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FTC: Protecting Consumers in the Next Tech-Ade

“Internet Usage Trends – Through the Demographic Lens”

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The Pew Internet Project is a non-partisan, non-profit research organization, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. We study the social impact of the internet, which means we measure who's online and what they do, but also who is not online and why. Most of our research is based on telephone surveys, which we feel provide a pretty accurate picture of the changing population. All our reports and data sets are available for free on our site: pewinternet.org.

I'll talk a bit about the evolution of the internet population, but I also want to talk about some of the demographic realities that limit the internet's reach.

Our overall estimate is that 73% of adults in the U.S. go online.

Age is a strong predictor for whether someone has internet access. 88% of Americans age 12-29 go online. This is the group called the Digital Natives, since they have grown up with this technology. Half of non-users in that age group have been online in the past – they just currently don't have access. That's not true with people over age 65, of whom just 32% are online. If a senior is offline, they are probably what we call “Truly Disconnected.” They have never used the internet and do not live in a connected household. Many of these people say they don't even know anyone who goes online. If they needed to access information on a website, they would probably not know where to start.

Health status is another demographic reality that affects internet penetration. 17% of Americans are living with a disability or a chronic disease that keeps them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities. 51% of Americans

living with a disability or chronic illness go online, compared to 74% of Americans who are not dealing with a disability or illness.¹

Ethnicity is also a predictor of internet use. 73% of whites go online, compared to 61% of African Americans. About three-quarters of English-speaking and bilingual Latinos go online, compared to about one-third of Spanish-dominant Latinos.² There are pockets of non-internet users, just as there are pockets of people who do not have a home phone. As Penn State scholar Jorge Reina Schement wrote in 1996, and it is still true today: “Isolation is not distributed randomly; rather, it is concentrated in certain groups so that they suffer its consequences with intensity.”³

It is striking that, despite a 10-point increase in the percentage of adults who go online over the past 3 years, the percentage of those who are Truly Disconnected remains 22%. They are overwhelmingly over age 70 and have less than a high school education. At the present time, when it comes to the internet, if you’re on, you’re on. If you’re off, you’re off.

For many of those who are online, the internet has become embedded in their daily lives.

In one recent survey, we found that the internet helped people get through some of what we called “major life moments” like buying a car, changing jobs, dealing with a serious illness, or finding a new place to live.⁴

The most frequently cited benefit of the internet was in helping people tap into social networks, and I don’t just mean MySpace or Facebook. For many internet users, their social network consists of their email contacts list, but they reap similar benefits.

American communities are transforming. People communicate and maneuver in multiple

¹ Pew Internet Project, August 2006 survey (report forthcoming)

² Pew Hispanic/Internet/Forum surveys with bilingual interviewers, June-September 2006 (report forthcoming). Note: 14.5% of Americans are Hispanic and about 20% of Hispanics are Spanish-dominant.

³ “Thorough Americans: Minorities and the New Media” (Benton Foundation, 1996)

⁴ Pew Internet Project, Feb-March 2005 survey, cited in “The Strength of Internet Ties” report, available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/172/report_display.asp

social networks rather than being bound up in one solitary community that is defined by where they live. Yet people's networks continue to have substantial numbers of relatives and neighbors — the traditional bases of community — as well as friends and colleagues.

People are able to maintain active contact with sizable social networks by using email and the internet, even though many of the people in those networks do not live nearby. And by the way, internet users are not shut-ins, confining themselves to their screens. To the contrary, we find that the more that people see each other in person and talk on the phone, the more they use the internet. Let me say that again: the more social you are offline, the more you use the internet. And the more they cultivate their contacts, the more likely internet users are to reap the benefits: People use the internet to seek out others in their social network when they need help.

Let me give you some examples.

I recently posted to my neighborhood listserv looking for tips about clearing out the standing water in my broken dishwasher. My friend Brian from down the street emailed back immediately to say he had the perfect gadget for this and solved my problem within the hour with this double-prong turkey baster thing. I never would have known that he had this gadget (it's not exactly cocktail party conversation) but emailing a segment of my social network did the trick.

On a more serious note, when someone I know was fighting transitional cell carcinoma, he joined an online community devoted to that specific type of cancer. One night before a round of tests, he wanted a snack and couldn't remember if he was allowed to eat within that timeframe before the test. It was too late at night to call his doctor, but someone in his online community was awake and told him no, do not eat the snack or you'll have to reschedule the test. It was a small event in his health care odyssey, but it was helpful to have access to just-in-time advice.

Another way that internet users solve problems or choose products is to go to a search engine. Search engines have become like public utilities of information. Just as you turn on your kitchen faucet and expect clean water to come out, internet users turn to search engines and expect clean information to come out. More than ever, internet users rely on search results to make decisions in their lives. And they toggle back and forth between their social networks and their search engines when they are making these decisions.

We have recently noticed in our research that some people don't really think about "logging on" or "going online." They just ARE online, whether they are using a cell phone, a handheld device, or a computer. All their sources of information, communication, and entertainment are seamless. An example is watching a TV show on a device other than a TV: 13% of TV viewers have done that, most commonly on a computer.⁵

Looking at these trends through a demographic lens, however, we see that about one in five adults in this country are disconnected from the just-in-time information source that the internet has become for many people. One in five adults are disconnected from the online communities that people use to find a new job, a new place to live, or the best treatment for their loved one's illness.

Broadband is making in-roads to many households that have traditionally lagged in internet adoption. When we began our research in the year 2000, less than 5% of Americans had broadband internet access at home. In 2006, broadband access at home is now installed for 42% of American adults and there is evidence that broadband is reaching a more diverse audience now than in 2005.⁶ Between March 2005 and March 2006, home broadband penetration grew twice as fast as it had the previous year. Middle-income Americans accounted for much of the increase, along with African Americans and new internet users coming online for the first time with broadband at home.

⁵ Pew Internet Project, Feb-April 2006 survey (report forthcoming).

⁶ Pew Internet Project, Feb-April 2006 survey, cited in "Home Broadband Adoption 2006" report, available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/184/report_display.asp

Another trend to watch is cell phone penetration. 50% of Americans age 65 and older have a cell phone, while only a third have internet access.⁷ 40% of Spanish-dominant Latinos have a cell phone, while only a third have internet access.⁸

The internet population is starting to look more like America, but it does not include the pockets of America that are disconnected from technology.

⁷ Pew Internet Project, Feb-April 2006 survey.

⁸ Pew Hispanic/Internet/Forum surveys with bilingual interviewers, June-September 2006 (report forthcoming).