

# World Internet usage grows to 300 million

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Almost three hundred million people access the Internet worldwide according to a report released this month by the Internet monitoring service Nielsen/NetRatings.

In the first ever examination of Internet access and penetration in Europe, Asia Pacific and North America, the report found that more than 295 million people in 20 countries in those regions have access to the Internet from a home computer.

While the US still has by far the widest Internet usage, with 137 million people having home access, the report notes a significant growth in Japan and Europe. Some 26.3 million people access the Internet from Japan and 82 million in Europe. Southeast Asia, including Australia and New Zealand, has 37 million people online.

Europe's leading countries in terms of the number of people accessing the Internet are the UK with 19.5 million; Germany, 15.5; and Italy, 11.1 million. Not surprisingly, given the dominance of the English language on the World Wide Web, the UK ranks third after the US and Japan. Nevertheless, 27 percent usage rate is highly significant given the relatively high costs of access in a country that has yet to implement un-metered local call charges.

Of the 82 million people across Europe, equating to one in five households with Internet access, more than half—56 percent—reside in the UK, Germany and Italy.

Though ranking behind the US, Japan, UK, Germany, Canada and Italy, Australia is recorded as having 7.6 million Internet users out of a population of around 18 million people. According to CommerceNet, Finland has the highest Internet penetration rate at 43 percent. Some 2.5 million out of a total 5 million people are online in the country.

As well as providing the details of how many people are accessing the Net, the report gives a more detailed breakdown of user habits online. Provided on a

commercial subscription basis for advertisers, Nielsen/NetRatings focuses on product searching and online purchases, but says little about users' reading habits.

The report points to a significant growth in Net usage in the UK, recording the highest browse-to-purchase ratio of all the European countries, with 64 percent of UK Internet users who have browsed for product information in the last six months also making online purchases in the same time period.

Interestingly the report notes that access from the workplace tends to be lower than home access in most countries. David Day, director of analytics at ACNielsen eRatings.com, said in a Nielsen/Netratings press release, "This is particularly the case in the Netherlands, where the home access rate is almost twice that of work." 48 percent of users access the Internet from home in the Netherlands, as against 26 percent at work. For the UK the figures are 42 percent and 24 percent respectively.

In Finland the figures are much closer, with home usage at 43 percent and access from work at 37 percent. This is accounted for by the much lower proportion of households with a fixed telephone line. Fixed lines have decreased over recent years as more and more people have switched to mobile telephones. While this has held back home usage in the first wave of the Internet as a mass medium, Finland looks well placed for the so-called Third Generation or mobile Internet.

An earlier report by the same company said that home Internet access had reached a critical mass in the US, with 52 percent of the home population having Internet access and 32 percent of the home population surfing the World Wide Web in July. According to that report, nearly 144 million people have access to the Internet in the US, compared with 106.3 million a year ago. This represents a growth rate of 35 percent over the past year.

According to Sean Kaldor, vice president of e-commerce at NetRatings, “Lower prices for personal computers and competitive rates for high-speed Internet access have increased the demand for Internet use. Internet access is growing dramatically each day due to cheaper access, making it possible for the mainstream consumer to log on.”

Disturbingly, Kaldor notes, “While Web usage has increased, the number of sites people visit has dropped in the past year. This means that the barrier to entry is higher for new Internet ventures as companies vie for surfers' attention.” Kaldor puts this down to the “power of branding online, as companies like Amazon.com have effectively leveraged their brand to amass a captive and loyal audience.”

No doubt corporate branding is as important in relation to the Internet as in all other walks of life, but the fact that Internet users are visiting fewer sites may also be due to the increasing commercialisation of the Internet itself.

New so-called broadband providers, offering high-speed access to the Net, also provide their own entry points or portals. Unbeknownst to the inexperienced user, when a search is made through a provider's web site for a particular phrase or keyword, the results presented are not an arbitrary selection from across the Internet. Invariably, they are selected from a list of sites that have a commercial arrangement with the provider.

Not only e-commerce sites, but increasingly the major news corporations are striking up deals with providers and search portals such as Yahoo and Altavista to ensure that their stories are ranked higher than rivals in search results.

The continued growth and geographic spread of the Internet is obviously important, and the figures relating to e-commerce are themselves interesting. But the value of the Internet for society as a whole, and the mass of ordinary working people in particular, lies not in its use as a giant cyber shopping mall but as a mass information highway where the free exchange of information and ideas can flourish.



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