

The Oxford Internet Institute 2007 Survey “The Internet in Britain 2007” Review and Key Points for Public Policy

An excellent and informative Snapshot

“The Internet in Britain 2007” is the third survey by the Oxford Internet Institute and is based on a multi-stage national probability sample of 2,000 during March –April of 2007. It actually achieved a response rate of 77% and is based on 2,350 responses. It therefore presents the most up-to-date and reliable picture publicly available.

The overall pattern is of a maturing market with 2/3rd of Britons using the Internet, mainly from home, over broadband. Growth, including transition to broadband has slowed and the 25% of non-users are largely among the socially excluded: retired, disabled, lower educated and lower income. They include a disproportionate number of women and their main reason for non-use is lack of skill. The percentage of ex-users is 5%. Most cite lack of interest or access rather than unfortunate experiences.

The survey contains much material on how and why the Internet is used by different age-groups and some mythologies are exposed. Thus students make much use of social networks but rarely seek to meet people they have met over the net, unlike those who are employed. Meanwhile by far the most common social impact appears to have been to strengthen contact with distant relatives and friends. User creativity, beyond sending e-mails or messaging, remains very much a minority activity and only 28% have got as far as exchanging photographs although 76% of users also have digital cameras and 37% have webcams.

High satisfaction overall but questions of privacy, trust and responsibility

The section on attitudes towards ICTs and the Internet trust reveal strongly positive attitudes with two thirds to three quarters saying that it makes life better or easier albeit 56% say it is complex and a third that it is frustrating to work with. Meanwhile 55% say there is too much immoral content, 66% say the present use is a threat to personal privacy and 65% say those who go on the Internet put their privacy at risk.

When it comes to “trust” on the part of Internet users, the Internet Services Providers score the same as Television News (3.5 out of 5) and more than companies (3.3), Newspapers (2.9) or Government (2.6). For comparison, Doctors score 3.9, “people I know” 3.8, “scientists 3.7, “people in the country” 3.0 and “people on the Internet” 2.9. Non-users and ex-users are significantly less trusting of ISPs, down to 3.1 and of people on the net: but they also appear to be less trusting in general.

Attitudes towards regulation and responsibility for Child Protection

Overall, including non and ex-users, there is a three way split 36: 30: 33 between those who think the government should regulate the Internet, those who think it should not and those who are undecided - with a modest balance in favour of regulation. If non or ex-users are excluded that balance swings the other way: 31: 34: 35, an equally modest balance against regulation.

The views are sharper when it comes to child protection. 52% of users think government has a responsibility for restricting children's content compared to 70%, who think ISPs have a responsibility.

More, 97%, think parents have a responsibility, than think teachers have one, 74%. However only 60% of users with children have set rules for their use of the Internet at home: two thirds of these also believing that children should access the Internet under parental control or supervision.

Non-users and ex-users think that government, ISPs and teachers should have more responsibility.

“Unpleasant experiences”

43% of respondents to the first Oxford Internet Institute Survey, in 2003, had suffered a virus infection. This fell to 18% for the second survey in 2005. It has since risen back to a worrying 34%. The proportion of those being contacted over the Internet “by someone from a foreign country” (The “Nigerian Scam”) has, however, remained constant (17 - 18%) while those contacted by someone requesting bank details (Phishing) has risen steadily and is now up to 17%. Meanwhile the proportion receiving obscene e-mails has fallen from 23% to 12% from strangers and 7% from “people you know”.

The proportion who are not concerned over receiving obscene or otherwise unwanted e-mails remains constant at about 38-39%. Meanwhile the proportion who are concerned and have done something, “such as installing a filter”, has risen from 36% to 44%. Those who are employed are the most concerned about spam and the most likely to have taken action while students are more conscious of receiving but less likely to take action. Meanwhile nearly half (46%) agree that personal information is readily available on-line but only 37% believe this is too easy.(36% disagree).

Unfortunately experience of actual fraud, while low, is rising sharply: “credit card details stolen via use on the Internet has doubled over the period of the surveys, albeit only from 1% to 2%. The proportion who have bought something “which has been misrepresented on the Internet” has trebled, from 3% to 9%.

Lack of Skills

Non-users cite lack of skills as one of the main obstacles and only 21% have had any training, compared to the 78% who try to work things out for themselves. 62% seek help from friends and family, 28% from those at work or school, 6% ask people at the library and 2% at the Internet café. Only 5% pay for help. As in the real world, women are more likely to ask for help.

Low usage of public sector sites and civic participation

Government and Politicians have high hopes of using of the Internet to transform access to public services and encourage civic participation but the survey shows that personal contact is still by far the most preferred route for political activity.

Overall only 9% report any “civic” activity on-line compared to 36% off-line: only 7% have signed an on-line petition compared to 24% who have signed one off-line and only 2% have contacted a politician on-line compared to 9% off-line.

Local government is leading the way but only 29% have used it to get information about local government services (compared to 26% for central government) while only 12% have used it to pay their rent or council tax compared to 11% to transact with central government.

Conclusions

The conclusions are in the mind of the reader.

I have cherry -picked and juxtaposed data from an excellent 80 page quarry available online at <http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis/>

I also recommend downloading and reading the recent report produced by the OII and National Audit Office on Government and the Internet.

http://www.governmentontheweb.org/access_reports.asp#download

This summarises what has been achieved and how far there is to go, helping both explain the low usage of current sites and recommending remedial action

Drafted by Philip Virgo,
Secretary General, EURIM
virgo.philip@eurim.org
www.eurim.org.uk

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