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Online Communities:
***Networks that nurture long-distance
relationships and local ties***

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Summary of Findings

The vibrant social universe online

In recent years, there has been concern about the social impact of the Internet on several levels. One major worry was that use of the Internet would prompt people to withdraw from social engagement and become isolated, depressed, and alienated. A related fear was that Internet users might abandon contact with their local communities as they discovered how easy it is to go online to communicate with those in other parts of the world and get information from every point on the planet.

We surveyed 1,697 Internet users in January and February to explore the breadth and depth of community online. Our findings suggest that the online world is a vibrant social universe where many Internet users enjoy serious and satisfying contact with online communities. These online groups are made up of those who share passions, beliefs, hobbies, or lifestyles. Tens of millions of Americans have joined communities after discovering them online. And many are using the Internet to join and participate in longstanding, traditional groups such as professional and trade associations. All in all, 84% of Internet users have at one time or another contacted an online group.

The pull of online communities in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks shows how Americans have integrated online communities into their lives. In the days following the attacks, 33% of American Internet users read or posted material in chat rooms, bulletin boards, or other online forums. Although many early posts reflected outrage at the events, online discussions soon migrated to grieving, discussion and debate on how to respond, and information queries about the suspects and those who sponsored them. With the dramatic displays of community spirit around the country following September 11, there are hopes that Americans' repulsion and shock the attacks might have sparked a renewal of civic spirit in the United States. The existing vibrancy of online communities profiled in this report suggests that Internet groups can play a supporting role in any enduring boon to community life in the aftermath of the attacks.

Our winter survey also showed that many Americans are using the Internet to intensify their connection to their local community. They employ email to plan church meetings, arrange neighborhood gatherings, and petition local politicians. They use the Web to find out about local merchants, get community news, and check out area fraternal organizations. Moreover, there is evidence that this kind of community engagement is particularly appealing to young adults.

Sociologist Barry Wellman argues that many new social arrangements are being formed through "glocalization" – the capacity of the Internet to expand users' social worlds to faraway people and simultaneously to bind them more deeply to the place where they live. This report illustrates how widely "glocalization" is occurring. The Internet helps many people find others who share their interests no matter how distant they are, and it also helps them increase their contact with groups and people they already know and it helps them feel more connected to them.

90 million Americans have participated in online groups

- 84% of Internet users, or about 90 million Americans, say they have used the Internet to contact or get information from a group. We call them "Cyber Groupies."

- 79% of Cyber Groupies identify at least one particular group with which they stay in regular contact.
- 49% of Cyber Groupies say the Internet has helped them connect with groups or people who share their interests.
- Cyber Groupies try out different groups; the average Cyber Groupie has contacted four online groups at one time or another.

Use of the Internet often prompts Americans to join groups. More than half of Cyber Groupies (56%) say they joined an online group *after* they began communicating with it over the Internet. This includes those who joined traditional groups whose existence predated the Internet, such as professional or fraternal groups. In other words, Internet access is helping people join all kinds of communities, including those that are not exclusively virtual communities.

- 40% of Cyber Groupies say the Internet has helped them become more involved with groups to which they already belong.

28 million have used the Internet to deepen their ties to their local communities

In addition to helping users participate in communities of interest that often have no geographical boundaries the Internet is a tool for those who are involved with local groups, particularly church groups.

- 26% of Internet users have employed the Internet to contact or get information about local groups. That comes to 28 million people.

Virtual third places

In the face of widespread worries that community activity is ebbing in the United States, these findings demonstrate that the Internet, while not necessarily turning the tide, has become an important new tool to connect people with shared interests globally and locally. In some ways, online communities have become *virtual third places* for people because they are different places from home and work. These places allow people either to hang out with others or more actively engage with professional associations, hobby groups, religious organizations, or sports leagues.

Online communities foster chatter and connection

These groups are lively online communities. People exchange emails, hash out issues, find out about group activities, and meet face-to-face as a result of online communities. Approximately 23 million Americans are *very* active in online communities, meaning that they email their principle online group several times a week.

- 60% of Cyber Groupies say they use email to communicate with the group; of these emailers 43% email the group several times a week.
- 33% of the 28 million Local Groupies who use email send email to their main local organization several times a week.

More contact with different people

Many Cyber Groupies and Local Groupies say that online communities have spurred connections to strangers and to people of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.

- 50% of Cyber Groupies say that participation in an online community has helped them get to know people they otherwise would not have met.
- 35% of Local Groupies say that participation in an online community has helped them get to know people they otherwise would not have met. This lower number relative to Cyber Groupies may be due to the fact that Local Groupies probably were acquainted already with members of the online group.
- 37% of Cyber Groupies say the Internet has helped them connect with people of different ages or generations.
- 27% of Cyber Groupies say the Internet has helped them connect with people from different racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds.

The types of connections people establish depend on the kind of group to which they belong. Members of some cyber groups go to their groups to establish personal relationships, while others just want to keep up with group news and activities.

- Members of belief groups, ethnic online groups, and especially online groups oriented to lifestyle issues are most interested in using the Internet to establish personal relationships.
- Members of entertainment, professional, and sports online groups tend to use email in group activities less often than those who belong to other kinds. They focus their online activities on getting information about popular culture.
- Men tend to be drawn to online groups involving professional activities, politics, and sports.
- Women tend to be drawn to online medical support groups, local community associations that are online, and cyber groups relating to entertainment.

The Groups Cyber Groupies Belong to ...	
The kinds of groups Internet users contact	% of Internet users who have contacted group
Trade association or professional group	50%
A group for people who share a hobby or interest	50
A fan group of a particular team	31
A fan group of a TV show or entertainer	29
A local community group or association	29
A group of people who share your lifestyle	28
A support group for a medical condition or personal problem	28
A group of people who share your beliefs	24
A political group	22
A religious organization	21
A sports team or league in which you participate	20
Ethnic or cultural group	15
Labor union	6

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.- Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%.

Joiners of online groups differ from those who belonged to the group prior to participating in it via the Internet

There are differences between those who have used the Internet to join a group and those who use the Internet to participate in groups to which they already belong. Many who join online groups are relative newcomers to the Internet. They tend to be urban dwellers, young adults, and less well-educated than the typical Internet user. As a cohort they are more ethnically diverse than other Internet users, and more likely to be interested in online groups relating to fun activities.

The Groups Local Groupies Belong to ...		
Thinking of local groups, do you belong to ...	Percent of Internet users who belong to ...	Percent who email this group
Local church, synagogue, or mosque	44%	43%
Local social club or charitable organization	30	56
Community group or neighborhood assn	22	52
Local youth group such as scouts or YMCA	22	43
Local sports league	20	38
Other group not mentioned	14	51

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan. - Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%

to be highly experienced Internet users. This suggests that the Internet use is drawing new and different kinds of people to local groups. Once people have found local groups online and joined them, they report high levels of community involvement.

Civic involvement by the young

These differences among Joiners—particularly their relative youth, newness to the Internet, and racial diversity—suggests that the Internet may be drawing a segment of the population to community engagement who have not been very tied to civic activities. Political scientist Robert Putnam has argued that one major reason for the decline in civic engagement in the United States is the reluctance among younger people to participate in community groups.¹ Our findings indicate that many young people are turning to the Internet as an outlet for community activity. Although young people tend to focus on online groups that involve

The 56% of Cyber Groupies who joined a group after having first contacted it through the Internet have very different tastes in online groups than the “Long-timers” who belonged to the group before engaging with it online. Joiners of Cyber Groups identify hobby groups as the online community that they contact most, followed closely by trade or professional associations. A significant number of joiners also say they contact online fan group of an entertainer or TV show. In contrast, Long-timers are most likely to say they are most closely in touch with trade or professional groups online.

At the local level, Long-timers are anchored in faith-based and community groups, while the joiners—who make up 20% of the Local Groupie population—show a greater tendency toward groups devoted to sports or with an explicitly social orientation.

Net Joiners of local groups are demographically diverse. They also tend

¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, pp. 33-35.

hobbies, they also are much more likely than other users to report that the Internet has helped them become more involved organizations in their community and connect with people of different generations, economic backgrounds, and ethnic groups. In other words, the primary draw to online communities for young people appears to be hobby groups; however, a secondary outcome, as young people surf to other online communities, is to connect many to groups that help foster civic engagement.

The Internet's role in local engagement

At the local level, people use the Internet mainly as an information utility to find out about local merchants and community activities. The Internet's role in public deliberation is modest. Public access to the Internet is only moderately available throughout the United States.

- 41% Internet users say that they “often” or “sometimes” go online to seek out information about local stores or merchants.
- 35% of Internet users “often” or “sometimes” go online for news about their local community or to find out about community events.
- 30% go online “often” or “sometimes” for information about local government.
- 24% go online “often” or “sometimes” to get information about local schools.
- 13% of Internet users say that they “often” or “sometimes” email public officials. This low rate may be because only half of all Internet users say their town has a Web site, and few Internet users find the town’s Web site very useful.
- 11% of Internet users say that they are aware of at least one local issue in which the Internet played a role in organizing citizens to communicate with public officials. However, this percentage doubles to 22% for Internet users who are active members of online communities.
- 51% percent of all Americans know of a place in their community where the Internet is publicly available. Overwhelmingly, these places are public libraries. African-Americans are the most likely to say that their community lacks public access to the Internet; 42% of African-Americans say their community does not have publicly available Internet terminals somewhere, compared with 29% of whites and 33% of Hispanics.

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Main Report

Part 1: Background

When ARPANET, the Internet's precursor, came online in 1969, it did not have a foundational moment like the telephone's, where Alexander Graham Bell's ordered his associate Thomas Watson: "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." That sentence signaled an era of person-to-person communication over distance. In contrast, ARPANET connected a community. In its earliest days, it was a community of computer researchers at major U.S. universities working on similar problems.² Since then, the Internet's capability of allowing many-to-many communications has fostered communities of various sizes and sorts.

In this report, we assess the scope of online communities in the United States and the impact they are having on people's lives. We examine two kinds of communities—those that are primarily cyber-based with no inherently geographic aspect (i.e., online communities) and those in which people use the Internet to connect with groups based in the community in which they live (i.e., communities online). We call members of the former group "Cyber Groupies." We define people who belong to any group having to do with their community as "Local Groupies" and analyze how they use the Internet to stay in touch with local affairs.

Our survey suggests that going online to connect with a group is a central part of Americans' Internet experience. More people have used the Internet to contact an online group than have done extremely popular activities, such as getting news online, health information, or financial information. More people participate in online groups than have bought things online. Fully 84% of all Internet users have contacted an online group at one time or another. We call them Cyber Groupies and there are about 90 million of them. Some 79% of Cyber Groupies identify a particular group with which they remain in contact. Additionally, Cyber Groupies often surf to more than one online group; the average Cyber Groupie has gone to about four different online groups at one time or another. Finally, a quarter of Internet users (26%) say they have used email and the Web to contact or get information about groups and organizations in their communities. These Local Groupies number more than 28 million.

The demographics of the Cyber Groupie population are fairly close to the overall Internet population. Where differences do emerge, the pattern suggests that early adopters of the Internet are more likely to have contacted online groups. This means that Cyber Groupies are more likely to be men and to have college educations or better. Cyber Groupies also tend to be younger than non-groupies. This no doubt is linked to the fact that online groups play a minor role in the lives of people over the age of 55.

² Michael Hiltzik, *Dealers of Lightning: Xerox PARC and the Dawn of the Computer Age*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999, p. 43.

The Cyber Groupie Population		
The Percent of Internet users in each group who are ...	Cyber groupies	Non-Cyber Groupies
Sex ...		
Male	51%	40%
Female	49	60
Age ...		
18-24	17	15
25-34	24	19
35-44	28	22
45-54	20	16
55+	11	28
Internet experience...		
Online in last 6 months	8	19
Online for about 1 year	17	23
Online for 2-3 years	33	32
Online for > 3 years	41	25
Number of Observations	N=1,426	N=271

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%.

The broad appeal of online groups and the youthful tilt of the Cyber Groupie population—especially among those active in online groups and those who have recently joined them—suggests that the Internet is providing an important place for associational activity for some of the most enthusiastic online Americans. This is occurring in the context of widespread worry that Americans are less and less willing to get involved in community affairs and group activities. It is too soon to say that use of the Internet is reversing that trend. But the findings from this survey indicate that group activity is flourishing online and it is a place that attracts Internet users to new group activity.

Part 2: The Internet, Communities, and the Virtual “Third Place”

Social scientists cite any number of indicators to illustrate that Americans’ level of civic engagement is on the decline. Membership in organizations whose health may be seen as an indicator of strong community involvement—such as the Parent-Teachers Association (PTA)—has declined steadily over the past several decades.³ The share of Americans voting in presidential elections has fallen since the 1960s, with voting rates in some local elections no higher than 10%.⁴ There has been some evidence of growth in certain kinds of organization called “tertiary associations,” but that has not been encouraging to those who worry about the decline of community in America. Tertiary organizations have members spread throughout the country, rarely have local chapters, and usually ask members only for a membership check in exchange for an occasional newsletter. These organizations expect little of their members besides their financial contributions.

While concurring that community involvement is on the wane, many activists believe that the Internet might be able to reverse the trend. Since the early days of the Web, activists have argued that “community networks” could bind increasingly fragmented communities together and provide a voice for segments of society that have been traditionally ignored. Such electronic communities can lower the barriers to democratic participation. Advocates hope lower barriers, coupled with deliberate activities that bring all segments of a town or city into the planning process for building community networks, can

³Robert D. Putnam, *op. cit.* p. 57. About 47% of families with children belonged to the PTA in 1960, while 18% belonged in 1997.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31-33. Putnam points out that 63% of eligible voters cast ballots in 1960, and 49% did so in 1996.

help revive the community spirit in America.⁵ These advocates do not argue that it is inevitable that the Internet will create community involvement, but rather that the Internet presents an opportunity to build community at a time when the need is great.⁶

Though often focused on the opportunities the Internet presents for a renaissance of local places, technology activists also recognize that virtual communities (i.e., online groups that connect people with common interests without any concern about distance) can play an important role in users' lives.⁷ One of the earliest proponents of virtual communities, Howard Rheingold, argues that "people anywhere ... inevitably build virtual communities" as "informal public spaces disappear from our real lives."⁸ Rheingold holds out hope that virtual communities can revive democratic participation, in part by increasing the diversity of sources of information and by sparking public debate that is not mediated by large corporations or special interests.

The hopes for the Internet and community are tempered by the acknowledgement that it is a technology that has the potential to undermine community. As author Andrew Shapiro points out, the Internet's potential to give people more control also allows them to restrict the flow of information they receive. By giving people a choice to block out information that somehow does not "fit" with a community's beliefs or norms, the Internet could exacerbate existing trends toward community fragmentation.⁹ Nothing about this is inevitable, but Shapiro notes that the evidence on online communities suggests that some degree of face-to-face interaction is necessary for an online community to be sustainable.¹⁰ As Katie Hafner points out in her new account of the pioneering online community "The Well," this cyber group really gained vitality once members, most of whom lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, had met face-to-face.¹¹

The findings of the Pew Internet & American Life Project survey indicate that something positive is afoot with respect to the Internet and community life in the United States. People's use of the Internet to participate in organizations is not necessarily evidence of a revival of civic engagement, but it has clearly stimulated new associational activity. And, because they have been both physical and virtual, these group interactions are richer than those found in "tertiary associations." This type of activity might be likened to what sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls the "third place"—the corner bar, café, or bookstore where people hang out to talk about things that are going on in their lives and neighborhood.¹²

⁵ Douglas Schuler, *New Community Networks: Wired for Change*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1996, p. 142.

⁶ Steven E. Miller, *Civilizing Cyberspace: Policy, Power, and the Information Superhighway*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1996, p. 329.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 333.

⁸ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 1993, chapter 1.

⁹ Andrew Shapiro, *The Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know*. New York: Century Foundation, 1999, p. 116-117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 211-212.

¹¹ Katie Hafner, *The Well: A Story of Love, Death & Real Life in the Seminal Online Community*, New York: Carroll and Graf, 2001.

¹² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 3rd Edition, 1999. For Oldenburg, people's "first place" is home and "second place" work.

Although Oldenburg very clearly has physical interaction in mind in talking about third places, the Internet has spurred in cyberspace the types of conversations that Oldenburg describes in third places. Our survey suggests that significant numbers of Cyber Groupies are enjoying new relationships because of their use of the Internet. One-quarter (27%) of Cyber Groupies say the Net has helped them connect with people of different economic and ethnic backgrounds and 37% say it has helped them connect with people of different generations. Whether through cyber groups or online groups grounded in local communities, the Internet’s “virtual third places” appear to be building bridges among their participants.

Patterns of chatter

If online communities are to have “third place” characteristics, chatter and connection have

How people engage with their online groups		
The percent of each group who responded “yes” to the following questions	Cyber Groupies	Local Groupies
Did you belong to this group before you started communicating with them online?	42%	80%
Do you ever send or receive email with this group or its members?	60	38
Do you email your online group at least several times a week?	43	33
Has communicating with this group through the Internet allowed you to get to know people you otherwise would not have met?	50	35
Does your group or association have a Web site?	73	40
Do you find your group’s Web site VERY useful?	50	40
Number of observations	N=1,350	N=438

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.- Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n =1,697. Margin of error is ±3% for Cyber Groupies, ±5% for Local Groupies

to be part of what is occurring when people access these groups. Our survey findings suggest that online communities, far from having passive members who lurk on email lists, are environments where a healthy number of members email others and interact on a frequent basis. This is especially true for non-local cyber communities, where a quarter of members routinely email other members.

Approximately 23 million Internet users engage in email exchanges with other online group members several times a week. This is about one-quarter of Cyber Groupies. While much of this emailing (76%) is simply seeking out membership news and group information, a lot of it (68%) involves discussing issues with other group members. And fully half (49%) of those who email an online group say that one of their main reasons to do so is to create or maintain personal relationships with members.

For Local Groupies—the 68% of Internet users who belong to a group with some connection to the community where they live—there are lower levels of online

chatter, perhaps because physical proximity enables face-to-face communication. Three out of eight (38%) Local Groupies use email to communicate with others in the group. This is conspicuously less than the 60% who email non-local cyber groups. Of these local emailers, however, one-third (33%) send messages to other group members at least several times a week. This means that one in eight (13%) of members of online groups that are close to home routinely exchange e-communications with group members. That comes to 10 million Americans.

It is not surprising that Local Groupies report lower levels of engagement with their online groups than Cyber Groupies. Local groups can rely on physical proximity for interaction and members may be accustomed to face-to-face or telephone contact. Most Local Groupies belonged to their principal local organization *before* they started using the Internet to deal with the group, while most Cyber Groupies did not belong to their main group before they started communicating with it online. Still, one-third (35%) of Local Groupies who go to their group's Web site or email the group say that participation online with a favorite local group has enabled them to meet new people. This is not as striking as the 50% of Cyber Groupies who report they have gotten to know someone new through their online group, but it illustrates that even in local areas many people use the Internet to make new contacts.

The behavior of people on listservs of their online groups is another indication that chatter is a popular activity in online communities. For people who go to their online groups' Web sites, about two-thirds (64%) report that the group has a listserv. Among Internet users whose main online group has a listserv, 60% read and post messages to it. Roughly a third (33%) of those active on listservs (i.e., those who have ever posted messages) write messages at least several times a week. This emailing and listserv activity is reflected in how connected people feel to other group members. Half (50%) of online group members say that participation with group through the Internet has enabled them to meet new people, and nearly half (47%) say the group has made them feel connected to other group members. About one in five (22%) say that they have arranged to meet in person someone in the group that they first met online.

About half of those who use the Internet to connect to local groups (49%) say these groups have listservs. Overall, about one-third (35%) of people who email a local online group have met someone new in their community with the help of the Internet, and 38% of these emailers say communicating with the local group through the Internet has increased their involvement in their local community.

Why people communicate with online groups	
The reasons cited by Cyber Groupies for emailing an online group ...	% who say it is important
Getting general membership news and information	76%
Getting involved with or learning more about group activities	71
Discussing issues with others	68
Creating or maintaining relationships with others in group	49

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n=1,697. Margin of error is ±3%

Reasons for chatter

Internet users were also asked about the reasons they communicate with their principal online group. They were most likely to report that liked discussing issues with others and creating and maintaining personal relationships with other group members. About two-thirds say an important reason they email others in the group is to discuss issues affecting the group, while half say emailing the group helps build relationships with others in the group.

Demographics of active online community members

The demographic profiles for Local Groupies and Cyber Groupies are quite similar. However, some demographic differences emerge when looking at Local and Cyber Groupies who are *active* participants in online groups, as measured by those who email their groups or go to their Web sites. Perhaps the strongest differences come in Internet experience, where Internet novices are substantially under-represented in the Local Groupie population relative to the overall Internet population, and under-represented relative in the Cyber Groupie population as well.

Active online community members have more education and Internet experience*			
	Active Local Groupies (%)	Active Cyber Groupies (%)	All Internet Users (%)
<i>Education ...</i>			
High school grad or less	21%	31%	35%
Some college	32	29	29
College grad	47	40	36
<i>Internet experience ...</i>			
Online in last 6 months	4%	6%	10%
Online for about 1 year	12	13	18
Online for 2-3 years	32	32	33
Online for > 3 years	51	49	38
Number of observations	N=453	N=833	N=1,697

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.- Feb. 2001 Survey.

** Active members are defined as those who communicate with a group by email.*

Part 3: New community participants

Net Joiners: The people who find groups on the Internet, then become members

In addition to fostering chatter, the Net is drawing people to groups they had not previously encountered. In part of our survey we asked respondents about the online group they most frequently contacted via the Internet. We enquired whether they belonged to this group

before they started using the Internet. More than half of Cyber Groupies (56%) joined the group after having begun communicating with it over the Internet. For Local Groupies, 20% joined the group after they begun communicating with it on the Internet. We call the people who have joined a group after being in contact via the Internet “Net Joiners.” The people who already belong to a group and who then begin to use the Internet to stay in touch with group activities are “Long-timers.”

Net Joiners generally have less Internet experience than Long-timers. Net Joiners are also more demographically diverse than Long-time group members. Notably, the joiners as a group are younger than the overall Internet population. Although Net Joiners tend to report lower levels of frequent participation in online groups than Long-timers do, there does not appear to be pervasive lurking among either Net Joiners or Long-timers. Many people, when thinking about the group with which they are most involved, report they are active participants in online discussions.

Joiners of online groups, whether they are cyber groups or local groups, have different membership patterns. Net Joiners are drawn principally to hobbyist groups, whereas Long-timers are most involved with trade or professional associations. For Local Groupies, the differences are more striking. While most Long-time members of local groups are most engaged with religious groups, Net Joiners are evenly split among religious groups and local youth groups. Moreover, they are interested in charitable groups, neighborhood associations, and local sports leagues.

Cyber Groupies: The online groups Net Joiners and Long-timers go to ...			
Which of these groups are you MOST in contact with through the Internet?	All Cyber Groupies (%)	Net Joiners* (%)	Long-timers** (%)
Trade association or professional group	21%	17%	30%
A group for people who share a hobby or interest	17	23	18
A religious organization	6	3	8
A group of people who share your lifestyle	6	5	6
A fan group of a particular team	6	7	6
A sports team or league in which you participate	5	5	6
A group of people who share your beliefs	4	3	5
A local community group or association	4	2	5
A political group	3	2	4
A fan group of a TV show or entertainer	3	10	3
A support group for a medical condition or personal problem	2	6	2
Ethnic or cultural group	1	2	2
Labor Union	1	1	1
NOT in contact with any particular group	16	16	9

*Those who join online groups **after** they encountered the group online.

** Those who already belong to a group **before** they use the Internet to communicate with it.

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.- Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%

On average, Cyber Groupies are most likely to say that a trade or professional group is the online group with which they most closely stay in touch (21% say this), followed closely by hobby groups (17%). In contrast, Net Joiners of online groups are most involved with a group having to do with a hobby.

Net Joiners are less involved with their online group than Long-time members, if

A Profile of Net Joiners of Cyber Groups and Long-timers in those groups		
	Net Joiners* (%)	Long-timers** (%)
<i>Where they live ...</i>		
Rural Areas	20%	17%
Suburban Areas	46	54
Urban Areas	33	29
<i>Sex ...</i>		
Male	48	53
Female	52	47
<i>Age ...</i>		
18-24	21	13
25-34	25	24
35-44	27	29
44-55	16	23
55+	10	11
<i>Race/Ethnicity ...</i>		
White, not Hispanic	74	81
Black, not Hispanic	10	6
Hispanic	11	5
Other	4	6
<i>Education ...</i>		
High school grad or less	39	25
Some college	30	27
College grad	30	48
<i>Income ...</i>		
Less than \$30K	22	11
\$30K-\$50K	24	21
\$50K-\$75K	16	21
Over \$75K	17	25
Don't know/refused	20	21
<i>Internet experience...</i>		
Online in last 6 months	11	5
Online for about 1 year	18	15
Online for 2-3 years	33	34
Online for > 3 years	38	47
Number of observations	N=798	N=613

*Those who join online groups **after** they encountered the group online.

** Those who already belong to a group **before** they use the Internet to communicate with it.

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.- Feb. 2001 Survey.

African-American. Another notable difference comes in Internet experience. These figures

involvement is measured by email traffic with the group, new acquaintances made, and perceptions about overall engagement with the group. About half of all Net Joiners (49%) say they use email to communicate with an online group, well below the three-quarters (78%) of Long-timers who use the Internet to keep in touch with it. However, when measured by frequency of email contact, Net Joiners are about as likely as the Long-time members to send or receive an email from the group at least several times a week (41% for Net Joiners to 45% for Long-timers).

Those who join online groups seem a bit more interested in using the Internet to monitor group news than their more veteran counterparts. Fully 79% of Net Joiners use the Internet to get general membership information and news about the group compared with 74% of Long-timers. Although about the same share of Net Joiners and veteran members use email to discuss issues with group members (67% of Net Joiners and 70% of veteran members), pre-Internet members are more likely to use email to create or maintain personal relationships with group members than Net Joiners (by a 53% to 44% margin).

Demographically, Net Joiners of cyber groups are more likely than Long-timers to be female, young, non-white, come from households with modest incomes, and relatively new to the Internet. Net Joiners are far less likely to have a college education than Long-timers and twice as likely to be in a household making less than \$30,000 per year. Net Joiners are also about twice as likely as Long-Timers to be Hispanic or

suggest that not only are cyber groups a magnet for Internet users, they are especially attractive to novice Internet users.

Those who take their communities online

Internet users who have joined a local group after encountering it online are most likely to be involved with a religious group (a local church, synagogue, or mosque) or a local youth group. About 1 in 7 (15%) Net Joiners keep most in touch with a local religious group and 14% are most engaged with a local youth group. Eleven percent of Net Joiners are most involved with a local social club or charitable organization, 10% with a sports league, and 10% with a neighborhood group or community organization.

The story is somewhat different for people who already belonged to a local group at the time they started communicating with it through the Internet. By far, the local church, synagogue, temple, or mosque is the type of group with which these users say they are most involved. Fully one-third (34%) says a religious organization is the main local group they communicate with over the Internet, far ahead of the 10% that report a community group or neighborhood association as their main contact group. Local sports leagues and local charitable or social clubs come in next.

No matter when they joined local groups – before using the Internet or after they got connected to the Net – there is no significant difference in the online behavior of those who use the Internet to interact with local groups. Their use of email with such groups and the frequency of their emailing are virtually the same whether they are Net Joiners of local groups or Long-timers with those groups.

Those who join local groups often report that their initial contact blossoms into new contacts and friendships. We asked Net Joiners if communicating with their group through the Internet has led them to meeting new people in their community and 57% said it had. About 30% of Long-timers said “yes” to this. This difference is not too surprising, since people who were members of the group prior to using the Internet to communicate with it already had ties to other group members.

This reasoning also explains the gap between Net Joiners and Long-timers when asked whether using the Internet to communicate with the group has increased their involvement in the community. Fully 57% of Net Joiners said that it had, while 34% of Long-timers said the Internet has increased their involvement in their community. It is notable nonetheless

Local Groupies: The online groups Net Joiners and Long-timers go to ...			
Which of these groups are you MOST in contact with through the Internet?	All Cyber Groupies (%)	Net Joiners (%)	Long-timers (%)
Local church, synagogue, or mosque	29%	15%	34%
Community group or neighborhood assn	10	10	10
Local sports league	7	10	9
Local social club or charitable organization	7	11	9
Local youth group such as scouts or YMCA	7	14	6
Other group not mentioned	6	10	7
NOT involved with any particular group	32	30	24
Number of observations	N= 530	N=106	N=424

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey.

that even for people who had some connection to a local group prior to using the Internet as a means to keep up with it, one-third say the Internet has helped them meet new people and increase their involvement with their community.

Demographically, there are wide differences in racial composition when comparing Net Joiners and Long-timers who use the Internet to stay connected with a local group. Fully 85% of Long-timers are white compared with 68% of Net Joiners who are white. Only 4% of Long-timers are Hispanic, while 11% of Net Joiners are Hispanic. Among African-Americans, 10% of Net Joiners are black compared to 5% of Long-timers. The differences persist for income and education. Finally, Net Joiners are urban dwellers; 41% live in urban areas, compared to 31% of all Internet users.

Building new ties; strengthening existing ones

For millions, use of the Internet cuts two ways in their social lives: It helps them find others who share their passions or lifestyles or professional interests. It also helps them feel more connected to groups or people they already know.

The table below summarizes Internet users' perspectives on how the Internet allows them to connect to different groups or people. The Internet's strongest bridges are relatively short ones. Online Americans most often say that the Internet has helped them connect to groups with which they are already involved or people or groups with common interests. Still, between one-quarter and one-third of Cyber Groupies say that the Net has helped them connect with people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, or economic backgrounds. One bridge that the Internet does not build, at least to a large extent, is to local community groups. Of the 26% of Cyber Groupies who said it has helped connect them to nearby groups, only 6% says it has helped them "a lot" in getting them in touch with locally-based groups.

Who are the Net Joiners and Long-timers in Local Groups?		
	Net Joiners (%)	Long-timers (%)
<i>Where They Live ...</i>		
Rural Areas	11%	16%
Suburban Areas	49	53
Urban Areas	41	31
<i>Sex ...</i>		
Male	52	50
Female	48	50
<i>Age ...</i>		
18-24	21	15
25-34	22	22
35-44	33	25
44-55	17	23
55+	7	15
<i>Race/Ethnicity ...</i>		
White, not Hispanic	68	85
Black, not Hispanic	10	5
Hispanic	11	4
Other	10	5
<i>Education ...</i>		
High school grad or less	27	20
Some college	37	30
College grad	36	50
<i>Income ...</i>		
Less than 30K	17	12
\$30K-\$50K	29	18
\$50K-\$75K	18	22
Over \$75K	21	27
Don't know/refused	15	21
<i>Internet experience...</i>		
Online in last 6 months	5	4
Online for about 1 year	14	13
Online for 2-3 years	28	34
Online for > 3 years	51	48
Number of observations	n=106	n=450

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey.

Cyber Groupies who are active in their online group are more likely to use the Net to connect with new people or groups. These users—defined as those who are members of a local and cyber group *and* who exchange emails with the group—are substantially more likely than other Internet users to report that the Internet has deepened their ties to groups to which they already belong or to local community groups. They enjoy a kind of “participatory premium.”

The effect is also significant when survey respondents are asked how effective the Internet is in helping them find people who share their interests or beliefs. Those active in online communities are more likely than other Internet users to say their online activities help them connect with people of different backgrounds. Given that the pool of active online community members is among the Internet elite (the technology’s early adopters who tend to be white, wealthy, and educated) this last finding is understandable. These users are accustomed to talking to those people and groups with whom they have conversed since they came to the Internet. On average, these people are not too different from each other.

How the Internet makes them feel connected		
The percent of who say their use of the Internet has helped them “a lot” or “some” ...	Cyber Groupies	Very active online community members
Find people or groups who share your interests	49%	61%
Become more involved with organizations or groups to which you already belong	40	58
Connect with people of different ages or generations	37	44
Find people or groups who share your beliefs	32	46
Connect with people from different economic backgrounds	29	37
Connect with people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds	27	33
Connect with groups based in your local community	26	43

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%.

Groupies is much more likely than active online community members in general to connect with people of different backgrounds. When asked whether the Internet has helped them connect with people from different generations, 53% said it had “a lot” or “some”; 41% said it had helped them connect with people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds; and 46% said the Internet had helped them connect with people from different economic backgrounds. And more than half (54%) said the Internet helped them connect to groups in their local community. In each case, these numbers represent about a 10-point increase over the average for active online community members.

As Internet adoption continues, it might be the case that new users are more likely to connect with people of different backgrounds than their predecessors in large part because the Internet population continues to diversify. Although difficult to predict, there is some evidence that this broadening of users’ social universes might increase as the Internet population grows.

The behavior of Local Groupies who joined an online community after making initial Internet contact illustrates this hopeful scenario. They are fairly diverse set of Internet veterans, with 11% Hispanics, 10% African-Americans, and 68% whites. This subset of Local

The Internet is also a bridge builder for younger members of online communities. Many in the 18-to-24 age bracket say the Internet helps them reach out to people of different ages, economic backgrounds, and ethnicity. Nearly half (47%) of online community members between the ages of 18 and 24 say the Internet helps “a lot” or “some” to connect them to people in different generations, 42% say it has helped make connections with people in different ethnic groups, and 36% say it has helped them reach out to people from different economic backgrounds. And 29% say it has helped them connect to groups in their local community. For the young who are quite active in online communities (i.e., those who email their groups), the results are more striking. Fully 60% say the Internet has helped connect them to people of different generations, 54% say that about ethnic groups, and 44% say it has helped them connect to local community groups.

In sum, online communities are enabling Internet users to build bridges to other groups and people, while at the same time deepening ties to groups and ideas with which people are already involved. As the Internet draws people to online groups, it is notable that these people (i.e., Net Joiners among Local Groupies) are ethnically more diverse than other Internet users. As the Internet disseminates more broadly throughout the population, there are signs that online groups may facilitate new connections across ethnic, economic, and generational categories. It is also worth underscoring that young people seem especially interested in taking advantage of the Internet’s bridge building potential in online groups. As noted at the outset, there is pervasive worry that young people shy away from group activity and civic engagement. With the online groups drawing young people into groups involved with their local community, this survey suggests that the Internet may develop into an important new avenue for civic engagement among young people.

Part 4: The differences among online group members

Different types of online groups attract different types of Internet users and elicit different kinds of participation from members. People involved in medical support groups are different from people in hobbyist online communities. Those drawn to groups involved with civic engagement are different from those who belong to professional and trade groups. And the amount of emailing in the different kinds of groups varies. This section examines different aggregations of online groups, looking at who joins them and the different levels of chatter and connection among participants. There is considerable overlap among categories, since the average Cyber Groupie has, at one time or another contacted about four different kinds of Internet groups. The section analyzes Internet users who have ever gone to a certain type of online group. An Internet user who has gone to a belief group and a lifestyle group is counted in both groups in the discussion below.

The Getting Ahead group: 51% of Internet users

People in the Getting Ahead category are those who belong to an online group related to their work, such as Internet groups involving trade and professional associations or labor unions. Only 6% of Internet users belong to an online group relating to a labor union, thus most of the Getting Aheads are professionals. And they are primarily males (57%), well educated (45% have college degrees or more compared to 36% of all Internet users), and well off economically (27% have household incomes in excess of \$75,000 compared to 21% of all Internet users). Finally, this group has a lot of Internet experience; 48% have been online for three years or more compared with 38% of the overall Internet population.

The Getting Ahead crowd is somewhat more likely than other Internet users to engage in extensive online chatter. Two out of three (66%) of the Getting Aheaders email their online group, which is more than the average online community member's rate of 60%, but both groups are about as likely to email the group at least several times a week. Those in the Getting Ahead cohort are slightly more likely than average users to contact the group to see what's going on and Getting Aheaders are more likely to report that the Internet has helped them get more involved with the groups to which they already belong. Some 46% say this, which above the Cyber Groupie average of 41% and higher than most of the groups discussed below. But people in the Getting Ahead category are no more likely than the average to contact their online group to establish personal relationships with other members or discuss issues with other members.

The Getting By group: 43% of Internet users

Online groups give people the opportunity to use the Internet to manage their day-to-day responsibilities that do not relate to their career, such as medical conditions or parenting. In other words, they belong to online communities that can help people get by on a daily basis.¹³ Groups that help in these areas are support groups that might involve a medical or personal condition or, on the neighborhood level, local youth groups such as the YMCA or

¹³ Xavier de Souza Briggs, "Brown Kids in White Suburbs: Housing Mobility and the Many Faces of Social Capital," *Housing Policy Debate*. Volume 9, Issue 1. Briggs distinguishes between social capital that helps people "get ahead" (e.g., improves job possibilities) and social capital that helps people "get by" (e.g., cope with everyday needs).

scouts. Combining those two types of groups yields the Getting By category. The Getting By cohort has more women than men and is skewed towards the 35-44 age bracket. Fully a third of the Getting By group (34%) are in that age bracket compared to 27% of all Internet users.

Online conversation is a bit more important to the Getting By group than the average online community member. Some 64% of Getting By community members email their group, and 46% do it at least several times a week. Fully 71% go to their group to discuss issues with other members. Finding out about group activities is important, as well: 74% say that this is an important reason they email the group. And 79% say they email the group to get general news about the group compared with 75% of all online community members. In terms of establishing personal relationships with online community members, the Getting By's are no more likely to do this than the average member an online group.

Belief groups: 56% of Internet users

Online groups regarding people's religious or spiritual beliefs are popular among Internet users. We combined three types of Internet users into a cohort we call the Belief group: people who have used the Net to contact a religious group, people who have reached out to others who share their beliefs, and Internet users who belong to a church or synagogue. This group looks very much like the Internet population overall, although a bit more likely to be female and well educated; 53% are women (versus 49% overall for Cyber Groupies) and 40% of the Belief Group has a college education or more compared to 36% of the Internet population.

In terms of online chatter, people in the Belief Group tend to value personal connections a bit more than the average member of an online community. Two-thirds (67%) have emailed an online group, with 46% doing so several times a week or more. Fully 53% of those in Belief Groups say that creating or maintaining personal relationships with other groups members is an important reason they email group members; this contrasts with 49% of all online community members. And 74% say that they email the group to get involved with and learn more about group activities, compared with 71% of all online community members.

Lifestylers: 28% of Internet users

Aside from seeking out people with common beliefs, online community members also take to the Internet to find people who have similar lifestyles, with 28% of Internet users having contacted such an online group at one time. Most Lifestylers are men (55%) and they are a bit more likely to live in urban areas than the average Internet users, by a 34% to 31% margin. They are also ardent Internet users; 45% have been online for three or more years compared with 38% of all Internet users. Lifestylers as a group do not have greater levels of education compared to the rest of the Internet population. Lifestylers are, however, younger and more ethnically diverse than the average Internet user. Fully 27% of Lifestylers are under age 34 compared to 23% of all Internet users. And 10% are Hispanics and 10% are blacks, compared for 8% figures for each racial category for all Internet users.

Lifestylers are among the most active emailers among online group members. Fully three quarters (73%) email their group, compared to 60% of all Internet users. And 54% email their group several times a week or more, compared with 43% of all Internet users.

Among Lifestylers, 77% say discussing issues with the group is an important reason for emailing it compared with 68% of all Internet users. More strikingly, 61% of Lifestylers say they email the group to create or maintain personal relationships with members, a substantial margin above the 49% of all Internet users who do so. Lifestylers also engage in emailing with local online groups with more frequency than average; 46% email local online groups compared to the 38% average. And 45% do so several times a week or more compared to the average of 33%. Overall, Lifestylers are very enthusiastic about the Internet's impact on their involvement in the groups to which they already belong. More than half (55%) say the Internet has deepened their involvement in groups, well above the average for all Cyber Groupies users (41%).

Ethnic and racial groups: 15% of Internet users

The 15% of Internet users who have contacted an ethnic group online are the most heavily urban and racially diverse subset of online community members considered in this section. The combination of city living and racial diversity comes with high levels of Internet experience, high incomes, and youth. Four out of nine (44%) Internet users who have contacted an online ethnic group live in urban areas compared with 31% of all Internet users. One-quarter (24%) are between ages 18 and 24 compared to 17% of all Internet users, and only 58% of ethnic and racial group participants are white, well below the 77% average for all Internet users. One in six (17%) of this group are black (twice the share of blacks in the Internet population), 13% are Hispanic (compared with 8% of Internet users), and 10% classify themselves as "other" compared to 4% of Internet users. Forty-two percent have college degrees or more compared with 36% of Internet users, and 53% have been using the Internet for three or more years compared to the 38% average. Fifty-two percent of those in ethnic and racial groups are male.

The distinctiveness of this group carries over to their pattern of chatter in online groups. Fully 72% email their principal online group (compared with 60% of all online community members) and 51% do so several times a week or every day (against the 43% average). And 58% email the group to create or establish relationships with other group members, higher than the 49% average for all online community members. The active emailing extends to messages to online groups involving matters close to home; 53% of ethnic groupies have email local online groups compared to the 38% average. It is not surprising that, on balance, members of ethnic and racial groups say the Internet has helped them become more involved with the groups to which they already belong. Nearly 3 in 5, or 57%, say the Internet has increased their involvement in groups.

Civic Engagement group: 45% of Internet users

People go online to connect to groups that have something to do with the place in which they live, with 29% of Internet users having at one time or another contacted a local community group or association and 30% having used the Internet for some involvement with a local charitable organization. This is the Civic Engagement group. Demographically, the Civic Engagers are similar to the Internet as a whole, although they are more experienced with the Internet and better educated. Forty-four percent of the Civic Engagement group has a college education or more compared to 36% of all Internet users. And the Civic Engagement crowd is somewhat older; 51% fall in the 35-to-55 age group compared to 46% of all Internet users. It also more experienced with the Internet, with 46% having been Internet users for three or more years compared to the 38% average.

The civically engaged are active in emailing online groups, especially online groups that pertain to matters close to home. Overall, 70% of the civically engaged email their online group versus 60% all online group members; 43% email their group several times a week, on par with all Internet users community members. For groups close to home, 44% of the civically engaged email these groups compared with 38% of all online group members.

Political Groupies: 22% of Internet users

About one in five (22%) of Internet users have used the Internet to contact a political group or organization, and this subset of Internet users is a predominantly male, educated, veteran group of surfers, with an urban bent. Fully 60% are male, half (50%) have a college education, and more than half (54%) have been online for three years or more. And 36% of users who have contacted a political group live in urban areas compared with 31% of all Internet users. Racially, blacks are underrepresented in this group, as only 4% of those politically involved are black compared to 8% of the Internet population.

Perhaps as a consequence of their lengthy Internet experience, the politically involved engage in a lot of email chatter. Three quarters (75%) have emailed an online group (45% several times a week or more) and 80% have emailed the group to find out about general group news compared with 76% for all online community members. For those who have contacted a political group using the Internet, even online politics seems to be local; 55% of this group has emailed a local online group of some sort, compared with 38% of all online community members. Political Groupies overall seem to approve the Internet's impact on their involvement with groups to which they already belong; 53% say the Internet has helped improve contacts with groups, 17 points above the Internet average.

Entertainment Groupies: 60% of Internet users

People who flock to online entertainment groups look very much like the rest of the Internet population, although they are a bit younger, more urban, and more experienced on the Internet than average. This group is defined as the 31% of Internet users who have contacted the fan site of a TV show or entertainer or the 50% of users who have contacted an online group having to do with a hobby. Some 52% of Entertainment Groupies are men and 34% live in urban areas (compared with 31% of all Internet users). Twenty-one percent are between the ages of 18 and 24, compared with 17% of all Internet users. Entertainment Groupies also have high levels of Internet experience, with 44% falling into the most veteran category of Internet surfers (three or more years online) compared to the 38% average.

Entertainment Groupies are a little more likely to email their group than average online group members (63% to 60%) and more likely by the same margin to email several times a week or more (46% to 43%). The pattern persists for establishing relationships with group members and discussing issues with group members.

Sports Junkies: 42% of Internet users

Sports Junkies are the Internet users who have contacted an online group about their favorite sports team, a sports team in a league in which they participate, or they belong to a local sports league. Sports Junkies tend to be suburban men between the ages of 35 and 44 who have a slightly more Internet experience than the average Internet user. Fully 59% of these are men and 54% live in suburban areas. Close to one-third (31%) are between age 35

and 44. Sports Junkies have been online a bit longer than the average Internet user (42% have been online for three years or more), but they have roughly the same educational levels as average online users.

The patterns of online chatter for Sports Junkies follow that of Entertainment Groupies very closely. Sixty-three percent of Sports Junkies email their online group and 46% do so several times a week or more. Fully 72% email their group to discuss issues with other group members and 51% do so to establish or create relationships with other group members. And 74% email the group to learn more about group activities or to become more involved with the group.

Patterns of Participation					
Online Community oriented to ...	% has ever emailed the group	% emailing several times a week	% contacting group to get community news	% seeking to establish personal relationships	% who say Internet has helped them become more involved with groups they belong to
Getting Ahead	66%	45%	79%	48%	46%
Getting By	64	46	79	49	42
Belief Groups	67	46	74	53	41
Lifestylers	73	54	78	61	55
Ethnic and Racial Groups	72	51	70	58	57
Civic Engagement	70	43	72	46	45
Political Groupies	75	45	80	47	53
Entertainment Groups	63	46	77	52	42
Sports Junkies	63	46	74	51	40
All Cyber Groupies	60	43	76	49	41

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%.

Comparing groups

Looking across these classifications of online community members, the groups that are most actively engaged, as measured by the amount of emailing by members, are Political Groupies, Lifestylers, members of ethnic and racial groups, and Civic Engagers. In each group, 70% or more email other group members, well above the 60% average. Online experience seems most strongly associated with engagement in online groups, with the groups with the most frequent emailing having a large share of the Internet's most experienced users.

There is also a correspondence between online experience and emailing local groups. For Political Groupies, Lifestylers, Civic Engagers, and members of ethnic and racial groups, the rate of local online group emailing is well above the average, and these groups contain the most experienced Internet users relative to the others. Internet users in these categories are also more likely than average to say the Internet has helped them become more involved with groups that they already belong to, with that finding being strongest for ethnic and racial groups, Lifestylers, and Political Groupies.

In looking at these active categories of online groups, two divisions stand out. First, the high levels of chatter among Civic Engagers and Political Groupies signals good news to those who hope that the Internet may contribute to a revival of American civic life. A substantial number of Internet users have contacted such groups using the Internet (29% have contacted a local community association and 22% have contacted a political group) and these users have a tendency toward establishing serious connections to online groups. Second, groups that have fairly direct ties to people's lifestyle or race/ethnicity also draw members willing to engage in online chatter and connection.

Although Belief Groups are not listed as highly engaged groups (because "only" 67% of members send emails), even that category's users report a relatively high incidence of emailing others to establish personal connections with other members. In some respects, the categories that have active emailers are inherently more interactive than the others. If you are interested in finding others who share your beliefs or lifestyle, you probably want to chat with them. If you are a fan of a TV show or a sports star, you may be more interested in getting information from a Web site about Tiger Woods or Jennifer Anniston than talking with other fans.

Part 5: The Internet and local scene

The Internet is an unparalleled medium for global communication, but it also has the potential to give people more information about what is going on in their local community. On balance, however, the vast majority of Internet users say that the Internet is a useful tool for becoming involved in things going on outside their community. Two-thirds (67%) of Internet users say the Net helps them get involved in things outside their community, compared to only 9% who say it helps them get involved in things close to home. Urban residents are most likely to say the Internet enables them to get involved with things close to home, with 12% saying it does, while only 6% of rural Internet users say that it does.

Not surprisingly, people who belong to online communities having to do with local matters are more likely to say that the Internet has gotten them more involved with their cities or towns. One in seven members (14%) of local online groups say the Internet has helped them become more involved in their local community. Nearly one in five (19%) of people who joined local online groups after first having Internet contact with them say the Internet has increased their involvement with their community.

The Internet and what's going on around town

For local purposes, the Internet is used most often as an information utility to find out about what is going on nearby. The most popular local information surfing activity is shopping; 41% of Internet users say that they "often" or "sometimes" go online to look for information about local stores or merchants. About one-third of Internet users go online looking for news about their local community or information about community events (35% in both cases). A somewhat lower number (30%) go to the Internet in search of information about local government, with one-quarter of Internet users (24%) using the Net to find out about schools. They are useful.

Few people use the Internet to email public officials, with only 13% of Internet users saying they “often” or “sometimes” send an email to a public official in their community or state. The low incidence of this kind of emailing may be due to ignorance of what is available on the Web about local government or some communities’ unwillingness to go online. About half of all (52%) of all Internet users say that their town or local government has a Web site, and 3 out of 8 (37%) say they do not know whether their town has a Web site. Just 12% say they are sure their town does not have a Web site.

How helpful are Web sites?	
<i>How useful do you find the following kinds of Web sites?</i>	<i>% saying “very useful”</i>
Local government	20%
The site of your principal local online group	40
The site of your principal cyber group	50

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Jan.-Feb. 2001 Survey, Internet users, n = 1,697. Margin of error is ±3%.

The low incidence of emailing public officials may also say something about the quality of local government Web sites. Only 20% of Internet users who have gone to their local government Web sites find the information there very useful, half the rate at which members of locally-oriented online groups find the Web sites of their groups very useful, and well below the 50% of members of cyber groups who find their groups’ Web sites very useful.

The Internet and public deliberation

The Internet is only occasionally used as a tool in public deliberation at a local level. About 1 in 9 Internet users (11%) are aware of a debate in their community where the Internet played a major role in organizing citizens to communicate with public officials. Seventy-two percent say use of the Internet was not part of any local deliberative process with 17% of Internet users saying they did not know. The Internet’s most experienced users (i.e., those online for three years or more) are most likely to be aware of the Internet playing a role in a local debate, with 17% being aware of such an occurrence. Only 6% of novice users (i.e., those who began using the Internet six months ago) have heard of the Internet playing a major role in local debate.

However, those who have participated in online communities are more likely to be aware of local public debates on the Internet. For the 28% of Internet users who are active members of online communities, about a fifth (22%) say they are aware of the Internet playing a role in a local issue. Members of Cyber Groups who belonged to the group prior to participating in it through the Internet are more likely than others to know of instances where the Internet helped shape public debate. Similarly, 23% of the Internet users who belonged to local groups before they began using the Internet to communicate with them say they are aware of the Internet playing a role in a local debate.

Local public access to the Internet

A final element in considering the Internet’s role in local communities is public access. Some see public Internet access as a way to allow those without a computer at home or work to enjoy the fruits of email and the Web. Others see public Internet access as a way to encourage community chatter, as people hang out at an Internet café or public library to check their email. When all Americans – Internet and non-Internet users alike – were asked if they knew of a place in their community where the Internet was publicly available, 51%

said yes, 32% said no, and 17% said they did not know. Internet users were much more likely to be aware of a public access site, with 63% saying their neighborhood had a public Internet access site compared with 38% of non-Internet users. When asked to classify the type of place where the Internet was publicly available, 42% of all Americans said it was the public library, 2% said a school, 1% an Internet café, and 1% said a copy or computer store.

The most prominent differences in responses to the public access question have to do with race. Some 53% of all white Americans and 51% of Hispanics said their neighborhood had a public Internet site, while just 44% of blacks said “yes” to this question. On the other side of the coin, 29% of whites said their neighborhood had no public Internet site, compared to 42% of blacks and 33% of Hispanics. The differences are greater for Internet users. Two-thirds (66%) of whites say there is a place nearby with publicly available Internet compared with 53% of blacks and 57% of Hispanics. While a quarter (25%) of all Internet users say their neighborhood lacks a place where the Internet is available, 23% of whites say this, 38% of blacks, and 29% of Hispanics.

Smaller differences are evident on public access for rural, urban, and suburban users. Among Internet users, 65% of rural residents say they know of a place in their community where the Internet is publicly available compared with 64% of suburban residents and 59% of urban dwellers. This relatively uniform finding is somewhat surprising because one might expect rural users, because of greater distance between enclaves of population, would either not know of publicly available Internet sites or simply not have them. All of this is in the context of higher Internet penetration rates in urban and suburban areas, with 57% of suburban residents and 55% of urban residents having Internet access compared with 44% of rural residents.

In summary, the Internet plays a fairly prominent role at the local level as an information utility and a comparatively small role in organizing public debate. However, for a subset of Internet users—the most wired and those who are most involved in using the Internet to be part of an online community—use of the Internet helps in community participation. A significant number of these users can think of a situation in which the Internet helped shape public participation. As for public access, the Internet does not have the standing of the pay phone when it comes to a publicly available communications tool. About half of all Americans can say that they know of a public Internet site in their neighborhood, with white Americans (Internet users especially) having greater awareness of these sites than blacks and, to a lesser extent, Hispanics.

Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between January 17, 2001 and February 11, 2001, among a sample of 3,002 adults, 18 and older. Of them 1,697 have access to the Internet. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2 percentage points. For results based Internet users, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The sample for this survey is a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid "listing" bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers). The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

New sample is released daily and is kept in the field for at least five days. This ensures that complete call procedures are followed for the entire sample. Additionally, the sample is released in replicates to make sure that the telephone numbers called are distributed appropriately across regions of the country. At least 10 attempts are made to complete an interview at every household in the sample. The calls are staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Interview refusals are recontacted at least once in order to try again to complete an interview. All interviews completed on any given day are considered to be the final sample for that day. The final response rate for this survey is 46%.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (March 2000). This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older, living in households that contain a telephone. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.