

PewResearchCenter Publications

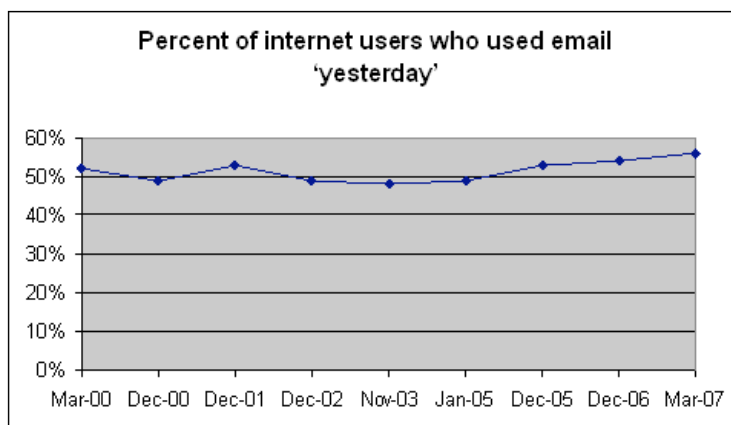
A Portrait of Early Internet Adopters: Why People First Went Online --and Why They Stayed

by Amy Tracy Wells, Research Fellow, Pew Internet & American Life Project
February 20, 2008

Social networking is a hot topic on the internet these days, and yet, social networking is nothing new. Remember BBSs (electronic bulletin board systems) and Usenet, chat rooms and threaded discussions? Respondents to a recent Pew Internet survey of several hundred longtime internet users said such features were among the most appealing things that drew them online. And they considered them every bit as much a "social networking" experience as today's Facebook users would say they do social networking online. As one respondent noted, "I started my online life on a state-wide time-shared mainframe computer in the 5th grade in 1972, and we were 'social networking' on it by 1976."

In our survey, we asked these long time internet¹ users why they first went online. The majority of respondents noted "to communicate with colleagues." When asked what their favorite application was at the time they first went online, most said email. This is not much different from what we found in a survey in February-March 2007: 56% of respondents reported sending email yesterday -- the day before they were contacted in the survey. This is a good reading for the number of internet users who were using email on an average day during the survey period. As my colleagues, Mary Madden and Susannah Fox have noted, "...the beating heart of the internet has always been its ability to leverage our social connections."²

Indeed the Project's findings since it first began to do national surveys of internet users has shown that the popularity of email use has not changed much, even as the size of the internet population has grown and its demographic composition has changed.



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, [Usage Over Time](#)

The bottom line is that social networking and its associated applications are a big part of life online.

Personal reasons drive internet use

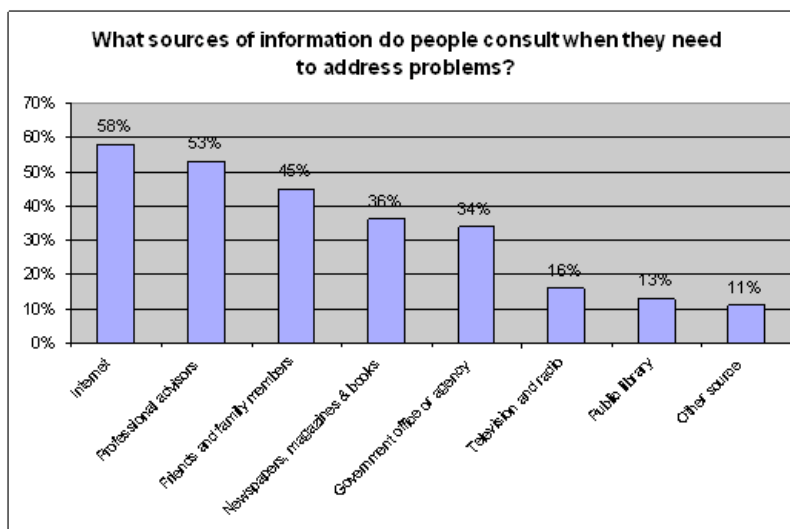
Though people might assume that the rapid uptake of the internet by businesses was the main driver of growth in the past decade, many of our respondents said they first went online for personal reasons, rather than professional or educational reasons. Fully 50% of the respondents stated they first went online for "personal" reasons; 31% said work was the cause; 19% said school was the cause. In fact, in a series of Pew Internet surveys going back to 2000, respondents have continuously cited personal reasons above work-related or school-related reasons as the cause for their first using the internet.

Many cited the same reason for their conversion to broadband or wireless access. While those kinds of connections are clearly helpful to those in school or for work-related activities, people in this sample said they upgraded their connections at home for personal reasons. They were looking for more speed to, as one respondent stated, "...explore virtually every aspect of [their lives], from the mundane to the metaphysical." They wanted to share as well as receive information, help and solutions.

Moreover, other survey findings reveal that the majority of internet users do just that. A national survey of 2,796 American adults by Pew Internet last fall asked respondents what sources of information they consulted for assistance with solving problems such as

health issues, education and job training, or taxes. They were asked to choose from options that included the internet, face-to-face sources such as friends and family, institutional resources such as a government agency or public library or established media such as newspapers.³ Fifty-eight percent chose the internet and, of these, 94% felt that they were successful in getting the information and resources they wanted.

It's important to note that respondents weren't being asked to choose between online or offline resources, old media or new media, or between a human or non-human response. They were being asked to choose a *channel* to an available and authoritative source. By opting for the internet in many cases, they chose the channel that could link them to the most people and sources, or literally the most "social" selection.



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project and University of Illinois Libraries Survey. June 27-Sept. 4, 2007. N=2,796 for entire sample, including an over-sample of 733 "low-access" respondents. Margin of error is +/-3% for entire sample. For internet users N=1,702 and margin of error is +/-3%.

Consumers Become Creators

Tastes and technologies do change. Most of those in our respondent pool said that in their early days on the internet they acted largely as individuals and consumers. That is, they used search engines; got news; played games; conducted research; downloaded software and emailed friends, family and colleagues. Many of these activities consisted of serial connections -- people querying systems, communicating privately with other individuals or with highly-defined communities. It would take a couple of years (and the addition of new tools) before people in this group engaged in creative and community processes. Once they had easier-to-use online tools, faster connections, and more familiarity with the online environment, they say they began to create and share photos, pieces of writing, videos and audio files. They also began rating products and tagging content. As one respondent noted:

"During the first few years [of using the internet] I was a **TAKER**; I looked for and found info I wanted. Then in early '90's I discovered HTML. I developed my own web pages. First for work, then on my own domains: I became a **GIVER/publisher**. **WHAT A THRILL** to contribute. One of my websites grew to over 1500 pages of original content... Today, I have several websites."

A Different Sort of Social Technology

Other social technologies have radically changed societies in recent history such as the automobile, telephone, radio and television. However, unlike the internet, these technologies remained fairly static in many ways. For example, cars are still used primarily for transportation, telephones for voice or text exchanges, radios and televisions to receive (and not send) programs. Similarly, remember Henry Ford's quip, "[the car] can be any color, so long as it's black"? Though all cars are no longer black, but, as the photo below illustrates, the pace of change has been slow. Though manufactured decades apart, these telephones are strikingly similar.



Figure 2: Early telephones: 1934 and 1954⁴

The responses of these early internet adopters suggest they saw themselves more as co-creators of the online environment than, say, car owners felt about the auto environment. There is a relationship between the internet and its user base that didn't exist with the previously mentioned technologies. Clearly, the technology itself exerted influence on users: they wrote email the way the technology allowed them to and they browsed web pages in the format that the technology afforded. Yet, they could themselves change the marketplace by creating better tools for the discovery and exchange of music and for social networking as well as adding their two-cents to the roiling exchange of ideas online. They could even -- with little chagrin -- rate their surgeons and lovers online.

These early adopters are quite proud of these contributions. They see themselves as doing more than manipulating the exterior of the internet. They argue they are crafting the interior by, in part, bringing along older social technologies. As one put it:

I remember my mother telling me about the excitement of getting a telephone -- well the internet for me has been so much better than even that. It's a personal connector, a free long distance video phone, a post office without stamps, a world-wide library, a visual and audio window on the world, and an opportunity for self expression.

What feels old and "traditional" about the internet to our respondents is that it's a voluntary social sphere where people can give and can take. What's new about the internet to these enthusiastic users is the rate at which it is influenced by people who use it for new kinds of social purposes. People aren't waiting to figure out its proper use, or for clear "rules of the road" to be articulated, they're simply taking it for a spin.

Notes

¹ The Internet Histories Web Survey used a convenience sample. Therefore, no generalizations are provided.

² Mary Madden and Susannah Fox, S. [Riding the Waves of "Web 2.0" More than a buzzword, but still not easily defined](#). Pew Internet Project. October 5, 2006. Accessed on January 13, 2008.

³ Leigh Estabrook, Evans Witt and Lee Rainie. [Information Searches That Solve Problems](#). Pew Internet Project. December 30, 2007. Accessed on January 30, 2008.

⁴ Photo courtesy of Phillip Whelan, [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0](#).