Online world as important to Internet users as real world?

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Is the online world as important to Internet users as the real world? Large numbers of Internet users hold such strong views about their online communities that they compare the value of their online world to their real-world communities, according to the sixth annual survey of the impact of the Internet conducted by the USC-Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future.

Among a broad range of findings about rapidly-evolving methods for online communication, the 2007 Digital Future Project found that 43 percent of Internet users who are members of online communities say that they "feel as strongly" about their virtual community as they do about their real-world communities.

"More than a decade after the portals of the Worldwide Web opened to the public, we are now witnessing the true emergence of the Internet as the powerful personal and social phenomenon we knew it would become," said Jeffrey I. Cole, director of the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future.

"The Internet has been a source of entertainment, information, and communication since the Web became available to the American public in 1994," said Cole. "However, in 2006 we are beginning to measure real growth and discover new directions for the Internet as a comprehensive tool that Americans are using to touch the world."

The findings about online communities and more than 100 other issues

are published in the 2007 Digital Future Project, the comprehensive annual examination of the impact of online technology on America.

The 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 2007 Digital Future Project found that Internet use is growing and evolving as an instrument for personal engagement – through blogs, personal Web sites, and online communities.

Online communities: a catalyst for connection and activism

Online communities and offline action -- The Digital Future Project found that involvement in online communities leads to offline actions. More than one-fifth of online community members (20.3 percent) take actions offline at least once a year that are related to their online community. (An "online community" is defined as a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only.)

Social activism – Participation in online communities leads to social activism. Almost two-thirds of online community members who participate in social causes through the Internet (64.9 percent) say they are involved in causes that were new to them when they began participating on the Internet. And more than 40 percent (43.7 percent) of online community members participate more in social activism since they started participating in online communities.

Online communities: daily use -- A significant majority of members of online communities (56.6 percent) log into their community at least once a day.

Member interaction -- Online communities are online havens for interaction among members. In 2006, 70.4 percent of online community members say they sometimes or always interact with other members of their community while logged in.

Internet users: reaching out across the Web

Posting information -- Growing percentages of Internet users are going online to post information, whether on a blog, posting photos, or maintaining a personal Web site.

-- The number of Internet users in America who keep a blog has more than doubled in three years (now 7.4 percent of users, up from 3.2 percent in 2003).

-- Likewise, the number of Internet users who post photos online has more than doubled in three years (now 23.6 percent of users, up from 11 percent).

-- The number of users who maintain their own Web site continues to grow steadily (now 12.5 percent of users).

The Internet and social links

The Digital Future Project found continuing growth of the Internet for connection to family and friends – but with virtually no negative effects on time spent in person with them.

New friends, online and in person -- Internet users are finding growing numbers of online friends, as well as friends they first met online and then met in person. In 2006, Internet users report having met an average of 4.65 friends online whom they have never met in person. Internet users in 2006 report an average of 1.6 friends met in person whom they originally met online -- more than double the number when the Digital Future Project began in 2000.

Does the Internet increase regular contact with other users" -- Responding to a question last asked in 2002, 42.8 percent of Internet users agree that going online has increased the number of people they regularly stay in contact with -- marginally less than the 46.6 percent who voiced the same response four years ago.

Internet users and communication with family and friends -- Although more than 40 percent of users say that the Internet has increased the number of people with whom they stay in contact, a lower percent say that since starting to use the Internet they are communicating more with family and friends.

In 2006, 37.7 percent of Internet users agree that since they started to go online they are communicating more with family and friends -- down from 45.5 percent in 2002.

Does the Internet change the amount of time spent with friends and family face-to-face" -- While large percentages of Internet users say that going online increases contact with family and friends, almost all users report that the Internet has no effect on the time spent with close friends or family face-to-face.

Source: University of Southern California