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Broadband: What's All the Fuss About?

The impacts of high-speed connections extend beyond access to information to active participation in the online commons

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As the internet was beginning to attract policymakers' notice in 1993, a gathering of communication policymakers and stakeholders addressed the question: "Users: Who Needs Advanced Networks?" The answer then focused on applications -- education, health care, improving democratic discourse -- that would use two-way video over high-speed networks to allow specialists to deliver content to users with very little after-transaction contact among parties.¹

Today, with nearly half of all Americans having high-speed internet connections at home, online interactivity means something different for a lot of Americans.² Many-to-many communication is now buttressed by many-to-many participation in the online world through user-created media. Still, questions remain about the use of advanced communications networks. Among them: Why does access to a high-speed connection at home matter? The easy answer to this question is straightforward. A broadband link at home means more information coming at the user faster. That invites a larger question: What are the consequences of networked users having access to all this information, especially when they are also armed with "always on" uploading capability?

At the heart of the answer lies a defining behavioral difference among home broadband users. As the Pew Internet Project first pointed out in 2002 in *The Broadband Difference*, broadband users are far more likely than dial-up internet users to create or post content to the internet.³ This means having a blog, posting photos online, or contributing to chat-rooms. Back then, when just 12% of adults had broadband at home, it was possible to imagine that the user-generated content phenomenon was mainly an artifact of early adopters. Some modest fraction of leading edge users would demand bandwidth to post content online and that would be about it.

User-generated content did not, however, stop with early adopters. As home broadband adoption grew, posting and creating content for the internet became more widespread. The Pew Internet Project reported in a 2006 survey that 44% of home broadband users had done at least one of the following activities that involve user-generated content:

having one's own blog or webpage, working on group blogs or webpages, remixing digital content and re-posting it online, or sharing something online created by the user (i.e., artwork, photos, stories, or videos). Although user-generated content is dominated by young people, 31% of those over age 50 with a broadband connection at home had engaged in at least one of these activities.

More significantly, user-generated content has shaped broad expectations about the primary purpose and uses of cyberspace. Napster and peer-to-peer music downloading was an early marker of shifting online expectations. Along with the attendant disruption of the music marketplace, Napster also diminished the role of traditional opinion makers such as marketers and critics in creating buzz about releases, replacing it in large part by the collective judgments of downloaders among the public.

Next came the emergence of the blogosphere, a powerful accelerator for the dissemination of chatter. No longer are fresh takes on politics or popular culture primarily defined by opinion writers on TV or in newspapers and magazines. A recent report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism shows how the news agendas of traditional media outlets differ from those of user-driven news sites.⁴ Online video, which is already popular in a broadband world, promises to reinforce these trends.⁵

In each of these cases -- music downloading, blogging, and online video -- a minority of users have impacts that outnumber their ranks. Only about 8% of U.S. internet users have their own blogs, but 39% read someone else's blog. And while no more than one in 10 blogs is about politics, 20% of those who get political news online have read political blogs. And while only a small minority of online users either create or forward online videos with political content, 15% of all internet users have watched a political video online, while 37% have watched a news video of any kind online.

To be sure, the ease and convenience of getting information are important features of cyberspace for most broadband users. When asked in 2006 why they get political news and information online, 71% of campaign internet users cited convenience (although 61% said they turned to the internet either because they wanted to access information on the Web not available elsewhere including from traditional news sources).⁶ But some of the increasingly broad array of information accessed by home broadband users has been generated or influenced by others among the growing mass of online users.

When asked in 2005 whether the internet played a role in five different important decision points (making a major investment, buying a car, getting additional career training, choosing a school for oneself or a child, or helping someone with a health or medical decision), 45% of online users said the internet played an important or crucial role. Of

these users, 34% said they received help with this decision from other people online. In the realm of politics, among those who got political news about online in 2006, 23% were actively participating in creating or forwarding content pertaining to the campaign.

The fuss about broadband, then, extends beyond access to information to active participation in the online commons as people with shared interests or problems gather at various online forums to chat or collaborate. Yochai Benkler has argued forcefully that the magnitude of non-market production enabled by cheaper computers and abundant bandwidth is important and significant to such things software development and Wikipedia.⁷ In a similar vein, Terry Fisher of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society points to the resurgence of amateurism in the production of culture, something fostered by digital technology and information networks. While inherently difficult to measure, these kinds of social and cultural capital are important elements in ongoing debates about the uses and consequences of broadband access. An ongoing challenge for those interested in the social, economic, and policy consequences of modern information networks will be to keep up with changing notions of what it means to be connected in cyberspace.

Just 15 years ago, the vision of a broadband world focused on specialists expanding their audience through two-way video. Today, the online audience has grown as users have driven the evolution of what online interactivity means. What will users think of next?

Notes

¹Janice Obuchowski, [The National Information Infrastructure: Communications and Computing -- Converging or Colliding?](#) (Washington, D.C.: The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University, 1994).

²[Home Broadband Adoption 2007](#), Pew Internet & American Life Project.

³[The Broadband Difference: How online Americans' behavior changes with high-speed Internet connections at home](#). Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2002.

⁴Project for Excellence in Journalism (2007), [The Latest News Headlines -- Your Vote Counts](#).

⁵[Online Video: 57% of internet users have watched videos online and most of them share what they find with others](#). Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007.

⁶[Election 2006 Online](#), Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007.

⁷Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*. Yale Press, 2006.

Terry Fisher, conference speech given at "[The Future of the Digital Economy: Digital Content -- Creation, Distribution, and Access](#)." Rome, Italy January 2006.