

Plugged into the Internet

by Paul Dickinson and Jonathan Ellison

Have you ever wondered why your neighbours' phones are always busy? It may be because they are surfing the Internet. More and more Canadians are now using the Net to stay in touch with each other, to bank, to shop, to research a topic for a school project, to browse for information, to play games, or to make travel plans. Conquering the limitations of geographic location, the Internet could change the lives of people as much as the telephone did in the early 20th century and television in the 1950s and 1960s.

Whether it will improve or harm participation in community life and social relationships is yet to be seen. But like it or not, the Internet is here to stay. In 1998, there were 4.3 million households in Canada (36% of all households) in which at least one member used computer communications regularly. This compared with 3.5 million households in 1997.¹ Household members may access the Internet from many locations: a child or teenager at school, a public library or a friend's house; a mother or father at work; a student at the university residence or perhaps at a cybercafé.

Ultimately, many people obtain access to the Internet from home. In fact, people were just as likely to use the Net from home as from the workplace, with home-use showing the largest growth between 1997 and 1998. Furthermore, those who used the Net at home did so frequently: 95% more than once a week.

E-mail most popular use of the Internet at home

Without doubt, e-mail was the most widely used application of home users: 86% households plugged into the

Internet used e-mail. The advantages of communicating electronically are many. In seconds, messages can be sent around the world to family members, friends or business colleagues. Digital photos can be appended to mail messages, thus making distribution of family photos easy. E-mail enables employees to work at home and still stay in contact with a central office, thereby reducing commuting time and providing a more family-friendly work environment. E-mail also keeps people with similar interests in

CST What you should know about this study

Statistics Canada first conducted the Household Internet Use Survey (HIUS) in October 1997 to collect detailed data about the use of the Internet by Canadian households. The survey was repeated in October 1998. The HIUS collected information from one household member about the Internet activities of the entire household. Over 38,000 respondents in private households were interviewed in 10 provinces.

Regular user: Households with at least one person who uses computer communications during a typical month, whether at home, work, school, public library or other location.

Income quartile: Total number of households divided into four equal parts sorted by household income. The top quartile is the 25% of households with the highest incomes; the bottom quartile is the 25% with the lowest incomes.

1. Households stating that they had ever used computer communications rose to 46% in 1998 from 38% in 1997.

touch: they can share information about a hobby, distribute special interest newsletters, or provide personalized editions of the daily news.

The Internet also has a wealth of information on nearly every topic imaginable. Government agencies, universities and colleges, libraries, banks, newspapers and magazines, businesses and maybe even your neighbours have web sites describing their products, services, programs, interests and opinions. It is little wonder, then, that searching for

information, and general browsing, were the second and third most common uses of the Internet for home users.

Although Internet shopping is becoming more popular, only one in 10 Internet-using households made purchases via computer at home (3% of all households). This low level of e-commerce may reflect consumer concerns over the security of credit card transactions on the Internet or perhaps the need by some consumers to see, feel or smell goods before they decide to buy.



Well-educated, high-income households were most likely to use the Internet

	Households using the Internet	
	1997	1998
	%	
All households	29	36
Household income		
Bottom quartile	12	13
Second quartile	18	24
Third quartile	33	42
Top quartile	54	65
Education level of household head		
Less than high school graduation	9	13
High school graduation/some postsecondary/postsecondary ¹	31	37
University degree	60	68
Age of household head		
Less than 35	38	45
35 to 54	39	47
55 to 64	21	28
65 and over	6	7
Family type		
One person household	16	20
Single family, without children under 18	28	34
Single family, with children under 18	38	48
Multi-family household	44	46

1. College or trade/vocational diploma or certificate.

Source: Statistics Canada, Household Internet Use Survey.

High-income households more likely to use the Internet

The use of computer communications is closely related to the socioeconomic status of the household. In 1998, the highest regular Internet use (65%) was among individuals living in households in the top income quartile and among households where the head had a university degree (68%). In contrast, Internet use was far lower in the bottom quartile (13%), and in households where the head had not graduated from high school (13%). Members of the top income and education households were more likely to use the Internet at work, school, public libraries and other places (as well as at home) than persons living in households with lower income or less education. Nevertheless, even among households in the lowest income quartile, Internet use grew, with 7% using it at home, 6% at school, 4% at work and 3% at a library in 1998.

Younger generation more connected

As with other household technologies, Internet use varies not just with income but also with the generations.² Overall, Internet use was highest among households headed by a 35- to 54-year-old (47%). This is in part because middle-aged households have higher incomes. In the bottom three income quartile groups, households headed by someone under age 35 led in Internet use. After accounting for income differences,

2. Howatson-Leo, L. and A. Peters. 1997. "Everyday technology: Are Canadians using it?" *Canadian Social Trends*, Autumn 1997.

young households and households with children under age 18 were more likely to be users of computer communications than older or childless households.

Other research shows that the biggest computer and Internet user in a family is most likely to be a teenager.³ This may be because young people have the most free disposable time. At the same time, parents may view Internet access as a way of preparing their children for the future and providing them with an advantage over peers who don't have access.⁴ Yet some parents are fearful that their children will give out personal information, view sexually explicit material or become isolated from other people.⁵

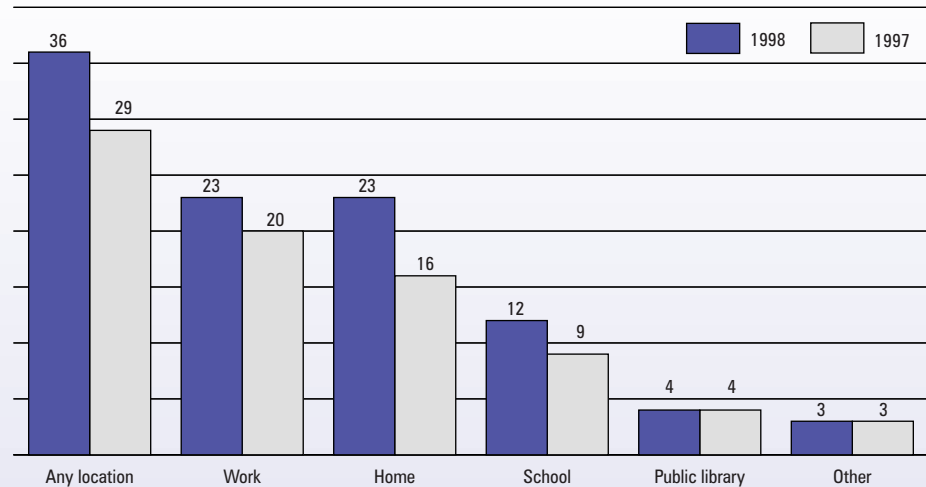
In contrast to high use in young households, only 7% of households headed by a senior used the Internet. Many seniors, at risk of social isolation after retirement and with the onset of physical disability, could benefit from access to Internet communities. However, most seniors did not use computers as younger adults and therefore did not acquire basic computer skills. In addition, many may be resistant to computer technologies and may not recognize the possible usefulness of the Internet.

Internet use highest in Ottawa

More than half of Canada's households are located in the 15 largest census metropolitan areas (CMAs) of the country. People living in these areas are generally more connected than those from smaller urban areas and rural communities. Ottawa⁶ is the most connected CMA, even though its Internet use did not change between 1997 and 1998. The population's high average levels of education and household income contribute to Ottawa's leadership in this area, as do the presence of the high-tech industry and the federal government, which provide Internet access to many of their employees. Household use of the Internet in all of the other large CMAs increased during the year, with the growth being particularly large in Calgary, Halifax, Victoria, Hamilton

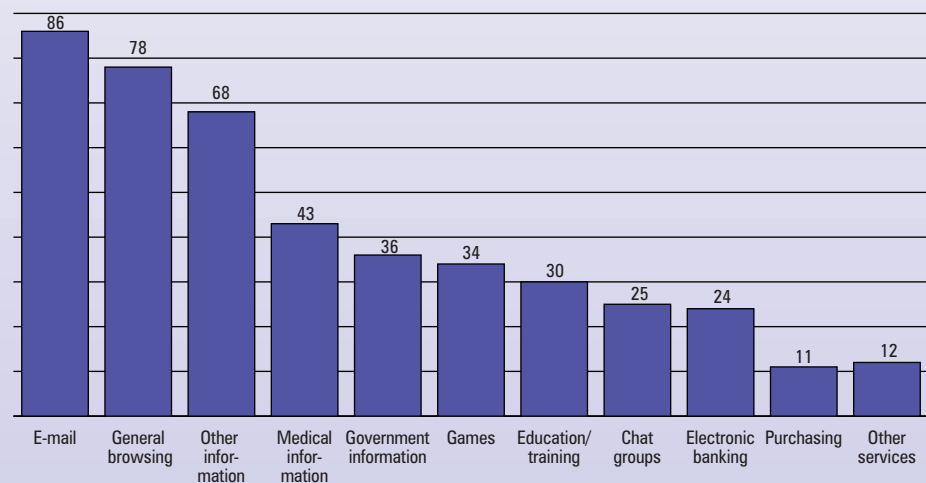
CST Internet use is growing fastest at home ...

% of all households with regular user



... and e-mail and general browsing are the most common uses

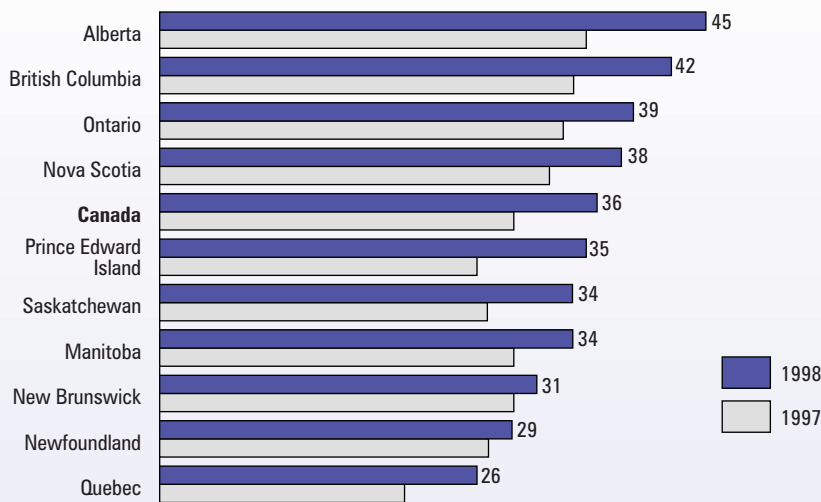
% of regular home user households



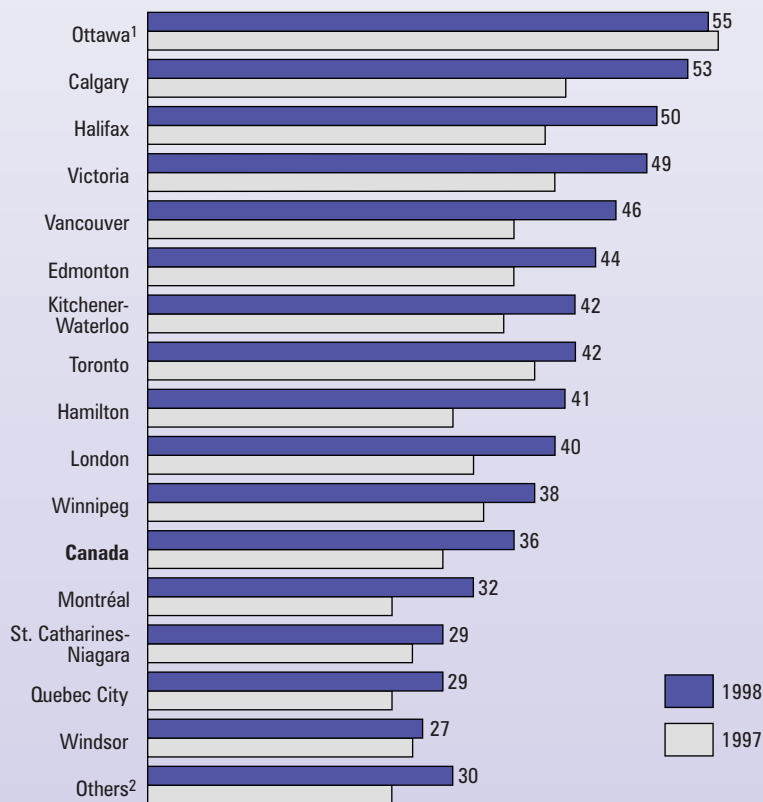
Source: Statistics Canada, Household Internet Use Survey.

- Tapscott, D. 1998. *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. New York: McGraw-Hill. p. 48; and ACNielsen. 1998. *The ACNielsen Canadian Internet Survey '98*. (http://www.acnielsen.ca/sect_internet/internet_en.htm).
- Haddon, L. 1999. *European Perceptions and Use of the Internet*. Paper for the conference Usages and Services in Telecommunications, Arcachon, 7-9 June 1999.
- Turow, J. 1999. *The Internet and the Family: The View from Parents, the View from the Press*. The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, report no 27. (<http://appcpenn.org/appc/reports/rep27.pdf>).
- Includes only the Ontario component of the census metropolitan area of Ottawa-Hull.

% of households using Internet regularly



... and may be high in Ottawa¹ because of the presence of government and high-tech industries



1. Includes only the Ontario component of the CMA of Ottawa-Hull.
 2. Includes households in smaller CMA's and households not in CMA's.
 Source: Statistics Canada, Household Internet Use Survey.

and London. In addition, Internet access at schools increased everywhere, while access at public libraries grew in most locations.

• This article is adapted from “Getting connected or staying unplugged: The growing demand for computer communications services,” *Service Indicators*, Volume 6, No. 1, Statistics Canada, Catalogue 63-016-XPB, 1st Quarter 1999.



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