

Mobile Access to Social Networking Sites: A UK Survey

The questions and analysis is provided by Dr Leslie Haddon, a specialist on information and communication technologies, based in the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics. The survey, commissioned by Shine Communications Limited on behalf of Vodafone, was carried out by the market research company ICM Research, 30th May to 1st June as part of its Omnibus survey.

The main aim of the survey was to examine the degree to which internet users accessed, or were interested in accessing, social networking sites (SNS e.g. Facebook, MySpace) via mobile devices, mainly by the mobile phone but also by other handheld devices (e.g. Blackberrys). Rather than just ask that one question, we wanted to put that access into context by showing other uses of the internet and asking some further speculative questions about how behaviour might change. Although part of a wider survey of mobile phone and internet users, here the focus is on the 709 internet users who were interviewed in a telephone survey.

To set the scene in terms of devices, mobile phones were understandably widespread: 94% of internet users had them. But since there has been less research on handheld devices, thinking particularly of various forms of Smartphone, it is worth adding some comments about these. 18% of internet users had such devices and of those that had them 46% visited websites and 62% accessed email every day (others did both but less frequently). It is interesting that a further 18% of people with these devices never used email and 25% never visited websites – implying that even with the capacity to go access the internet and arguably a slightly more useful user-interface than the mobile phone a substantial minority still do not use these devices to go online.

Now to the main question. While 43% of internet users with a mobile phone and/or handheld devices used them at some point to access emails and the same percentage used them to access websites, only 24% used them for ever accessing social networking sites. What does this mean? Obviously social networking does not dominate life online, unlike the image that some of the more enthusiastic media coverage might imply. In fact only 7% of the whole sample use the various mobile devices to do so everyday, although this may well change somewhat given Vodafone's current promotion of its new service allowing such access. On the other hand, this figure of roughly a quarter is still substantial given that SNS have been around far less time than the other more established uses

As might be expected, the youngest adult group in this survey (18-24 year olds) were most active, but two further points are worth adding. 20% of this group (in contrast to the 7% overall, noted above) used a combination of mobiles and mobile devices to visit SNS everyday. But then again, 37% used them to check their email everyday and 32% used them to visit websites. Even for this age group the 'traditional' aspects of the Internet were still more established than SNS (and there were no substantial gender differences in this respect). Second, 11% of the next oldest age group (25-34 years old) also used mobiles and mobile devices to visit SNS everyday, so interest was no restricted to the young adults. Smaller percentages of older groups may have

tried this out, but on the whole interest in using mobile devices to visit SNS was currently negligible the older one was.

For many years we have known that cost shapes telecoms use. In fact, it does so for a surprisingly wide section of whole community. Over 10 years ago this was demonstrated in relation to the landline through a large European survey¹, showing that this was true not only in the UK, and subsequent evidence has shown how cost also influences mobile phone calls². Therefore, in the current survey we asked if cost was not a factor would those people who already accessed various Internet services from their mobile phones and mobile devices do so more. Since this is a speculative question we have to take the specific figures with a pinch of salt: what people say is not always what they will do. But the point was to measure interest in accessing social networking sites from mobile devices as opposed to other services and to measure whether cost was also a factor in this domain. The answer: it is!

Take the internet users who already accessed the online world via whatever mobile and handheld devices. 41% thought that they would be more likely to do this, predominantly answering 'very likely'. Although this was more so among the 18-24 year olds (58% of these) it was impressive that there was interest across all age groups, even those over 65 years old! There were no major gender differences. When we followed this question by asking those people showing an interest what they would want to access, the answer was email (74%) and websites (70%) first, followed by instant messaging (60%) and then social networking (34%). Basically that is the same message as comes from the information about what people already do: more established uses attract more interest when people think about what they would like to do. But while clearly not dominated by an interest in social networking, even the level of a third of users is substantial given how long the facility has been around. Numbers get a little small too quote percentages, but as above, younger adults were more interested as were more females.

And what about those who do not currently use mobiles and handheld devices to access the internet, i.e. the new potential users or market? If cost was not a factor the patterns are mainly the same, but with a slightly lower level of interest – 30% become interested when the cost barrier is removed and interest in social networking is still present (36% of those who thought they might access the internet more picked this option). Once again, this trails behind the other three uses listed above (80%, 80% and 59% respectively).

We asked a few extra questions of this group. First, why would they not want mobile access? While substantial minorities mention screen size (42%) and the lack of keyboard (37%), the more influential reason was that they were simply 'not interested' even if the price was not a consideration (81%). Moreover, this was by far the main reason for all age groups. However, the picture is more complex, since we had another question just to double check their intent. We asked this group if they

¹ Haddon, L. (1998) 'Il Controllo della Comunicazione. Imposizione di Limiti all'uso del Telefono', in Fortunati, L. (Ed.) *Telecomunicando in Europa*, Franco Angeli, Milano, pp. 195-247. The survey covered France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK

² Haddon, L. and Vincent, J. (2005) 'Making the Most of the Communications Repertoire. Choosing between the Mobile and Fixed-Line', in Nyíri, K. (Ed.) *A Sense of Place. The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Passagen Verlag, Vienna, pp.231-40.

would be more likely to access the internet specifically with a laptop if cost was not a factor, and now 52% said they would be likely to from this particular device (the majority being 'very likely' to). This implicitly suggest that screen size and keyboard count for something, or else people perceive the laptop as a more 'appropriate' device for going online compared to the smaller handheld ones.

Even if only in terms of asking the sample what they could anticipate we wanted to have some idea of whether the reduced cost of using mobile phones and other handhelds to go online would change the timing of when people accessed social networking sites - in other words, if it would change their routines. After all, we already know that the arrival of mobiles influenced the times when calls were made, using more of the 'dead times' during the day, between other activities. And tariffs influence usage, as some people make more calls at the weekend and shift communications to evening calls if they are seen as being 'free' (or rather paid for at a flat rate as opposed to paying for every call). Basically not many did think removing cost barriers to mobile internet access would make them time shift the timing of their access online. Of those whole who already used mobiles and handheld mobile devices to go onto the internet, only 6% thought it might change the timing of their access to email and only 4% to social networking sites. For those who currently did not use mobile device access, 13% thought they might change the timing of their access to email (the one moderately interesting answer from this question) and only 6% thought it might change the timing of when they visited social network sites. One has be careful in interpreting these answers because in part we are only measuring what they can envisage, whereas in practice the timing may change without their being able to anticipate it. That said, apart from the email answer among those currently not making use of mobile access, the thought that it might make a difference to life in this sense was clearly not on their mind.

While these are the main headlines concerning mobile and potential mobile access to the internet there were also some background questions to flesh out the place of social networking sites in people's lives, given the limited data we have on this so far. First, it is clear much Facebook dominates – amongst subscribers to SNS this accounted for 49% of users whereas the next largest single provider was MySpace at 14%.

If we take all internet users, the timing of their use of different parts of the interests reflects a number of different factors. The cost of doing so at different times is one consideration, although this is less influential as PC users increasing migrate to flat-rate tariffs, especially with broadband. Opportunity and choice are the other factors. So we asked when internet users typically access email and social networking sites, by what ever means offering the choices of 'anytime', or more specifically whether 'during the day', 'the evening' or 'the weekend' was more typical. We can eliminate the latter since only a small percentages used the weekend to predominantly access email or social networking sites. Internet users accessed the email first and foremost anytime (39%) followed by evenings (26%) and then during the day (20%). Despite its importance, on the whole 11% never accessed email! In comparison, the social networking figures for access are lower because more internet users do not access such sites. But it is the split that is interesting: those accessing in the evenings (18%) and anytime (16%) are similar in number, with fewer typically doing so during the day (5%). It would seem that there is still more pressure to check email often, and this will include work emails for some of these people. SNS, being a more social

interest, appears less demanding and can for many wait until ‘social time’ in the evening - although some clearly checked their sites throughout the day.

The next background question focused on internet users who had SNS access (298 people in this survey). Since this usually implies that they had their own site we would expect them to put text there. But we know from a very recent study of MySpace in the US³ that roughly half put up a profile and that is all they do – i.e. they do not go back to check it. In addition, in the US study a majority only put up a standard profile – not adding pictures, not customising it. And among those US users who were active there were also various degrees of activity: 30% were active, 20% somewhat active. Therefore, we tried to explore some of the same questions in the UK survey. We asked on a 1-5 scale (if 5 meant a ‘lot of effort’, and 1 meant ‘no effort’) how much effort those with SNS access put into uploading photos or videos, joining groups or using other applications (e.g. poke me, buying gifs). If we take 4 and 5 on the scale to mean reasonably active, 22% uploaded images, followed by 18% who used other applications, with 9% joining groups. While we were asking slightly different questions, this is comparable to the US results. Enthusiastic commentators stressing how much SNS users do online will probably be a little disappointed with the figures, but as social scientist sensitive to what people do online, the figure of a roughly a fifth is respectable showing a fair amount of activity.

Lastly, we had the question trying to find out how integrated social networking is in people’s lives by asking what it meant to them if the survey participants would lose access to email and to SNS: would it ‘ruin your day’ (the most severe response), specially ‘your social life would suffer’, ‘your work life would suffer’ or ‘it would not effect me’? To compare like with like, we asked email users for their response to losing email access (623 people) and SNS users for their response to losing SNS access (286 people). 25% thought losing email would ruin their day, whereas half that, 12%, thought that losing SNS would be so severe. That is a strong indicator of how much email has been integrated into the lives of those who use it. But despite the lower figure for SNS it suggests that a minority have already become somewhat dependent on social networking. Looking in more detail, work email is a factor, with 41% feeling that their work would suffer if they lost email. While only 11% thought work would suffer if they lost SNS one wonders why this figure is even that high given that social networking is usually regarded as a social activity. The figures for social life suffering were closer: 17% for email, 20% for social networking sites. Looked at another way (and reflecting the fact that respondents could give more than one answer to the work/social life questions): 50% thought that lose of email would not affect them, 75% of SNS users thought that loss of social networking site access would not affect them. While social networking may be attractive, there are many who are clearly not so committed to it. But to put even that into perspective, a decade ago when the internet itself was evolving as a mass market ago researchers were surprised by evidence that suggested how many people who used or had used the internet were not as committed to the online world as the research community and the industry at the time believed⁴.

³ Parks, M. (2008) ‘Charactering the Communicative Affordances of MySpace: A Place for Friends or a Friendless Place?’ Paper presented at the Conference of the International Communications Association, *Communicating for Social Impact*, Montreal, May 22nd-26th.

⁴ Katz, J. and Aspden, P. (1998) ‘Internet Dropouts in the USA. The Invisible Group’, *Telecommunications Policy*, Vol.24, no.4/5 pp.327-339; Kingsely, P. and Anderson, T. (1998) ‘Facing

Social networking has received a good deal of very positive press but the danger is that if you create so much hype you also run the potential risk of creating a media bubble that could burst. For example, in the early 80s there was a similar type of enthusiasm about the first home computers⁵ - i.e. high media viability, many positive stories, home computers were the 'must have' Christmas present for children in 1983 in the UK and studies at the time showed how parents were worried about their children being 'left behind'⁶. In the particular case of the home computer industry there were then some oversupply problems, some bankruptcies, a shake-out of companies similar to the dot.com phenomenon a few years ago and some industry restructuring. That was the first 'bad story' But there were also stories about computers being unused in cupboards (some were, but that claim was probably overdone), and arguments that home computing had been merely a fad. To be precise, the argument was that the machines that had been sold were just for games and the home computer as such would never really find a place in the home. Stories about home computers almost disappeared from the media for years! But if you look at the figures for the take-up of home computers, they grew steadily over those same years. This is an example of media burst bubbles that clearly did not do justice to the subsequent history of this device.

What these survey results show is that they put social networking into perspective by comparing it to more established applications, such as email. This makes expectations more modest, more realistic – and arguably more sustainable. However, what we can also say about the figures from the perspective of a social scientist monitoring histories in this field of technological development, is that the various percentages reached by social networking in relation to the different questions is reasonably high given the relatively short period of time that this application has been marketed. To put it another way, enthusiasts might be disappointed that the cup is 'half empty' but we can also see ways in which the cup is 'half-full'.

Specifically;

- If a quarter of Internet users are already accessing social networking sites with their mobile phones or mobile handheld devices, this shows an interest in this service.
- If the cost barrier is reduced it looks as if that interest will increase, not only among those currently using mobile phones and handheld devices for remote access but also among those who do not yet do this.
- The evidence is mixed on the extent to which the small screen size and lack of keyboard on the mobile phone and handheld devices is a barrier to use, but it looks as if it is a barrier to some extent (which would fit in with the qualitative research in this field⁷).

Life without the Internet', *Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy*, 8: 4, 303-12.

⁵ Haddon, L. (1988) 'The Home Computer: The Making of a Consumer Electronic', in *Science as Culture*, No.2, pp.7-51.

⁶ Haddon, L. and Skinner, D. (1991) 'The Enigma of the Micro: Lessons from the British Home Computer Boom', *Social Science Computer Review*, Fall, Vol.9, No.3, pp.455- 49

⁷ Haddon, L. and Vincent, J. (2007) Growing Up With a Mobile Phone – Learning from the Experiences of Some Children in the UK, a Report for Vodafone.

- Interest in using the mobile phones and handheld devices to access social networking sites is still concentrated in young adults (18-24), but has spread a little to slightly older groups (25-34)
- At the moment, the people interviewed do not think that having this remote access will substantially alter the timing of when they access social networking sites.
- While many currently access those sites anytime, a roughly equal number do so in the social time of the evening.
- About a fifth are quite active on their social networking sites in terms of uploading images and using other applications, which for a relatively new internet service is nevertheless impressive.
- It may not be as integrated into people's lives as email, but after just a few years of existence as a service a quarter of those with social networking sites thought that loss of access mattered, a half of those, clearly the committed ones, thought that it would ruin their day.

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Most relevant related publication: Haddon, L. (2004) *Information and Communication Technologies in Everyday Life: A Concise Introduction and Research Guide*, Berg, Oxford.