

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (2000) "Reliable data may be old news by the time you read it," The Irish Times 3 July, 8.

Reliable data may be old news by the time you read it

What do we really know about the Internet and how it is used? In Ireland reports on usage based on MRBI surveys are published by the Information Society Commission. Amárach Consulting also conducts and publishes such surveys and Nua Internet Surveys has made a business of publishing information on Internet trends around the world.

However, the reliability of information is always uncertain - different surveys use different methods and the results do not always tally. In 1999, two commercial surveys came up with radically dissimilar findings - suggesting that either 4 per cent, or 74 per cent, of Irish businesses were using the Internet.

Reliable information is important not only for business purposes but also for identifying and explaining patterns such as the "digital divide" between people actively using the Net and those excluded from the information revolution.

The gathering and publication of official information on Internet usage in Ireland is scant. Government figures, when available, tend to come from largescale random sampling. While they produce more reliable data than smaller-scale commercial surveys they require more time for analysis, resulting in information that passes its best-before date in advance of publication.

In 1998, the [Central Statistics Office](#) (CSO) collected information on the household use of computers and the Net, but has yet to publish the results and has no plans to collect such information on a regular basis. The CSO will also ask about home access in the 2001 Census, with the information made available in early 2002.

In contrast, government statistics offices in other countries are leading the field in such research. The [US Census Bureau](#) has been gathering information on home computer use since 1984. It has been working with the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) on Internet research since 1997.

Their joint project, [Closing the Digital Divide](#), combines the Census Bureau's expertise with the NTIA's analytical focus to produce a clear, up-to-date picture of how the Internet is accessed and used by groups of people in different regions in the US. The Digital Divide project develops policies and programmes to extend the benefits of the Internet to all communities in the US.

Government statistics offices in Australia, Canada, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden are also carrying out Internet research.

Net usage aside, the Irish CSO website is a good source of general statistical information, providing up-to-date information on tourism, agricultural prices and the most popular Irish baby names.

A useful place to begin a search for national information is the US Census Bureau website which contains links to statistical agencies in more than 100 countries. For an international overview, the [UN Statistics Division](#) publishes a wide range of information, especially on developing countries.

One feature which could be improved on virtually all the statistical Web pages is the search facility. For example, entering "Internet use" as a search term turns up dozens of mostly irrelevant links, on each of the more than 20 statistical Web pages tested, including the CSO page.

Maybe statistical offices could learn from commercial companies, who use their sites to glean information about the preferences of their customers and improve the usability accordingly.

Related links:

www.cso.ie

www.census.gov

www.un.org/depts/unsd

www.digitaldivide.gov