Better things to do or dealt out of the game? Internet dropouts and infrequent users

by Susan Crompton, Jonathan Ellison and Kathryn Stevenson

*T*he Internet promises to become one of the principal ways by which both governments and businesses will communicate with their citizens and their customers. But in 2000, 42% of Canadians aged 15 and over had never used the Internet. Furthermore, over 5% were Internet dropouts — people who haven't used the Net for at least one year; another 5% had gone on the Net in the past year, but used it rarely and had not surfed in the past month at all. Is it reasonable to make the Net a major conduit of information among individuals, governments and businesses when this new communication technology has not been adopted uniformly throughout society?

Previous studies have shown that women are less experienced computer users than men[1] and that people with higher incomes and education are most likely to be connected to the Net.[2] According to new data, Internet dropouts and infrequent users are more likely to be employed and more likely to be women than people who use the Net regularly (five or more hours a week). They are also less likely to live in households with incomes over $60,000 a year or to have a postsecondary education. While these facts may explain why people are unable to adopt Internet technology, they do not explain why they fail to maintain it. This article examines the characteristics of Internet dropouts and infrequent users and compares them with Canadians who use the Net regularly. It also asks why some people have not been swept away by the Internet wave.

Why aren't they surfing?

According to the 2000 Household Internet Use Survey (HIUS), just over 813,000 of all Canadian households that have ever used the Internet reported that they no longer did. Over one-quarter of these dropout households (232,500) had used the Internet regularly during a typical month, with over half surfing the Net at least once a week. By far the most common reason that they had dropped out was that they had "no need" of the Internet (30% of dropout households).[3] This suggests that the World Wide Web either did not have what these people were looking for, or that they were content to use more conventional sources of information that do not demand expensive equipment or special skills. It may also indicate lack of time or difficulty finding what they were searching for.

1. Dryburgh, H. Spring 2002. "Learning computer skills." *Canadian Social Trends.*

2. Dickinson, P. and J. Ellison. Winter 1999. "Plugged into the Internet." *Canadian Social Trends.*

3. There is no common understanding of what "no need" means. Respondents could have interpreted this phrase to mean any number of situations.

This article uses data from the 2000 Household Internet Use Survey (HIUS) and the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS) on access to and use of information communication technology. The HIUS, introduced in 1997 to measure the adoption of Internet services by Canadian households, collects data from approximately 34,000 private households in the 10 provinces. In 2000, the questionnaire included a brief series of questions for households that had used the Internet on a regular basis in the past but no longer do so. Because the objective of the HIUS is to collect data at the household level, information about the behaviour of individual members of the household is not available. This missing piece of the puzzle is addressed by the 2000 GSS, which collected detailed information about the individual's use of technology, allowing researchers to focus on personal use of the Internet. GSS data were collected over a 12-month period from January to December 2000 from almost 25,100 respondents aged 15 and over living in private households in all 10 provinces.

The definition of user differs between the HIUS and the GSS and cannot be reconciled because of the way the data were collected. Despite these differences, both surveys taken together shed light on many Internet-related issues. To keep the definitional distinctions as clear as possible, however, this article uses the HIUS data for information about the reasons why households stopped using the Internet, while GSS data are used for all other characteristics.

Dropout household: a household that once used the Internet in a typical month, regardless of the location of use (home, work, school, library, etc.), but no longer does. A typical month refers to a month that is not out of the ordinary for the household, usually in the past year, as determined by the respondent.

Regular users: individuals who have spent at least five hours on the Internet in the past week, regardless of the location of use (home, work, school, library, friend's or relative's house, any other location).

Infrequent users: individuals who have not used the Internet from any location in the past month, but have used it at some time in the past 12 months.

Dropouts: individuals who have not used the Internet from any location for at least 12 months.

Some 17% of households that had previously used the Net regularly dropped out because it was too expensive and 14% did so because they lost access to a computer. These reasons are similar to those given by Net dropouts in the United States: in September 2000, 11% of American dropouts said they had quit the Net because their connection had proved too costly and 21% said they no longer had a personal computer.[4]

Lack of experience more common to infrequent users

A person's degree of comfort or familiarity with new technologies may play a role in their decision to use the Net. Infrequent users and dropouts do score somewhat lower on the technology use index than regular users, suggesting the fewer of these devices people use, the less likely they are to use other types of technologies.[5] Although only a small percentage of Canadian households that had dropped out cited difficulty or complexity as their reason for giving up on the Net, some of the earlier U.S. research identified complexity and frustration as one of the principal barriers to access.[6] Given

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4. Lenhart, A. September 2000. *Who's not online: 57% of those without Internet access say they do not plan to log on.* Pew Internet & American Life Project. http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp. (Accessed October 9, 2001.)

5. The technology use index measures people's use of a fax machine, cell phone, ATM, answering machine, pager, cable TV, satellite dish and DVD.

6. Katz, J.E., Ph.D. and P. Aspden, Ph.D. *Social and Public Policy Internet Research: Goals and Achievements.* Presentation given February 2, 1998 to the University of Michigan School of Information. http://www.communitytechnology.org/aspden/aspden_talk.html. (Accessed October 9, 2001); Lievrouw, L. July 1999. "Nonobvious things about communication technology: The case of Internet dropouts." *New Media.* http://www.icahdq.org/publications/newsletter1/july_99/july_newmedia.html. (Accessed October 9, 2001.)

CST — Dropouts and infrequent Internet users are more likely to be working and have lower household incomes than regular users

	Regular users	Infrequent users	Dropouts
Total	5,272,200	1,086,830	1,257,200
% of population aged 15 and over	21	4	5
% female	39	58	54
Average age (years)	34	36	37
Technology Use Index (maximum = 8.0)	4.7	4.2	4.0
% with annual household income $60,000 or over[1]	54	38	31
% with more than high school education	75	68	61
% with home Internet connection	89	36	20
Main activity in past 12 months (%)			
Work	63	70	67
School	26	13	9
Child care, household work, maternity/paternity leave	4	9	10
Retired	4	4	8
Other[2]	3	4	6

1. Includes only households that reported.
2. Includes looking for work, long-term illness and other reasons.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

CST — Dropout households most often say they do not need the Internet

Reasons for dropping out

No need	30
Too expensive	17
Lost access to computer	14
Used to have access … at a friend's	8[1]
… at work	5[1]
… at school	6[1]
Too difficult to use	4[1]
Equipment is broken	5[1]

% of dropout households

1. Subject to high sampling variability.
Note: In dropout households, at least one household member had once regularly used the Internet in a typical month.
Source: Statistics Canada, Household Internet Use Survey, 2000.

the improvement and proliferation of search engines in recent years, these issues may no longer present a serious impediment to potential users, but the original research does suggest that inexperience may play a role in deciding not to use the Internet.

Indeed, according to the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS), infrequent users are more recent, and therefore less experienced, users: 40% have learned to navigate the Net within the last year, compared with only 14% of regular users.[7] As they gain more experience, infrequent users may then move on to more regular use or drop out, depending on how useful they find the Internet.

Being comfortable with surfing the Net is undoubtedly linked to the user's level of comfort using a PC. Infrequent users were not nearly as likely as regular Net users to perform activities such as word processing, bookkeeping, data entry and analysis, and game playing. Not surprisingly, only 20% of infrequent users described their computer skills as very good or excellent, in contrast with 57% of regular Internet users.

American researchers have reported that people who learned how to use the Net from family or friends were more likely to drop out than people who were taught in the workplace or were self-taught.[8] GSS results suggest that Canadian users are similar: regular Net users were more likely than infrequent users to rate formal training (e.g. courses) and self-teaching as important tools for acquiring computer skills.[9]

7. Data are not available for dropouts because the question was not asked of respondents who had not used the Internet in the previous 12 months.

8. Katz and Aspden. op. cit.

9. For more information on learning methods and preferences, see Dryburgh, H. Spring 2002. "Learning computer skills." *Canadian Social Trends.*
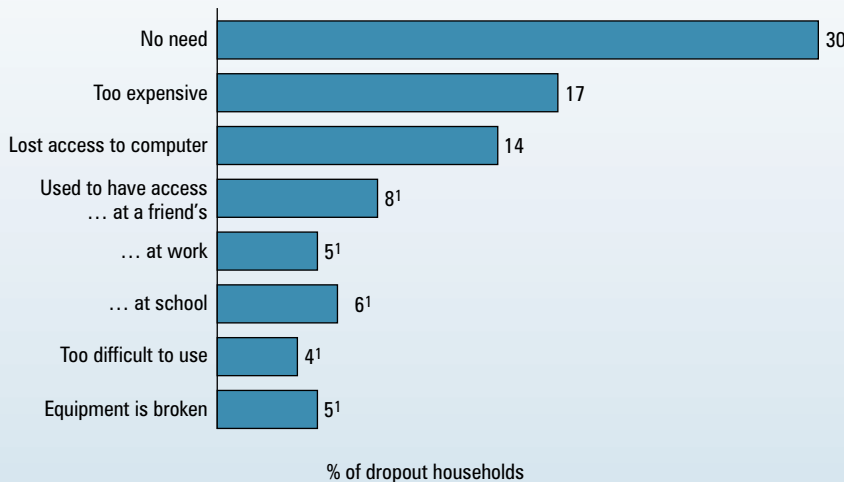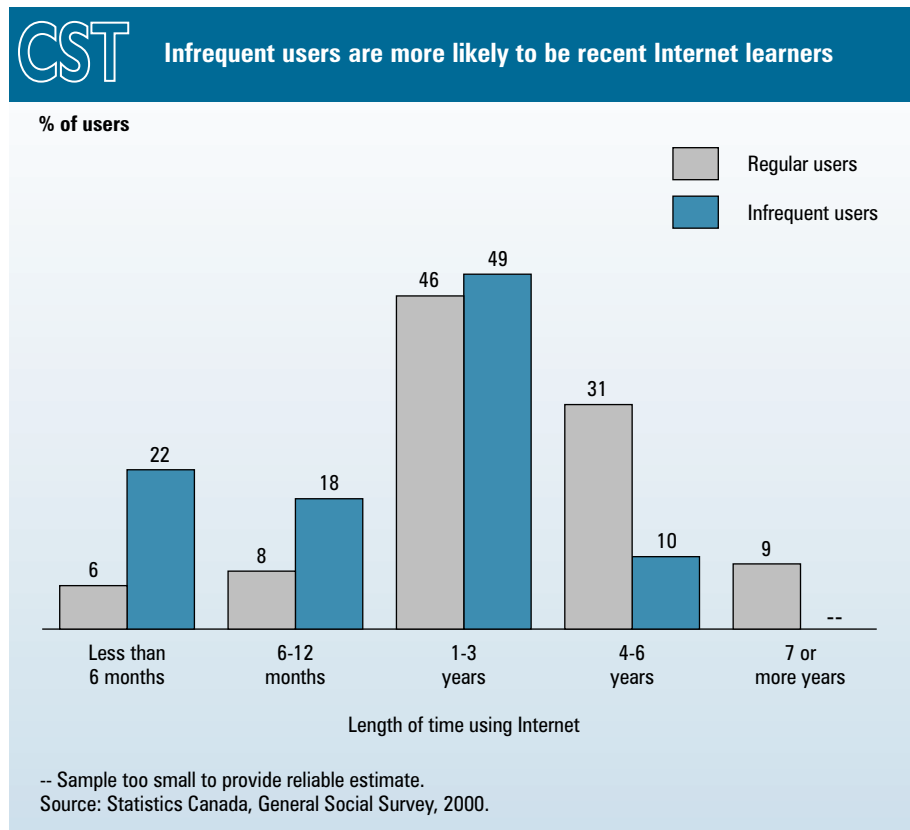
Have they dropped out for good?

According to the 2000 HIUS, a total of 813,000 households that had previously used the Internet (both typical and non-typical users) had since abandoned it. Can they be enticed back? It's not certain. Only about 28% of them believed that, in the coming year, they would return to using the Net on a regular basis. And of those that did envision returning to regular use, the majority (67%) intended to do their surfing from home. Other locations — such as work, school or public library — were not nearly as conducive to a return to regular surfing, probably because they are simply too inconvenient for one reason or another.

Interestingly, over 368,000 households that no longer used the Net had a PC at home but 62% of them had no intention of accessing the Net again in the next year. Almost one-quarter didn't think it was useful or else didn't need it; one-fifth said it was too expensive and almost as many had no interest in the Internet. One reason was technological: the PC was too old to support the technology (16%). Others were so pressed for time that they believed they would not have time to use the Net (14%) even if they were connected.

Who hasn't used the Net at all?

According to the 2000 GSS, 42% (about 10.3 million) of Canadian adults have never used the Internet. Although non-users are quite different from Net users, many of these differences stem from the fact that non-users are considerably older: almost 75% are aged 40 or over and their average age is 54. Almost half are homemakers, retired or caring for children; over half are women. Non-users are also less technologically inclined than users, scoring an average of 3.1 out of 8.0 on the technology use index, while regular users score 4.7.

Only 22% of all non-users are interested in learning to use the Net. The top three reasons they give for not learning

Infrequent users are more likely to be recent Internet learners

% of users

Regular users
Infrequent users

	Less than 6 months	6-12 months	1-3 years	4-6 years	7 or more years
Regular users	6	8	46	31	9
Infrequent users	22	18	49	10	--

Length of time using Internet

-- Sample too small to provide reliable estimate.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2000.

are cost, lack of access to a computer or to the Internet and not having enough time. When non-users not interested in the Net are asked if they would want to learn if the Net were available in a library or other public place — thus removing some of the barriers to learning — three-quarters still say no. Almost half are not interested, one in 10 cite lack of skills or training, and the remainder report various other reasons such as not having enough time, lack of privacy and excessive waiting time.

Summary

The main reason people say they stop using the Internet is that they discover they don't need it. Other common reasons include losing access to the Net or to the computer they were using to access it. The expense of being connected is also too much for some people to manage — users who do drop out tend to have fewer financial resources. Furthermore, their Internet needs may be fairly low-level, for example using e-mail, and their incentive

may not be as great as that of someone who uses the Net for a wider range of activities. With younger people using the Internet for an increasing number of purposes, one might expect that they will continue to do so over a lifetime, provided they have easy access. As a younger generation replaces the less interested and computer-savvy older generation, it is probable that the Net will become just as common a communication technology as radio, television and the telephone.

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