



## **Annual Internet Survey by the Center for the Digital Future Finds Shifting Trends Among Adults About the Benefits and Consequences of Children Going Online**

**Center for the Digital Future**

Annenberg School for Communication

### **Seventh Annual Study Finds Significant Concerns About Online Predators and Children's Participation in Online Communities**

Are Americans becoming more concerned about the role the Internet plays in children's lives?

The 2008 Digital Future Project has identified several sobering trends in views about going online -- in particular in adults' opinions about Internet use by children.

"In general, opinions about the Internet remain overwhelmingly positive," said Jeffrey I. Cole, director of the Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. "But after seven years of tracking the impact of the Internet, we are also seeing evolving trends which show that adults view some aspects of going online by children to be as troubling as their use of other media -- or even potentially dangerous."

The 2008 Digital Future Project found that:

- \* The percentage of adults who said that the children in their households spend too much time using the Internet reached 25 percent of respondents -- an increase for the third year in a row and the highest percentage yet reported in the seven years of Digital Future Project studies.

- \* A small percentage of adults (13 percent) said that the children in their households spend less time with friends, but that percentage increased for the third year in a row -- another new high for the Digital Future Project

- \* The number of adults who said that the grades of the children in their household has declined since the household started to use the Internet has grown for the second year in a row.

- \* In a new question for the 2008 study, more than half of adults (53 percent) said that online predators are a threat to the children in their households. Only 24 percent of adults with children in their household disagreed with that statement.

- \* In another new question, almost two-thirds of adults (63 percent) are uncomfortable with the children in their households participating in online communities. Only 15 percent of adults are comfortable with children participating in online communities.

The findings about adult views of children's online behavior and more than 100 other issues are published by the Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the comprehensive annual examination conducted since 2000 on the impact of online technology on America.

The Digital Future 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 Internet: foremost as an information source**

In spite of some shifting views among adults about children and the Internet, the overall responses to the Digital Future Project continue to supply a broad range of strongly positive views about the benefits of Internet use -- especially about its value as an information source, and its growing use for involvement in online communities.

The Digital Future Report found that the Internet is perceived by users to be a more important source of information for them -- this over all other principal media, including television, radio, newspapers, and books.

Eighty percent of Internet users age 17 and older consider the Internet to be an important source of information for them -- up from 66 percent in 2006 -- and higher than television (68 percent), radio (63 percent), and newspapers (63 percent).

### **Online Communities: The Social Effects Grow**

The Digital Future Project found profound social impact produced by growing participation in online communities.

The Digital Future Project found that membership in online communities has more than doubled in only three years. More than half of online community members (54 percent) log into their community at least once a day, and 71 percent of members said their community is very important or extremely important to them. Fifty-six percent of members reported meeting their online counterparts in person.

The study found that participation in online community membership has particularly dramatic effects on participation in social causes. Three-quarters of online community members said they use the Internet to participate in communities related to social causes, with 40 percent saying that they use the Internet at least monthly to participate in such communities. Eighty-seven percent of online community members are participating in social causes that are new to them since their involvement in online communities began.

And, a large and growing percentage of members -- now 55 percent -- say they feel as strongly about their online communities as they do about their real-world communities.

“Clearly, the growth of online communities is opening a range of opportunities for social connection, involvement and communication that could not have been anticipated even five years ago,” Cole said.

“The emergence of online communities is demonstrating that opportunities to be involved in common projects and idea sharing about any subject we choose and with people anywhere on Earth is possible and practical,” Cole said.

### **The Internet and politics: mixed opinions**

The Digital Future Project found a range of contrasting views about the impact of the Internet in the political process.

For example, almost two-thirds of users (64 percent) agree that the Internet has become important for political campaigns, and more than half of users age 16 or older (55 percent) said that using the Internet allows people to better understand politics.

However, even as the Internet's role in political campaigning and candidate communication has increased dramatically, only small numbers of users believe that the Internet is a catalyst for political change: less than one-quarter of users (22 percent) believe that the Internet is a tool to encourage public officials to care more about what people think, while only 28 percent agree that using the Internet gives people more of a say in what government does. And the percentage of users who said that the Internet gives people more political power has remained about 30 percent for two years.

In a new question for the Digital Future Project, respondents were asked about their interest in voting online. Among respondents 16 and older, 41 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, while 37 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

**The Center for the Digital Future:  
seven years of exploring the digital realm**

The Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School for Communication 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, Australia and New Zealand.

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 (1.5 years or less of experience) and very experienced users (more than 10 years of experience).

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

For highlights of the 2008 Digital Future Project or to order a copy of the complete report, visit [www.digitalcenter.org](http://www.digitalcenter.org).

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## **Highlights:**

### **The 2008 Digital Future Project – Year Seven**

Among the key findings on more than 100 major issues, the 2008 Digital Future Project found:

#### **America on the Internet**

**Hours Online** -- The number of hours online per week continues to increase – rising to an average of 15.3 hours per week, up by more than one hour per week from 2006, and the highest level in the Digital Future studies.

**Top 10 Most Popular Online Purchases (Users Who Have Purchased Online)** -- The 10 most popular online purchases are books, clothes, travel arrangements, gifts, CDs, videos, electronic goods, software/games, products for hobbies, and computers/peripherals.

**Activities On The Internet: How Often?** -- How frequently do Internet users participate in the most popular online activities? In the current Digital Future Project, these percentages of Internet users were involved in these activities at least weekly: e-mail (96 percent), Internet surfing without a specific destination (71 percent), looking for news online (60 percent), finding product information (43 percent), conducting online banking or other financial services (38 percent), instant messaging (37 percent), playing online games (35 percent), searching for humorous content (25 percent),

In a new question for the Digital Future Project, 16 percent of Internet users said they go online to find or check a fact at least daily, while seven percent of users go online daily or more often to look up the definition of a word.

**What Is Your Home Page?** -- A growing number of Internet users select a search engine for their home page. Twenty-one percent of Internet users said that their home page is a search page such as Google -- more than double the response in 2005. Declining in the current study is the percentage of users who use an Internet portal -- such as Yahoo, America Online, or MSN -- as their home page.

**What Is Your Destination After Your Home Page?** -- In a new question for the Digital Future Project, Internet users were asked where they go online after they log in and land on their home page. Almost half of users (47 percent) and the largest percentage by far said that their next destination is their e-mail account.

#### **Internet Connection At Home: Telephone Modem Use Continues To Decline**

For the seventh consecutive year, access to the Internet at home through a telephone modem continued to decline, and now represents less than one-quarter of all online access from home. More than three-quarters of home Internet access was through a broadband connection, an increase of 25 percent in one year.

In spite of tremendous growth in broadband use, more than half of new users access the Internet through a telephone modem.

**Broadband: Is It Always On At Home?** -- In a new question for the Digital Future Project, broadband users were asked if they kept their broadband connection on most of the time while they are at home. More than two-thirds of broadband users -- 68 percent -- agreed with this statement.

**Working Computers: How Many At Home?** -- The number of American homes that have more than one working computer increased substantially over 2006 and 2005. In the current study, 43 percent of users said they have more than one working computer.

**Internet Access By Cell Phone And Wireless Computer** -- The use of cell phones and computers equipped with wireless cards for Internet access continued to increase to their highest levels thus far in the Digital Future Project.

## **Internet Non-Users**

**Internet Non-Users: Reasons For Not Being Online?** -- Americans who do not go online continue to offer several explanations for not using the Internet, and all of the four major reasons are increasing in prevalence.

**Will Internet Dropouts Return To Internet Use?** -- The number of Internet dropouts who said they will go back online declined to the lowest level in the five years this question has been asked in the Digital Future Project.

**Internet Non-Users: Views About Not Going Online** -- Respondents who do not use the Internet report a variety of disadvantages about not being online, such as being excluded from communications, feeling disadvantaged during job transitions, or having difficulty obtaining information for their jobs or personal interests.

**Non-Users: Will They Go Online?** -- Of the respondents in the current study who are non-users, 46 percent said they are somewhat likely or very likely to go online next year – up from 40 percent in 2006. The percentage of respondents who said they are not likely at all to use the Internet in the next year dropped to 54 percent of non-users -- near the lowest level in the seven years of the Digital Future Project.

## **Media Use and Trust**

**Television And The Internet: Importance As Sources Of Information And Entertainment** -- After seven years of studying online behavior and attitudes, the Digital Future Report found that the Internet is perceived by users to be a more important source of information for them -- this over all other principal media, including television, radio, newspapers, and books.

**Information Online: Is It Reliable?** -- In the current Digital Future Project, 46 percent of Internet users said that most or all of the information online is generally reliable -- this compared to 43 percent of non-users who gave the same response.

**Online Information: Reliability And Accuracy Of Frequently-Visited Web Sites**  
Steadily increasing percentages of Internet users find high degrees of reliability and accuracy on their favorite Web sites. Eighty-three percent of users said that most or all of the information on Web sites they visit regularly is reliable and accurate -- the same percentage as in 2006 and slightly higher than 81 percent in 2005.

**Media Web Pages: Reliability And Accuracy** -- Internet users continue to report high levels of reliability and accuracy for Web pages posted by established media, such as The New York Times and CNN. Among all users, 80 percent said that most or all of the information posted on media Web sites is reliable and accurate -- up from 77 percent in 2006.

**Search Engines: Reliability And Accuracy** -- A higher percentage of Internet users reported negative views about the reliability and accuracy of information provided by search engines, such as Google. Slightly

over half of Internet users -- 51 percent -- said that most or all of the information produced by search engines is reliable and accurate -- down from the 62 percent who reported the same response in 2006.

**Time-Shifting Of TV Viewing** -- A large minority of respondents are time-shifting their TV viewing. In a new question for the Digital Future Project, 29 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "I often watch television shows that have been recorded with a VCR or a digital video recorder such as Tivo."

**Media Online: New Users And Very Experienced Users** -- New users and very experienced users report wide differences in use of a variety of online media. New users spend considerably more time online playing computer games -- an average of 1.2 hours per week more than very experienced users. Very experienced users spend more time than new users reading online newspapers, books, and magazines, and listening to online radio.

**Would You Miss The Print Edition Of Your Newspaper?** -- In a new question, respondents who read print editions of newspapers were asked if they would miss the offline edition if it was no longer available. While more than half of respondents (52 percent) expressed some level of agreement with this question, 27 percent disagreed.

**Does Online Content Lead To Cancelled Print Subscriptions?** -- Twenty-one percent of Internet users agreed that they have stopped a subscription for a newspaper or magazine because they now get the same or related content online.

**Posting Information Online** -- Distributing original content created by Internet users -- whether through a blog, display of photos, or maintaining a personal Web page -- continued to increase. In the current Digital Future Project, 41 percent of Internet users said they post photos online -- an almost fourfold increase in only four years. Smaller but steadily growing percentages of users said they maintain their own Web site or keep a personal blog.

## **Consumer Behavior**

**Who Is Buying Online?** -- The number of online purchasers has increased to the highest level in the history of the Digital Future Project, increasing 16 percent since 2006.

**Purchasing On The Internet: Spending Per Month** -- Sixty percent of Internet users age 18 and older bought online and spent under \$100 a month, a large increase over 2006.

**How Often Do Online Purchasers Buy Online?** -- The average number of annual online purchases for those age 18 and above increased to its peak thus far in the Digital Future Project -- now more than 36 purchases per year.

**How Does Buying Online Affect Traditional Retail Purchasing?** -- A large percentage of online purchasers reported that their Web purchases have reduced their buying of similar items in retail stores. After a small decline in 2006, the percentage who said that Web purchasing reduced their local retail purchasing somewhat or a lot grew to 67 percent of online purchasers, up from 65 percent in 2006.

**Browsing For Products: Retail Stores Vs. The Internet** -- Large percentages of respondents report using both the Internet and retail stores for browsing and purchasing. Seventy-one percent of Internet purchasers said they sometimes or often browse in traditional retail locations and then buy online. Even higher percentages of respondents said they use the Internet as a merchandise browsing tool before buying in stores.

**Privacy: Concerns When Buying Online** -- Privacy and security online have been found to be major concerns in each of the seven Digital Future studies. Almost all respondents have reported concerns about the

privacy of their personal information when or if they buy on the Internet. The percentage of all respondents who reported the highest level of concern increased in 2007, and overall concern was the highest since the first year of the Digital Future Project.

**Privacy: Comparing Concerns Among Non-Purchasers Vs. Purchasers --** Although the percentage of all users who report the highest level of concern continues to be quite large, comparing Internet purchasers to non-purchasers shows that online buyers report much lower levels of concern.

**Credit Card Information: Are Concerns Stabilizing? --** Concerns about credit card security when or if buying online continue to remain high among respondents in the Digital Future Project. Although the percentage of those with the highest level of concern about credit card information increased slightly to 57 percent, the overall levels of concern have stabilized over the four most current years of the study -- and at a much lower level than when this issue was first tracked in 2001.

## **Communication Patterns**

**How Many Americans Are Using E-mail? --** The already high level of e-mail use by Internet users grew even higher. In the current digital future project, 99 percent of Internet users said they use e-mail.

**How Quickly Should Users Reply To E-mail? --** Increasing numbers of e-mail users expect rapid response to e-mail. Thirty-one percent said that personal e-mail messages should be answered as soon as possible -- up from 24 percent in 2006.

**E-mail Communication With Teachers, Government Officials, And Health Care Professionals --** Growing percentages of e-mail users reported that they use e-mail to contact a teacher or government official; more than half of e-mail users contacted either a teacher or government official.

**Instant Messaging And Social Relationships --** Even as use of instant messaging increases, less than one-quarter of Internet users overall said that instant messaging is important in maintaining social relationships.

**The Internet And Social Relationships --** In a new question for the Digital Future Project, users were asked about the importance of the Internet in helping to maintain social relationships. Overall, 45 percent of users said that the Internet was important or very important in helping them to maintain social relationships, while 30 percent of users said the Internet is not important in maintaining their social relationships.

**The Internet And Online Friends --** Internet users report growing numbers of online friends. Internet users said they have an average of 5.2 friends online whom they have never met in person, the highest number reported thus far in the Digital Future Project.

**Total Time Spent Socializing With Friends And Family --** Internet users report slightly more time per week than non-users socializing with friends in person. Users also report spending three more hours per week than non-users socializing face-to-face with family.

**Children And Time Spent With Friends --** Large percentages of adults (87 percent) said that the children in their household spend the same amount of time or more time with friends since using the Internet. However, the percentage of adults who said that their children spend less time with friends increased for the third year in a row, to the highest level in the seven years of the Digital Future Project.

**Online Predators: Are They A Threat To Children? --** A new question for the Digital Future Project found that a large majority of adults said that online predators are a threat to the children in their households. In households with children, 53 percent of adults agreed that online predators are a threat to their children.

## Social Effects

### Online Communities

*For the Digital Future Project, an “online community” is defined as a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only. These online communities represent broad interests -- professional, social, spiritual, hobby, and political, among others.*

**Are You A Member Of An Online Community?** -- Fifteen percent of Internet users reported they are members of an online community -- more than double the percentage since this question was first asked three years ago.

**Types of Online Communities** -- Nearly half of online community members said their community is related to their hobbies. Large percentages of members report that their community involves their social lives or professional issues.

**Participation In Online Communities: Does It Affect Involvement in Real-World Communities?** -- A large percentage of online community members said that their participation in those communities has no effect on their involvement in offline communities. However, 16 percent of online community members said that this involvement decreased their involvement in offline communities.

**Online Community Members: Interaction** -- Seventy-one percent of online community members said they sometimes or always interact with other members of their community while logged in, up marginally from 70 percent in 2006.

**Online Communities: Links To Offline Actions** -- A large increase in the percentage of online community members take actions offline at least once a year that are related to their online community, such as attending a meeting.

**Online Community Members: Do They Meet Members Of Their Community In Person?** -- In addition to high levels of interaction with specific members of online communities, a growing majority of online community members meet their counterparts in person.

**Web Sites For Video Sharing Or Social Networking: How Often Do You Visit?** -- While one-fourth of online community members never visit video sharing or social networking sites such as YouTube or Facebook, half of them visit once a week or more, and 22 percent visit at least once a day.

**Why Do Users Visit Web Sites For Video Sharing And Social Networking?** -- Internet users reported a wide range of reasons for visiting video sharing services such as YouTube and social networking Web sites such as MySpace, with relaxing or filling time at the top of the list. Users also report several reasons involving personal values, such as gaining insight into themselves or other members, looking for a sense of belonging, or finding models of behavior.

**Posting Content Online By Online Community Members** -- Among all online community Web site visitors, almost two-thirds (64 percent) said that they never create videos or other content to post on Web sites such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and Hi5.

**Children Participating In Online Communities: The Adult View** -- Although participation in online communities Web sites for video posting and social networking is increasing, a large percentage of adults are uncomfortable with the children in their households participating in online communities. In a new question for the Digital Future Project, adults with children in their household were asked if they were comfortable with the children participating in online communities; 63 percent disagreed, while only 15 percent agreed.

**Participation In Online Communities Related To Social Causes** -- Three-quarters of online community members in the current Digital Future Project said they use the Internet to participate in communities related to social causes -- up 30 percent from 2006.

**The Internet: An Aid For Users To Stay Informed About Social Causes?** -- Almost all members of online communities (94 percent) said the Internet helps them become more informed about social causes.

**Are You Participating In New Social Causes Because Of Online Communities?** -- Large and growing percentages of online community members (87 percent) are participating in social causes that are new to them since their involvement in online communities began.

**Social Activism And Participation In Online Communities** -- Although many online community members are actively involved in social causes, a lower percentage said that their activism has increased since they began participating in online communities compared to 2006.

**Has Offline Participation In Social Issues Changed Because Of Online Involvement?** -- Although large percentages of Internet users said they participate in online social causes, only 16 percent said that they are involved more often in offline social issues as a result of their online participation.

**Online Communities: Participation In Non-Profit Organizations** -- A growing percentage of online community members report that their participation in non-profit organizations has stayed the same since they started using the Internet. Twenty-one percent of online community members said their involvement in non-profit organizations has increased -- down from 30 percent in 2006.

**Are Online Communities As Important As The Real World?** -- For the second year in a row, a large percentage of members of online communities feel as strongly about their online communities as they do about their real-world communities. Fifty-five percent of online community members said they feel as strongly about their online communities as they feel about their real-world communities -- an increase from 43 percent in 2006.

## **Children And The Internet**

**Internet Use: The Right Amount Of Time For Children?** -- The small but growing percentage of adults who said that the children in their households spend too much time using the Internet reached 25 percent of respondents -- the highest number in the seven years of the Digital Future Project.

**Television Viewing: The Right Amount Of Time For Children?** -- In all seven studies in the Digital Future Project, more than 40 percent of adults said that the children in their households spend too much time watching television. That percentage has reached the highest level in the study (49 percent) for the second year in a row.

**The Internet And Schoolwork: Children's Views** -- Children and adults in the current Digital Future Project continue to express conflicting views about the importance of the Internet for schoolwork. Almost all Internet users age 18 and under said that going online plays a major role in their schoolwork, but the level of importance has declined slightly.

**Internet Use And School Grades: The Adults' View** -- As in the previous years of the Digital Future Project, adults take a different view than children of the Internet's value for schoolwork. Most adults said that the Internet has no effect on school grades for the children in their household, and the adult view of the Internet as a negative influence on grades is growing.

**Internet Use And Television Viewing: Use As Punishment Tools** -- Denying access to both the Internet and television as a punishment tool for children continued to increase, and reached their highest levels to date.

## **Political Power And Influence**

**Is The Internet Important In Political Campaigns?** -- Sixty-four percent of Internet users agreed that the Internet has become important for political campaigns -- up from 59 percent of users in 2006.

**Is the Internet A Tool For Political Influence?** -- Can the Internet encourage public officials to care more about what people think? Only a small percentage of respondents said yes, and the number is declining.

**The Internet: Does It Help People Better Understand Politics?** -- In the current Digital Future Project, belief that the Internet can be a tool for learning about the political process continues to remain high, but has declined slightly for the second consecutive year.

**Voting Online: A Split Decision** -- In a new question for the Digital Future Project, respondents were asked about their interest in voting online. Among respondents 16 and older, 41 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, while 37 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

**Trends And Issues** -- The Digital Future Project identified several major trends and issues about the maturing of the Internet, including: increasing negative views about the Internet, the views of non-users, changes in media use, online communities, and the impact of the Internet on the political process.

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