

*The OPA White Papers*

# **The Web Habit: An Ethnographic Study of Web Usage**

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# Online Publishers Association White Paper

## **The Web Habit: An Ethnographic Study of Web Usage**

By John Carey

### Abstract

This paper presents findings from an ethnographic study of Web usage in the U.S. The study found that the Web has become a core part of everyday life for most users and that users have formed very specific habits around it, similar to the way people formed habits around earlier forms of mass media such as newspapers and television. Some of the elements forging the new Web experience include pervasive access in homes, offices and public locations; broadband service that is always on and quickly available; wireless networks that are bringing the Web into any room within a home; the social transformation of the Web from a remote work tool to a welcome member of the family, and the increasing amount of time people are spending online. Core Web usage spans information, communication, shopping and entertainment. Web users recognize and value quality content and have developed loyalties that carry across online and offline media brands. A large quantitative study that complemented the ethnographic research supported findings about habitual Web use and synergies across online and offline content sites.

### ***Introduction***

The purpose of this study was to examine patterns of Web usage in the changing context of where people access the Web, how they access it (i.e., the increasing use of broadband), the growth of wireless networks and other factors that were either not present or quite different a few years ago. The study also examined some common assumptions about how people use the Web – for example, the belief by many in the media industry that the Web is used primarily as a tool to search for specific information or that e-mail/communication is the only reason most people use the Web.

The study used an ethnographic methodology of in-depth interviews with Web users and observations of their behavior in the natural settings in which they go online.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnography is a research methodology that was developed in anthropology for the study of distant cultures. Anthropologists would live with a native group over a period of months or years and write a detailed description of the culture based upon observations and interviews. Ethnography was later adapted for the study of Western cultures and the behavior of people in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). More recently, a number of researchers have utilized this technique for the study of new media (e.g., Carey,

It involved 44 people (23 females and 21 males, with an age range of 14 to late 50s) from 23 households in six states. (Most were in the tri-state New York area, but California, Florida and Massachusetts were also represented.) The interviews and observations took place in homes, offices and in some public locations over a period of four months. The households had a somewhat higher penetration of broadband compared to that of the U.S. in order to capture a glimpse of where Web usage is likely to be in the near future. However, this was not a study of early adopters (Rogers, 1997, pp. 313 - 330). While a few people met the criteria of early adopters, having adopted broadband service as soon as it was available in their neighborhood, a majority had only moderate interest in technology and did not have homes filled with electronic gadgets. The group included a salesman, an elementary school teacher, a carpenter, a dentist and a short order cook.

This was a qualitative study. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn about the percentage of people in the general population who may follow the patterns that were identified. However, the qualitative study was accompanied by a large quantitative survey that examined some of the same issues (excerpts from the quantitative study are included in this report) and yielded data that can be used to size many of the patterns identified in the ethnographic study.

## ***Findings***

The study findings can be grouped into four areas: how and where people access the Web; the transformation of the Web from a work tool into a routine part of everyday social life; the emergence of Web habits; and Web content usage.

### **I. How and Where People Access the Web**

#### The Pervasiveness of Web Access

One of the strong findings in the study is that the Web is becoming a pervasive presence in people's lives. People use it all day long – at home, at school, at work...and everywhere in between. Not only are computers with Web access present in homes,

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1996; Moores, 1996; and Silverstone, 1994). This form of research is suited to discovering new patterns of behavior and generating hypotheses, which can then be tested in surveys or other quantitative research.

offices and in many public places, but in each of these contexts, computers are entering spaces where they were previously absent. For example, the Web is present not only in executive offices but also in many cubicle environments, open office settings and in a range of locations we typically don't think about when using the term "office." For example, a dentist in New Jersey had Web access in a small room adjacent to where he treats patients. He goes on the Web as soon as he arrives at the office as well as between patients (see Photos 1 and 2). Another example was a carpenter in New York who had Web access in a small office adjoining his workshop. A third example was an office waiting room, where people could get on the Internet while waiting for their appointment (see Photo 3).

In the homes visited, computers were located in a number of different rooms, including bedrooms, living rooms, dens and even kitchens. Some homes had two or more computers with Web access. The kitchen computer, in two of the homes visited, was particularly illuminating. One woman reported that she had purchased a computer for the kitchen when the family decided to install a wireless network. While the main Web computer was in a downstairs den, she wanted Web access in the kitchen, where she spent a great deal of her time. She expected to use the kitchen computer for recipes and other functions related to the kitchen and for it to become her personal computer. She reported, however, that as soon as it was set up, everyone in the household began to use it. As a result, she had to compete for access. Further, she began using it for everything, not just for recipes or shopping lists as she originally intended (see Photo 4). Web access from the kitchen may seem unusual at first, but when we consider the role of the kitchen in households – that is, as a central hub of activity – it is not so surprising. Placement of the Internet in the kitchen is indicative of its centrality to everyday life. The phenomenon has been reported by others, as well (Hafner, 2003, p. G-1).

Web access is common not just in homes and offices but also in thousands of dorms and public locations. A college dormitory included in the study provided Web access to every student individually as well as in some common areas where usage was shared. Further, the dorm was a 24 hour-a-day environment. Some students kept their computer on continuously and went on the Web in the middle of the night, either because

they were studying late or simply because they were awake and decided to get up and check something out online at 3 a.m.

Public locations were also included in the study. While the cyber cafe phenomenon is well documented, it is much more common outside the U.S. Here, public access is available in many hotel lobbies, airports (see Photo 5), parks, fast food restaurants, coffee shops and truck stops. The growing use of WiFi hotspots is accelerating this form of access and has achieved a level of general recognition. Even Zagat now publishes a guide to WiFi hotspots. While still at an early stage of development, wireless access to the Web from mobile devices such as PDAs and advanced cell phones is expanding the number and types of locations where people can get on the Internet. Collectively, they contribute to a pervasive environment of Web access: homes, offices, dorms, hotels and public locations.

## **II. The Transformation of the Web from a Work Tool into a Routine Part of Everyday Social Life**

### The Web as a Core Part of Everyday Life

In discussing the role of the Web in everyday life, all but a few of the study participants described it not as an occasional or infrequently used medium, but as core to their everyday lives. (People with broadband access to the Web and longer term dial-up users were the strongest in describing the Web as a core part of their lives.) They used expressions such as "I use it for everything" and "I couldn't get along without it." Further, they described using it in multiple locations such as home and work, and in multiple "sessions" throughout the day, some of which were long and some of which were short. This was especially true for those with broadband access. Typically, they had a browser open whenever they were at home or in the office.

Some Web sessions last several minutes to an hour or more, while some last less than a minute, e.g., checking the weather. The study participants described a broad range of activities on the Web, including information gathering, communication, shopping and entertainment. Some of this usage was for important, directed activities such as gathering information about a health issue, seeking mortgage rates or sending an e-mail about a

business issue. However, much more of their reported and observed activity was about simple, everyday needs and wants such as checking the weather, sports scores, news headlines or a horoscope, and staying in touch with their network of friends and family. These latter activities cemented the Web as a core component of everyday life.

### Socialization of the Web

As a medium becomes core to everyday life, people begin to integrate the media device into their social world. In other words, as they warm up to the medium, they tend to personalize the device, so that it is no longer viewed as a cold, remote piece of technology, but rather as extension of themselves. This happens in a multitude of ways, as observed in the homes and offices that were visited. One of the ways people are socializing the Web is by decorating the computer monitor with stuffed animals that lay on top of or next to it. Some people placed family photographs and other memorabilia on or next to the monitor (see Photo 6). These forms of decoration appear to be related to the acceptance of the computer as a social and entertainment object within the household and not just a remote work tool. This treatment of the computer as a person or friendly object has been documented by Reeves and others in a variety of settings (Reeves and Nass, 1996) and is particularly significant because it mirrors how television was treated in households in the 1960s and 1970s, when family photographs, trophies and other personal memorabilia often adorned the top of the TV set.

Another aspect of the socialization process observed during the study was the presence of pets near the computer monitor in some households (see Photo 7). This has also been a characteristic of television usage – with pets often sitting at the foot or on the lap of people as they watch TV. It relates, in part, to the greater amount of time people are spending on the Web (pets often hang out where people hang out) and, in part, to the distribution of household PCs rooms beyond the typical home office. In the past, when the Web PC was most often found in a home office, access was sometimes restricted for pets.

Use of the Web is also shaped by existing family patterns and, in turn, influences some everyday family behavior. One notable observation was that some people, especially children, used the Web as a group. For example, two or three children would

sit together at the PC while using an entertainment site. Sometimes a parent would come by to check out what the children were doing and would stay awhile to discuss an activity or give a tip (see Photo 8). Parents reported that this was a good way to monitor their children's online activities. That is, by keeping the computer in a shared space within the home where they could easily walk by and see what the children were doing, they could effectively control their children's Web usage.

Wireless networks are playing an indirect role in the socialization of the Web. In earlier research by the author (Carey, 2003), I observed a number of wired networks in homes. Because of the difficulty in running the wires, most of these networks linked two computers in the same room or in adjoining rooms. As a result, it created a "home office" environment. With wireless networks, people can locate additional computers in any room they choose. Further, wireless laptops can be moved from room to room. So, in this study, I observed far fewer office settings in homes with networks. Often, a person would sit on a couch or at a kitchen table with a wireless laptop and go on the Web. These were more relaxed settings in which Web usage fit into the social definition of the room, rather than re-defining the room as an office.



Photos 1 and 2





Photos 3 and 4

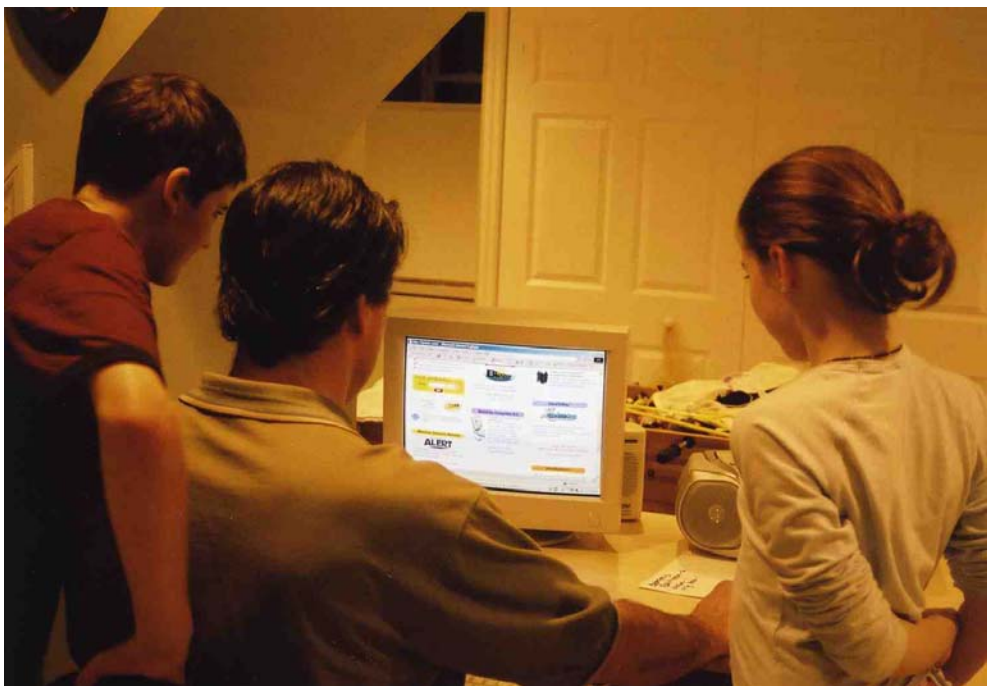


Photos 5 and 6





Photos 7 and 8



### **III. The Emergence of Web Habits**

#### The Web Habit

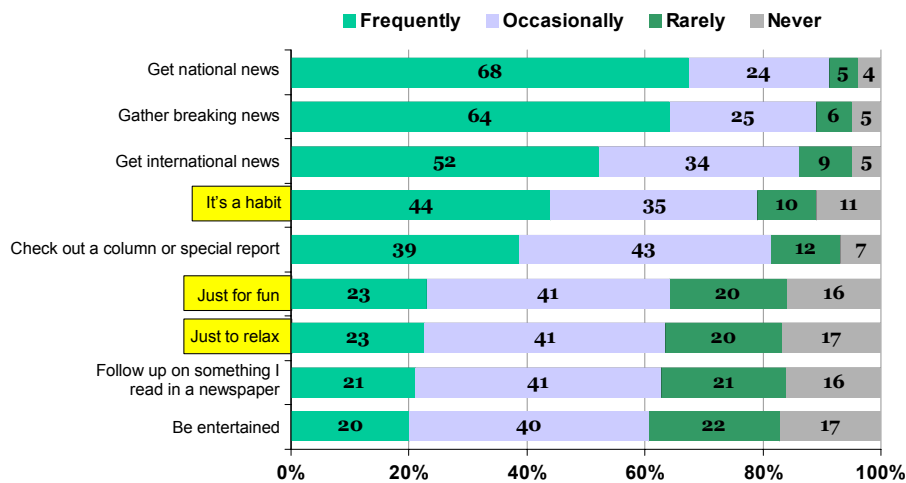
A core characteristic of many mass media is that people develop routines or habits surrounding their usage. There has been a good deal of research about people's habits in using mass media such as newspapers and television (see Bentley, 2000 and Bogart, 1981 for newspaper reading habits; see Barwise, 1997 and Silverstone, 1994 for television usage habits). During interviews with people for this study, it became clear that they were describing habits they had formed in using the Web. These habits are different from the active use of the Web to search for specific information, and some of this habitual use of the Internet may have mistakenly been classified as searching behavior in earlier research. Further, the characterization of the behavior as "searching" depends in part on the question that is asked of people. For example, if you ask a person if he or she searches for weather information, the response is likely to be yes. However, in talking to people about their use of the Web for weather information, they described routines that happened every day and sometimes several times a day, often without making a conscious decision. In other words, they did it out of habit. The same type of behavior was described by people with respect to getting sports scores, news headlines or stock information; they did it routinely and instinctively. They did it out of habit.

The characteristics of the Web habits observed in this study are complex. Some of these habits appear to be similar to a newspaper reading habit. For example, one person reported that each morning he opened his laptop on the kitchen table while having coffee and checked out the news on *The New York Times* Web site. However, other Web habits appear to be similar to the way people habitually use television. That is, they go to the medium constantly because they depend on it for psychological comfort such as keeping them company or occupying time. Further, with the Web, as with TV, people spend some long sessions and some brief ones with the medium. Some of this usage involves a conscious decision to go online and then to a specific site; but much of it is a routine they have formed in which they go to the same favorite Web sites without thinking much about it. The Web habit differs from TV habits in that most TV

programming is scheduled whereas most Web content is not dependent on a fixed schedule. In this sense, Web sites are much more available than are television programs.

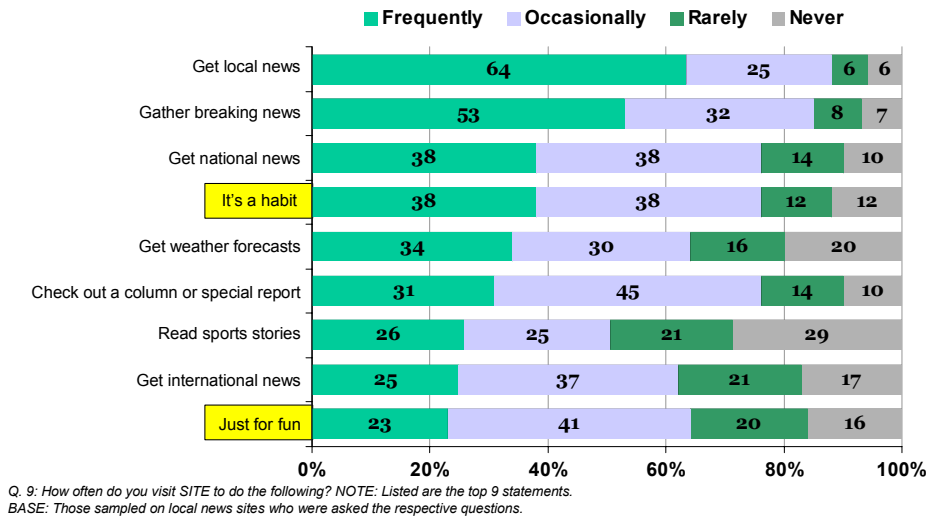
A large quantitative study by Frank N. Magid Associates paralleled this study and addressed the issue of Web access as a habit. It showed that for national and local news sites, many people access them out of habit (Tables 1 and 2). The pattern was not as strong for entertainment sites.

**Table 1 Why People Visit National News Sites**



Q. 9: How often do you visit SITE to do the following? NOTE: Listed are the top 9 statements.  
BASE: Those sampled on national news sites who were asked the respective questions.

Table 2 Why People Use Local News Sites



However, even with entertainment sites, people reported that much of their access was for fun or generally to relax, not for specific objectives that required careful decisions.

Understanding the nature and characteristics of Web habits will require more research. However, Web habits are important because they suggest that people have developed an ongoing relationship with the medium, depend on it, and use it often without making a conscious decision to search for specific information. It is a social as well as an informational relationship.

### Morning Usage Routines

Web habits and routines surfaced in a number of ways throughout the study. One was in how some people have begun to use the Web in the morning. This may be a relatively new phenomenon (quantitative studies can better assess how many people use the Web in the morning) but a number of study participants discussed using the Web routinely in the morning. One person, an AOL user, said that he turned on his computer each day as soon as he got up, then took a shower, and when he finished his shower, jumped on the Web to check news headlines and get e-mail. Another person said that he

started his day by checking e-mail and going to a series of sites that had his favorite comic strips. A third person said that checking the weather online in the morning was "part of my getting ready routine, just like what I'm going to wear." A female college student described her morning routine of going to the Web (which was on 24 hours a day in her dorm room) three or four times between getting dressed, grabbing a bite to eat, and checking what she needed for class. In these brief Web encounters, she typically did not sit down at the computer but instead leaned over to check her horoscope, see if there was any e-mail, get the weather for her area, etc. Morning use of the Web fills in a new block of time and makes the Web, for many people, an all day medium.

### Patterns of Use at Work

Most people in the study had access to the Web at work. They indicated that the Web could be used for work-related activity, such as checking e-mail or getting information related to work. However, most said that a modest amount of personal Web usage was also permitted, much as they were allowed to make some personal phone calls during work. In addition, Web use was permitted during breaks, at lunch time and before and after the regular work day. For those who ran their own businesses, such as a dentist or carpenter, Web use was regulated by their individual work patterns rather than by company policy. However, nearly everyone described logging onto the Web as a routine behavior that they performed every day upon arriving at work.

Web use at work fell into clear routines but these routines did not necessarily take place at fixed times. Some people described using the Web during breaks, which varied in time based on the day's schedule. Similarly, many said that they went on the Web between meetings. One person said that he went on the Web "to take little mind breaks every so often." Other people discussed going on the Web as part of a routine in starting the work day or during lunch. One study participant discussed a daily routine of coming to work, stopping at the coffee truck outside his office, picking up a coffee and a bagel, then sitting down and going on the Web as he drank the coffee and ate the bagel. Many of the study participants kept a browser open all day long, but minimized it or put it in their task bar. Periodically, they would refresh the browser and check stock information, sports scores or news about their company. One person characterized this as "going to



the Web for brief snippets." Another common pattern was to go on the Web during phone calls, particularly long phone meetings when a person was passively listening to the discussion.

#### **IV. Web Content Usage**

##### Information as a Core Part of Web Usage

One of the myths in some media industry circles is that the Web is primarily about communication (e-mail and instant messaging) and that everything else is secondary or not important. The study found that information was a core part of Web usage along with communication, shopping and entertainment. In fact, for many people in the study, it has become a habit to turn to the Internet first when seeking information of practically any type. For the study participants, information included news that they gathered regularly as well as breaking news stories, since many believed that Web news sites would be updated more quickly than television or radio news. It also included everyday information needs such as weather, local movie times, or driving directions. A number of study participants said that they used the dictionary, maps, yellow page directories and telephone information services far less often because they could get the same content faster or cheaper on the Internet.

Information searches were also part of the mix. Some of the searches were through search engines and some involved simply going to content sites that had certain types of information. One woman said that she was getting married in a few months and she went regularly to a content site for brides to learn about finding a caterer, choosing flower arrangements, etc. Others mentioned content sites that they used regularly for health information, sports stories, the stock market, and many other topics.

##### Recognition of Quality Content Sites

Another Web myth is that quality content no longer matters. According to some theories, the Internet democratized information and has leveled the playing field in a way that makes all information equal. To the contrary, that is not at all what the study participants said. People indicated that when it comes to content online, brand matters; in

fact, they recognized that many sources of information on the Web are not reliable. People are highly discriminating about their information sources online, just as they are in the offline world. They recognize and trust certain brands. This is not to say, however, that only traditional offline media brands are recognized as reliable.

Many of the trusted media brands mentioned by study participants were traditional offline newspapers, magazines or television networks. However, some were new online brands that have developed a reputation for quality. Further, study participants indicated that they want content both from well known brands and from sources that may not be as reliable but which provide a different perspective. As an example, reviews of books, cameras, cars, etc. were cited by a number of people who indicated that while they wanted an objective review by an expert, they also liked sites that supplemented the expert review with comments from people who had read the book, bought the camera, owned the car, etc.

Study participants also mentioned that they rely on quality content sites to find links to other quality sites. One common example cited was to read a story about a topic at a site they trusted and then to use links from the story to other sites where they could learn more on the topic. A number of people indicated that they would like to see more links within stories to other sites (or other articles on the same site) where they could get more information if they so desired.

A few people in the study, mostly college students, said that they used blogs for political commentary, humor and links to other content. Having received a lot of attention in recent months, most blogs can be described as personal journals or diaries. However, the blogs that study participants used were more like newsletters. Some had achieved their own brand identity and were viewed by study participants as quality content sites; others were viewed as a form of vanity press. As in the offline world, there is a broad range of types of publications on the Web. The long term role of blogs is still to be determined.

### Use of Information to Support Online and Offline Shopping

Study participants reported substantial use of the Web for information to support shopping, both online and offline. This included product reviews, product comparison

charts, information about pricing and tips on how to purchase certain products. It also included stories on topics of interest that led to purchase decisions – for example, reading a travel story about family-friendly beach resorts and then deciding to go to one of the places mentioned in the article. Many said that this had become an ingrained part of their shopping patterns – to start with information gathering on the Web.

A number of people also commented that the way they shop had changed over the past few years because of the Web. One person cited his old pattern of driving to a mall and going from store to store to see what was available in a certain category, compare prices, and then decide what to buy. He indicated that he now does all of this preliminary work on the Web and then goes to the mall knowing what product he wants, where he can get it and what it will cost.

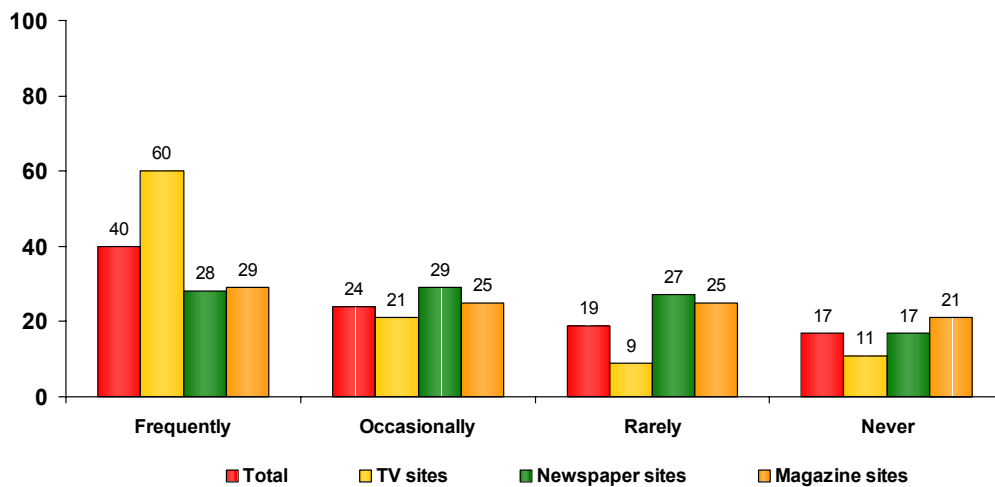
### The Web and Offline Media

There was much discussion by study participants about their use of the Web in relation to their use of offline media such as TV, newspapers and magazines. In discussing TV, some said that they were watching less TV and spending more time online. However, the more interesting pattern appears to be how the use of the Web, in many ways, resembles the use of TV – users are spending a lot of time with it, using it for many purposes and at many different times of day, gaining access to it from multiple rooms, and are treating it like a member of the family. There was also a substantial amount of reported and observed multi-tasking with TV, i.e., using the Internet and TV at the same time. In addition, TV stations and networks were successful in driving many people to their respective Web sites. The quantitative study supported this finding (see Table 3).

In discussing newspapers, magazines and the Web, some study participants cited advantages of print. Specifically, they mentioned that print products are portable, making it easy to take them with you to the bathroom or on a train. Also, some said that they liked the look and feel of paper over text on a computer monitor. However, others indicated that they liked the look of text on a monitor over print on paper or simply that they had become comfortable with monitors and preferred them over paper. Also, surprisingly, some perceived the portability of paper as an inconvenience. They felt as

though it was burdensome to have to carry a newspaper or magazine around with them. Quite astonishingly, these people perceived Web access to be so pervasive that they felt they could access the same information online from virtually anywhere at any time without having to carry anything around with them at all.

**Table 3 Overlap in Using Online and Offline Brands**

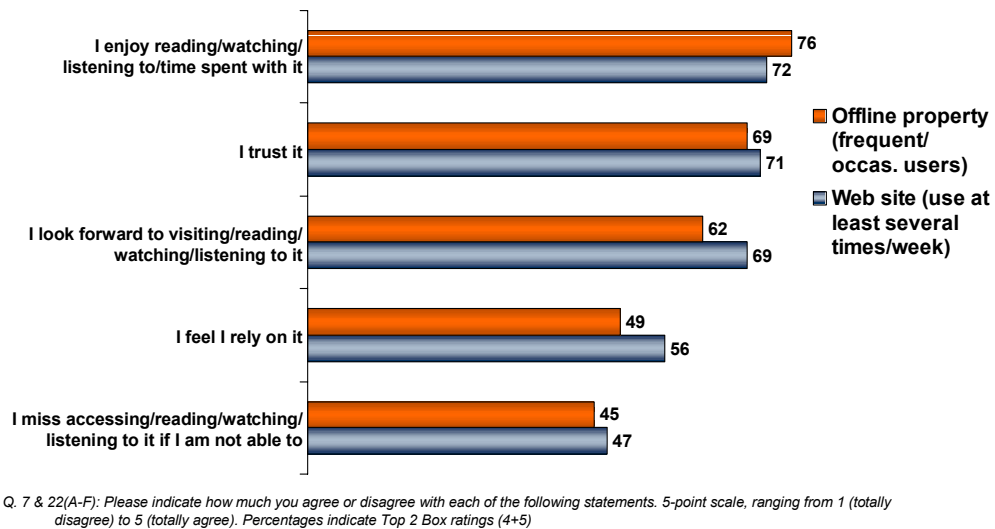


Q. 20: On average, how often do you read/watch/listen to OFFLINE PROPERTY? BASE: Total sample (N=25,852)

There was a lot of discussion about synergies between print and the Web. That is, study participants learned about Web sites from print sources and were driven to them from a link in a newspaper or magazine. Also, there was loyalty to both the online and offline properties of the same brand. Table 4 from the quantitative study shows similarities in attitudes about online and offline sources. It shows that feelings of trust, enjoyment and reliance are very similar for the offline property and the corresponding Web site for the same brand. Not only do people place as much value on content on the Web as they do on content in print and on television, but they are emotionally attached to

and equally passionate about the online and offline versions of their favorite media brands.

Table 4 Emotional Attachment to Online & Offline Brands



## Discussion

In 1953, television had entered more than half of U.S. households and was becoming an important mass medium. Many media industry analysts thought that they understood the true nature of television. Television was a medium for live drama and adaptations from classic radio programs. However, right in front of everyone's eyes was the actual future of television: situation comedies like *I Love Lucy*, sports, and local and national news.

We may be at a similar stage today with the Web. Some media analysts believe that the Web is a specialized tool that is used for e-mail, purchasing products and searching for information. These are important components of Web usage but are only a fraction of the whole story. The findings from this study suggest that the has become a

core part of everyday life, with consumers forming specific routines or habits around Web usage, just as they did with earlier mass media such as newspapers and television. The broad social impacts of the Web are still not fully understood (DiMaggio et al, 2001).

Some of the major elements that are helping to shape the emerging Web experience, and the habits people are developing around Web usage include: pervasive access points in homes (and in multiple rooms in some homes), offices and public locations; broadband access that is "always on" and quickly available to users; wireless networks that are bringing the Web into any room within the home; socialization of the Web (by decorating monitors and creating more relaxed environments where the Web is accessed) that transforms it from a remote work tool into a welcome member of the family; and the increasing time that people are spending online.

There is also much to be learned about Web usage through further research. This study examined a range of age groups but the small size of the study did not allow for an in-depth look at any one group. It would be useful to concentrate on one group – for example, 18 to 34 year olds – and examine their patterns of Web use in more depth. The issue of multi-tasking emerged during the study but is a complex phenomenon (people multi-tasked between a Web site and TV, cell phones, wired phones, instant messaging, and other Web sites) that both requires and deserves closer examination.

The issue of search engines also deserves further exploration. Search engines are clearly an important part of Web usage, but how are people using them? In this study, for example, search engines were sometimes used as a substitute for a favorites list. That is, in some cases, when a known site was not bookmarked and the person didn't know or didn't want to guess the URL, they used the search engine as a quick way to get to a site that they already knew about. What are the multiple functions of Web search engines?

There are also many language issues associated with the Web. For example, many people in the study talked about *watching* TV and *reading* a newspaper but *going to* Web sites. They used a metaphor of place with some even talking about *hanging out* at Web sites. What type of relationship does this metaphor of place reflect? In this sense, we are still at an early stage of understanding the fascinating and important phenomenon of the Web as a mass medium.

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John Carey is Managing Director of Greystone Communications, a media research and planning firm. He conducts in-home ethnographic research, planning studies, survey research and laboratory-based usability studies of new communication services.

Recently, he has conducted studies of broadband Web users, content services on the Web, user interfaces for satellite radios, software on demand, digital cable services, interactive television, and personal video recorders.

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### ***The OPA White Papers***

The OPA White Papers are edited by Michael Zimbalist, executive director of the Online Publishers Association. For questions about this series or to submit an idea for a future paper, please contact:

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### ***About the Online Publishers Association***

Founded in June 2001, the Online Publishers Association (OPA) is an industry trade organization dedicated to representing high-quality online content providers before the advertising community, the press, the government and the public.

Comprised of some of the most trusted and well-respected media brands, the OPA is committed to producing groundbreaking research into online advertising and media consumption with the goal of advancing the online publishing industry. Through credible research and ongoing communications, the OPA seeks to establish and promote the Internet as an effective advertising medium for marketers and a sustainable media business for publishers, thereby ensuring the continued availability of quality content for consumers worldwide.

Members of the OPA ascribe to the highest standards in Internet publishing with respect to editorial quality and integrity, credibility and accountability.

Current members of the OPA are: ABCnews.com, About.com, Bankrate.com, Belo Interactive, CBS MarketWatch, cbsnews.com, CNET Networks, CNN.com, CondéNet, Cox Newspapers, Edmunds.com, ESPN.com, Forbes.com, Hearst, Internet Broadcasting Systems, iVillage, Jupitermedia, Knight Ridder Digital, Meredith, MSNBC.com, mtv.com, New York Times Digital, Reuters, Scripps Networks, Slate, Sporting News Online, Tribune Interactive, USATODAY.com, Wall Street Journal Online, Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive and weather.com.