

Surveys show significant growth in British Internet use

By Mike Ingram
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Several recent surveys indicate a significant growth of Internet access in Britain in the last 12 months. According to a *Guardian/ICM* poll published Monday December 20, more than one in three British adults now have access to the Internet either at home or at work.

The survey shows that Internet use is growing faster than any previous technology, including radio and television. The number of adults with Internet access has grown from 29 percent in January of this year to 37 percent. The number of UK residents accessing the Internet has increased by 25 percent in just under a year and the survey predicts that 21 million people, almost half of the population, will be online by the end of the year 2000.

An article in the *Guardian* newspaper announcing the poll was headlined "One in three Britons online, but the net shows big gaps". It focused on disparities shown between different age groups and social strata, stating that the survey "confirms most people's suspicions that the Internet is still very much a young person's medium, it also shows the poor have failed to secure equal access".

British advertisers and market researchers characterise social class according to five groupings from A to E. Group A is defined as representing professional workers (lawyers, doctors, etc.), scientists and managers of large organisations. Group B is made up of shopkeepers, farmers, teachers and other white-collar workers. Group C represents skilled manual workers and is broken down between two groups—C1, representing higher grades such as master builders, carpenters and nurses; C2, the lower grades such as electricians and plumbers. Group D is made up of semiskilled manual workers such as bus drivers and lorry drivers and the bottom group E is for unskilled

manual workers such as general labourers, barmen and the unemployed.

The *Guardian* cited figures of 59 percent access among the most affluent "AB" social group, compared with 14 percent among the "DE" social classes to back up its point.

This narrow emphasis was criticised by Professor Patrick Dunleavy of the London School of Economics Policy Group in the *Guardian* letters page the following day. Citing figures from the British Market Research Bureau, Dunleavy wrote, "in fact recent Internet trends show signs that a dispersion stage is now happening." The gap between social classes in Internet access is narrowing. From mid-1998 to mid-1999 the percentage growth in Internet access for those in the AB social group was 33 percent. For the C1 group it was 44 percent and the C2 it was 66 percent. Even given that the base figure for Internet access from which the percentages for growth rates are drawn is smaller the further down the social scale you go, Dunleavy argues that this points to a process of levelling out.

"The largest group of new arrivals on the Internet in this period were 1.2m people in the C1 group", Dunleavy added, and "Even among the retired and unemployed DE group, access grew by 50 percent over the year. So a catch-up phase has started".

"Getting this issue right is very important", he continued. "A great many people across the public services are still justifying the provision of not very good Internet services to citizens by appealing to access inequalities as a reason for avoiding progress towards electronic transactions. Ironically the long-term effects of this stance are to worsen social inequalities by reducing support for public services, as they increasingly appear more old-fashioned and out of

touch compared with the modern progressive-looking private sector."

A poll published this month by *Mori* shows that 46 percent of the UK population have a personal computer (PC) either at home or at work. Some 17.5 million use a computer at home and 11.5 percent use one at work or their place of study. Some 4 million adults in Britain have made online purchases over the Internet.

The same organisation says that e-commerce is set to double in importance over the next two years. "Across the manufacturing, retail and wholesale industry sectors, 56 percent consider e-business will be essential or very important in one to two years' time for the sector in which they operate compared to 13 percent who consider it will be unimportant. Around two-thirds perceive it can give them a competitive advantage," the survey finds.

The report adds, "Contrary to general perceptions, the US is only slightly ahead of Europe in terms of implementation, with Sweden taking a lead. The US and Europe are equally focused on the development of e-business for their organisation going forward."

A significant factor in the growth of UK Internet access is the emergence of the "Free ISP" (Internet Service Provider). The decision by leading high-street stores to team up with existing providers to offer a subscription-free access has given a huge boost to Internet usage. In a country in which all local telephone calls are still metered, competition among the free providers themselves has now led a number of them to offer toll-free 0800 numbers for weekend access, and users are anticipating that totally free access will become the norm.

Technological developments mean that the growth in Internet access over the coming year could outstrip even the most optimistic predictions. The development of Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL), a technology that allows data transfer at speeds of up to 2mb/s (at least six times faster than a standard modem) over a normal phone line, will have a major impact. The much faster access offered by this and other technologies such as cable modems could see the Internet replacing more traditional broadcasting media such as TV, offering the possibility of "video-on-demand".

Already an integral part of life for many, the Internet will increasingly merge with other media to satisfy the

communication, educational, cultural and leisure requirements of masses of people as we enter the new millennium.

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