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The Changing Nature of Internet Access

“People are connecting to the Internet at a phenomenal rate” (Strauss & Frost 1999, p6).

With the development of the “user-friendly Web browser software” (Hurst 1998, p5) making the Internet easier to navigate, and the cost of home personal computers (PCs) “subject to rapid price deflation” (Carr 2003, p45), “access to the Internet [as a result] is becoming more pervasive” (O’Connor & Galvin 2001, p20). In the UK in 2007, 40.4 million users had accesses to the Internet, representing a 162.1% increase from 2000 (Internet World Stats 2008). These users represented over 15 million households (61 per cent) that had access to the Internet, of which eighty-four per cent had access to a broadband connection (National Statistics 2007). Global Internet growth has increased ten-fold in the last ten years, from approximately 147 million in 1998, to the current 1,407 million users in 2008 (Argaez 2008), a worldwide Internet penetration rate of 21.1% (Argaez 2008). This escalation has surpassed other communication media, in terms of access numbers and the speed of adoption (Strauss *et al* 2006, p171).

The demographics of Internet users are no longer limited to a select stereotype of users, such as “computer fanatics, academics and early adopters” (Koranteng 1998, p3). The area that has seen the most growth has been among those who are in employment, increasing from 67% in 2003 to 81% in 2007, a possible result of users being made aware of and using the Internet at work (Dutton & Helsper 2007, p11). However, students remain the principal users of the Internet, with a 97% access rate in 2007 (Dutton & Helsper 2007, p11). Education is a major contributing factor, as only around half (55%) of those with a basic education use the Internet, compared with 90% usage among those with a higher university education (Dutton

& Helsper 2007, p12). Students are also three times more likely to use the Internet than those who are retired (31%) (Dutton & Helsper 2007, p11). The Internet provides students and consumers alike with “increased access to education and training” (Katz & Rice 2002, p19). However, as the ‘Internet generation’ grows older and as “technology evolves” (Weber 2007, p4) usage rates amongst retirees are expected to increase.

A Mintel (2008) survey of students and youth has shown that the number of locations where the Internet has been accessed has also increased year-on-year from 2002 to 2007. As well as in the home, which remains the prime location of access (up 24%), access has increased in centres of education (up 14%), libraries (up 13%), places of work (up 14%), and ‘cyber-cafes’ and ‘Internet shops’ (up 7%). Access through a wireless (WiFi) connection has the capacity to enable further infiltration, providing the potential to access the Internet almost anywhere. However, to date this potential has not been fully realised, with growth in public access WiFi only increasing 1% in the period.

Public WiFi is set to rise further as access is no longer limited to just a PC screen, “allow[ing] users to leave their desktops” (Wright 2008) yet stay connected. Internet access convergence, with existing products, including mobile phones (BBC News 2007), laptops and digital television, being incorporated with Internet technologies allows for access 24 hours a day anywhere in the world. Drawbacks so far, however, have included the high costs of access and the ‘cumbersome’ usage ergonomics of such devices (M/Cyclopedia 2004). These aspects will inevitably improve, as will the technology, as demand increases (Wright 2008).

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