Chapter 3
A Biography of the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project

Lee Rainie
Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, USA

ABSTRACT

The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project is a "fact tank" of primary research that has documented three revolutions in digital technology in the United States since 2000. First, the project has charted the rise of the Internet and broadband connections in the U.S. Second, it has explored the rise of mobile connectivity on mobile phones and laptops. Third, it has charted the growth of social media, especially social networking websites. At the same time, the project has paid particular attention to probing the impact of digital technology on six domains of the social world: 1) the impact on families, 2) communities, 3) healthcare, 4) education, both formal and informal, 5) politics and civic life, and 6) workplaces. All of the reports of the project and the survey data it has collected are available for free from its website at pewinternet.org.

INTRODUCTION

The Pew Internet Project was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts in December 1999 with a charter to track the adoption of the internet and explore the impact of the internet on key social activities. The Project was funded to be a non-profit, non-partisan research organization that would generate statistics and analysis that others – especially institutions – could use for their own purposes as they planned their missions and policy prescriptions for the emerging digital world. The main methodology employed by the Project has been to conduct nationally-representative telephone

surveys of adults and teenagers (defined as those ages 12-17). It has also used online surveys and focus groups to enrich its findings.

A key part of the Project's mandate from its funders was that its researchers be "opportunistic" in their approach to studying the emerging digital environment. That is, the Project was empowered to research the most topical, most important, and most interesting developments in digital spaces. Thus, some of the Project's work has been in response to arising policy disputes and the advent of new devices and apps that have entered the marketplace.

OVERVIEW

The Project's research findings often center on its regular surveys that monitor online life, including the ways in which users' behavior changes as they gain more experience and upgrade their hardware, software, and connectivity. Project reports have dealt with such topics as:

- The impact of people's internet and cell phone use on their key relationships and broader social networks. They can maintain bigger and more diverse networks; often have more close ties and greater levels of social support; and are more involved in their communities and in political activity. (Hampton and Sessions 2009, Hampton and Sessions 2011, Boase and Horrigan 2006)

- How people use the internet to get and participate in news. A large proportion of news "consumers" create and comment on news; people use different platforms to get different types of news and usually use multiple platforms (e.g. newspapers, internet, radio, TV) to get news, rather than relying on just one channel for news. (Purcell and Rainie 2010, Rosenstiel and Mitchell 2011)

- The "civic" tone of online life – that is, the degree to which pro-social and anti-social behaviors play out in teenagers' and adults' online lives. Most people witness and practice altruism online, but the incidence of bullying and hate activities that people witness is notable (Lenhart and Madden 2011). Sexting also exists as a small number of teens (3%) share risqué or nude pictures of themselves and a larger number (15%) have access to those pictures (Lenhart 2009).

- The way that internet users act on the health information they get online and how they participate in helping others in peer-to-peer networks. Two-thirds of adults get health information online and it has often affected the way they get health care, for instance by changing their relationship with their physicians and providing them access to peer networks of fellow patients and caregivers (Fox 2011, Fox 2011, Fox and Jones 2009).

- The impact of the internet on campaigns, elections, and Americans' overall civic life. More than half of Americans use the internet for political news and information; the internet has passed newspapers as a source on which people rely when they get such news; about a quarter of Americans use their cell phones to get and share political information; and social media are growing as a factor in political discourse (Smith 2011, Smith 2011, Smith 2010, Smith 2009).

- The increasing incidence of "reputation management" as an online literacy that matters to users -- and Americans' attitudes about trust and privacy online. Younger Americans are more active in watching and intervening with others when they see references to themselves; many now self-censor before they put information about

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