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Eluding the Web's Snare

By KATIE HAFNER

VICKI LEWIS, a 57-year-old former television producer who lives in Bethesda, Md., inhabits a household filled with Internet users. Her children are on the Internet constantly, as is her husband.

But in spite of the electrons flying all around her, she resists the pull to go online.

A new study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project has found that 42 percent of American adults say they are not connected to the Internet, and a surprising number are like Ms. Lewis. That is, they live in a household where other relatives are regular Internet users, or they have close friends who regularly go online. Yet they refuse to join the crowd.

Of those who do not use the Internet, the study found, 74 percent have relatives or close friends who do. And 20 percent of the nonusers are what the study calls Net evaders: people living in Internet-connected homes where other relatives go online.

The Net evaders have their reasons for remaining offline. Some are short on free time and fear that it will take over their lives - that once they take the plunge, they will never resurface. Others simply prefer to send and receive handwritten correspondence. Still others lament the loss of face-to-face contact associated with the rise of the Web. A few confess to ignorance and intimidation. And there are those who manage, through wired surrogates, to take advantage of the Internet indirectly for research or communication.

In resisting the tide, the Net evaders are increasingly chastised. Ms. Lewis said that her friends constantly tease her and that her husband and children are beginning to lose patience. "I can tell they're getting kind of disgusted," said Ms. Lewis, who took a course on how to use the Internet two years ago but has since forgotten what she learned.

Furthermore, she said, she worries about what will happen if she goes online and the habit sticks. "I'm afraid that once I get on, I will come up only to eat," she said. "I read these scare stories about people who once they get on can't get off."

But in fact, once online, many people do get off - enough that they form a category of their own that the

Pew study calls Net dropouts, representing 17 percent of the nonusers.

"Some grew disillusioned with the online world," said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet Project, based in Washington. "They decided it was just a time swamp, or they never found what they wanted."

Such is the case with Jerilou Hammett, 59, who, with her husband, Kingsley, 58, publishes *Designer/Builder*, a bimonthly magazine based in Santa Fe, N.M.

Ms. Hammett said she and her husband were on the Web back in 1996, but soon dropped it. "We began to see that it took an enormous amount of time," she said. "And often the quality of information we found was very superficial."

E-mail is so commonplace that those who do not have electronic addresses to hand out in addition to their phone numbers, or in lieu of them, are considered outcasts who must justify themselves.

Writers for Ms. Hammett's magazine are often taken aback when she tells them not to submit articles by e-mail, but to send a disk instead, or put the article in the regular mail.

"I believe on a business level the same thing I believe on a personal level," Ms. Hammett said. "Communication between people is more effective face to face. Or, if you can't do that, then on the phone."

It is not so much philosophical conviction as raw fear, however, that keeps Peter O'Grady, 60, of Chapel Hill, N.C., a former television news editor and retired research librarian, away from the Net. "I'm what you would call Internet scared," he said. "I'm intimidated by the technology."

Mr. O'Grady's wife, Grace, and his children, both adults in their 20's, are avid users.

Mr. O'Grady said he had himself to blame, at least in part, for not being online. "I know I'm missing out on things," he said. "It's just inertia holding me back. I think once I got the knack of it, you probably wouldn't be able to drag me off."

Even some members of the Web generation are not embracing the online world entirely, the Pew study found. Lee Serafini, a recent college graduate working as a personal trainer, is at best lukewarm on the subject of the Internet. He checks his e-mail once a week, perhaps twice, and then only if someone has told him to expect a message. He uses the Web only to place an occasional order for a vitamin supplement he cannot find anywhere else.

Every day, he is confronted by his alter ego: his 66-year-old grandmother, Barbara Serafini. Mr. Serafini, 22, lives with his grandparents in Doylestown, Pa., and Mrs. Serafini is a Web devotee. She is online five hours a day exchanging e-mail and instant messages with far-flung grandchildren; she uses the Web to sell mineral supplements.

Her live-in grandson remains unmoved by her enthusiasm. "She uses it for anything and everything," said Mr. Serafini, who majored in communications at Elon University in North Carolina. "Me, I'd much rather talk to somebody on the phone."

Mr. Rainie said that he and his staff were surprised to find so many people in close proximity to the Internet but indifferent to it. The wide assumption has been that those who do not go online are elderly, constrained by finances or seldom exposed to the Net.

The first time the survey came back, Mr. Rainie thought the findings were a fluke. So the question was asked repeatedly: Does anyone in your household go online from home? "We asked it eventually six different times during surveys in 2002 and got the same result," Mr. Rainie said. Ultimately the surveys, conducted in March and May of last year, examined the habits of 1,294 nonusers of the Internet.

Even people for whom the Internet should be an obvious solution are turning away from it. Catherine Sears, 49, a chiropractor in Portsmouth, Va., carries on her proud isolation in a world seething with bandwidth. Dr. Sears once had a Net connection at her small practice, but she and her staff used it so seldom that the Internet provider canceled the account.

More surprising, however, is her decision to stay offline given her marital situation. Dr. Sears and her husband, Lewis Walker, who teaches English almost 300 miles away at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, have been married for about nine years. But the relationship has always been a long-distance one.

And while her husband uses e-mail constantly, Dr. Sears prefers the telephone as the chief means of checking in with each other. When she writes letters, she sticks with paper and pen.

"I suppose I have a romantic attachment to handwritten letters and the United States Postal Service and commemorative stamps, and what I feel to be a very strong connection between handwriting and the person," she said.

Like some other Net evaders, Liz Manville, 48, who lives in Los Angeles and owns a placement agency for those in the fashion industry, has an AOL e-mail address. But when she checks her mail once a month or so by using her 17-year-old daughter's computer, "there are 600 million messages, and it's overwhelming," she said.

Now friends and relatives know to extend special dispensation to her when sending electronic messages. A friend recently sent a party invitation out by e-mail, but Ms. Manville never saw it. If the friend had not followed up with a phone call, Ms. Manville would have missed the party.

Yet those who avoid using the Web still occasionally want to harvest some of its fruits.

Dr. Sears, for one, said she had no qualms about asking others to do online searches for her. She recently called her sister, who lives in Maryland, to ask her to gather some information about a used car that Dr. Sears was considering buying.

And for all her adamancy, even Ms. Hammett occasionally makes use of the Web. In fact, she found the telephone number of someone who has become one of her most important professional contacts by having a friend look it up on a Web site.

Edward Tenner, the author of "Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences" (Vintage Books, 1997), likens people who appoint Web proxies to those who choose not to drive cars because they can always hitch a ride with friends.

Dr. Tenner said that assigning the label "evaders" to those who appoint Web stand-ins might be a bit harsh. " 'Circumventers' might be better," he said, adding that he tended to admire people who have called upon him to do their pointing and clicking for them. "My time helping others with Web queries is like taking the scenic route while driving a friend to the airport," he said.

Such vicarious partaking of the Web's fruits does not stop Ms. Hammett, the magazine publisher, from taking the high ground.

Ms. Hammett said that when she tells people she has no e-mail address, she sees fewer raised eyebrows these days. "Now people say, 'Hey, that's really interesting; that must be great,' " she said. "I think they're overwhelmed with it themselves."

Other holdouts recognize that sooner or later, practicality will erode their resolve. Mr. Serafini, who is looking for a job as a sportswriter, checks for e-mail from prospective employers on his grandmother's computer.

And now that Ms. Manville has started Manville Connections, a small business in need of its own Web site, she knows she will finally be cornered. She plans to enroll in a course to learn her way around cyberspace. What's more, she said, she is less ignorant than her circle of friends and family might think.

"I know what [Yahoo](#) is," she said. "I really do."