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Utah No. 3 in Internet use in U.S. for 2009

Census estimates say 83% of state residents live in homes connected to 'Net

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SALT LAKE CITY — In 1993, Pete Ashdown started the XMission Internet provider company in Utah, figuring a few fellow computer geeks must need it like he did.

It's not just for geeks anymore. Four of every five Utahns used the Internet last year, according to U.S. Census survey data released Wednesday.

In fact, Utah now ranks No. 3 among the states in the percentage of residents who use the Internet, up from No. 6 in 2007 when the last such estimates were released.

The census estimated that 77.9 percent of Utahns used the Internet in 2009. That is well above the national average of 68.4 percent.

The only states that were higher than Utah were Alaska (79.2 percent) and Washington (78.8 percent).

"I really didn't foresee the expansion and necessity of the Internet when I started XMission in 1993," Ashdown said when told about the new data. He noted that he started with just one computer and five modems on a 1.5-megabit line. He said such a line now "is serviceable for e-mail (for a single user), but not much else."

He added, "I believe the Internet has become a staple of our communication. It is a requirement for many companies, like my own, in getting a job and staying in communication with your employer and other businesses."

According to census estimates, more Utahns live in homes that are connected to the Internet than actually use it. The census estimated that 83.1 percent of Utahns lived in homes connected to the Internet in 2009, which also ranked No. 3 in the nation.

Just eight years ago in 2001, only 54 percent of Utah households were connected to the Internet.

The data show that Internet service in Utah is quickly becoming as common and important as water, electric and phone utilities. Ashdown predicts the popularity of the Internet will continue to grow, that its capabilities will improve, and that people will find expanded ways of using it.

"My daughter prefers Hulu on her laptop (for TV and movies via the Internet) to our home PVR and widescreen TV. We are going to continue to see the convergence of all media and communications to the Internet," Ashdown said.

"Soon, I think the Internet as a 'facility' will fade into our daily life in the same sense that we don't think about where, who or what provides our electricity," he said.

Utah state demographer Juliette Tennert gives several reasons why Utah may rank so high among the states in Internet usage.

"Utah has the youngest median age in the nation with lots of kids," she said. "Younger groups tend to be more comfortable with technology and have grown up with computers, so it's not surprising to see our ranking."

Tennert adds that Utah ranks high in high school graduation and the amount of education its residents have received. She said not only are people more likely to use the Internet if they are well-educated, "but kids use it for research at school, too."

She said the vast majority of Utahns also live along the Wasatch Front in a concentrated urban area where it is easier and cheaper to place broadband access. "So they truly have access to the technology. In many states where the population is more spread out, that may not be the case."

Utah also is home to many high-tech businesses, Tennert said. "We have a high concentration of high-technology businesses that require the use of the Internet," and that may have helped spread its importance throughout the community.

Bob Graveley, regional spokesman for Qwest, offered some other possible reasons for high Internet use in Utah.

"There is a good degree of competition in Utah between the different providers. I know we have made a push in recent years to expand availability to customers, and now reach 92 percent of Utah households with our service," he said. "We've been deploying additional fiber in Salt Lake City and Provo to make the fastest speeds available."

He said the competition helps keep prices lower and makes companies push harder to reach new customers. "They also offer packages of bundled services to try to make themselves as attractive as possible, such as if you get their Internet, they give you a break if you also get their phone service or wireless or video."

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