

America's favorite pastime: Web surfing?

February 16 2006



Jolene Troup finds herself surfing the Web during her downtime at work, whether it be checking her online banking statement or her Myspace mail to playing games or reading up on course descriptions on her school's Web site.

"I work at a real estate company and the market is very slow -- not much people want to buy new home construction," said the 21-year-old college student living in Gainesville, Florida, "so I have no contracts to put in, therefore I am bored and the Internet is the only entertainment or interaction."

Troup, 21, is only one of many Americans who are finding themselves spend free time online, turning the information highway into a place to hang out.

"Today's cyber culture is what society depends on now," Troup said. "If there was no such thing as the Internet, the world would be a boring place."

Some 40 million people said they surfed for fun on a typical day during the month, up from 25 million people in November 2004, according to a recent report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

Conducted in December 2005, it found that nearly a third of Internet users went online on a typical day for no particular reason, just for fun or to pass the time; while two-thirds of all Internet users admitted they had tried surfing the Web to just past time.

"I think this uptick in hanging out online signals that people look to the Internet as a destination in and of itself," said Deborah Fallows, a senior fellow and the report's author. "People have always gone online very 'purposefully,' doing their e-mail, looking for information, making transactions -- very specific tasks. I think that means that people are now looking to the Web for passing the time -- as place they can go and expect to be amused, entertained, learn something new or interesting, or just fill their idle time."

Web surfing for fun tied with getting news online in third place behind 52 percent who said they use the Internet to send or receive e-mail and 38 percent who use it for search engines.

Typical Web surfers were most likely to be male than female, younger and therefore more attracted to the Internet, had more years of Internet experience, and have broadband access.

So why the increase in idle web surfing?

Fallows says broadband and growth of Internet content are behind the

soaring pastime.

According to Fallows, broadband, which is becoming more prevalent to consumers, is making hanging out online much easier and more pleasant for people as a pastime.

This seems to be the case with the penetration rate for home broadband access rising to 36 percent in 2005 from 3 percent in 2000.

Some 72 percent of Internet users who have broadband at home said they web surfed compared to 63 percent of dial-ups users. And while 39 percent of those with broadband surfed on a typical day for fun, only 23 percent of dial-up users reported having web surfed for fun on a typical day.

Fallows also said contributing to the increase was the availability of different kinds of content for consumers to enjoy. Indeed, according to the Hobbes' Internet Timeline by Robert Hobbes Zakon of the technology expertise group Zakon Group LLC, the number of Web Sites grew from 17 million in the middle of 2000 to as many as 65 million in the middle of last year.

"There's something for everyone," Fallows said. "For example, great new things to just explore, like Google Earth, or lots of blogs to wander about and just check out, lots of international information that can take people wandering around the globe for new perspectives and interests. That's just a few of the possibilities. Every-more Web sites from museums, accessibility to books, you name it."

With more people going online, this may also mean good business for the future of the marriage between mobile and the Internet.

"Imagine the possibilities of hanging out online while you're waiting for

the bus, waiting for friends to arrive, waiting for your plane," she said. "Carrying the Internet around in your pocket will be able to substitute for talking on your cell phone, looking at magazines you pick up in the doctor's office, and many kinds of small time-killing activities."

And with cyber culture expanding, Fallows says this new trend is not only signifying changes in the Internet but also in consumer culture, shifting people's attention from the channel surfing to the Web surfing.

"More Americans are Web surfing to kill time, pass time, and fill time," she said. "It seems to be a positive change. There is more engagement there than channeling surfing. These people are going to the Internet, opening a broad world to explore that interests them, beyond being a passive receptor of the TV."

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