

More Aussies online, but digital divide remains

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Five out of every six Australians are now online and regard the internet as a central part of their lives – but people who don't have access are at a deepening disadvantage as the digital gap widens, researchers have warned.

The latest research for the World [Internet Project](#) (WIP) compared Australians' online habits to internet users in Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. The survey shows that 86 per cent of Australian households have internet access, with 96 per cent of these being [broadband connections](#).

Also, the proportion of people who connect through their mobile devices has more than doubled – from 15 per cent in 2009 to 37 per cent in 2011.

"Many people expected internet take up by Australians to slow down in 2011, but the latest survey shows that there is still a strong growth," say Professor Julian Thomas and Mr Scott Ewing from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) at Swinburne University of Technology.

"More people are going online, and they are doing more things when they do.

"The internet is now Australia's most important source of information – and is rapidly replacing traditional media of newspapers, radio and

television," they say.

The survey reveals that most [respondents](#) see the internet as a social technology that increases their contact with friends and family. It is also an important source of entertainment, challenging television as Australian's biggest entertainment medium, the researchers say.

Other popular activities include looking for information on restaurants and recipes. Respondents also love to shop online, as 72 per cent say they are buying something on it every month.

A quarter of the respondents also say they look at internet sites with [sexual content](#), and one in ten do so at least weekly: Australians own up to a slightly higher rate of 'sex surfing' than do other nationalities in the survey.

However, the strong growth of internet take up is also widening the digital gap, the researchers say.

"As more people use the internet, it's easy to assume that everyone is online – but that's not the case. A large amount of low-income households still do not have home broadband access," says Prof. Thomas.

The survey shows that internet access is directly linked to income and almost four in ten households earning less than \$30,000 a year say they cannot afford home broadband. They are less likely to access government services or material online and do not see the internet as a fast and efficient way to obtain information.

"These people are at greater disadvantage and in danger of being left behind as services put more of their resources on the web," Mr Ewing says.

"Differences in income also affect how much people benefit from the internet. Not everyone gets the same 'bang for their buck' online, as people from lower income households are more likely to see it as a frustrating technology."

"As we approach the rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN) – with two thirds of our respondents saying that the development of NBN is a good idea – the question is what we should do to encourage lower income households to connect as well," says Prof. Thomas.

"Since the extra bandwidth from NBN will provide more opportunities for Australians to access online content, we have to make sure that everyone partakes in this – so that the digital divide does not become more serious."

The World Internet Project is a 32-country partnership that aims to explore how the Internet influences social, political, cultural, and economic behaviour and ideas, as measured by the attitudes, values, and perceptions of both [Internet users](#) and non-users. CCI is the Australian partner of the World Internet Project.

Details of the 2012 WIP report can be found at: [cci.edu.au/projects/digital-futures](http://www.cci.edu.au/projects/digital-futures) target="_blank">www.cci.edu.au/projects/digital-futures .

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