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Contact: Justin Pierce
(310) 962-6001

Gender Differences Emerge on Social Networks

USC Annenberg Center for the Digital Future Survey:
Younger women value online communities more, amid
signs of networking fatigue among younger men

Los Angeles, April 9, 2010 -- In a sharp reversal over the past three years, many more young women than men now report feeling as strongly about their internet communities as their real world ones; 67 percent of women under forty—but only 38 percent of men in the same age group—say they feel as strongly about their favorite internet community. As recently as 2007, survey numbers were reversed; 69 percent of younger men said their online communities were just as important as offline equivalents vs. 35 percent of younger women.

Researchers at the Center for the Digital Future, part of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, are reporting another gender shift. The Center's latest survey reveals that nearly half of young women say they've met offline with an online community contact, against barely a third of men under forty (48% vs. 36%); in 2006 the percentage was the same for women, but 59 percent of younger males had met offline with an online community contact.

Michael Gilbert, author of *The Disposable Male* and a senior fellow at the Center, where he focuses on gender and family issues, says growing interest in online communities and social networking by younger women reflects historic adoption patterns.

"Women have been a bit more cautious with new technologies but they generally catch up and often exceed men in their enthusiasm once they've had a chance to look around. Men tend to charge in to new technologies and the opportunities they enable." But, says Gilbert,

“there are some early signs men may be over the infatuation and are starting to check out.”

Both sexes, of all ages, tell the Center they get considerable benefits from their online community, but younger male enthusiasm is waning. In 2005, 77 percent of men under forty said their online community was very or extremely important; just 39 percent say that now. This trailing off of interest is reported even though men generally are more likely than women to say they're contributing to their internet community (84% vs. 69%).

Despite the early signs of networking fatigue among younger men, their online connections must count for something since 40 percent acknowledge their internet community involvements have decreased the time available for their offline communities. Here, too, women are closing the gap; in the Center's latest survey, 27 percent of young women say their membership in online communities has resulted in a reduction in time spent in their offline ones, a fourfold increase since 2007.

The Center's surveys also show that women, of all ages, demonstrate a wider range of online community interests, putting greater emphasis on social, spiritual and relationship aspects. Gilbert believes these deeper personal and social interests likely account for the increasing importance women place on their online communities.

*Through findings developed in annual surveys conducted among 2,000 American households, the **Digital Future Project** provides a broad year-to-year exploration of the influence of the Internet and online technology on Americans by examining the behavior and views of a broad national sample of Internet users and non-users.*

*The **USC Annenberg Center for the Digital Future** also created and organizes the **World Internet Project**, which conducts similar surveys and studies in twenty-seven countries around the world.*

*Located in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, the **USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism** (annenberg.usc.edu) is among the nation's leading institutions devoted to the study of journalism and communication, and their impact on politics, culture and society.*