

Internet users still communicate in homogeneous world

Last week my column talked about sex and the Internet. Now let's talk about sex and the Internet again! (OK, I actually want to talk about gender and the Internet. But I'm sure I'll get more readers if I use the word "sex" instead.)

Traditionally the Internet has been viewed as a sort of high-tech boys' club. For years now, an oft-quoted estimate has had nine males using the Internet for every one female. Well, it turns out the Internet might not be as populated with Y chromosomes as everyone thought.

Four Internet surveys have come out since April, each showing a higher level of female participation on the Net than previously believed. However, they disagree wildly as to how many women there are:

■ The Graphic Visualization & Usability Center conducted an anonymous World Wide Web survey in May and June. It found 82 percent of respondents were male, 15.5 percent were female and 2.5 percent refused to say. Web address: http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/user_surveys/User_Survey_Home.html

TECHNOBABLE

Marc LaFountain

■ SurveyNet, a web site specializing in anonymous surveys of the Net, started a continuing survey in August. So far, 76.9 percent have said they are male and 22.9 percent have said they are female. The rest have chosen not to answer. Web address: <http://www.wisdom.com/sv/>

■ O'Reilly & Associates, which released its study in July, took the more statistically reliable approach of randomly selecting its own sample of telephone users. O'Reilly found that 66 percent of those surveyed were men and 34 percent were women. Web address: <http://www.ora.com:80/survey/>

■ Matrix News conducted an e-mail survey of the Internet from October to December of last year. Matrix released data in April showing that 64 percent of survey respondents claimed to be

male and 36 percent claimed to be female. Web address: <http://www.tic.com/mids/demostat.html>

I have included the addresses of all the surveys so you can browse them. They examine far more than the gender composition of the Net.

For instance, the surveys confirm the suspicion held by many that Internet users are wealthier and better-educated than the average citizen. The GVV study found an average income of \$69,000 per Internet user. In the O'Reilly study, 43 percent of respondents said they had incomes between \$35,000 and \$75,000. All of the studies that dealt with education found higher-than-average levels of college and post-graduate degrees among Internet users.

A depressing finding was made by the GVV study, showing that there are very few minorities using the Internet. The GVV survey had 82.3 percent of its respondents identify themselves as white. No other race made up even five percent of the survey results.

So, now that I have rattled off all of these statistics, what do they mean? Well, in spite of some

recent gains by women, the Internet is still primarily the domain of the white, well educated, well paid, male. And, that's not a good thing.

Women—even well-educated and well-paid ones—often aren't choosing to use the Internet. Minorities, the less educated and the less affluent either seem unable or unwilling to use the Internet. What all of this spells is the possible creation of a technological underclass.

I am not a gloom-and-doomer when it comes to technology and the future. I don't believe we are heading toward a real-life "Brave New World." However, I do believe information will be the currency of the coming age. In that age, there will be information have-nots, and those could easily be people not using the Internet today.

The solutions to getting more people online are not easy ones, but they must be considered. First, we need to structure more Internet content so that it appeals to women and minorities. We need to let those people know that going online can be interesting and beneficial for them.

Next, we need to get the poor and less afflu-

ent online. While I don't support Newt Gingrich's "laptop for every citizen" fantasy, I do think a nation we could be doing a lot more to foster community computer access. Columbia is a perfect example of a city that has done something to give access to citizens with the creation of Mic Net (which I wrote about last year).

I was surprised somewhat to realize that fit the mold of the stereotypical Internet user (OK, I don't make \$69,000, but maybe someday). While it would be nice to think the net is filled with people just like me, it also would be boring. I really don't want to share a virtual world with millions of copies of myself. We need different types of people online to make the Internet a energetic and vibrant place.

Marc LaFountain, a journalism senior, can be mailed at lafountain-marc@sc.edu. To subscribe to an electronic version of this column, send e-mail to listserv@univscvm.csd.sc.edu with "SUT-BABBLE YourFirstName YourLastName" in the body of the message.

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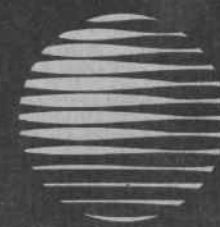
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