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Special Issue Editorial: World Internet Project

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Believing that we lost a great opportunity understanding the impact of television and that the ultimate influence of the web and other forms of digital communication will eclipse that of television, we founded the World Internet Project (WIP), a groundbreaking longitudinal project designed to understand the economic, political and social impact of digital technologies. Fostering unprecedented collaboration among dozens of countries around the globe, the project has established and will continue to establish benchmarks for attitudes and behaviors on the web and
in mobile. The project is committed to sharing high-quality and innovative data and insights with academics, governments, journalists, citizens and corporations around the world.

The World Internet Project (WIP) originated at the UCLA Center for Communication Policy (now the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future) and was founded with the NTU School of Communication Studies in Singapore and the Osservatorio Internet Italia at Bocconi University in Milan, Italy. From the beginning it was recognized that the increasing influence of digital technology and the Internet is a true international phenomenon. It has always been the project's intent to expand to include all the regions of the world and ultimately to include 25 or more countries. While it was important to find partners among developed countries before they grew too acclimated to the web, it is also equally important to work with developing countries as they begin to move on-line.

We believe that the Internet (in whatever distribution system: PC, television, wireless or some yet to be developed system) will transform our social, political and economic lives. We further believe that the influence and importance of the Internet will dwarf that of the most important cultural influence of the past 50 years: television. Potentially the Internet represents change on the order of the industrial revolution or the printing press. Believing this, our Internet Project is designed to get in on the ground floor of that change and to watch and document what happens as households and nations acquire and use the Internet.

The World Internet Project will explain how the Internet is changing the world--today, tomorrow and into the future. Our goal is to understand the important technological change that is occurring all around us and all over the world. The Internet Project is the first wide-scope, longitudinal exploration of how life is being transformed by computers and the Internet, with year-to-year comparisons of the social and cultural changes produced as people use this extraordinary technology. This study is also the first to analyze these broad questions about the Internet on a global scale. While the methodological and international collaboration is complex, the rationale behind the project is remarkably simply: track households as they go on-line and continue to follow them as their usage increases and becomes more comprehensive.

The USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future conducts the survey in the United States and coordinates the international partner projects. Independent teams in each country direct the implementation of the international partner projects. Our goal is to find the most qualified teams in each country coming from distinguished universities or research centers. As of May 2008 there are approximately

30 countries in the project. Each year the researchers meet in one location to share results, explore common issues and concerns and to continue to refine the methodology and scope of the work.
The U.S. research team became interested in this project while doing extensive work in the 1990s on television and its content. In 1998 television viewing by children under the age of 14 in the United States dropped for the first time in the 50-year history of television. For the very first time children found something more appealing than television: computers and the Internet. While television has had an unprecedented influence on culture, its influence has been primarily in entertainment and leisure. It is now becoming clear that computers and especially the Internet are producing effects comparable to television's on work, school and play.

Believing that the importance and influence of computer technology and the Internet will dwarf that of television, this is a project designed to do the important research that should have been conducted on television in the 1940s. The research plan calls for drawing a truly random and representative national sample comprising computer and Internet users and non-users as they are accounted for in the national population. Each year the project conducts an extensive survey of these households and then, using standard longitudinal methods for retention, watch as the non-users become users and as the users become more advanced and comfortable users. The study is based on the belief that the use of the Internet will continue to grow (though probably through wireless and television devices rather than through computers) until it reaches television-type levels of 98.3%.

Using a combination of well-accepted scientific survey methods and techniques for social science data analysis, the research team conducts a long-term longitudinal study on the impact over time of computers, the Internet and related technologies on families and society. In each country the study follows the growth and change in computer and Internet use and non-use in 2,000 households. The same households will be surveyed year after year, as computer and Internet use evolves. As important as tracking Internet use--possibly even more important--is surveying non-users. We will track social and cultural behavior among non-users to see if and how attitudes and actions change as their households obtain computers and Internet access.

This project will be able to determine why non-users do not participate and what their sense of the connected world is. Then we will learn what compels many of them to become users and how their already-established patterns of media use, child-rearing policies, economic and political behavior and other activities change. If penetration of the Internet into homes reaches 90%, the study will be able to determine who the 10% non-users are, why they remain non-users (economic or psychological issues) and how they do off-line what most of the world is doing on-line. In short, this project will look at the hundreds of things that are likely to change and remain vigilant to examine the thousands of things that cannot be predicted to change. In addition to providing reliable information about who is on-line and how and why, the project will trace whether a situation of information haves and have-nots develops and the ways in which our social, political and economic lives are changing.

The objective is to coordinate a truly international effort over the long term to understand how both industrialized and non-industrialized countries are affected by the use of information technology.