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The British Life and Internet Project: inaugural survey findings

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Keywords

Internet, Consumer behaviour, Interpersonal communications, United Kingdom

Abstract

The British Life and Internet Project was launched in 2002 to explore the way people use the Internet in Britain. It will survey people online throughout each year on a range of topics linked to the use of the Internet. In the first survey that was conducted, just before Christmas 2002, respondents were asked a series of questions about their history of involvement with the Internet and the nature of their online behaviour. The findings indicated that online technology was used overwhelmingly for sending and receiving e-mails and for obtaining news and information linked to work and hobbies. Such is the demand of the Internet on the time of users that many acknowledged reducing the amount of time they spend on other activities, such as watching television, reading newspapers, and even going out to do the shopping. The Internet is, for most of its users, an important interpersonal communications medium, used to stay in touch and gossip with family and friends.

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Introduction

The Internet is one of the fastest growing communications phenomena ever, with dramatic increases in online activity observed over the closing years of the twentieth century. While the telephone took 75 years to reach 50m users world-wide, and television took 13 years, the Internet took only four years (UNDP, 1999). NUA figures for May 2002 showed more than 580m Internet users in the world, with the greatest concentrations being found in Europe (186m), North America (183m) and the Asia/Pacific region (168m). NUA is a company that monitors surveys by a large number of market research companies in different countries (Norris, 2001). Although the use of different surveys limits the comparability of the data, these estimates have been confirmed by other sources worldwide, including government departments, media organisations and interest groups (Arunachalam, 1999).

There are wide disparities between nations in the degree to which significant Internet penetration has been achieved. This “digital divide” has been linked to economic, political, social and cultural factors and has been found to occur within nations as well as between them (Norris, 2001). While the uptake of new communications technologies has displayed regional and socio-economic variations, the Internet has, nonetheless, emerged as a significant new medium through which individuals obtain information and entertainment, and conduct a range of transactions.

Research among the online populations of the USA and Europe has revealed that, while many people search for information on the World Wide Web, the most popular application of the Internet is to send e-mails to family and friends (Pew, 2000; Eurobarometer, 2000). By 2000, nearly seven in ten (69 per cent) Internet users across Europe had e-mailed family, friends or colleagues in the last three months, while approaching one in two said they had searched for educational materials (47 per cent) or product information (47 per cent). Around one in seven said they had purchased items such as books (14 per cent) or CDs (14%)

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per cent) online. Other uses included searching for job-related information, listening to music online, visiting government Web sites, watching TV channels and bidding in auctions. All this activity illustrates the range of applications that characterise Internet behaviour.

While much publicity has centred on the role the Internet can play in relation to business and consumerism, for many of its users its application is focused much closer to home. For the great majority of Internet users, being online is important because it provides a convenient, on-tap access route to family and friends. In the USA, the most advanced Internet nation in the world, most Internet users acknowledge that e-mail has improved their contacts with family and friends. The guilt over not having made the effort to see a relative or friend for a long time could be appeased by sending them an e-mail. In fact e-mail was more convenient than having to take time out to visit. Through the Internet, contact with friends could be maintained without having to spend so much time talking to them. Further, it was easier to have unpleasant conversations or to speak one’s mind via e-mail and such messages could clear the air when relationships were strained (Pew, 2000).

Other research has confirmed these survey reports about the nature of interpersonal relations online. Within a computer-mediated environment, the relative anonymity and emotional distance it creates can cause people to communicate with each other differently than from face-to-face meetings. We may all display greater bluntness of expression online and more honesty in the way we disclose our feelings (Joinson, 2001; Joinson and Banyard, 2002; Postmes et al., 2002).

As users become more experienced online, the Internet can become transformed into a purposeful tool with a range of applications (Pew, 2002a). From initially learning how to use e-mail to send messages to people we know, as user competence grows, the Internet is used for more complex applications including work-related tasks, to make purchases and to conduct financial transactions. It can be used to find information about a wide range of topics, either to satisfy idle curiosity or for more specific reasons. US research has indicated that the Internet can play crucial information-providing and advisory roles in relation to a number of major life events. Users indicated that they used the Internet in relation to education and training for their career, getting a new job, obtaining information to help a loved one who was seriously ill, choosing the best available school for their children, and for making significant purchases such as a car (Pew, 2002b).

In addition to the functions it can serve for individual users, the Internet has been promoted as enhancing democracy by making governments more accessible to citizens, providing transparent information about government activities and making those who govern more accountable. In Britain, the Government has set the ambitious target of ensuring that virtually all government departments – central and local – are online by 2005. Government Web sites will not simply provide information about government policies and activities, but will function as transactional links through which citizens can engage directly with a wide range of public services (Office of the E-envoy, 2001). As yet, while there has been significant growth in government Web sites, internationally, sophisticated interactive communications links and transactional services have been limited (Norris, 2001). Nonetheless, evidence has emerged that significant minorities of citizens have begun to use government and party political Web sites (Eurobarometer, 2000).

This paper reports initial findings from a new research project that has been designed to track the behaviour and opinions of Internet users in Britain. The British Life and Internet Project (BLIP) was launched in 2002 to explore the way people use the Internet in Britain. Surveys are conducted online with known Internet users around the country[1]. The survey has access to some 30,000 UK e-mail addresses that have been compiled from a number of Internet user databases.

Periodically, online questionnaires are posted on the BLIP Web site (www.britishlifeproject.co.uk) or e-mailed to members and Internet users invited to respond. Each survey collects information about the demographic characteristics of the sample and respondents’ Internet using history. In addition, surveys focus on specific themes that are concerned with the way people use the Internet, what they use it for, their opinions about Internet services and its impact on their lives.
The current survey, which served to launch the project, focused on the way people use the Internet around Christmas time. It investigated the way people use the Internet at this special time of year to keep in touch with family and friends and to seek out and purchase Christmas gifts. How much do Internet users now depend on cyberspace for their Christmas shopping? How much do they spend? Do they have any reservations or concerns about shopping on the Internet? How significant has the Internet become, alongside or in place of more traditional forms of Christmas-time communication, in enabling people to keep in touch with their loved ones?

The Christmas Internet survey

The fieldwork was conducted between 2-10 December 2002. In all, 12,400 Internet users were contacted about the survey and 2,887 responded (giving a 23 per cent response rate). The initial survey was sent to a database of users provided by The Independent Digital Group.

Demographic profile

The response sample comprised nearly two-thirds male respondents (64 per cent) and over one-third female respondents (36 per cent). The sample exhibited a diverse age spread: 18-24 (14 per cent), 25-34 (25 per cent), 35-44 (24 per cent), 45-54 (21 per cent), 55-64 (11 per cent), and 65+ (5 per cent).

More than two-thirds of respondents were in full-time work (69 per cent), with under one in ten, respectively, in part-time employment (9 per cent) or unemployed (9 per cent). Just over one in ten (11 per cent) reported that they were in full-time education.

One in three respondents were single (33 per cent), more than four in ten (43 per cent) were married, and one in six (16 per cent) were living with a partner to whom they were not married. A small minority (8 per cent) were divorced, separated or widowed.

A clear majority of respondents (75 per cent) had no children up to age 16 living with them in their household, one in eight (12 per cent) had one such child, and one in seven (14 per cent) had two or more children living at home.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (92 per cent) were white and of European origin. The remainder were divided among Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi (2 per cent), Arab (1 per cent), Chinese (1 per cent), other Asian (1 per cent), Caribbean (1 per cent) and African (1 per cent) respondents.

Newspaper readership

Turning to daily newspaper readership, respondents were asked which daily or evening newspapers they personally read regularly (meaning at least two copies a week). The most commonly reported daily newspaper read by respondents was The Independent (26 per cent), followed by The Guardian (21 per cent). This is explained by the fact that the survey universe was constructed significantly from an e-mail database supplied by the Independent Newspaper Group. The next most popularly read daily newspapers were The Times (10 per cent) and The Daily Telegraph (7 per cent).

Mid-range tabloid readers of newspapers such as the Daily Mail (3 per cent) and Daily Express (1 per cent) were much less commonplace among the sample, with Financial Times readers (4 per cent) being more frequently occurring. Readers of tabloids such as The Sun (2 per cent), The Mirror (2 per cent) and Daily Star (less than 0.5 per cent) indicate the broadsheet bias in the sample.

This pattern was reflected in claimed Sunday newspaper reading, for which regular reading meant at least two copies a month. The most read newspapers among this sample were The Observer (21 per cent), Independent on Sunday (21 per cent), The Sunday Times (17 per cent) and The Sunday Telegraph (7 per cent). These were followed by The Mail on Sunday (4 per cent), News of the World (3 per cent), Sunday Mirror (2 per cent), Sunday Express (1 per cent) and then The People, Star on Sunday all achieving fewer than 1 per cent of respondents saying they were regular readers.

Internet history

The overwhelming majority of respondents (91 per cent) had Internet access at home, with under one in ten being wholly dependent on gaining access elsewhere (9 per cent). Male respondents (94 per cent) were somewhat more likely than female
respondents (87 per cent) to say that they had Internet access at home. Well over half of respondents (58 per cent) indicated that they had had Internet access at home for at least three years. More than one in four (27 per cent) said they had had home Internet access for between one and three years.

Male respondents (63 per cent) were more likely than female respondents (49 per cent) to report home Internet access for three or more years. There was an age difference in reported length of access to the Internet at home. The under-34s (42 per cent) were less likely than those aged 35 and over (69 per cent) to claim to have had home access to the Internet for 3+ years. Married respondents (68 per cent) were far more likely than either cohabiting respondents (53 per cent) or single respondents (44 per cent) to say they had had home Internet access for three or more years.

Most respondents were regular users of the Internet. Nearly four in ten (39 per cent) of those with home access said they used the Internet from home at least twice a day, with more than one in five (22 per cent) saying they used the Internet at home at least once a day. More than one in four of these respondents (27 per cent) claimed to access the Internet from home at least once a week. Male respondents were somewhat more regular Internet users than female respondents. More than four in ten males (43 per cent) reported using the Internet from home two or more times a day, compared with just under one in three females (32 per cent). The heaviest users of the Internet at home were the oldest respondents. Those aged 18 to 34 (23 per cent) claimed to use the Internet from home two or more times a day compared with 43 per cent of those aged 35-54 and 64 per cent of those aged 55+.

More than two-thirds of respondents (68 per cent) said they accessed the Internet from work at least once a day, with a further one in ten (10 per cent) saying they did this at least once a week. Around one in six respondents (18 per cent) said they never accessed the Internet from work.

No gender differences emerged in frequency of Internet access from work. It was not surprising, though, that the oldest age groups were most likely to say they never used the Internet at work. The over-65s (78 per cent) were most likely to say this, followed by a much smaller proportion of 55-64s (39 per cent) and an even smaller proportion of under-55s (11 per cent). Hence, the age-related pattern of Internet use was clear. Older respondents used the Internet predominantly from home, whereas younger respondents, who were still in employment, did so mostly from their place of work.

Marital status also exhibited a link to work use of the Internet. Married respondents (22 per cent) were more likely than single respondents (12 per cent) or cohabiting respondents (8 per cent) to say they had never used the Internet at work.

During completion of the online survey questionnaire itself, more than one in two respondents (53 per cent) said they did so from home, with more than four in ten (43 per cent) reportedly doing so from work, and a tiny minority (3 per cent) doing so from an Internet café or from a friend’s home.

**General Internet-related activities**
Respondents were questioned about general Internet-related activities. A list of 37 activities was provided and in each case respondents had to indicate whether they had done any of these things on the Internet in the past week, in the past month, in the past year, or whether they had never done these things online.

The activities most often endorsed as having been engaged in online during the previous week were:

- sending/reading e-mail (99 per cent);
- getting news online (89 per cent);
- doing job-related work (69 per cent);
- looking for information linked to a hobby/interest (65 per cent);
- looking for product-related information such as about books, toys, music (62 per cent);
- going online just for fun or to pass time (59 per cent);
- conducting personal banking online (49 per cent);
- checking weather forecasts (39 per cent);
- getting travel information about airline/hotel prices (34 per cent);
- checking sports scores (31 per cent);
- visiting central government Web sites (30 per cent); and
- getting ideas for gifts to buy for Christmas for family/friends (27 per cent).

Some age-related differences in the nature of use of the Internet emerged. The under 34s (84 per cent) were more likely than either the
35-54s (69 per cent) or the over 55s (49 per cent) to have ever visited a Web site associated with a television programme. While an overwhelming majority of under 55s (94 per cent) said they had, at some time, engaged in work-related activities online; fewer 55-64s (76 per cent) said this, while far fewer respondents aged over 65 (47 per cent) had reportedly ever done this. Instant messaging online was an activity most often associated with those aged 24 and under (70 per cent of whom had ever done this) and least often associated with the over 55s (46 per cent). Yet there were no significant age differences in the extent to which respondents claimed to have sent online Christmas or birthday greetings to family members. The most likely users of adult Web sites were respondents aged 35-44 years. This was the only age group for which the majority of respondents (53 per cent) claimed ever to have visited one of these sites.

Single respondents (50 per cent) and cohabiting respondents (45 per cent) were much more likely than married respondents (30 per cent) to say they had ever taken part in chat rooms online. Single respondents (61 per cent) were also more likely than both married (42 per cent) and cohabiting respondents (51 per cent) to have ever sent instant messages to someone online at the same time. Despite the social usage of the Internet, only a minority overall used it to find a date. This use of the Internet was more prevalent among single respondents (18 per cent) than among married respondents (3 per cent), though cohabiting respondents were markedly more likely than their married counterparts to report having sought an online date (11 per cent).

Purchasing via the Internet
There were signs that Internet users are using the Internet not only to get ideas about things to buy for themselves or for others, but also to make those actual purchases. For instance, eight in ten respondents (80 per cent) had purchased a book online within the past year, with more than one in five (21 per cent) saying they had done so within the previous week.

Again, eight in ten respondents (80 per cent) said that they had bought or made a reservation for travel online within the past year, with one in six (16 per cent) claiming to have done so within the previous week.

More than one in two respondents (51 per cent) said they had made online purchases of groceries or household items over the past year, with nine per cent reportedly having done this within the past week.

Interpersonal communication and the Internet
The Internet was also used as a communications medium for keeping in touch with others, whether relatives, friends or strangers. More than one in ten respondents (11 per cent) claimed to have used the Internet within the past year to find someone to date. Nearly one in four (24 per cent) said they had used the Internet within the past year to meet new people and make new friends. A total of four in ten (40 per cent) had, within the past year, taken part in “chat rooms” or online discussions with other people. Ethnic minority respondents (53 per cent) were less likely to report joining in chat rooms than were Caucasian respondents (61 per cent). More than one in two (51 per cent) had, within the last year, sent “instant messages” to someone who was online at the same time. Finally, seven in ten respondents had used the Internet at some point within the past year to send online Christmas or birthday greetings to family and friends. And, of course, as already noted above, nearly all respondents (99 per cent+) had used the Internet for e-mail purposes.

Online democracy
The government has announced ambitious plans to establish online access to central and local government universally by 2005. The current research indicates that Internet users in Britain are already making use of such online services. More than nine in ten respondents (91 per cent) claimed to have visited a central government Web site in the past year, with three in ten (30 per cent) claiming to have done so within the previous week. A total of eight in ten respondents (80 per cent) had reportedly visited local government Web sites for information about local public services during the past year, with one in five (20 per cent) saying they had done this in the past week. A smaller proportion, but still over half of respondents (54 per cent), claimed to have visited political party Web sites in the past year, with one in ten (10 per cent) saying they had done this in the past week.
Internet as an information source

The evidence from this survey indicated clearly that the Internet is an important information source for its users. Virtually all respondents (99 per cent) had used the Internet to get news, and a significant majority (87 per cent) had used it for weather reports. More than six in ten respondents (63 per cent) had at some time checked online sports scores and over nine in ten (95 per cent) had accessed online travel information in the past year.

Male respondents (41 per cent) were much more likely than female respondents (12 per cent) to say they had checked sports scores on the Internet during the previous week. Female respondents (54 per cent) were much more likely than males (28 per cent) to say that this was something they never did. In addition, respondents with two or more children at home (40 per cent) were more likely to have checked sports results on the Web in the previous week than were either respondents with just one child at home (30 per cent) or no children at home (29 per cent).

On a more personal front, virtually all respondents (99 per cent) had accessed online information relating to a hobby or interest within the last year, and nearly six in ten (58 per cent) had gone online at some point for housing information.

Underlining the growing importance of the Internet to consumers, most respondents (98 per cent) had, at some point in the previous year, looked for product-related information online. Significantly, and probably linked to the proximity to Christmas, more than six in ten (62 per cent) said they had looked for product-related information online within the past week.

Internet as entertainment

The Internet is not just a source of information, it is also a source of entertainment for its converts. While relatively few respondents (9 per cent) claimed to have watched a movie online, most (77 per cent) had watched video clips online within the past year. Male respondents (24 per cent) were more likely than female respondents (13 per cent) to say they had watched a video clip online during the previous week.

In a hybrid entertainment-related informational application of the Internet, more than seven in ten respondents (72 per cent) said they had visited Web sites linked to TV shows within the previous 12 months.

At the more risqué end of usage, nearly one in two respondents (47 per cent) claimed to have visited an adult Web site in the past year. Males (15 per cent) were significantly more likely than females (1 per cent) to say they had visited one of these sites in the past week. Female respondents (83 per cent), meanwhile, were much more likely than male respondents (37 per cent) to say they never visited adult Web sites on the Internet.

Financial usage

Some evidence emerged that many Internet users utilise online financial services. More than seven in ten respondents (71 per cent) said they had conducted personal banking online in the past 12 months, with nearly one in two (49 per cent) having done so within the previous week. Male respondents (53 per cent) were somewhat more likely than female respondents to say they had conducted online banking during the past week. Only a minority (12 per cent) had bought or sold stocks and shares online, however, over the previous year.

Downloading content

The Internet is not just a source of online information and entertainment for live consumption. It provides users with access to content they can download for re-use. More than eight in ten respondents (81 per cent) indicated that they had ever downloaded software online relating to music or digital photography. More than one in five (21 per cent) said they had done this during the previous week. This recent activity was reportedly more prevalent among male respondents (26 per cent) than female respondents (11 per cent).

A clear majority of respondents (64 per cent) also claimed ever to have downloaded other kinds of files such as games, video files or picture files. Far fewer respondents reported ever having downloaded movies (16 per cent) or music recordings (38 per cent), or to have shared files from their own computer such as music, video or picture files, or computer games with others online (30 per cent). Male respondents (34 per cent) were more likely ever to have engaged in file sharing online than were female respondents (22 per cent).
Those activities most often endorsed as never having been done online were:

- watching a movie online (91 per cent);
- finding someone to date (89 per cent);
- playing a lottery or gambling online (89 per cent);
- buying stocks and shares online (88 per cent);
- downloading movies (86 per cent);
- meeting new people or making new friends (76 per cent);
- participating in online auctions (74 per cent);
- getting photos developed/storing/displaying photos online (72 per cent);
- sharing files from own computer (e.g. music, video, picture files) (70 per cent); and
- obtaining music recordings online (62 per cent).

**Internet and use of time**

Survey respondents were asked whether using the Internet had changed the amount of time that they spend on a variety of other activities. Had the Internet increased or decreased the amount of time spent on the listed activities? A total of 11 activities were presented in this context: working at the office; working at home; shopping in stores; commuting in traffic; reading newspapers; watching television; spending time with my family; thinking about what to buy people for Christmas; spending time with my friends, and attending social events and activities.

In terms of percentages of respondents saying that using the Internet had decreased the amount of time they spend on each of these activities, the ranking that emerged is as follows:

- watching television (42 per cent);
- reading newspapers (36 per cent);
- going around shops buying Christmas presents (34 per cent);
- shopping in stores (33 per cent);
- commuting in traffic (16 per cent);
- working in the office (13 per cent);
- thinking about what to buy people for Christmas (11 per cent);
- spending time with my family (11 per cent);
- working at home (6 per cent);
- spending time with my friends (5 per cent); and

- attending social events and activities (5 per cent).

Internet use appears, on the basis of this self-report evidence, to have had the greatest impact on watching television and reading newspapers. While the greatest proportion of respondents said that using the Internet had made no difference to time spent watching television (56 per cent) or reading newspapers (50 per cent), as the figures above show, significant minorities of respondents said that this new medium had led them to reduce the amount of time they spend consuming these two longer-established media.

The one major gender difference in relation to the reported impact of using the Internet on other activities emerged in relation to television viewing. Here, male respondents (47 per cent) were more likely than female respondents (33 per cent) to say that using the Internet had decreased the amount of time they watched television.

For most respondents, the Internet made no difference to the amount of time they spent working at the office (73 per cent) or at home (54 per cent). In regard to working at the office, the reported impact of the Internet was fairly evenly divided between those saying it had increased the time they spent at the office (14 per cent) or decreased it (13 per cent). Where a clearer impact was becoming established, however, was in respect of working from home. Here, many more respondents said that use of the Internet had resulted in increased amount of time spent working at home (40 per cent) than decreased time working at home (6 per cent). This finding probably also links with reports that the use of the Internet had decreased (16 per cent) rather than increased (1 per cent) time spent in traffic commuting. Number of children in the household was associated with the extent to which respondents claimed to have increased the amount of time they spend working at home. Respondents with two or more children at home (51 per cent) were more likely than respondents with one child (41 per cent) or no children at home (38 per cent) to say that using the Internet had increased the time they spent working at home.

Respondents aged 25-44 (40 per cent) were most likely to claim that using the Internet had decreased the amount of time they spent going round the shops buying Christmas
presents, with the 45 and over age groups (30 per cent) being less likely to admit to this change, and the under 24s (25 per cent) least likely of all age groups to acknowledge this effect of the Internet.

The social impact of the Internet was marginal. Most respondents indicated that using the Internet had not changed the amount of time they spent with their family (86 per cent) or friends (90 per cent) or going to social events (89 per cent).

The use of the Internet at Christmas for shopping and buying presents was in evidence. One in three respondents (33 per cent) said the Internet had decreased the amount of time spent shopping in stores, with few (4 per cent) saying the Internet had increased store shopping time. Reinforcing this last finding, more than one in three respondents (34 per cent) also said that using the Internet had decreased (compared with 2 per cent saying increased) time spent going around shops buying Christmas presents.

Opinions were more mixed on whether the Internet saved time thinking about what to buy people for Christmas, with 11 per cent saying it decreased time spent doing this and 13 per cent saying it increased time spent on it.

**Importance of e-mail to its users**

Over nine in ten respondents (92 per cent) claimed to have sent at least one e-mail “yesterday” (i.e. the day before they responded to the survey). One in four respondents (25 per cent) claimed to have sent three to five e-mails, one in three (33 per cent) said they had sent between six and 20 e-mails, and one in seven (14 per cent) had reportedly sent 21 or more e-mails the previous day. Respondents aged 24 to 35 (44 per cent) were most likely to have sent 11 or more e-mails during the previous day, with the youngest (18-24: 15 per cent) and oldest (65+: 11 per cent) being the least likely to have sent this many.

When asked how much they would miss using e-mail if it was no longer available to them, three out of four respondents (76 per cent) said they would miss it “a lot”. Most of the remaining respondents (17 per cent) said they would miss e-mail “quite a bit”.

Reporting on their behaviour over the past week, most respondents said they had e-mailed a friend (88 per cent) or a relative (60 per cent). However, telephoning a friend or relative (82 per cent), or visiting with friends (73 per cent), but compared favourably with visiting with family (50 per cent), having friends over to my home (46 per cent), and having family over to my home (28 per cent). The oldest respondents were most likely to have e-mailed a member of their family in the past week. A clear majority of over 55s (77 per cent) said they e-mailed a relative in the previous week, with younger age groups (56 per cent) being much less likely to have done so.

Most respondents said they found e-mail either “very useful” (42 per cent) or “quite useful” (31 per cent) for communicating with members of their family. Even more found e-mail “very useful” (67 per cent) for keeping in touch with friends, with many others (26 per cent) finding it “quite useful” for this purpose. Older respondents aged 55+ (57 per cent) were more likely than younger respondents (under 55: 38 per cent) to say they found e-mail “very useful” for communicating with family members. For the youngest respondents, aged up to 35 (77 per cent), e-mail was “very useful” for communicating with friends, with older respondents (61 per cent) being somewhat less likely to say this.

**E-mailing family**

Respondents were asked to indicate which member of their immediate or extended family they e-mail most often. Just over one in ten (11 per cent) claimed never to e-mail family members. Among the remainder of the sample, the family members e-mailed most often were ranked as follows:

- sister (15 per cent);
- brother (13 per cent);
- wife (9 per cent);
- mother (9 per cent);
- daughter (8 per cent);
- father (7 per cent);
- son (7 per cent);
- husband (5 per cent);
- cousin (5 per cent);
- niece/nephew (2 per cent);
- in-law (2 per cent);
- aunt/uncle (2 per cent);
- grandchild (less than 1 per cent); and
- grandparent (less than 1 per cent).

E-mailing was found to occur most often between siblings (28 per cent), followed by with parents (16 per cent), and then with
children (15 per cent) or between spouses (15 per cent).

When respondents were asked to provide further information about the person e-mailed most often in terms of where they lived, it became clear that this person tended to live at a location remote from the respondents. In nearly four in ten cases, this person lived in a different part of the country (39 per cent) and in more than one in four cases (26 per cent) overseas in a different country. It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that in nearly one in five cases (19 per cent) the family member e-mailed most often lived in the respondent’s home, and in a similar proportion of cases (17 per cent) they lived in the same community or area.

The Internet may provide a substitute for face-to-face contact with the family member e-mailed most often. For most respondents (57 per cent) they reported actually seeing this person just a few times a year or less often. At the other extreme, there are family members with whom regular face-to-face contact does not diminish e-mailing them too. In nearly one in five cases, respondents saw the family member they e-mailed most often every day. Significantly, the family member most often e-mailed may also be contacted by telephone fairly frequently too. In more than one in two cases (52 per cent), this person was reportedly telephoned at least once a week.

Getting respondents to think further about the relative they most often e-mailed, they were also asked to indicate the kinds of things they e-mailed this person about in the past four weeks. Ten different reasons for e-mailing were provided. These are shown below in rank order according to how often they were selected by respondents. The relative most often e-mailed was contacted online in the past four weeks:

- to make arrangements for Christmas (35 per cent);
- to tell them about something that has upset or worried you (32 per cent);
- to find out what they want as a present for Christmas (25 per cent); and
- to wish them a merry Christmas (8 per cent).

Thus, e-mail is used primarily to pass along and share information with family, either about self, family matters or other things of mutual interest. It is still significant, however, that more than one in three respondents used e-mail to make arrangements for Christmas and one in four used it to find out what the other person might want as a Christmas gift.

Some gender-related patterns of use emerged in relation to the Internet as a social activity. Female respondents were more likely than male respondents to say they e-mailed a family member in the past four weeks to pass along a joke or something funny they had heard (66 per cent versus 54 per cent), to tell them about something that had upset them (40 per cent versus 27 per cent), and to pass along something about their job or other things they had been involved in (59 per cent versus 50 per cent).

The youngest respondents, aged up to 35 (64 per cent), were most likely to have used e-mail in the past month to pass along a joke or funny story. Older age groups (52 per cent) were somewhat less likely to use e-mail for this purpose. The over 55s (14 per cent) were twice as likely as the under 45s (7 per cent) to report using e-mail to wish a relative a merry Christmas.

E-mailing friends

Respondents were asked about e-mailing friends as well as family. When asked which of their friends they e-mailed most often – a friend who lives close by or one who lives far away, more than six in ten (62 per cent) said they e-mailed a geographically remote friend.

In nearly six in ten cases (59 per cent), the friend e-mailed most often lived either in another part of the country (30 per cent) or in a different country (29 per cent). In nearly four in ten cases (39 per cent) the friend lived in the same community or area.

E-mailing a friend was, to some extent, a substitute for seeing them face to face. It was also a partial substitute for telephoning them. In nearly six in ten cases (58 per cent) the respondent saw their friend a few times a year.
at most. In one in two cases (50 per cent), to one in eight cases did they see this friend (12 per cent) or telephone them (14 per cent) a few times a week or more.

Respondents were also asked to give the most usual reasons for e-mailing this friend. The same ten reasons were provided as for family members. Thus, over the previous four weeks, respondents claimed to have e-mailed their friend:

1. to pass along something interesting they had heard or read (79 per cent);
2. to pass along news about yourself, family or people you know (76 per cent);
3. to pass along a joke or something funny you have heard (66 per cent);
4. to pass along something about your job/other things involved in (62 per cent);
5. about getting together for dinner or social activity (54 per cent);
6. to get advice about something (41 per cent);
7. to tell them about something that has upset or worried you (37 per cent);
8. to arrange to see them over Christmas (23 per cent);
9. to wish them a merry Christmas (13 per cent); and
10. to find out what to buy them for Christmas (9 per cent).

The pattern with e-mailing friends was similar to that for e-mailing family. E-mail is used mostly to pass along information and experiences of mutual interest. A few respondents did refer to using e-mail to make Christmas arrangements with friends, but this form of communication was less popular in this context in relation to friends than in relation to family. As with e-mailing relatives, e-mailing friends exhibited gender-related differences. Female respondents were more likely than male respondents to say they had e-mailed a friend in the past four weeks to tell them about something that had upset or worried them (47 per cent versus 30 per cent) and to pass along some news about themselves, their family or people they knew (85 per cent versus 71 per cent). E-mail is a medium for gossip.

The youngest respondents (18-34s: 67 per cent) were most likely to use e-mail to make social arrangements with friends. This age band was also most likely to have used e-mail to pass along a joke to a friend (44 per cent) or to gossip about work or other events in their lives (67 per cent).

Single respondents (66 per cent) and cohabiting respondents (63 per cent) were more likely to use e-mail for making social arrangements than were married respondents (43 per cent). Single respondents (69 per cent) and cohabiting respondents (65 per cent) were also more likely to have e-mailed a friend in the past four weeks to pass along something about their job or other events in their lives than were married respondents (55 per cent).

The Internet and Christmas shopping
One of the principal themes of this survey was to find out the extent to which the Internet is used these days for Christmas shopping. To what extent do Internet users use it to get ideas for gifts and to make actual purchases?

To begin with the survey obtained some wider background from respondents about Christmas shopping. How many people did they have to buy gifts for? Who were these people? How much money were they likely to spend on buying Christmas gifts?

More than one in three respondents (36 per cent) said they had to buy Christmas gifts for ten or more people. More than four in ten respondents (42 per cent) had to buy gifts for between five and nine people, while just under one in five (19 per cent) had to buy gifts for four or fewer people. Just a few respondents (4 per cent) said they had no one they needed to buy gifts for. Female respondents (45 per cent) were more likely than male respondents (31 per cent) to say they had to buy Christmas gifts for ten or more people. Not surprisingly, respondents with either two or more (46 per cent) children or one child in the home (43 per cent) were more likely than respondents with no children living at home (33 per cent) to say they had to buy Christmas gifts for ten or more people.

When asked which people Christmas gifts would have to be purchased for, respondents answered:

• mother/father (19 per cent);
• other relative (17 per cent);
• friend (16 per cent);
• spouse/partner (15 per cent);
• son/daughter (11 per cent);
• work colleague (6 per cent);
• boyfriend/girlfriend (5 per cent);
• grandparent (4 per cent);
• grandchild (2 per cent); and
• other (5 per cent).
In total, most respondents (62 per cent) expected to spend between £100-500 buying Christmas gifts, with one in seven (15 per cent) expecting to spend more than this, and over one in five (22 per cent) expecting to spend less. For most respondents (62 per cent) the most expensive single gift they expected to buy would cost between £21-100, for one in six (16 per cent) it was likely to cost £100-200, and for a small minority (7 per cent) more than £200. For one in eight (12 per cent) the most expensive gift was expected to cost no more than £20.

Whether or not respondents had children living at home with them made a difference to how much money they expected to spend on Christmas gifts in 2002. Respondents with two or more children at home (70 per cent) or one child at home (67 per cent) were more likely to say they would spend £200 or more on Christmas gifts as were respondents with no children living at home with them (47 per cent).

Male respondents (5 per cent) were two and a half times as likely as female respondents (2 per cent) to say they would spend more than £1,000 in total on buying Christmas gifts this year.

Married respondents (45 per cent) were the most likely to say they expected to spend £300 or more on buying Christmas gifts, with cohabiting respondents (34 per cent) and single respondents (14 per cent) being progressively less likely to say they would spend this amount.

When asked whether they had used the Internet yet this year to find out information or to get ideas about Christmas gifts, more than six in ten respondents (61 per cent) said that they had done so. Among those (39 per cent) who said they had not used the Internet in this way yet, between one in five and one in four (23 per cent) said they expected to do so. Thus, among these Internet users, if they had not yet used the Internet to get Christmas gift ideas (during the first half of December), most (77 per cent) were unlikely to do so.

When respondents were asked whether they had used the Internet to purchase any Christmas gifts this year, nearly six in ten (58 per cent) said they had done so. Among those (42 per cent) who had not done this, most (58 per cent) said that they would do so eventually. Married (63 per cent) and cohabiting respondents (63 per cent) were more likely than single respondents (49 per cent) to say they had used the Internet this year to purchase any Christmas gifts.

Among respondents who had decided not to purchase gifts on the Internet, they were asked to give reasons for not doing so. A total of 11 reasons were provided and respondents were invited to say how important each of these reasons was. In terms of percentages of respondents saying these reasons were “very important”, the findings revealed the following:

1. I want to see the items I purchase (49 per cent);
2. I feel there are better ways to shop (32 per cent);
3. don’t want to risk using my credit card online (19 per cent);
4. not interested in shopping online (19 per cent);
5. concerned about quality of merchandise (18 per cent);
6. don’t have a credit card (9 per cent);
7. not buying gifts this year (6 per cent);
8. not comfortable using a computer or going to shopping Web sites (5 per cent);
9. don’t have time to shop online (3 per cent);
10. tried shopping online and it didn’t work (3 per cent); and
11. don’t have easy access to the Internet (2 per cent).

The findings indicate that among those respondents who had not purchased Christmas gifts online and did not intend doing so (17 per cent of total sample), the main reasons given were the need still to see the merchandise and belief that offline shopping was a better way to shop. Female respondents (55 per cent) were somewhat more likely than male respondents (45 per cent) to say they wanted to see the items they purchase. A minority also exhibited some concern about credit card security and quality of the merchandise purchased online.

Respondents (58 per cent) who said they had purchased Christmas gifts online were asked how many such gifts they had bought in this way. One in five (20 per cent) said they had bought just one gift online, one in four (26 per cent) had bought two gifts, over one in three (35 per cent) had purchased between three and five gifts, and nearly one in five (19 per cent) had purchased six or more gifts online. Respondents with two or more children living at home with them (29 per...
cent) were the most likely to say they had bought six or more gifts online, compared with 23 per cent of respondents with one child at home and 17 per cent of respondents with no children living with them.

Among those respondents who had bought gifts online, more than half (57 per cent) had spent between £21 and £100, just under one in five (18 per cent) had spent £101-200, one in seven (15 per cent) had spent over £200, and one in ten (10 per cent) had spent up to £20. The same respondents were asked to say what kinds of gifts they had purchased online. The key findings were as follows:

- books (26 per cent);
- computer products (8 per cent);
- children’s toys (8 per cent);
- clothing (7 per cent);
- hi-fi equipment (6 per cent);
- video games (5 per cent);
- small household appliances (toaster, kettle, blender, etc.) (3 per cent);
- ornaments/objet d’arts (3 per cent);
- video camera (3 per cent);
- sports equipment (2 per cent);
- children’s games (2 per cent);
- TV set/VCR (2 per cent); and
- various other items – perfume/cosmetics, suitcases, jewellery, handbags, garden plants, garden ornaments, large household appliances (all under 2 per cent).

Respondents with two or more children living at home were most likely to report buying children’s toys on the Internet, followed by respondents with one child at home (12 per cent) and respondents with no children living with them (6 per cent). Married respondents (10 per cent) were more likely than either single (5 per cent) or cohabiting respondents (6 per cent) to have bought children’s toys on the Internet.

Using the Internet to make these purchases did not cause respondents any discomfort. The great majority (86 per cent) said they were “very comfortable” (34 per cent) or “quite comfortable” (52 per cent) giving their credit card details over the Internet. The over 65s (17 per cent) were significantly less likely than average to say they felt “very comfortable” about giving their credit card details over the Internet.

Finally, all respondents were asked about the different ways in which they might communicate with others this Christmas. A clear majority, in each case, said they would mail letters or Christmas cards to family and friends (84 per cent), phone a family member to talk about Christmas holiday plans and events (82 per cent), and phone a friend to talk about Christmas-related plans (77 per cent). Hence all these Internet-linked respondents expected to use traditional forms of communication to reach out to family and friends at Christmas.

More than half (57 per cent) also said they would send e-mails to family members to talk to them about Christmas events and to make plans, nearly one in two (49 per cent) also said they would send a Christmas card by e-mail. Interestingly, ethnic minority respondents (55 per cent) were proportionately more likely to say they would send a Christmas card by e-mail than were Caucasian respondents (48 per cent). Finally, over four in ten (42 per cent) said they would send an e-mail to someone they had not spoken to for a long time to exchange Christmas greetings. Such findings indicate the growing significance of the Internet at Christmas time as a channel through which people can interact with those they have not seen in ages.

**Discussion**

The survey of Internet users that has been reported here confirmed earlier research in the USA (Pew, 2002a, b) and in Europe (Eurobarometer, 2000) in showing that e-mail is the most widespread single application of the Internet. But while over two-thirds of Internet users said they had e-mailed family, friends or colleagues in the past three months, in the current survey, virtually all respondents (99 per cent) had used e-mail during the past week. Although the authors of this report cannot claim that the survey sample is fully representative of Internet users in Britain, this finding nonetheless underlines the significance of the Internet as a two-way communications medium.

The prevalence of e-mail use may, of course, be explained in part by the timing of this survey. It is possible that use of the Internet to contact family and friends is especially likely to occur at Christmas time. For example, while Internet use has been...
associated more with younger people, more than one in ten (11 per cent) respondents aged over 65 years claimed to have sent 11 or more e-mails the previous day. E-mail was used more often than the telephone to contact friends, though less often to contact relatives. In fact the significance of the Internet as a communications medium at Christmas was further underlined by marked age differences, with a larger proportion of over 55s (77 per cent) than of younger age groups (56 per cent) claiming to have e-mailed family members during the previous week.

The current survey indicated a key difference in patterns of Internet use by age. The Internet is not the preserve of young people; many older respondents reported regular and long-term use of this medium. The significant difference between younger and older users was the primary location of online behaviour. For younger ones still at work, the Internet was accessed most often from the office, while for older respondents, it was used most often at home.

As an interpersonal communications medium, the Internet is used first of all to gossip, then to share jokes, and then to make social arrangements. It is also used to get advice or to seek emotional support. More than one in three respondents used e-mail to make arrangements to see family members over Christmas, with nearly one in four using it to make such arrangements with friends.

Another prominent feature of Internet-related behaviour for this online sample was the use of the Net for news information. An overwhelming majority (89 per cent) claimed to have used the Internet over the previous week for that purpose. This finding is not surprising, however, given that the sample was derived from a population of online news subscribers. In fact, the current sample comprised many experienced Internet users, with well over half the respondents claiming to have had Internet access for at least three years. Job-related usage was widespread, but so too was looking for information linked to a hobby or interest, or simply going online for fun or to pass time.

The diversity of Internet-related behaviour was further illustrated by the majority of respondents who went online to look for product-related information, travel information and to conduct financial transactions. This type of use indicates the growing competence and confidence of Internet users in Britain. Most respondents (80 per cent) had purchased a book online in the past year, with the same proportion saying they had made an online travel reservation during that time. In addition, over half (51 per cent) had purchased groceries online.

On current evidence, the Internet is emerging as a Christmas shopping medium. It was clear that many respondents had Christmas gifts to buy for a number of people. The majority of respondents in this survey claimed to have used the Internet to seek Christmas gift ideas and information and to purchase gifts. Furthermore, the great majority of respondents (80 per cent) who said they had purchased Christmas gifts over the Internet had bought more than one item this way. More than four in ten (43 per cent) spent more than £100 on gifts purchased online. All this shows the growing significance of the Internet as a consumer medium. Despite the difficulties experienced by early dot-com operators in the late 1990s, these latest findings offer encouraging signs that the Internet could evolve into an important consumer platform in the future.

Note

1 The British Life and Internet Project comprises a consortium consisting of researchers from the University of Sheffield and City University, eDigital Research and the Independent Newspaper Group.

References


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