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Is America at a Digital Turning Point?

Ten years of studies by the Center for the Digital Future finds extremes of benefits and consequences produced by online technology

Americans love their online technology, but what is the cost to their personal and professional lives?

A decade of studies by the USC Annenberg Center for the Digital Future creates a portrait of the American Internet user reaping the benefits from going online while at the same time paying a tremendous price in the form of time, privacy, and well-being.

“After 10 years of studies, we find that the strengths as well as the consequences of technology are more profound than ever,” said Jeffrey I. Cole, director of the Center for the Digital Future. “At one extreme, we see users with the ability to have constant social connection, unlimited access to information, and unprecedented buying power. At the other extreme, we find extraordinary demands on our time, major concerns about privacy, and vital questions about the proliferation of technology – including a range of issues that didn’t exist 10 years ago.

“We believe that America is at a major digital turning point,” said Cole. “Simply, we find tremendous benefits in online technology, but we also pay a personal price for those benefits. The question is: how high a price are we willing to pay?”

The year-to-year comparisons in the Center’s Digital Future studies involve more than 100 major issues concerning the impact of online technology in the United States. Among the highlights of the findings, along with predictions by Cole for digital directions to come, are these 10 major issues:

1. Social media explodes – but most content has no credibility.

Millions of Americans engage in social media every day, yet they believe that the vast majority of the information they find there has almost no credibility.

“It’s no news that social media is the future of communication, but what is not yet fully appreciated is the lack of faith most Internet users have in the accuracy of information they find on social networking sites,” said Cole.

“Our most recent study found that 51 percent of users said that only a small portion *or none* of the information they see on social networking sites is reliable,” Cole said. “And only 14 percent said that most or all of this information is reliable. This speaks volumes about the credibility of communicating through social networking.”

2. The meaning of “E-Nuff Already” continues to expand.

Five years ago, the Center for the Digital Future coined the term “E-Nuff Already” to describe concern among Internet users about the impact of e-mail on their lives. “E-Nuff Already” has continued to expand and now includes a growing range of issues.

“Back then,” said Cole, “e-mail was the primary concern; now, ‘E-Nuff Already’ has grown to include many services and equipment that has tremendous benefits for users, but is also perceived as encroaching on users’ lives.

“Americans are more connected than ever, but the sheer overwhelm of technology may be reaching a breaking point,” said Cole. “We get too many e-mails, the barrage of texts is constant, we carry multiple electronic devices, and new services and gadgets continue to be produced. How long will it be before Americans again say ‘E-Nuff Already?’”

3. The desktop PC is dead; long live the tablet.

Over the next three years, according to Cole, the tablet will become the primary tool for personal computing. Use of a desktop PC will eventually dwindle to only 4-6 percent of computer users – writers, gamers, programmers, analysts, scientists, and financial planners – and laptop use will decline as well.

“The tablet is such an inviting gadget,” said Cole. “The desktop PC is a ‘lean forward’ device – a tool that sits on a desk and forces users to come to it. The tablet has a ‘lean-back’ allure -- more convenient and accessible than laptops and much more engaging to use. For the vast majority of Americans, the tablet will be the computer tool of choice by the middle of the decade, while the desktop PC fades away.

“We don’t see a negative consequence in the move to tablets,” said Cole, “but the coming dominance of tablets will create major shifts in how, when, and why Americans go online – changes even more significant than the emergence of the laptop.”

4. Work is increasingly a 24/7 experience.

Personal computers and online technology have created increased efficiency and greater productivity in the workplace. However, for many employees, the price of that efficiency also includes the growing presence of work in their lives away from the office.

“Decades ago, we thought that computers would be labor-saving devices,” Cole said. “It’s true that technology makes us more productive, but with that productivity comes greater expectations about how we work and when we work.

“For many workers – blue-collar and white-collar alike -- technology makes them accountable to their work all the time,” said Cole. “Is it reasonable to assume that employment is a 24/7 experience?”

5. Most U.S. print newspapers will be gone in five years.

“Circulation of U.S. print newspapers continues to plummet, and we believe that the only newspapers in America that will survive in print form will be at the extremes of the medium – the largest and the smallest,” said Cole. “It’s likely that only four major daily newspapers with global reach will continue in print: The New York Times, USA Today, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. At the other extreme, local weekly newspapers may still survive, as well as the Sunday print editions of metropolitan newspapers that otherwise may exist only in online editions.”

“The impending death of the American print newspaper continues to raise many questions,” Cole said. “Will media organizations survive and thrive when they move exclusively to online availability? How will the changing delivery of content affect the quality and depth of journalism?”

6. Our privacy is lost.

Perhaps the biggest price that Americans pay for Internet use is the loss of their personal privacy – in particular, as a result of the growing trend of information-gathering about online behavior.

“The issue of privacy is simple – if you go online for anything at all, your privacy is gone,” said Cole. “Americans love that they can buy online, look for information online, and join social communities online. But the price we pay is that we are monitored constantly; private organizations know everything there is to know about us: our interests, our buying preferences, our behavior, and our beliefs.

“Americans are clearly concerned about this,” Cole said. “Our latest Digital Future study found that almost half of users age 16 and older are worried about companies checking what they do online; by comparison, 38 percent said that the government checking on them is a concern.”

7. The Internet’s role in the American political process is still a question.

A decade of Digital Future Studies consistently produced findings that Americans believe the Internet is important in political campaigns and helping people to understand politics, but online technology still has almost no role in affecting political power or giving individuals more say in what their government does.

“Even though online outreach to voters continues to expand, and Internet fundraising is a major priority for candidates, the Internet is not yet considered a tool that voters can use to gain more political power or influence,” Cole said. “We believe that this is changing, and over the next two election cycles we see the Internet becoming a major factor in changing the political landscape.”

8. The Internet will continue to create shifts in buying habits, at the expense of traditional brick-and-mortar retail.

Even though buying online has existed for 18 years, Internet retailing has ever-growing impact on purchasing in the United States. “For example,” said Cole, “witness the major growth in online buying and the effects of “Cyber Monday” on the 2011 holiday buying season. Or consider the near-complete collapse of traditional CD retailing as music downloading has flourished. Or see the rapid decline of brick-and-mortar bookstores as Amazon and other online book outlets have expanded.

“Even though purchasing online has already had a significant impact on buying habits, the changes still to come in American purchasing brought by the Internet will no doubt be even more extensive,” Cole said.

9. As social networking continues to grow, family and friends are linked more closely than ever. But how is social networking and other Internet use affecting time spent with family and friends?

In the early Digital Future Studies, large and stable percentages of Internet users said the face-to-face time they spent with family or friends had stayed the same since they started going online. Then in 2007, a much larger percentage of users said that they spent less time together with family members since being connected to the Internet, and a smaller but still significant percentage said they spend less face-to-face time with friends.

“Given recent large increases in social networking through Facebook, Twitter, and other online forums, it would seem that individuals are linked more than ever to their family and friends,” Cole said. “But is quality being sacrificed for quantity? Will those who use social networking services consider them as alternatives to face-to-face involvement with the people in their lives?”

10. What comes next?

The most interesting topic about the impact of online technology on America “is the undiscovered trend yet to come,” said Cole.

“In 2006, YouTube and Twitter had just been born, and Facebook was a toddler,” said Cole. “Six years ago, who would have thought that these nascent technologies would become the standard for social communication in 2011? The next major online trend is being developed right now by a new crop of Internet visionaries just waiting to be heard.”

The Center for the Digital Future is a unit in the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism.

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