

On October 13, 1994, Netscape Communications Corporation made their version of the “Mosaic” browser available as a free download from their company website.¹ Thousands of people downloaded the computer program, installed it on their computers and began to experience the power and functionality of a single entranceway to the millions of computers connected across the globe using a “TCP/IP” communications protocol.² This network began with the interconnection of four simple computers belonging to the US department of defense in 1969, soon evolving into an academic research tool and by 1995, the



primarily commercial inter-network we know as the “Internet.”³ Using a simple programming format referred to as “HTML” or “hypertext markup language” the Mosaic browser provided the end-user with immediate information, everything from graphics, music, books, research data, computer programs, news and more were made readily, and for the most part without cost, in a user-

friendly format called a “Web page.” The earth-changing phenomenon often referred to as the “World Wide Web” was born.

Since its inception, the growth of the Internet almost seems to model that of the universe itself. Once the mechanism was in motion, it simply gained momentum, growing at an almost unfathomable rate. Starting with a handful of computers, the Internet has grown to well over two hundred billion web pages⁴

¹ Marc Andreessen and Eric Bina conceived and developed The “Mosaic” browser while students at the University of Illinois. They, along with Jim Clark, left the school in 1994 and formed the publicly traded “Mosaic Corporation,” later renamed “Netscape Communications Corporation.” Paul Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 303.

² Ibid., 295-297.

³ Ibid., 295-297.

⁴ Michael Liedtke, “Yahoo Claims Web’s Biggest Search Engine,” *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, 14 August 2005. Liedtke writes that Yahoo now claims to have indexed over 20 billion websites. According to “Metamend <www.Metamend.com>,” an Internet search engine research firm, even the most powerful search engines index only about 10% of all Websites. Using this simple formula it is unclear exactly how many WebPages exist, but 200 billion becomes a fair estimate. Interestingly, web portals such as Yahoo and Google has stopped using the amount of pages that are indexed as a barometer for success. Web search engines are now using their ability to narrow a search and provide reliable, usable information. Aaron Wall, “2006 Search Engine

providing information to over one billion individual users world-wide.⁵ What is even more amazing is that by the time you have read this sentence seven thousand new web pages will post to the Internet.⁶

If the growth of the Internet is beyond what anyone could have imagined, the impact of the Internet almost defies comprehension. Influencing everything from how Fortune 500 companies operate to casual communication between friends and family, the Internet has become a significant part of society and revolutionized the perception of the world. According to the “April 2006 Pew Internet & American Life Project,” seventy-three percent of American adults (about 147 million adults) and over eighty-seven percent of American Teenagers are online.⁷ The Internet has become an integral part of American life, with a growing consensus worldwide.⁸ Sixty-four percent (82 million) of adults in the United States alone have used the Internet for “religious and spiritual purposes,” most out of “curiosity.”⁹ An additional forty-eight million have used email for “spiritual or religious discussion (many were making prayer requests or responding to prayer requests).”¹⁰ In addition, according to a recent survey “more people use Christian media than attend church.”¹¹ In October of 2005, George Barna released a report stating, “For a rapidly growing number of Americans, a local church is no longer the place to go as their primary religious meeting place.”¹² The report goes on to state that “new ways of experiencing and expressing faith, such as through house churches, marketplace ministries, and cyber churches, are becoming the norm for millions of people,” and “that new forms of religious experience and expression are growing in popularity, drawing millions of people closer to God but farther from involvement in a congregational

Algorithms," *SEO Book.Com*, 13 June 2006, <<http://www.seobook.com/relevancy/>> (24 February 2007).

⁵ From “How Many People use the Internet? What do they use it for?” By bCentral powered by Microsoft, found online at <<http://www.bcentral.co.uk/marketing/ebusiness/how-many-people-use-the-internet-what-do-they-use-it-for.msp>>

⁶ According to Metamend, approximately 10 million new web pages are uploaded to the Internet per day. <<http://www.metamend.com/internet-growth.html>>

⁷ Mary Madden, “Internet Penetration and Impact,” (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006, accessed 13 March 2007), 1; available from <http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/182/report_display.asp>; Internet. According to the most recent Nielson/NetRatings as many as 210 million US users are online daily. <http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/resources.jsp?section=pr_netv&nav=1>

⁸ According to the Microsoft Corporation, the online population in Europe and Asia is growing at a faster rate than that of the United States. <<http://www.bcentral.co.uk/marketing/ebusiness/how-many-people-use-the-internet-what-do-they-use-it-for.msp>>

⁹ Lee Rainie, “Internet: The Mainstreaming of Online Life,” (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005, 63. <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Internet_Status_2005.pdf> (accessed 1 March 2005).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barna, *The Barna Report: March 14,2005*, (Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, 2005), 1.

¹² Barna, *The Barna Update: Rapid Increase in Alternative Forms of The Church Are Changing the Religious Landscape- October 24,2005*, (Ventura, CA: The Barna Group, 2005), 1.

<http://www.the-world-wide-web.com>

Exploring the Impact of the Internet on Society and the Church

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church.”¹³ The Internet has become a prominent resource in the search for faith and the work of the church.

With each passing day, the Internet’s popularity grows. Regardless of gender, race, socio and economic lines the result is the same, more and more people are going “online.” Adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine are the largest demographic, 78 percent of adults in this age group already use the Internet. Almost seventy-four percent of adults between the ages of 30 and 49 are online, 60 percent of adults between the ages of 50 and 64, and 25 percent of adults over the age of 65. In 2003 and 2004 adults over the age of sixty-five became the fastest growing segment of online users, confirming the ever-growing importance and necessity of the Internet in daily life and the validity that the Internet has become a universal phenomenon.¹⁴

Gender does not appear to be a factor, since most statistics agree that there is an equal representation of men and women online. However, education, household income, and race do seem to provide some clear trends in Internet usage. Education and socio-economic circumstances, the most recent datum reveal, are primary factors in whether or not people use the Internet. Eighty-eight percent of college graduates are online, compared to the thirty-two percent of adults who did not finish high school.

Eighty-nine percent of adults living in a household with a yearly income of \$75,000 or more are online compared to the forty-four percent of adults living in households making less than \$30,000 a year. Similar, yet less dramatic, trends appear among racial groups, sixty-seven percent of white, non-Hispanic adults, 59 percent of Hispanic adults and 43 percent of Black, non-Hispanic adults are presently online. It is also worthy to note that only thirty-eight percent of adults with disabilities use the Internet.¹⁵



In Practice

Research indicates that people are doing the same things online that they do “offline.”¹⁶ Individuals are utilizing the resources available on the Internet as an enhancement to both their professional and personal lives. The most popular and time-consuming activity is email, the second, searching for information and gathering data. Entertainment and e-commerce are the third and fourth most popular use.¹⁷ A recent study revealed that 83 percent of online Americans use the Internet to seek information about their hobbies, 29 percent doing so on a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lee Rainie, *The Pew Internet and American Life Project*, 63.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

daily basis.¹⁸ To quote the Pew Internet study, “As the Internet has grown exponentially, the hierarchy of metaphors that describe it has remained constant: The internet is most of all a mail pigeon, then a library, then an amusement park, then a shopping center.”¹⁹ This humorous, yet pithy, definition will more than likely be useful for some time to come.

Almost all online users claim that the Internet has been a key to developing closer and more efficient family relationships.²⁰ In the United States, where it has become common for individuals to relocate far from family members and long-time friends, the Internet has provided an inexpensive and easy to use communications hotline. Family reunions happen everyday via the World Wide Web through the exchange of email and digital photos, video and audio files. Considering the ever-increasing rate of technological growth, the dropping prices of equipment and services for end-users, and the greater availability of high-speed Internet access (not to mention the rising prices of fuel), only the imagination can limit the possibilities and implications for the relational uses of the Internet in the future.

The Internet has positively affected Church “family” relationships. Church and ministry “interactive message boards”²¹ and “chat-rooms”²² provide continuously

available outlets for active church members, visitors, and individuals who have never seen the inside of a church building to gather



for discussion, encouragement and prayer. Many new churches are expanding the scope of the local church to include an “Internet” or “Online” campus. One such church is LifeChurch.tv.

LifeChurch.tv began in 1996 under the leadership of “visionary” Craig Groeschel.²³ According to the LifeChurch.tv website, Craig’s “creative leadership

¹⁸ Maggie Griffith, “Hobbyists Online,” (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007, accessed 28 Sept 2007), 1; available from <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Hobbies_2007.pdf>; Internet.

¹⁹ Lee Rainie, 63.

²⁰ Ibid., 64.

²¹ An “interactive message board” is simply “the technical name for a discussion board, it is a section on some Web sites that displays messages posted by users. The phrase “interactive message board” is industry jargon used by Web developers to describe the technology that drives this kind of interactive feature.” All Internet vocabulary definitions are from www.NetLingo.com found online at <<http://www.netlingo.com/lookup.cfm?term=interactive+message+board>>

²² “A ‘chat room’ is a variation on the interactive message board, it is a Web site for live, online conversation in which any number of computer users can type messages to each other and communicate IRT. These messages usually appear on an area of the screen next to the user's nickname or handle. Most chat rooms have a particular topic (which you are expected to discuss), but some chat rooms are purely for meeting other people. Other chat rooms are designed as elaborate 3-D environments, where you select an avatar that represents you in this virtual meeting place.” <<http://www.netlingo.com/lookup.cfm?term=chat%20room>>

skills are changing the way church is done worldwide. Under his leadership, LifeChurch.tv has become one of the country's first multi-campus churches, with forty weekly worship experiences at nine different locations.”²⁴ One of those nine “locations” is the World Wide Web. The pastor of the Internet Campus is Rev. Brandon Donaldson. Pastor Donaldson affirms the idea that the Internet Church is no more or less a church than LifeChurch.tv’s eight resident campuses, “I love the thought that our Internet Campus is just a fancy building that allows people from everywhere to attend, but the key thought is it is just a building. We use it to facilitate the church, which is people.”²⁵ Although exact attendance numbers were not readily available, the church sees “new believers every week” and the “attendance has been constantly growing.”²⁶



Another popular online ministry is “TruthMedia Internet Group.” This recognized leader in online evangelism and discipleship, publishes monthly statistics claiming that by simply using the ever changing content on their active family of websites over 80,000 people are “built in faith” a month.²⁷ They also report that through the relationships built using their online chat rooms, contact forms, email and message boards ministries an average of 1,500 individuals a month will have “rededicated or accepted Christ.”²⁸ Considering that “TruthMedia” is just one example of many evangelistically minded, discipleship-oriented websites, the current impact of the web as a medium for building the Kingdom of God is undeniable, and the future is bright.

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This article was published by Brewer Christian College on October 12, 2007.

²³ LifeChurch.tv, "History of LifeChurch.tv," *LifeChurch.tv*, 19 March 2007, <<http://www.lifechurch.tv/p/782/Default.aspx/>> (19 March 2007).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Brandon Donaldson, email correspondence 3 March 2007.

²⁶ John Blanchard, chat room correspondence 12 March 2007. The website announced that they had over 400 in attendance on Easter morning 2007.

²⁸ In February of 2007, TruthMedia published that through their website “80,546 People were built in Faith,” and “1,518” people had “indicated spiritual decisions (rededication or accepted Christ).” < <http://www.truthmedia.com/aboutus/monthstat.html>>