

Caught In The Net What To Make Of User Estimates?

Survey estimates of the number of adults who access the Internet vary substantially. Pollsters involved offer several explanations. Brad Fay, Vice President of Roper Starch Worldwide, has suggested that telephone surveys exaggerate the number of on-line users since these surveys miss a significant portion of lower income households which lack a working phone – and are unlikely to use the Internet. Below, Birdsell et al. offer their explanation, which includes the effects of question wording and the explosive growth of the medium.

Q: Do you use the World Wide Web at home, or not? Do you use your computer at work or another location to access the World Wide Web, or not?
(Baruch-Harris Survey Unit, April 19 - 22, 1996)

11% access Web

Q: Do you ever use a computer at work, school or home to connect with computer bulletin boards, information services such as America Online or Prodigy, or other computers over the Internet?
(Princeton Survey Research Assoc. for Pew Research Center, April 19 - 25, 1996)

21% use Internet/online services

Q: Please tell me if this applies to you personally ... regularly use the Internet or other online computer information services either at home or at work. Does this apply to you or doesn't it?
(Hart & Teeter Research Companies for NBC/Wall Street Journal, March 1-5, 1996.)

24% use Internet/online services

Q: Here is a list of on-line data systems. Which of these, if any, do you access from a computer at home ... at work ... someplace else beside work or home?
(Roper Starch Worldwide, Jan. 6-20, 1996; in-person interviews)

15% access Internet/Web/online services

8% access Internet/Web

Measurement Issues: Wording and Timing Have An Effect

Internet use—and by extension, use of the World Wide Web—is difficult to measure, and not surprisingly, estimates of the on-line population vary widely. We feel these differences in measurement stem from four factors: 1) decisions about what to call a Web or Internet user, 2) the difficulty of phrasing questions which deal with the multiple points of access to the Internet characteristic of the user population, 3) the extraordinarily rapid growth of the medium, and 4) procedures employed to 'clean' the data after it is collected.

The Baruch-Harris surveys employ a broad definition of Web use, asking respondents "Do you use the World Wide Web..." from a number of locations. Other studies have been more restrictive, predictably depressing estimates of Internet usage.

Citizens who do not subscribe to a service and may not even own a computer may nonetheless use public access terminals at schools or libraries. A study of the Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica, CA found that 25% of regular users log-on from public terminals.¹ The same may prove true for the Web. Phrasing questions to pick up users at the many possible points of access is a daunting task. However, focusing on only one or two points of access clouds the usage picture.

Differences among estimates of usage can be further explained by the explosive growth of the World Wide Web. Even conservative estimates suggest an average growth rate of better than 10% per month since December 1994. Our recent growth figure for the WWW user population bumps that number up to almost 19%. Hence, one should expect surveys separated by two or more months to show a measurable difference.

A final issue concerns post-collection procedures. For example, Donna Hoffman et. al. change CommerceNet/Nielsen's 'yes' answers on Web use to 'no' if respondents answered 'never' to the question, "how often [do] you yourself use the Internet for accessing the World Wide Web?"² A rephrasing of this sort could easily drop even heavy Web users who access via a service such as America Online.

¹ Patrick B. O'Sullivan, "Computer Networks and Political Participation: Santa Monica's Teledemocracy Project," *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 23 - 2 (May 1995), p. 99.

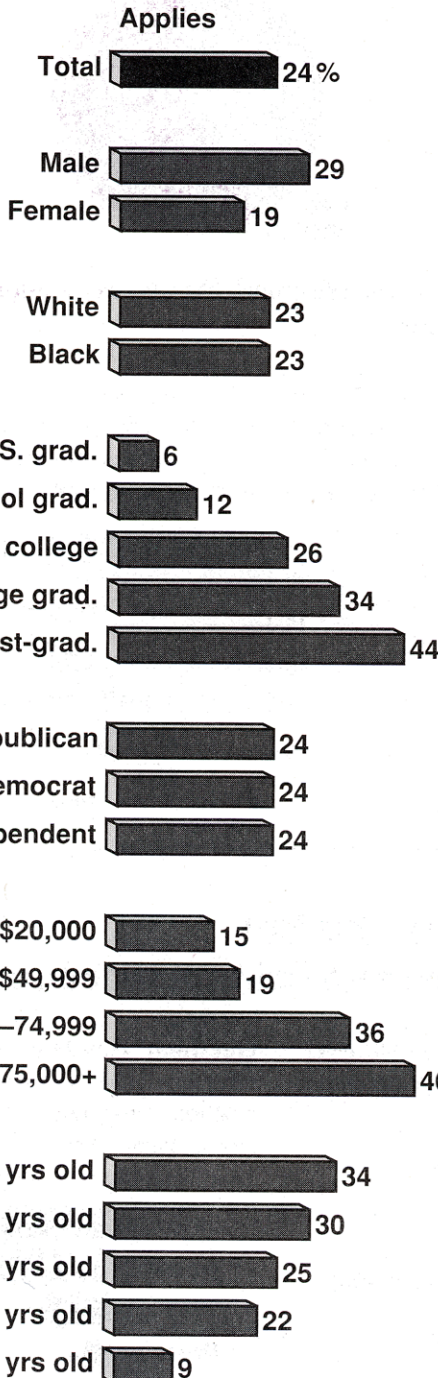
² Donna L. Hoffman et. al., "Internet Use in the United States: 1995 Baseline Estimates and Preliminary Market Segments," Draft Date: April 12, 1996 <<http://www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/baseline/1995.Internet.estimated.html>>

—David S. Birdsell, Douglas Muzzio, Humphrey Taylor and David Krane

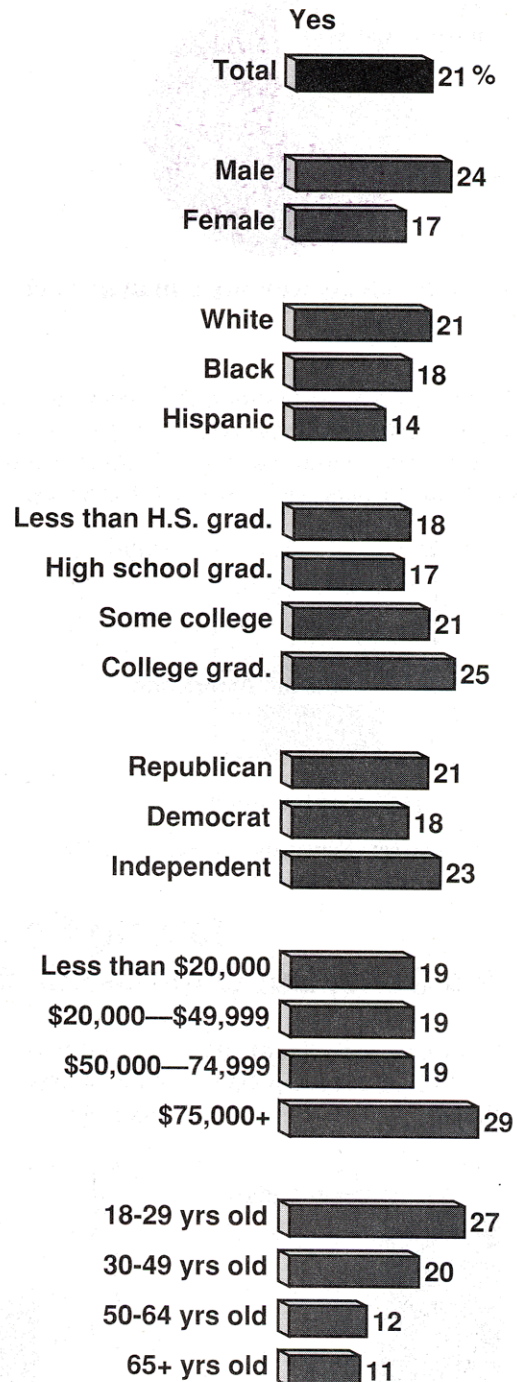
Who's Surfing the Net?

Estimates Vary. However, Most Surveys Suggest Internet Users Are Generally Younger, Well-Educated and Well-Off

Question: Please tell me if this applies to you personally—regularly use the Internet or other on-line computer information services, either at home or at work... does that apply to you or doesn't it?



Question: Do you ever use a computer at work, school or home to connect with computer bulletin boards, information services or other computers over the Internet?

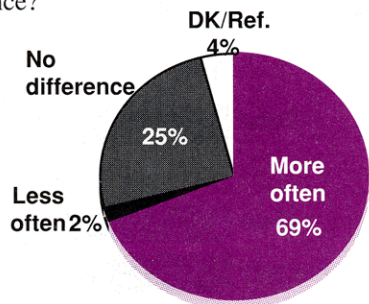


Source: Survey by Hart & Teeter for NBC/Wall Street Journal, March 1-5, 1996. (n=2,001)

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center, April 19-25, 1996. (n=1,751)

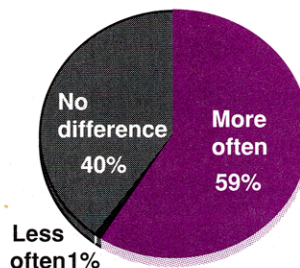
E-Mail and On-Line Chat Groups Have Increased Communications — For Some

Question: From what you have seen in your workplace, do you think people in upper and lower levels of organizations communicate with one another more often now that e-mail is available, do they communicate less often, or hasn't it made any difference?



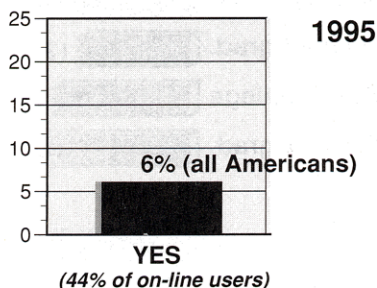
Note: Asked of respondents who use e-mail at work.

Question: Thinking about your family members and friends who also use e-mail, do you think you communicate with them more often now that e-mail is available, less often, or hasn't it made any difference?

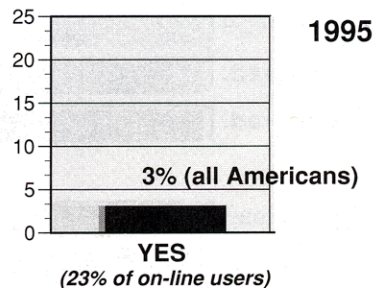


Note: Asked of respondents who use e-mail for personal reasons.

Question: I'd like to ask you a few questions about what you do when you go on-line (either from home or at the office/school). Do you ever communicate with other people through on-line forums, discussion lists or chat groups?



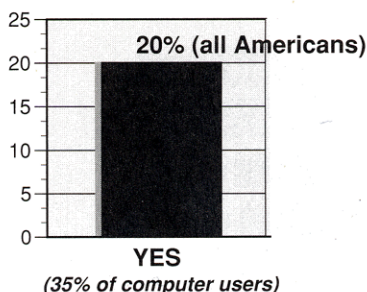
Question: (I'm going to ask you about some things people are doing on-line these days. For each one, please tell me if you have ever done this.) Have you ever made a friend or on-line buddy that you've never met in person?



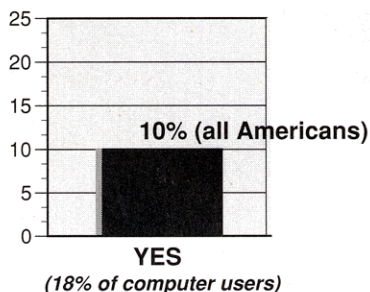
Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times-Mirror, May 25-June 22, 1995.

Talking Politics On The Net It's Done, But Other Media Still Dominate Political Discourse

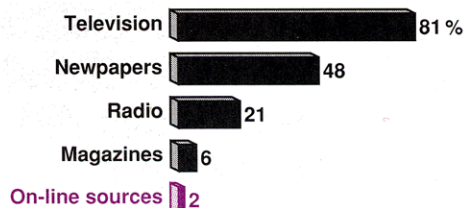
Question: Do you ever go on-line to get information on current events, public issues and politics?



Question: Do you ever go on-line to get information about the 1996 presidential campaign?



Question: How have you been getting most of your news about the Presidential election campaign? From TV, from newspapers, from radio, from magazines or from computer on-line sources?



Note: Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center, April 19-25, 1996.

Politically-Oriented Web Sites

Compiled by Catherine P. Flavin

National Politics and Elections

•**AllPolitics** is CNN/Time's political digest of news, candidates and polls. <<http://www.allpolitics.com/>>

•**American Voter '96**, Congressional Quarterly's site, tracks House and Senate members and provides facts about candidates for Congress. An interactive chance to "Rate Your Rep" allows users to compare their responses to a battery of issue questions with their representative's record. <<http://voter96.cqalert.com/>>

•**CBS Campaign '96** goes beyond sound-bite news with campaign coverage of strategies and issues, political profiles and polls. Enroll in "Elections 101", their short course on the basics of American electoral politics. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/>>

•**Democracy Place, USA**, the product of Soundprint Media Center and the Pew Charitable Trusts, links TV and radio with print media in civic journalism's electronic hometown. A special feature, "Follow the Money", takes citizens through campaign finance. <<http://democracyplace.org/>>

•**Decision '96** is Microsoft and NBC's united effort to cover election news and issues. "VoteWise", produced with the League of Women Voters, expands this site's assets for citizen education. <<http://www.decision96.msn.com/>>

•**Doonesbury Electronic Town Hall** peddles "Cyber Citizenship", with daily news briefings, offbeat straw polls, volunteer opportunities and a cyber store (where royalties go to charity). <<http://www.doonesbury.com/>>

•**The Gallup Organization's** homepage offers the results of recent Gallup surveys accompanied by helpful, succinct analysis. <<http://www.gallup.com/>>

•**Jefferson Project** is a far-reaching source for on-line politics, covering the left, right, radical and libertarian. <<http://www.voxpop.org/jefferson/>>

•**PoliticsNOW**, the upshot of a merger of PoliticsUSA and ElectionLine, includes coverage of politics and government from ABC News, The National Journal, The Washington Post, Newsweek and LA Times and the Associated Press. <<http://www.politicsnow.com/>>

•**Thomas**, the Library of Congress's site, links users with "Hot Bills" in Congress as well as with the Congressional Record and other resources for navigating the legislative labyrinth. <<http://thomas.loc.gov/>>

•**Vote Smart Web** is a voter education site, packed with reports on candidates and elected officials, the issues, with connections to other voter resources and political satire pages. <<http://www.vote-smart.org/>>

Candidate Sites

•Bob Dole

Bob Dole for President (official site): <<http://www.dole96.com/>>

The Unofficial Bob Dole Homepage: <<http://seas.upenn.edu/~lapple/bobdole.html>>

•Bill Clinton

White House Web Site: <<http://www1.whitehouse.gov/wtt/welcome.html>>

The Unofficial Bill Clinton Homepage: <<http://www.av.qnet.com/~yes/>>

•**Pat Buchanan for President:** <<http://www.buchanan.org/>>

•**Ross Perot's Reform Committee: Reform Party:** <<http://www.reformparty.org/>>

•**Ralph Nader and the Green Party:** <<http://www.rahul.net/greens/>>

•**Libertarian Candidates:** <<http://www.lp.org/>>

•**Skeleton Closet** covers the candidates' dark sides, offering one-stop shopping for mudslinging needs. <<http://www.realchange.org/>>

National Party Organizations

•Democratic National Committee:

<<http://www.democrats.org/>>

•**Republican National Committee on GOP Main Street:** <<http://www.rnc.org/>>

Issue-Oriented or Interest Group Pages

•**Christian Coalition** <<http://cc.org/>>

•**The Freedom Forum** <<http://199.72.48.16/FreedomForum/>>

•**Health Policy Page** <<http://epn.org/idea/health.html>>

•**National Rifle Association** <<http://www.nra.org/>>

•**National Organization of Women** <<http://www.now.org/>>

•**State of Nature** <<http://www.nrdc.org/nrdc/field/state.html>>

•**Welfare Reform Watch** <<http://www.handsnet.org/handsnet2/welfare.reform/>>