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PUBLIC AND MEDIA RESPONSES TO 9/11

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Internet Use and the Terror Attacks

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The mission of the Pew Internet and American Life Project is to explore the impact of the Internet on everyday life in the United States. On September 11, 2001, terror attacks changed everyday life for at least the foreseeable future, and the Pew Internet & American Life Project sought to determine what changes, if any, the attacks brought about online.

In the days immediately following the September 11 terror strikes on the World Trade Center (WTC) and the Pentagon, the number of Americans online dropped. But there were signs by the end of September that online activity was returning to the usual levels. At the same time, there were conspicuously more Internet users getting news online after September 11 than in previous periods. More than two thirds of Internet users (69%) have used the Web to get news and information related to the attacks and their aftermath. Half of Internet users—more than 53 million people—

have gotten some kind of news about the attacks online. Many online Americans have used the Internet to stay "on alert" for news developments by subscribing to e-mail news updates and getting newscasts streamed to their desktops. Among those watching developments most carefully online are 33% of Internet users who have gotten information about the financial markets because of their concern about the economic impact of the terror strikes against America.

Perhaps the most significant development online after the attacks has been the outpouring of grief, prayerful communication, information dissemination through e-mail, and political commentary. Nearly three quarters of Internet users (72%) used e-mail in some way related to the events—to display their patriotism, contact family and friends to discuss events, reconnect with long-lost friends, discuss the fate of the victims, and share news.

Other Internet users went to chatrooms, bulletin boards, commemorative sites, and other online communities to describe their anguish, offer consoling words, broadcast their patriotism, and debate, even yell at times, about the meaning of the September 11 events. One third of Internet users read or posted material in chatrooms, bulletin boards, or other online forums and most report that those virtual commons were civil, rational places. Another 12% visited commemorative sites, many of which were created in the wake of the attack.

It is important to stress that for all of the online activity that focused on the terror assaults, this was not a breakthrough moment for use of the Internet compared to other technologies. There was not a flight to new technologies from television as a news source or from the phone as a communications tool. Indeed, there was very heavy reliance on television and the telephone even among the most committed and active Internet users.

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented here come from two periods of phone survey work by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Both periods were before the U.S. attacks on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The first survey took place from September 12 through September 19, 2001, involving 2,039 adults, some 1,138 of whom were Internet users. In that sample, the margin of error is +/- 2% for the entire sample and +/- 3% for answers based only on responses from Internet users at a 95% confidence

INTERNET USE

level. The second survey took place from September 20 through October 1, 2001, involving 1,029 aged adults 18 and over in the continental United States, 525 of whom were Internet users. The margin of error on the entire sample from this survey is +/- 4% and +/- 6% for Internet users at a 95% confidence level.

The sample for this survey was a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid "listing" bias. It also provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers) by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

Nonresponse in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (2000). This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults aged 18 or older, living in households that contain a telephone. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.

This chapter also cites Web traffic data from comScore Networks, a research firm in Reston, Virginia, that provides Internet usage intelligence to the public and private sectors based on a sample of 1.5 million global opt-in users. Those data were made available at the request of the Pew Internet & American Life Project. More information about comScore Network's methodology can be found at http://www.comscore.com/about/about_method.htm.

FINDINGS

In the first days after the attacks, the nation was engrossed in the rescue effort, the investigation, and the stories that emerged from the attacks themselves. Many people stayed offline as they watched television, talked to family and friends, and tried to absorb the enormity of what happened. It also meant that much of the "normal"

online activity dropped significantly as people flocked to news sites, sent and read e-mail related to the attacks, and visited virtual places where they could discuss the events and their aftermath.

In the days after the attacks the number of people using the Internet fell, as did the number of people sending and reading e-mail. As illustrated in Table 3.1, the overall size of the online population of Americans was down in the days following the attacks. Even the heaviest users of the Internet, the truly "wired" cohort who usually go online every day and have plenty of Internet experience, were not quite as fervid in their use of the Internet in the days just after the attacks. These highly wired Americans were also using e-mail somewhat less than they had. On any given day in February, the survey shows that 82% of the heaviest users of the Internet send or read e-mail. That compares to the 71% who were sending and reading e-mail on an average day during the period from September 12-19.

These survey findings were confirmed by network traffic data shared with us by ComScore Networks (Table 3.2). The traffic data provided additional illustration that although overall Internet usage was down, those using the Internet were using it heavily.

Table 3.1. Internet Use the Week of 9/11/2001

Types of Use	Percent of Internet Users
Went online "yesterday" for any purpose	51%
Send or read e-mail	42%
Get news online	27%
Seeking hobby information	10%
Browsing for fun	13%
Doing work-related research	13%
Seeking medical or health information	3%
Buying products	2%

Table 3.2. ComScore Networks Measures of Internet Traffic (in Billions)

	September 4-5	September 11-12	Change
Number of site visits	1	3.4	240%
Number of page downloads	5.7	21.2	272%
Number of minutes spent online	8.2	28.3	245%

The number of sites visited by those online more than doubled, as did the number of page downloads and the number of minutes spent online by those who had logged on. What were these heaviest Internet users doing online?

THE RISE IN INTERNET USE FOR GETTING NEWS

Many more people than usual were seeking news on the Internet in the days following the attacks. Our surveys showed that on an average day online in the 4 weeks before the terror attacks, 22% of Internet users got some kind of news, often by chancing upon news items while browsing or doing other activities on Web sites. As shown in Table 3.3, on the day of the attacks, 28% of Internet users were getting news online and in the period of September 12-19, 27% were getting news on a typical day.

Overall, 50% of Internet users, or about 53 million people, went online looking for news about the attacks and the aftermath at some point in the first 3 weeks following the attacks. More men than women were news consumers. Some 57% of men with Internet access sought news about the attacks and the aftermath, compared to 43% of women. (By comparison, women were more likely than men to have sent e-mails to family and friends about the assaults.)

Web-based news was not the only news-seeking activity. Some 15% of online Americans got audio or video versions of newscasts streamed to their desktops and 7% of Internet users signed up to get e-mail news alerts about the continuing coverage of

Table 3.3. News Gathering By Internet Users. (September 20-October 1, 2002)

Type of news gathered	% of Internet users
News about the attacks	50%
Information about financial markets	33%
Information about Osama bin Laden	23%
Information about Afghanistan	21%
Download pictures of American flag	19%
Information about victims or survivors of the attack	15%
Check flight status of someone's plane	13%
Information about Islam	13%
Visit commemorative Web site	12%

the attacks and their aftermath. Of Internet users, 25% reported that they were multitasking on 9/11 by having the television or radio on while they were surfing the Web or sending e-mail.

Generally, people went to specific news sites with which they were familiar; 58% of online Americans reporting doing that. But more than 25% of Internet users turned to search engines to dig for information; 23% used search engines to track down the information they wanted; and 6% reported that they went to both search engines and news sites to get material.

News seeking had an international dimension. ComScore Networks reported that there was a huge spike in international traffic to U.S.-based news Web sites in the days immediately following the attacks. The data show that on September 11 and 12 unique visitor traffic to cnn.com grew 680% to 11.7 million, msnbc.com grew 236% to 9.5 million, cbs.com grew 819% to 1.7 million, nytimes.com grew 206% to 1.7 million, washingtonpost.com grew 225% to 1.2 million, and usatoday.com grew 174% to 1.1 million.

MORE NEWS IS GOOD NEWS—BUT NOT RIGHT AWAY

Although there was heavy use of the Internet for news seeking, the Internet has not supplanted traditional news media. Indeed, for most Americans, the Internet was not a primary resource for news, nor for reaching out to others, after the terror attacks, but it was a helpful supplement to television and the telephone and many found it useful for expressing their sorrow and anger at the assault.

Our surveys showed that Americans, including Internet users, relied mostly on television for their news and the phone primarily for their communication needs in the days following the terror attacks. For many online Americans, the Internet played a useful supplemental role as a communications tool—through their use of e-mail and instant messaging—and as a news source.

Asked how they first heard of the attacks, about two thirds of respondents said they heard from traditional electronic news media sources, television and radio, and about one third heard about the assaults in conversation (see Table 3.4). The figure for conversational exchange is remarkably high, possibly because the attacks took place during a time of day when many people were just congregating at their workplaces and probably because of the magnitude of the news. Half of those who heard about the attacks from other people heard it in a telephone call and it is likely the case that those conversations

Table 3.4. How People First Heard of the 9/11 Terror Attacks. (September 12–19, 2002)

How information was learned	Percent of Internet Users
Television	44%
Network news	20%
Cable channel	11%
Local news	9%
Don't know/no response	4%
Talking with others	31%
Face to face	16%
On the telephone	15%
Radio	22%
Don't know/no response	2%
Internet	1%

were shocked exchanges of the news. It was the kind of story that many people needed to bring to others' attention and needed to discuss with others immediately.

The general picture of many Internet users that emerges in the aftermath of the attacks is that they were aggressively using all the means at their disposal to get information about the unfolding crisis and to make contact with their networks of loved ones and friends. That meant they were anxious consumers of TV news and restless users of the telephone even more than they used online tools.

Eighty-one percent of respondents said they got most of their information from television and about 11% said they got most of their information from radio. There was no statistical difference between Internet users and nonusers in reliance on TV news or radio. Only 3% of Internet users say they got most of their information about the attacks and the aftermath from the Internet.

It can be said that our results are not all "good news" for news on the Internet. In the aftermath of the attacks, there were considerably fewer Internet users going online to do things unrelated to getting news or using e-mail to communicate. Compared to our tracking survey findings from before September 11, 2001, the number of people getting hobby news on a typical day between September 12–19 dropped by 50%; the number buying products online fell by 50%; the number seeking medical information fell by 40%; the number browsing the Web just for fun dropped by 35%; and the number doing work-related research fell by 24%.

There were important distinctions to note among different types of Internet users. Veteran Internet users went online with much higher intensity than newcomers in the aftermath of the terror attacks. Those with 1 year or less experience were the most likely to log on less frequently right after the attacks.

This is part of a larger trend we have observed in tracking surveys. Many newcomers report that they were using the Internet less than they were 6 months before the attacks because of time constraints. In contrast, many veterans reported they were using the Internet more than they did 6 months earlier because they were doing more research, and in all likelihood devoted their time online to gathering news and information about the terror attacks.

DID THE INTERNET "WORK" ON SEPTEMBER 11?

Nearly one third of the respondents (32%) said they had some trouble placing phone calls on September 11 and about one eighth of these respondents turned to the Internet to make contact with loved ones and friends. At the same time, 43% of Internet users said they had at least some trouble accessing the Web sites they wanted to consult for news about the attacks—15% of Internet users said they had a lot of trouble in the first hours of the attacks getting to a Web site. Of those who had difficulty, 40% eventually reached the site they had tried at first and another 39% went to other sites to seek information about the attacks. But one fifth of those who had trouble simply gave up on using the Internet to get news about the attacks.

Most Internet users in this survey reported overall satisfaction with the Internet's performance. Almost half of Internet users (47%) said they got at least some modest benefit from their use of online tools. Some 34% said the Internet helped them learn more about what was going on and 30% said it helped them connect to people they needed to reach. Men were more likely than women to cite the benefits of the Internet for getting news about the terror strikes.

However, most of the people who actually used the Internet to gather news and contact key family and friends had a positive assessment of the role of the Internet in their lives following September 11. For instance, 67% of those who went to news Web sites for material about the attacks said the Internet helped them learn more about what was going on. Similarly, 70% of those who e-mailed family members about the attack and 66% of those who e-mailed friends said the Internet helped them connect with people

they needed to reach. And more than three quarters of those who got news online or exchanged e-mail about the assaults gave some kind of positive assessment about the role of the Internet in their communication or information gathering.

THE INTERNET: A PERSON-TO-PERSON MEDIUM IN A TIME OF CRISIS?

The need to talk to others, be they friends or family (or, in some cases, strangers) proved very strong after 9/11. In the 2 days after the terror attack, three quarters of all respondents (74%) reached out to loved ones and friends by phone or via the Internet. Some 82% of Internet users used the phone or e-mail to make contact with people they care about in the first 48 hours after the attacks.

On the day of the attacks, 51% of respondents phoned family members and 40% phoned friends about the crisis. About one quarter (23%) tried to reach someone to try to find out if she or he was safe. Interestingly, Internet users were more likely than non-Internet users to be using the phone to reach out to potential victims. On that same day, 15% of respondents who were Internet users sent e-mail about the crisis to family members and 12% sent e-mail to friends. (More women than men did this.)

Additionally, 6% of Internet users sent instant messages to someone on 9/11, which is about the same level of use of instant messaging that takes place online on any given day judging from previous surveys.

The need to reach out to others was not confined to friends and family. One third of those who use the Internet reported posting or reading comments about the attacks on a Web site bulletin board, in a chatroom, or on an e-mail list. The vast majority reported reading material, rather than contributing to a discussion. Some 28% of Internet users were observers on the virtual commons; 5% of Internet users said they posted to such communities. Men were more likely than women to have written something in such places; and young Internet users (those aged 18–29) were by far the most likely to have read what others had said. In the 48 hours immediately following the attacks, 13% of Internet users "attended" virtual meetings or participated in virtual communities by reading or posting comments in chatrooms, online bulletin boards, or e-mail listservs. That is substantially greater than normal. On a typical day, only 4% of online Americans visit chatrooms.

Asked about the discussions that were unfolding on bulletin boards, in chatrooms, and on e-mail lists, 46% said the postings were mostly about how the United States should respond to the attacks, 22% said they were mostly about consoling those who were sad about the attacks, and 19% said they were mostly about ways people can personally deal with the attacks in their communities.

Asked to judge the nature of the online discussions they observed, most said they were civil rather than angry (57% vs. 37%), rational rather than heated (72% vs. 21%), and focused mostly on people rather than policy (57% vs. 35%).

E-mail exchanges were common, too, and the types of e-mail sent and received as reported by respondents are summarized in Table 3.5.

CONCLUSION: SIGNS OF A RETURN TO NORMALCY ONLINE

In the final week of September, a period before the U.S. retaliatory bombing began against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, patterns of Internet use were returning to average levels. In the period between September 20 and October 1, 57% of Internet users were online on a typical day. The number of people sending and reading e-mail on any given day had risen, too, as shown in Table 3.6. Between September 20 and October 1, 49% of Internet users were handling e-mail.

The most striking finding from this survey is that more Internet users continued to get news online after 9/11 than had done so before the attacks. It is well possible that the Internet has "proven itself" as a useful medium for supplementary information, particularly as an extension of television news. Whereas television

Table 3.5. E-Mail Use Immediately After 9/11

Type of e-mail Use	Percent of Internet Users
Received or sent patriotic material by e-mail.	46%
Received or sent e-mail prayer requests.	33%
Received or sent e-mail messages of consolation.	25%
Sent e-mails to people they had not spoken to in years.	12%
Received e-mails from people they had not spoken to in several years.	10%
Received or sent accounts of survivors or victims.	9%
Received e-mail with hate material in it.	2%

Table 3.6. Internet Use Before, During and After 9/11

Activity	August 13-September 10	September 12-19	September 20-October 1
Went online "yesterday" for any purpose	56%	51%	57%
Send or read e-mail	51%	42%	49%
Get news online	22%	27%	26%
Seeking hobby information	20%	10%	22%
Browsing for fun	20%	13%	20%
Doing work-related research	17%	13%	15%
Seeking medical or health information	5%	3%	5%
Buying products	4%	2%	2%

tends to provide breadth of information relatively quickly, particularly in times of crisis, the Internet provides a means by which people can "dig deep" for the specifics of the news. Although it is far beyond the scope of this chapter's ability to confirm it, one may speculate that we have witnessed another version of media "convergence" insofar as media users, long savvy now to the strengths and weaknesses of particular media, are using multiple media to meet their information needs.