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The rise of the e-citizen
*How people use government
agencies' Web sites*

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Summary of findings

Web presence is not optional for governments in the United States. Citizens are online and learning to demand answers at Internet speed. Government budget-writers require that the cost-savings potential of the Internet be mastered. At the same time, laws and executive orders mandate the provision of at least some services online.

And Americans are stepping up to use them. Fully 68 million American adults have used government agency Web sites – a sharp increase from the 40 million who had used government sites in March 2000 when we first polled on the subject. They exploit their new access to government in wide-ranging ways, finding information to further their civic, professional, and personal lives. Some also use government Web sites to apply for benefits, engage public officials, and complete transactions such as filing taxes.

While many government site users focus on their personal needs in dealing with government agencies, there is abundant evidence that a new “e-citizenship” is taking hold:

- 42 million Americans have used government Web sites to research public policy issues.
- 23 million Americans have used the Internet to send comments to public officials about policy choices.
- 14 million have used government Web sites to gather information to help them decide how to cast their votes.
- 13 million have participated in online lobbying campaigns.

Other key findings

Satisfied searchers: Most government Web site visitors are happy with what they find on the sites; 80% of them say they find what they are seeking on the Web sites.

Improved relations with government: Overall, 60% of government Web site users say such sites had improved their interactions with at least one level of government. Half of government Web site users (49%) say the Internet has improved the way they interact with the federal government; 44% say it has improved the way they interact with their state government; and 30% say the Internet has improved the way they interact with local government.

Federal and state sites get better grades than local sites: Federal and state Web sites are more popular than local Web sites: 80% of government Web site users have visited federal sites, 76% have visited state sites, and 41% have visited local government Web sites. Generally, seekers find the information they want more easily on federal (68%) and state (69%) Web sites than they do on local government sites (46%). Federal and state sites get higher evaluations from these Internet users.

What government site users do at agency Web sites <i>The percentage of those who use government Web sites who have ever done these activities at government sites...</i>	
Get tourism and recreational information	77%
Do research for work or school	70%
Download government forms	63%
Find out what services a government agency provides	63%
Seek information about a public policy or issue of interest to you	62%
Get advice or information about a health or safety issue	49%
Get information about potential business opportunities relevant to you or your place of employment	34%
Send comments about an issue to a government official	34%
Get information or apply for a government job	24%
Get information about elections, such as where to vote	22%
Get information that helped you decide how to vote in an election	21%
Get information about a lottery	21%
Get information about or apply for government benefits	20%
File your taxes	16%
Renew a driver's license or auto registration	12%
Renew a professional license	7%
Get a fishing, hunting or other recreational license	4%
Pay a fine	2%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Filing taxes online and saving time: As of last autumn, 16% of those who use government Web sites had filed taxes online. Some 70% of those who filed their taxes online say they have saved time doing this online and about half of them say they saved more than an hour. About 12% of government Web sites users have renewed an automobile registration online.

Tell us about our Social Security accounts. The most frequently cited service that government users would like to have is to be able to access their Social Security account information. Currently, the Social Security Administration allows individuals to request copies of their statements via the Internet, but the information is then sent to them through the mail rather than to their desktops. Experiments with providing the statements online ended in April 1997 amid concerns about ensuring the confidentiality of the data.

Many still learning all they can do at government Web sites. Asked about their most recent visit to a government site, 38% of these Internet users said they were performing a new activity; 60% were doing something they did before at a government site.

Use of government sites since September 11: Many government agencies became more anxious to convey key information through their Web sites since the September 11 terror attacks and the early October anthrax scares. For a relatively small number of Internet users, this was an important way for them to get information about government policies and recommendations. About 7% of those who access government sites have turned to them in response to major news events and about three-quarters of that small subgroup got information related to the September 11 attacks and the aftermath. And half of that 7% have used the Internet to email an elected official in response to the attacks. This is roughly the same as the number of people who wrote to or telephoned their officials. Similarly, about half have used the Internet to get information about how to get involved politically.

About the surveys: The findings in this report come from several surveys by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The figures about the overall group of Internet users who go to government Web sites come from a phone poll of 2,391 people taken in January 2002. The more in-depth assessment of how people use government Web sites comes from a survey of 815 people who had told us in previous surveys that they used government Web sites. This separate survey was conducted between September 5 and 27, 2001 (we made no calls on September 11). Finally, the material about how people used government Web sites after September 11 comes from the ongoing polling we did between September 12 and November 18 about Internet use related to the attacks, the anthrax scares, and the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Main Report: The rise of the e-citizen

Part 1: Who visits government Web sites and what they do

Introduction

The rise of e-government has been one of the most striking developments on the Web. In just a few years, thousands of government agencies, legislators, and courts have established a Net presence. Today, all three branches of the federal government are online, and the portal FirstGov.gov claims to link to 47 million pages.¹ In addition, all 50 states have government Web sites. Local governments are catching up. There are few places where any government official feels justified in not putting government information and services online.

Government site users	
Male	53%
Female	47%
Age	
Age 18-29	21%
Age 30-49	49%
Age 50-64	21%
Age 65+	6%
Don't know/refused	3%
Education	
Less than college education	52%
College education or higher	48%
Income	
\$0-30,000	15%
\$30,000 – 50,000	22%
\$50,000-75,000	19%
\$75,000+	30%
Don't know/refused	14%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey Jan. 3-Jan. 31, 2002. N=1,451 Internet users. Margin of error is ±3%.

Our surveys show that one of the fastest growing activities online in recent years has been the use of government Web sites. Our January 2002 tracking survey shows that 58% of American Internet users, or 68 million adults, have visited at least one government Web site, and most have visited more than one. This makes the act of seeking government information and completing transactions with government agencies one of the most popular activities online. More Americans have visited government Web sites than have sought financial information online, made travel reservations, sent instant messages, or gotten sports scores online. The number of government Web users has grown substantially since our first survey in March 2000. At that point about 40 million American adults had gone to at least one government agency Web site.

Government Web site users are more likely than other Internet users to have college degrees (48% vs. 31%), and they live in households with somewhat higher incomes than the general Internet population. At the same time, those who use government Web sites are much like other Internet surfers in terms of gender and race.

Where government site users go; how often they visit

Twice as many government Web site users have visited federal agency sites as have visited the sites of their local government. Some 80% of those who use government Web sites have visited federal agency Web sites and 76% have visited state sites. But only

¹ http://www.firstgov.gov/top_nav/about.html?ssid=1007419749171196_172. Note that a “page” is not the same as a “site.”

41% have visited their municipal or county sites. One reason for the difference may be the lack of familiarity with local sites. While a study from the University of Maryland in 2000 found that more than 80% of local governments have a Web site,² we found in a survey last year that only half of Internet users were able to tell us whether their local government had a Web site at all.

Asked which sites they visited most frequently, 34% of these users said it was federal Web sites, 33% said it was state sites, and 11% said it was local sites. The rest either said they frequented all types of sites equally or didn't know what sites they visited most.

How government sites users rate the sites			
	<i>The percent of government site users who have visited this type of site</i>	<i>The percent of those users who rate the sites excellent or good</i>	<i>The percent who rate the sites fair or poor</i>
Federal sites	80%	76%	24%
State sites	76%	76%	24%
Local sites	41%	62%	38%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Men are more likely than women to say federal sites are the sites they frequent most often. Federal Web sites are particularly popular among those who have at least some college education (over 80% compared to 69% of high school graduates). In contrast, women are more likely than men to cite state and local sites as their favorite. State government Web sites are equally popular among those with and without college educations.

Blacks in particular are more likely than other groups to favor the content available at their local government Web sites. Some 63% of black Internet users have sought out a local government site, compared to 40% of whites. In addition, 30% of black users cite local government sites as the type they visit most frequently, compared to 10% of whites.

Among Internet users who say they have visited government Web sites, 6% say they visit such sites every day, 20% say they visit several times a week, 41% say they visit several times a month, and 32% say they visit just a few times a year. Among those who claim a "favorite" government Web site, the visits are even more frequent, up to several times a week. In their most recent search for government information online, 61% of government Web site users did their browsing from home.

The information they seek

The most popular activities at government Web sites relate to the search for information. Understandably, people flock to the Internet to track down material that might otherwise take hours to obtain by phone or through personal visits to government agency offices.

² Norris, Fletcher, and Holden "Is your local government plugged in? Highlights of the 2000 Electronic Government survey" <http://pti.nw.dc.us/docs/E-Gov2000.pdf>

Internet users research a variety of items on government Web sites, including material about what agencies do, the facts that are contained in government databases and documents, information related to civic issues, and insights into the business climate or opportunities in various communities.

The top three types of information sought address recreation, work, and personal concerns. Tourism and recreation goals top the list, with 77% of government site users seeking it out. This is perhaps due in part to the home page promotions that many states and localities employ. For instance, the Maine Web site allows visitors to reserve campsites online.³ Vacation planning is followed by doing research for work or school (70%) and searching or information about the services offered by particular agencies (63%).

There are no strong demographic differences among those who use government sites for those top activities. Women are somewhat more likely than men to do work-related government surfing (73% to 66%). Those over the age of 65, surprisingly, are less likely than other age groups to use the Internet to learn about government benefits (34% compared to over 60% for all other age groups). But the most popular activities, on the whole, are equally popular among all groups.

By contrast, job seeking at government sites is the most highly segmented task. About a quarter of government site users (24%) have looked for government jobs online. Blacks are more likely than whites, by a margin of 58% to 21%, to look for job listings on government sites. This discrepancy can be explained in part by fact that blacks online in this particular population tend to be younger than whites,⁴ and young people were more likely than older to be seeking government jobs. Some 37% of government site users aged 18-29 had sought government job postings, while only 26% of those aged 30-49 and 14% of those aged 50-64 have done so. This probably tracks closely with overall trends

Information-seeking trumps service transactions at government sites	
<i>Information</i>	
Get tourism and recreational information	77%
Do research for work or school	70%
Find out what services a government agency provides	63%
Seek information about a public policy or issue of interest to you	62%
Get advice or information about a health or safety issue	49%
Get information about potential business opportunities relevant to you or your place of employment	34%
Get information about elections, such as where to vote	22%
Get information that helped you decide how to vote in an election	21%
Get information about a lottery	21%
<i>Transactions</i>	
File your taxes	16%
Renew a driver's license or auto registration	12%
Renew a professional license	7%
Get a fishing, hunting or other recreational license	4%
Pay a fine	2%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

³ <http://www.state.me.us/>

⁴ 18% of white government surfers and 42% of black government surfers are under the age of 30.

in job seeking. Younger Americans are more likely to be active in the job market than middle-aged and older Americans.

Perhaps in keeping with the youth of job seekers, incomes among those looking for government jobs are also lower: More than a third (35%) of government Web site users in households with under \$35,000 of income have sought out government employment, compared with 20% of those in households earning more than \$50,000. Finally, among government site users, government jobs tend to appeal to those who already work for the public sector. Government employees are more likely than those who do not work for the government to look up government jobs, by a margin of 34% to 21%

Frequent surfers have the broadest experience of using information and features at government Web sites. They have performed an average of seven of the tasks we asked about, compared to five or six for less frequent government site users. Frequent surfing is also the strongest predictor of whether an individual has sought any of the given types of information. Online longevity is also associated with each of these, though to a lesser extent.

Getting involved

There is concern among academics, activists, and even some elected officials that government Web sites might focus too much on providing services, and not enough on facilitating Americans’ civic involvement. This service orientation, they argue, treats citizens as consumers rather than owners of government, and thus inhibits public engagement with the nation’s political life.

Issues addressed online by the users of government Web sites	
Environment	15%
Education	11%
Health Care	11%
Civil Rights/Social Justice	10%
Abortion issues	7%
Criminal justice issues	5%
Traffic/Sprawl/Development/Zoning	4%
Government Budget/Tax/Finance	3%
Internet issues	3%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Sites Survey, September 5-27, 2001 date. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Our survey suggests that while government site users are certainly taking advantage of all the services and information made available on government sites, a portion are also very active in using the Internet to monitor public affairs. Close to two-thirds of them (62%) have sought out information on public policy issues via government sites. About one in three (34%) has taken the extra step of contacting an official through a site and one in five (19%) has used the Internet as part of a concerted lobbying campaign. That activity translates into impressive

numbers: It means 42 million Americans have used government Web sites to research public policy issues; 23 million Americans have used the Internet to send comments to public officials about policy choices; and 13 million have participated in online lobbying campaigns. Asked about the issues they had lobbied for, government site users cited environmental, educational, and health issues most often. In addition, 21% of

government site users have gathered information from such sites to help them decide how to vote in an election. That translates into more than 14 million people.

Are government Web site users more likely than other people to be politically engaged? We do not have enough data on the political activities of this group to draw direct comparisons with the rest of the population, but we can provide some perspective. According to the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, 41% of American adults have ever contacted an elected official. Of course, anyone who has emailed an elected official is likely to have done so only in the past few years, and cannot be lumped together with people who may have written a letter 10 or 15 years ago. The same Pew Research Center survey found that 19% of adults have contacted an elected official within the past year. Looking at both numbers, it appears that government Web site users compare favorably with the general population for civic engagement.⁵

Some final observations about online activism: First, although it is often assumed that activism online is an activity for young Americans, our survey shows that those ages 18-29 are the least likely to have used the Internet in overtly political or activist ways. Second, there is no relationship between trust and using the Internet to research public issues or to contact officials. People who are wary of government are just as likely as those who trust it to use the Internet to try to influence the direction of policy or monitor issues.

The impact on citizen-government interactions

We asked government site users to what extent their use of government sites had improved their relationship with their public agencies. Overall, 60% of government Web site users say such sites had improved their interactions with at least one level of

government. Some 49% said the Internet had improved the way they interact with the federal government, 45% said it had improved the way they interact with state government and 30% said it had improved the way they interacted with local government.

How much does the Internet improve your interactions with government? <i>The percent who say it improves their interactions</i>				
	<i>A lot</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Only a little</i>	<i>Not at all</i>
Federal government	20%	29%	25%	23%
State government	18%	27%	27%	26%
Local government	11%	19%	18%	48%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Sites Survey, September 5-27, 2001 date. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Internet veterans were more likely than those with less experience to express appreciation for the Internet’s role. Assessment of the benefits of government sites was also affected by how frequently visitors used them, and how much trust they have in government.

⁵ “The Tough Job of Communicating with Voters.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. February 2000.

Percent of those who use government Web sites who claim government sites have improved their interactions with the government				
Level of Government	Frequency of surfing		Level of trust in government	
	More than once/week	Less than once/month	High	Low
Federal	64%	43%	58%	45%
State	59%	36%	54%	38%
Local	39%	26%	43%	21%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Assessing site quality

Those who use government Web sites are more impressed with federal sites than state or local sites. Seventy-six percent of government users rate the quality of federal government sites as “good” or “excellent,” compared with 61% for local government sites.

Trust in government is strongly related to the perceived quality of government Web sites: fully 86% of high trusters, some 80% of medium trusters, and just 62% of low trusters rate federal and state Web sites as “good” or “excellent.” Local government Web sites earn fewer accolades, but still do better among those who trust government. Some 72% of high, 64% of medium, and 49% of low trusters give local government sites good or excellent ratings.

Finally, those who successfully accomplished what they set out to do at government sites were more likely to give them high marks. And frequent government site users were more likely than occasional surfers to rate the sites highly.

How often they find what they want

Respondents say government agencies have a spotty record about making it easy to find the information the public wants. A majority of respondents believe that it is “fairly” or “very” easy to find information on federal sites (68%) or state sites (69%). However, only 46% say the same about local government. As noted above, 80% of government visitors said they were able to accomplish what they wanted to at their last visit to a government Web site. That is fairly similar to the record that other groups report about other kinds of online searches. For instance, it is close to the figure that is reported by those seeking health information and those seeking religious information online.

However, it also means that 20% of government site users were frustrated in their attempt to find information in their most recent searching episode. We do not know if those who were frustrated were simply faced with sites that lacked the content they needed⁶, or if

⁶ The lack of useful content at some government Web sites was recently illustrated by a report from the Congress Online Project, which pointed out that some congressional Web sites serve primarily as promotional

they did not know how to navigate through the pages. If navigation was the main problem, we would expect that the most frequent surfers – those most familiar with government sites – would have higher success rates in finding what they want online. In fact, they are no more successful than less active surfers in this regard.

Education and trust in government were associated with successful searching. College graduates said they found what they were looking for most of the time (63% v. 53% for non-college grads).

Part 2: A closer look at some activities

A new urgency for health information

Half of government site users (49%) have sought health and safety advice from government sources. There are no notable demographic differences in this use of government sites. The evenness of demand suggests that the government is a widely trusted authority on health issues. Even those who trust government the least look for health information as much as do those who trust it the most.

However, we probably have not captured the whole story on this issue. We finished surveying government site users a week before the nation's first anthrax death. Immediately, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Department of Health and Human Services were in the headlines daily as they tried to manage an unprecedented and incalculable health crisis. A nervous population entering flu season hungered for any scrap of helpful information. Six months later, anthrax is still on the front page of the CDC web site.⁷

Pay taxes

Some 16% of those who use government Web sites have filed taxes online, as of late September 2001. There is a sharp drop-off in participation at the age of 65, where only 3% have done so. Tax filing is also not something that is done much by those who live in lower income households (those earning less than \$30,000), where only 9% of the Internet users from those households file taxes online.

These facts are perhaps explained in part by current policies related to online tax payments. Taxpayers wanting to e-file federal returns must either pay a preparer who will take care of the electronic filing, or else purchase the software to do so themselves. Efforts by the IRS to permit tax filing at its Web site face opposition from private preparers and software companies. They argue that the IRS would be stepping into the private sector by allowing free e-filing and they cite privacy concerns about the security of information filed online.⁸

tools for politicians rather than resources for constituents. "Most Web sites on the Hill unimpressive, survey finds." *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2002. P. A19.

⁷ <http://www.cdc.gov/>

⁸ "IRS Plans to Offer Tax Filing on the Web" *The Washington Post*. January 26, 2002, p. A6.

Of those who have filed their taxes online, 70% say it saved them time – roughly 1.5 hours, on average.

Register cars; get driver's licenses

Visits to the state motor vehicle bureaus often involve long lines and bureaucratic obstacles. Currently, 12% of government Web site users have gotten driver's licenses or renewed their auto registration online. The people who live in households with high incomes are most like to have sought to renew driver's licenses or auto registration online – 17% of those in households earning more than \$75,000.

We cannot draw firm conclusions as to why so few people have engaged in electronic transactions with the government. It is generally true throughout the online world that people are much more comfortable getting information than they are in performing transactions. And it appears the government world is no different. We might expect that those who trust government more would be more likely to engage in online transactions with it, but that is not the case. The availability of many government services may be an issue. Automated services may not exist in all states or cities. Where they do, people may be unaware of them or dubious about sending the personal information required over the Internet.

Get information about or apply for government benefits

A fifth of those who have used government Web sites have done this. A relatively high proportion of African-Americans have done so – 35%. And it is something that is more popular among those who live in households earning between \$30,000 and \$50,000 and those with at least a year or two of college education.

Get information about public policy issues

Fully 62% of government Web site users have done this. This is an activity that is most likely to have been performed by those who live in high-income households. And it tends to be something that younger Internet users have done in greater numbers than older Americans. It is also something that is very popular with the heaviest users of government Web sites.

Get information that helped them decide how to vote

A fifth (21%) of these Internet users have done research at government Web sites that they say has helped them decide how to vote in an election. Men (24%) are more likely than women (18%) to have gotten such crucial information from government Web sites. And Republicans are more likely than Democrats or independent voters to have used this information in assessing how to vote. Some 27% of Republicans have used government Web sites for this purpose, compared to 20% of Democrats and 17% of independents.

What else would they like on government Web sites?

There was a surprisingly modest response in our survey when we asked respondents what other services they would like to receive online from government Web sites. A third of the respondents (32%) said there was nothing more they wanted on Web sites, and 38% said they did not know if they wanted anything else. The most cited desire was to access

Social Security information (9%).⁹ A few wanted to be able to conduct more transactions, like filing taxes. And the rest generally wanted more information and faster access to Web sites.

Focus groups have been more successful at drawing people out on their wishes. Fairfax County, Virginia found in its focus groups that citizens wanted such specifics as searchable databases of complaints against local businesses and signups for tee-time at the public golf course.¹⁰

⁹ Currently, the Social Security Administration Web site (www.ssa.gov) allows citizens to request a benefits statement that is then sent through the mail. While this method is slower, it does provide some privacy protection.

¹⁰ "A Friendlier County Web Site; Focus Groups, Survey Prompt Easier Access" The Washington Post, June 14, 2001, p. T03.

Part 3: Different types of government Web site users

We have found that three variables are strongly associated with differences among those who use government agency Web sites: frequency of use, trust in government, and length of time online.

Frequent visitors – 19% of those who use government Web sites fall into this category

Some of our previous reports on other subjects have shown that those who frequently visit specific types of Web sites tend to rely on those sites more than occasional visitors do. Frequent visitors also have the greatest levels of satisfaction with the results that they find. We found the same associations among government Web site users: Those who visited government Web sites once a week or more often looked for more kinds of information than less frequent users and frequent users reported higher levels of satisfaction than those who were less frequent visitors. Many said they were interacting better with their governments because of the information they found on the Web.

Differences between frequent and infrequent users of government Web sites			
Percent of those who use government Web sites who have done these activities and who...			
Activity	Visit government sites more than once/week	Visit government sites less than once/month	Other traits associated with high use of this material on government sites
Do research for work or school	85%	60%	Online longevity
Seek information about public policy or an issue of interest to you	78%	49%	Online longevity
Find out what services a government agency provides	75%	53%	Online longevity
Get advice or information about a health or safety issue	62%	41%	Online longevity
Get information about potential business opportunities relevant to you or your place of employment	48%	26%	Online longevity
Get information about elections, such as where to vote	31%	15%	Online longevity, college education

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Frequent government site users tend to have professional motives behind their visits – perhaps in part because many are already government employees. Government employees are more likely than others to look for jobs at government job sites. Some 23% of those who use government Web sites work for the public sector, but they constitute 42% of frequent surfers. Frequent visitors are more likely than occasional

visitors to use government Web sites while at work. Half (49%) of frequent visitors last visited a government site from work, compared to only 30% of other government site users.

Work demands appear to be the main characteristic distinguishing frequent government site users from others. There are more men in this group (56%) than women. And they are often veteran Internet users. Other than that, there are few differences that can be attributed to standard demographics. Frequent users of government sites are no more likely than others to have a college education, or to belong to a specific racial or ethnic group.

High trusters – 24% of those who use government Web sites fall into this category

Trust in government correlates with having a good online experience at government Web sites. Those with a high trust in government generally think the quality of government Web sites is good, they say they find what they're looking for on the sites, and they feel the sites improve communications between the government and its citizens.

There are few traits that distinguish the high trusters from the low. However, those who show high trust in government and who visit government Web sites are disproportionately Republican. While 34% of government Web site visitors are Republican, full 47% of high-trusting visitors affiliate with the GOP.

Internet veterans – 50% of those who use government Web sites have five or more years of Internet experience

Our previous studies have shown that online experience leads to better searching and better navigating of Web sites. In the case of government site users, the population is split roughly half and half between those who have four years or fewer of online experience, and those who have five years or more. We found that five-year Internet veterans visited more types of government Web sites, looked for more types of information, and engaged in more actual transactions while at the sites than non-veterans.

Activities at government Web sites associated with frequent use			
Percentage of those who use government Web sites who have done this and who....			
Activity	Visit government sites more than once/week	Visit government sites less than once/month	Other traits less strongly associated with this activity
Send comments about an issue to a government official	41%	28%	College education
Get information about or apply for a government job	34%	17%	None
Get information about or apply for government benefits	27%	15%	Having less than a college education
Activities most strongly associated with how long people have been online			
Percentage of those who use government Web sites who have done this and who....			
Activity	Have been online for 5 years or more	Have been online for 4 years or less	Other traits less strongly associated with this activity
Download government forms	71%	54%	College education, frequency of visiting government sites
Use Internet as part of a group effort to change a policy or affect a politician's vote	22%	15%	College education (almost the same association as online longevity)
File your taxes	20%	12%	None
Renew a driver's license or auto registration	14%	9%	None

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

Part 4: A case study of the last visit to government Web sites

We asked people to tell us a bit about the last time they visited a government Web site. As a result, we learned that government sites are not every-day browsing fare. About 1 in 3 people in our sample (38%) had visited a government site within the week of when we reached them on the phone. About a third of our sample (34%) accessed a government site from a computer at their workplace, but 49% of the most active government site users did so from work. And of those who went to government sites during the previous day, the great bulk of them did so from work.

Getting started: Key word searches are important

In their most recent use of a government site, these Internet users were relatively likely to have begun their search at a major search engine or general site such as MSN or AOL (49%). About 29% started at a site they had used before; 9% started at a site they had heard about through a government publication; 7% began a site recommended by a friend or another source like a newspaper advertisement; and 3% went hunting through a portal that specializes in bringing together government material such as FirstGov.gov.

As home subscription services, the MSN and AOL homepages are starting points more for those starting from home (20%) than from work (8%). Frequent government site users, not surprisingly, are more likely than the least active to start at a government site they have been to before (35%-22%). Similarly, 41% of those who went online from work started with a specific government Web page they already knew, compared to 24% who went online from home.

Those who used general search queries when they began their hunt for government material tended to read the search list and pick the options that seemed to fit what they were trying to do or picked a site whose name they knew. Only 21% started with the first item on their search list and then checked other sites if that first hit didn't work.

What they did

People visited government web sites for a variety of reasons. The most commonly cited was simply "general research" (15%). Some 8% were doing research for work, 7% were looking for jobs, and another 7% may have been planning vacations (as indicated by visits to tourism and parks information pages). Some 6% sought information on Social Security or other government benefits.

While most users (60%) were doing things they had done before, work appeared to drive the most repeat visits. 71% of those who accessed government sites from work were performing tasks they had done before, compared to 57% of home surfers and 46% of those who accessed from somewhere else.

Activities pursued by those who use government Web sites the last time they went online	
Activity	
Search for general information/research	15%
Search for tax information/download forms	9%
Research for work/school	8%
Find information about regulations, licenses, and policies	7%
Search for employment	7%
Search for information on government policies or officials	7%
Research travel or tourism information	4%
Search for information on parks and recreation	3%
Search for financial aid and grants information	3%
Access Social Security information	3%
Access government benefits information	3%
Look for information about business laws, procedures, or licenses	2%
Access information related to motor vehicles	2%
Access health-related information	2%
Search for information on the US military/Department of Defense	2%
Find information related to the September 11 attacks	1%
Look up lottery information	1%
Other	16%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is $\pm 4\%$.

How easily they did it

The great majority of those who use government Web sites, about 80%, accomplished what they set out to do the last time they went online. Neither the most frequent surfers nor the Internet veterans showed any advantages in this regard. Similarly, 80% of respondents were able to keep their searches of government sites limited to no more than three Web sites, regardless of whether they had logged on at home or work, or whether they were frequent or infrequent searchers. Those who accessed from work may be just a little more efficient in their searches, being more able (32%) than those home surfers (21%) to keep their searches to 15 minutes or less.

How many sites they visited and how much time they spent

A majority of our sample (65%) went to more than one government Web site during their most recent hunt for government information or services: 44% went to two or three sites;

13% went to four or five sites; 5% went to between six and ten sites; a 2% went to between eleven and twenty sites. Fully 86% of these Internet users spent an hour or less during their most recent hunt for government information or services.

Trying out new activities on government sites

Many Internet users are just beginning to understand how much they can do on government Web sites – and many government agencies are regularly expanding the kinds of things that their constituents can do at the sites. Thus, it was not surprising to hear in this survey that a relatively large number of government site users (38%) were doing something new at a government site during their most recent visit to a government site.

Government Web sites after September 11

On September 11 and in the weeks after the terror attacks, Americans flocked to the Internet to reach loved ones and get news. By all accounts, as they tried to make sense of what had happened, Americans supported the actions of their government. Nonetheless, those looking for information about the crisis used the government Web space only modestly.

How much time they spent online	
<i>During their most recent foray to government Web sites, Internet users spent this much time at those sites</i>	
Less than 15 minutes	24%
15-30 minutes	35%
31-60 minutes	27%
1-2 hours	8%
More than 2 hours	5%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Government Web Site Survey, September 5-27, 2001. N=815. Margin of error is ±4%.

As with other browsing habits, people went to the Internet after the attacks to get information and to find out how to help. Overwhelmingly, they sought information from well-established news sites. About 7% of those who use government Web sites claim to visit government sites in response to the attacks, the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban, and the subsequent anthrax scares.¹¹

There was not a great surge of citizen contact via the Internet with public officials. About 4% of Internet users contacted an elected official via email in response to the attacks. Similarly, 4% have used the Internet to get information about how to get involved politically.¹²

Methodology

This report is based on the findings of several surveys of Americans about their use of the Internet. First, they are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between September 5-27, 2001 (we made no calls on September 11), among a sample of 815 Internet users, 18 and older, who have ever gone online to look for information from a local, state, or federal government Web site. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 4 percentage points. In

¹¹ January 2002 tracking survey

¹² October-November 2001 tracking survey

addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Interviews for this survey were completed from a pre-screened sample of Internet users who in past surveys identified themselves as government Web site users. Once the household was reached, interviewers asked to speak with the individual who had recently completed a telephone survey. Once the targeted person was on the phone, they were asked a few screening questions to make sure that they had ever gone online to look for government information.

At least 10 attempts were made to complete an interview at every household in the sample. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Interview refusals were re-contacted at least once in order to try again to complete an interview. The final response rate for this survey is 51%.

Second, the figures about the overall size of the online population of those who use government Web sites are drawn from the January 2002 daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between January 3 and January 31, 2002, among a sample of 2,391 adults, 18 and older – 1,451 of them are Internet users. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2 percentage points. For results based Internet users, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The sample for this survey is a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid "listing" bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers). The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (March 2000). This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older, living in households that contain a telephone. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.