction -- Online communities are online havens for interaction among members; 70.4 percent of online community members say they sometimes or always interact with other members of their community while logged in.

Internet users: reaching out across the Web

Posting information -- Growing percentages of Internet users are going online to post information, whether on a blog, posting photos, or maintaining a personal Web site.

-- The number of Internet users in America who keep a blog has more than doubled in three years (now 7.4 percent of users, up from 3.2 percent in 2003).

-- Likewise, the number of Internet users who post photos online has more than doubled in three years (now 23.6 percent of users, up from 11 percent).

-- The number of users who maintain their own Web site continues to grow steadily (now 12.5 percent of users).

The Internet and social links

The Digital Future Project found continuing growth of the Internet for connection to family and friends – but with virtually no negative effects on time spent in person with them.

New friends, online and in person -- Internet users are finding growing numbers of online friends, as well as friends they first met online and then met in person. Internet users report having met an average of 4.65 friends online whom they have never met in person. Internet users report an average of 1.6 friends met in person whom they originally met online -- more than double the number when the Digital Future Project began in 2000.

Does the Internet increase regular contact with other users? -- Responding to a question last asked in 2002, 42.8 percent of Internet users agree that going online has increased the number of people they regularly stay in contact with -- marginally less than the 46.6 percent who voiced the same response four years ago.

Internet users and communication with family and friends -- Although more than 40 percent of users say that the Internet has increased the number of people with whom they stay in contact, a lower percent say that since starting to use the Internet they are communicating more with family and friends.

Of Internet users, 37.7 percent agree that since they started to go online they are communicating more with family and friends -- down from 45.5 percent in 2002.

Does the Internet change the amount of time spent with friends and family face-to-face? -- While large percentages of Internet users say that going online increases contact with family and friends, almost all users report that the Internet has no effect on the time spent with close friends or family face-to-face.

The USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project: Six years of exploring the digital realm

The USC-Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future created and organizes the World Internet Project, which includes the Digital Future Project and similar studies in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Australia. The center is supported by public foundations and private companies, including Accenture, America Online, Time Warner Companies, Sony, AT&T, Microsoft, and the Coca-Cola Company.

The Digital Future Project provides a broad year-to-year exploration of the influence of the Internet and online technology on Americans. Since 2000, the project has examined the behavior and views of a national sample of Internet users and non-users, as well as comparisons between new users (one year or less of experience) and very experienced users (more than nine years of experience).

The project also explores differences in online behavior among users of telephone modems compared to broadband.

For highlights of the 2007 Digital Future Project or to order a copy of the complete report, visit www.digitalcenter.org.

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Highlights: 2007 USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project

Among key findings in more than 100 major issues, the 2007 USC-Annenberg Digital Future Project found that:

Americans on the Internet -- more than three-quarters of American are Internet users; 77.6 percent of Americans age 12 and older go online.

The Internet at home – more than two-thirds of Americans (68.1 percent) use the Internet at home, a substantial increase from the 46.9 percent of users who reported home Internet use in 2000 (the first year of the Digital Future Project).

Hours online -- the number of hours online continues to increase, rising to an average of 8.9 hours per week, an average of one hour more than 2005.

Internet connections at home: modem use plummets -- Use of telephone modem to access the Internet continues to decline. Last year, the number of Internet users who reported that they went online through a telephone modem dropped to less than a majority (45.6 percent) for the first time in the Digital Future Project. Use of telephone modem for access dropped again, to 37 percent of Internet users.

Access to the Internet through a broadband connection grew slightly, increasing to 50 percent, compared to 48.3 percent in 2005.

Time spent online: modem users vs. broadband users -- As use of broadband for Internet access has increased, the Digital Future Project has identified significant differences in online behavior among Internet users who go online through a telephone modem and those who connect with a faster broadband connection.

Although some Internet activities could require less time through a high-speed connection, the Digital Future Project continues to find that broadband users spend more time online than modem users in all of the most popular Web activities (e-mail, chat rooms, entertainment, information for work or school, information-seeking for personal use, and transactions).

Men and women online -- For the first time the percentage of women going online was higher than the number of men.

Electronic dropouts: why do users stop going online? -- The more than one-quarter of Internet non-users who have previously gone online (27.2 percent) continue to report a variety of reasons for not going online, but the attitudes have shifted considerably. In the current study, a much lower percentage of electronic dropouts report that the reason they stopped going is "no computer available" – a continuation of the decline that began in 2005 and by far the lowest level reported thus far in the Digital Future Project.

Electronic dropouts: will you go back online? -- Less than half of non-users who previously used the Internet (46.3 percent) say they will go back online, the lowest level in the history of the Digital Future Project.

Will non-users go online? -- In the current study, of the 22.4 percent of respondents who do not currently use the Internet, 40.1 percent say they are somewhat likely or very likely to go online next year – down marginally from 41.6 percent in 2005.

The Internet and television: how important as sources of information and entertainment? -- The Digital Future Report continues to find that the Internet has a solid position as an important source of information and entertainment for the vast majority of users, consistently outranking television.

Among users age 17 and older, almost two-thirds of Internet users (65.8 percent) consider the Internet to be a very important or extremely important source of information for them -- up from 56.3 percent in 2005.

Information on the Internet: is it reliable and accurate? -- The number of users who believe that most or all of the information on the Internet is reliable and accurate grew sharply over 2005, reversing a three-year decline. Well over half of users (55.2 percent) say that most or all of the information online is reliable and accurate – up from 48.8 percent in 2005, but still below the peak in 2001 (58 percent).

Which Web sites are reliable and which are not? -- The number of Internet users who say that most of the information posted by established media and government Web sites is reliable and accurate remains generally consistent with 2005 and 2003 results. Web sites mounted by established media (such as nytimes.com and cnn.com) ranked highest, with 77.1 percent of users saying that most or all information on those sites is reliable and accurate -- down slightly from the peak of 78.5 percent in 2005.

Faith in government Web sites declined even more, to 74.8 percent of users saying that most or all information on those sites is reliable and accurate – down from 78.2 percent.

Internet use and its effect on time spent watching TV – More than one-third of Internet users (35.5 percent) say that they spend less time watching TV since they began using the Internet -- a modest increase over 2002.

Internet purchasing: who is buying online? -- The number of online purchasers rose to its highest level in the history of the study (51.1 percent).

Internet purchasing: how much do you spend? -- Online buyers spend an average of $50 a month more than in 2001.

Internet purchasing: spending per month -- Increasing are the number of users who spend between $1 and $100, and the small number who spend more than $1000 per month. The number of users who spend more than $100 but less than $1000 remained about the same compared to 2005.

The first internet purchase: how long do users wait before they buy? --New Internet users are waiting longer before making their first online purchase. Internet users who buy online say that, after going online, they waited an average of 35.2 months before making their first purchase, an increase of more than two months over 2005.

The first Internet purchase: why did users wait? -- The number of Internet purchasers who said that their concern about giving a credit card number was the main reason for delaying their online purchases dropped to its lowest level in the study so far. Concern about giving a credit card number was cited by only four percent of Internet buyers -- down from 14 percent in 2005 and 32 percent in 2003.

Concerns about privacy when buying online -- All six years of the Digital Future Project have shown that most respondents report some level of concern about the privacy of their personal information -- such as name and address, phone number, and purchasing habits -- when or if they buy on the Internet. The intensity of that concern had been declining in the first four years of the study, and increased slightly in 2005. However, concern about the security of personal information again declined.

Overall, the total percentage of respondents age 16 and over who report some concern about online personal information is very high; during the years this question was asked, between 88 and 94 percent of respondents report some concern.

Among respondents age 16 and over, 86.8 percent express some level of concern about the privacy of their personal information when or if they buy online -- down from 89.5 percent in 2005.

The percentage who report the highest level of concern (very or extremely concerned) declined to less than half of respondents (46.5 percent) -- down from almost two-thirds of respondents (65.8 percent) five years ago.

Concerns about credit card information: high but stabilizing? -- Concerns about credit card security, such as worries about personal privacy online, continue to remain high among all respondents to the Digital Future Project. However, the percentages of those with the highest levels of concern have stabilized over the three most current years of the study -- and at much lower levels than five years ago.

Those who said they were very concerned or extremely concerned declined to 53.1 of respondents, the lowest level in the five years this question has been asked.

Do you use e-mail? -- About 90 percent of Internet users use e-mail -- statistically the same as in 2005. Given that 77.6 percent of all Americans go online, and 89.8 percent of those users have e-mail, this means that 69.7 percent of Americans now use e-mail.

Children and the Internet

Internet use and watching television: the right amount of time for children? -- A small but growing percentage of adults say that the children in their households spend too much time using the Internet -- a number that has grown in each of the three most recent years of the study. Almost 70 percent of adults (69.6 percent) say that the children in their households spend the right amount of time online, a number that declined modestly for three years in a row.

Throughout the Digital Future Project, more than 40 percent of adults say that the children in their households spend too much time watching television. That percentage has risen steadily for the past five years, and has now reached the highest level in the six years of the study (48.6 percent).

Schoolwork and the Internet: children's views -- Children and adults continue to express conflicting views about the importance of the Internet for schoolwork. Of Internet users age 18 and under, 80.5 percent say that going online is very important or extremely important -- slightly less than the 83.5 percent who reported the same responses in the previous study. However, almost three-quarters of adults (74.1 percent) say that since their household acquired the Internet, the grades of children in their households have stayed the same.

Political power and influence

The Internet's importance in political campaigns -- Even though 2006 was an election year, a slightly lower percentage of respondents age 16 or older say that the Internet has become important to political campaigns; 59.5 percent agree or strongly agree that the Internet has become important for political campaigns -- down from 64 percent in 2005.

The Internet and political knowledge -- Belief that the Internet can be a tool for learning about the political process continues to remain high, with 59.3 percent of users agreeing that by using the Internet, people can better understand politics -- down marginally from 60.4 percent in 2005 (the peak year for this response in the study).

Does the Internet give people more say in what the government does? -- The number of Internet users who believe that using the Internet will give people more of a say in what government does declined.

Less than 20 percent of users (18.9 percent) agree or strongly agree that the Internet gives people more of a say in government -- down from 20.7 percent in 2005, and the lowest level in the five years this question has been asked in the Digital Future Project.

Is the Internet a tool to help gain political power? -- In spite of the recent growth of online communication by political parties and candidates, the number of users who say the Internet can be used as a tool to gain political power declined.

After increasing in 2005, the number of users 16 and older who agree or strongly agree that using the Internet can give people more political power dropped to 31.4 percent, from 39.8 percent in 2005.

More than half (53.6 percent) disagree or strongly disagree that the Internet can give people more political power -- an increase from 49.5 percent in 2005.

The Internet at work

Using the Internet at work: hours online -- Use of the Internet at work for professional reasons has increased steadily for each year in the Digital Future Project.

Internet users who go online at work say that they actively use the Internet for work an average of 7.8 hours each week -- an increase from 5.6 hours in 2005, and better than three hours more per week over when the question was first asked in 2001.

The Internet at work: personal use -- A small but increasing number of Internet users say they can't visit Web sites for personal reasons while at work.

Of users with Internet access at work, 85 percent say they can visit Web sites at work that are not related to their jobs; 15 percent of users cannot visit non-work oriented Web sites while on the job, an increase of 4.3 percent over 2005.

Does the Internet make workers more productive? -- The percentage of users who say the Internet at work makes them more productive has continued to increase overall for all six years of this study.

Almost 70 percent of users who have access to the Internet at work (69.7 percent) say that by going online at work their productivity has improved somewhat or a lot, an increase from 66.3 percent in 2005, 65.8 percent in 2003, 64.5 percent in 2002, 60.9 percent in 2001, and 56.7 percent in 2000.

While large numbers of respondents continue to report that they use the Internet for personal reasons at work, only 1.5 percent of those who go online at their jobs say their productivity has worsened because of Internet access at work.

For highlights of the 2007 Digital Future Project or to order a copy of the complete report, visit www.digitalcenter.org.

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