

# **The Internet as a Unique News Source**

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**Millions go online for news and images not  
covered in the mainstream press**

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# Summary of Findings

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## **Significant numbers of Americans are turning to the Internet for news coverage and images they cannot find in the mainstream media.**

Over the last few months, war images have begun appearing online that were deemed too graphic and disturbing to be carried by the mainstream press. A significant number of Internet users, many of whom have explicitly gone looking for them, have seen these images online.

- 24% of adult Internet users have seen graphic war images online. That comes to more than 30 million people.
- 28% of those 30 million who have seen war images actively went looking for them.

The survey shows that 72% of America's Internet users – or some 92 million people – have used the Internet to get news of any kind, not necessarily news related to the war. Furthermore, on any given day, about 27% of online Americans are gathering news on the Internet.

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## **Overall, Americans disapprove of the display of the graphic and disturbing war-related images on the Internet by a 49%-40% margin. But by a small plurality, those who are Internet users approve the posting of the pictures.**

As a whole, Americans show discomfort with the nature of the war images that are appearing on the Internet. By a 49%-40% margin, all Americans disapprove of the posting of such images. Another 4% said their views on the rightness or wrongness of displaying graphic pictures “depends” on the circumstances and images. And 7% refused to answer the question or said they didn't know the answer.

However, a major cultural divide separates Internet users from non-users on this question. Internet users said by a small 47%-44% edge that they approved the display of the pictures. That is a sharp contrast with non-Internet users, who disapproved of the pictures by a 58%-29% margin.

This Pew Internet & American Life Project report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet. All numerical data was gathered through telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between May 14 and June 17, 2004, among a sample of 2,200 adults, aged 18 and older. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is +/- 2%. For results based Internet users (n=1,399), the margin of sampling error is +/- 3%.

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### **There are notable divisions about the display of war-related images between men and women, younger and older Americans, richer and less well-off Americans, and Democrats, Independents and Republicans.**

Other dramatic contrasts appear between segments of the population. And in some demographic groups, a scant majority of the members express approval of the graphic images being shown online; these include men, young Americans under 30 years old, high earners, and registered Democrats and Independents.

- 53% of men approve of the graphic war images being available online compared to 29% of women.
- 52% of those under 30-years-old approve compared to 44% of those 30 – 49 years and 31% of those over 50 years old.
- 52% of those with at least \$50,000 income approve, compared to 35% of those with income less than \$50,000.
- 52% of Democrats approve and 53% of Independents approve. That contrasts with the 42% of Republicans who approve.

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### **Once they have seen the most graphic pictures, though, Internet users have mixed feelings about the wisdom of viewing them.**

The horrific nature of many of the war-related images that have appeared online have left Internet users with a range of feelings.

- 51% of the 30 million Internet users who have seen the images felt they had made a good decision in looking at them.
- 33% of those who have seen the images wish they hadn't seen them.
- 7% said they had both views.

Those who appear the most troubled by having seen the graphic and disturbing images include women, Americans under 50 years old, and those with lower socioeconomic status.

Those who felt they made a good decision to view the images online include:

- 68% of men compared 39% of women
- 69% of those over 50 years old compared to 54% of those 30 - 49 years and 56% of those 18 – 29 years old
- 65% of those with incomes over \$50,000 per year compared to 49 % of those with incomes less than \$50,000 per year

## Summary of Findings

Those who wished they hadn't seen the images include:

- 55% of women compared to 34% of men
- 48% of those 18 – 29 years old compared to 41% of those 30 – 49 years and 31% of those over 50 years
- 50% of those with incomes less than \$50,000 per year compared to 33% of those with incomes over \$50,000 per year

<b>The Internet as a Unique News Source: Summary of Findings at a Glance</b>
Significant numbers of Americans are turning to the Internet for news coverage and images they cannot find in the mainstream media.
Overall, Americans disapprove of the display of the graphic and disturbing war-related images on the Internet by a 49%-40% margin. But by a small plurality, Internet users approve the posting of the images.
There are notable divisions about the display of war-related images between men and women, younger and older Americans, richer and less well-off Americans, and Democrats, Independent and Republicans.
Once they have seen the most graphic pictures, though, Internet users have mixed feelings about the wisdom of viewing them.
Source: Fallows, Deborah, and Lee Rainie. <i>The Internet as a Unique News Source</i> . Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, July 8, 2004.

# Contents

**Summary of Findings**

**Part 1. Introduction**

**Part 2. The new experience of war images online**

**Part 3. Demographic and other group differences**

**Methodology and questionnaire responses**

# Part 1.

## Introduction

Previous polling by the Pew Internet & American Life Project during times of high national tension or major news events, like September 11 or the start of the Iraq war, has documented some reasons that people are prompted to turn to the Internet and even adapt it for new purposes.

Following September 11, Internet users took advantage of the Internet as an effective communication tool; 72% of Internet users said they used email to contact friends & family, reconnect with some who were out of touch, share stories, and discuss events surrounding September 11. The “commons” areas, like message boards and chat rooms, became very active and newly popular.<sup>1</sup> Many virtual, ad hoc clearinghouses sprang up so people could trade and catalog information about friends and family who might have been affected by events of that day. Unprecedented levels of charity donations given online established a model for unprecedented levels of political donations that followed in the next wave of political campaigns.

In the early days of the Iraq war, large numbers of Americans were turning to the Internet as a source of supplementary, varying, and directed information about the war and its import: 66% said they went to the Internet for the variety of news coverage, 23% looked for information on the war’s effect on financial markets; 15% looked for information about the country and people; 9% looked for information on how to prepare for a terrorist attack.

Overall, the Project’s research has shown the Internet news audience climb from 54 million in our first survey in March, 2000, to 92 million in the survey we completed between May 14 and June 17, 2004. That is an increase of 70%. Moreover, we found in March 2000 that on any given day that month, about 20 million American Internet users were getting news online. The figure jumped to almost 35 million in May-June 2004 – an increase of 75%.

Now, polling done during one of the most turbulent periods of the Iraq war suggest Americans are turning to the Internet for another reason, as a unique source of information they know exists, but has not been covered in the mainstream media.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Tragedy\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Tragedy_Report.pdf)

## Part 2.

### The new experience of war images online

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#### **Americans are turning to the Internet for news coverage they can't find in the mainstream news media.**

During recent months, a significant number of Americans have been turning to the Internet as a source of news and pictures that are not available in the mainstream media. This has come at a time of intense and dramatic news coverage that includes an unprecedented volume of references to disturbing images from the war in Iraq.

About one quarter of Internet users say they have gone online at one time or another for news that was not covered by the mainstream press; 24% of Internet users say they have searched on the Internet for news stories, photographs or videos that other media outlets have decided not to publish or broadcast.

Further, with respect to specific coverage of the war in Iraq, 24% of Internet users have seen war images on the Internet that were deemed too graphic or disturbing to be shown on television or in newspapers. Of those who have seen such images, 28% said they actively sought out these images. The rest say they happened upon the images while they were doing something else online.

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#### **There are cultural schisms over whether the most graphic images should be available online.**

There is a sharp cultural and values divide over the publication of the most graphic war-related images. Overall, 49% of all Americans disapproved of those images being available on the Internet, compared to 40% who approve of those images being shown.

Among segments of the population, a major values gap emerges. Men approve the idea of graphic and disturbing war-related pictures being made available online by a margin of 53%-36%. Women, on the other hand, disapprove of their availability online by a 61%-29% gap.

Another stark opinion gap exists when it comes to age. Younger Americans, those 18 – 29 years old, approve of graphic images being available online by a 52% - 41% margin. Americans who are 30 – 49 years old disapprove by a 47% - 44% margin, and those who are over 50 years old disapprove by a 56% - 31% margin.

## Part 2. The new experience of war images online

Those at the higher end of the socioeconomic scale are more approving of graphic images being available online. Those with at least some college approve of the images being available by a 47% - 43% margin, compared to those with less education, who disapprove by a 55% -34% margin. Those who earn at least \$50,000 per year approve of the images being available online by a 52%-40% margin, compared to those who earn less, who disapprove by a 55%-35% margin.

Another division exists between Internet users and non-users. By a 47%-44% margin, Internet users support the idea of those pictures being available online, while non-users overwhelmingly opposed the posting of those pictures by a 58%-29% margin

Political partisanship also makes a difference, albeit a smaller one. Democrats approve of graphic images being available online by a margin of 52% to 41%; Independents approve by a margin of 53% to 40%. Republicans, on the other hand, disapprove of these images being available by a margin of 49% to 42%.

There are sharp divisions over the wisdom of displaying graphic images online		
<i>All the members of this group (Internet users and non-users included)</i>	<i>Approve the display of the images online</i>	<i>Disapprove the display</i>
Men	53%	36%
Women	29%	61%
Under age 30	52%	41%
Over age 30	37%	51%
College or graduate degree	47%	43%
High School diploma or less	34%	55%
Household earning over \$50,000	52%	40%
Household earning less than \$50,000	35%	55%
Internet user	47%	44%
Non-Internet user	29%	58%
Democrats	52%	41%
Independents	53%	40%
Republicans	42%	49%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project May-June 2004 survey. N=2,200. . Margin of error is ±2%.

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### The experience of viewing the disturbing images online is both positive and painful.

Almost one quarter of Internet users have actually seen the graphic and disturbing war images that appear only online. They come away from the experience of mixed mind: 51% of those Internet users felt they had made a good decision in looking at the images, 33% wish they hadn't seen them, and 7% volunteered that both of these impressions were true for them.

One cohort, women, stood out from the rest as more than half responded negatively to both questions we posed. Of the 16% of women who have seen the war images online, only 36% say they felt they made a good decision in doing so; 52% said they wish they hadn't seen them, and 3% said both.



## Part 3.

### Demographic and other group differences

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#### Men pursue and consume the news online more than women do.

The popularity of getting news from the Internet has grown over the years, with additional boosts following major news events like September 11 or the start of the Iraq war. Since 2000, when the Pew Internet & American Life Project began tracking participation in Internet activities, men have consistently shown that they are more likely than online women to have used the Internet to get news. In the latest figures, 77% of men have gone online to get news compared to 66% of women.

These gender-related differences are also evident when the issue focuses on the images that are available online. Men and women behave differently in how they gather news, consume news, and in their attitudes about news presentation.

Men have followed more war-related news than women. Some 56% of

American men have seen images in the mainstream press of the American contractors killed in Fallujah compared to 48% of women; 79% of online men have seen Iraqi prisoner images compared to 73% of women; 62% of men have seen images relating to Nicholas Berg, the young American murdered by Islamic terrorists, compared to 57% of women. When it comes to war images specifically on the Internet, the findings are consistent. Some 32% of men who are Internet users have seen the more horrific images that available exclusively online, compared to 16% of women.

Men are also more active in using the Internet to seek out news that is not covered in the traditional media. Fully 33% of wired men have actively searched the Internet for general news not covered in the mainstream press, compared to 16% of women. Further, of men who have seen the more graphic online images, 32% of men went looking for the online images that were deemed too graphic or disturbing for television and newspapers, compared to 21% of women.

Gender differences and graphic war images online <i>Men seek, view, and approve of graphic war images more than women</i>		
	Men	Women
Approve of graphic images online	53%	29%
Have seen graphic images online	32%	16%
Have searched for images	32%	21%
The percent of those who saw the images and felt it was a good decision to view them	68%	39%
The percent of those who saw the images and wish they had not	34%	55%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project May-June 2004 survey. N=2,200. Margin of error is ±2%.

## Demographic and other group differences

Finally, 53% of men approve of television and newspaper presentation of war images, compared to 41% of women. Likewise 53% of men approve of the more graphic images being available only on the internet, compared to 29% of women.

Part of the explanation for this gender difference is that women are more unhappy about finding those graphic and disturbing images. While 68% of men felt it was a good decision to go looking for extreme images, only 39% of women felt that way. And 34% of men wished they hadn't seen them, compared to 55% of women.

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### Young Internet users are more tolerant of disturbing news in principle, but oldest users are more comfortable in reality.

In previous findings about early Iraq war coverage, young adult Internet users, those 18 – 29 years old, show a greater appreciation than older users of how the Internet can keep them abreast of the news.<sup>2</sup> In this survey, younger users continue to demonstrate their enthusiasm for going online for news of all and any sort. Some 29% of the youngest Internet users have looked for general news or photos or videos not covered offline, compared to 23% of users over 30 years old.

And a significantly larger number of the youngest Internet users, 32%, have seen images online that were deemed to be graphic or disturbing by traditional media outlets, compared to an overall 21% of older users.

Younger users are more accepting than older Americans of graphic news coverage of the ugliest parts of this war, both by the mainstream media and online. Significantly greater numbers of young Americans, 56%, think the traditional media is within acceptable bounds

with the images they have been showing, compared to 48% of those between 30 – 49 years old and 40% of those over 50 years. And significantly larger number of young Internet users, 52%, approve of the more extreme images being available on the Internet, compared to 44% of those 30 – 49 years and 31% of those over 50 years.

Age difference and graphic war images online <i>Age is a factor in approval of and reaction to graphic war images</i>			
	<i>Under age 30</i>	<i>30-49 years old</i>	<i>50+</i>
Approve of graphic images online	52%	44%	31%
Have seen graphic images online	32%	23%	18%
The percent of those who saw the images and felt it was a good decision to view them	56%	54%	69%
The percent of those who saw the images and wish they had not	48%	41%	31%

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project May-June 2004 survey. N=2,200. . Margin of error is ±2%.*

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Iraq\\_War\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Iraq_War_Report.pdf)

## Demographic and other group differences

However, the tolerance doesn't translate into comfort when it comes to reality. Of those who actually saw the most graphic online images, 69% of those who were 50 – 64 years old thought they had made a good decision to look at the graphic images, significantly more than the 54% of those 30 – 49 years old, and 56% of the youngest Internet users. Similarly, more young users, 48% wished they hadn't seen the images, compared to 41% of those 30 – 49 year olds, and 31% of those 50 – 64 years old.

### Upscale Internet users tolerate and absorb disturbing news better than others.

Upscale Americans, those with higher education and income levels, are more tolerant of the disturbing war coverage they see both online and in the mainstream press. These Americans agree that the mainstream media is presenting appropriate material. Some 53% of those with at least some college education think so, compared to 41% of those with less education. Similarly, 52% of those with family incomes above \$50,000 approve, compared to 44% of those with lower incomes.

Among Internet users, we find a similar degree of tolerance for the more graphic online imagery. 47% of those with at least some college education approve of the more extreme online imagery available, compared to 34% of those with less education. And 52% of those with incomes at least \$50,000 approve, compared to 35% of those with lesser incomes.

The group of upscale Internet users didn't either go looking for or see the most graphic online images in greater numbers than less upscale users. But the upscale users who did see them were more likely to feel they had made a good decision in

Socioeconomic differences and war images online				
<i>Upscale Internet users approve of and are less disturbed by images than others.</i>				
	<i>Some college education</i>	<i>No college</i>	<i>Over \$50,000 household income</i>	<i>Less than \$50,000</i>
Approve of graphic images online	47%	34%	52%	35%
The percent of those who saw the images and felt it was a good decision to view them	59%	56%	65%	49%
The percent of those who saw the images and wish they had not	40%	44%	33%	50%

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project May-June 2004 survey. N=2,200. . Margin of error is ±2%.*

viewing them. 59% of those with at least a college education said they made a good decision, 40% said they wish they hadn't seen them, compared to those with less education, where 56% said they had made a good decision and 44% wish they hadn't seen them. Similarly, 65% of those with incomes above \$50,000 said they had made a good decision, 33% wished they hadn't seen them. This is compared to those with lower income where 49% said they made a good decision and 50% wish they hadn't seen them.

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### **All Americans are more approving of the standards of the mainstream press than the Internet for publishing images. Internet users are more approving than non-users of any images that appear.**

In the mainstream media, where consumers are presumably more familiar and comfortable with the traditional boundaries of what constitutes acceptable imagery, 47% of Americans think the print and television press are right in showing the kinds of war images they do, compared to 41% who don't think so. But the tables turn when it comes to online material; more people express their discomfort with the graphic and disturbing war related images that have been appearing uncensored online. Only 40% of Americans approve of the kinds of images available on the Internet -- ones that traditional media have decided NOT to show -- compared to 49% who disapprove.

Consistent with our findings from the early days of the Iraq war, in which Internet users were more likely than non-Internet users to believe the press was doing a good job covering the war, we find again now that Internet users are more approving of media coverage than non-Internet users. Some 52% of Internet users think the mainstream media are showing appropriate war images, compared to 38% of non-Internet users. Even more dramatically, 47% of Internet users approve of the more graphic imagery that is available online, compared to 29% of non-Internet users.

Yet, even among the most aggressive group, the 28% of Internet users who have actively sought and seen graphic and disturbing images online, there remains more than a quarter of those who have reservations about what they have seen. About three-quarters of those who actively sought and found the graphic online images, 72% said they made a good decision in looking at the images; while 24% wish they hadn't seen them, and 4% said both.

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### **Both Democrat and Independent Internet users are more tolerant of disturbing news images being online than Republican Internet users.**

Democrats and Independents are both more likely than Republicans to approve of the war imagery being available both in the mainstream media and online. Some 43% of Republicans think the mainstream media should show the kinds of images they are showing, compared to 62% of Democrats and 55% of Independents. About 42% of Republicans approve of the more graphic images being available on the Internet, compared to 52% of Democrats and 53% of Independents.

But the differences stop there. Behavior and attitudes about the graphic online imagery are similar across partisan boundaries. Some 23% of Republicans have seen the graphic and disturbing images online, compared to 26% of both Democrats and Independents. Of those who have seen the images, 26% of Republicans actively went searching for them, compared to 29% of both Democrats and Independents. Some 61% of Republicans felt

## **Demographic and other group differences**

they had made a good decision looking at the images, compared to 58% of Democrats and 56% of Independents.

# Methodology and questionnaire responses

The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates from May 15 to June 17, 2004, among a sample of 2,200 adults, 18 and older. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2 percentage points. For results based Internet users (n=1,399), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The sample for this survey is a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid “listing” bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers). The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. Additionally, the sample was released in replicates to make sure that the telephone numbers called are distributed appropriately across regions of the country. At least 10 attempts were made to complete an interview at every household in the sample. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Interview refusals were recontacted at least once in order to try again to complete an interview. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day. The final response rate was 30.9%.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the Census Bureau’s March 2003 Annual Social and Economic Supplement Survey. This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older, living in households that contain a telephone. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.

## Methodology and questionnaire responses

### Questionnaire material

**ONIM1** Over the past few months, photographs and videos have come out of Iraq containing graphic or disturbing images from the war. Some of these images have appeared in newspapers and on television. In general, do you think the media should or should not show these kinds of war images to the American public?

<u>CURRENT</u>		
%	47	Should show them
	41	Should not show them
	7	(VOL) Depends
	6	Don't know/Refused

**ONIM2** Have you, personally, seen any of the images from Iraq of...?

		<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW/ REFUSED</u>
a	The American contractors killed in Fallujah	52	46	2
b	Iraqi prisoners of war being abused by American soldiers	76	23	1
c	American civilian Nicholas Berg, held hostage and murdered in Iraq by Islamic terrorists	60	38	2

**ONIM3** Some of these war images were deemed too graphic or disturbing to be shown on television or in newspapers, but were available on the Internet. Did you happen to see any of these images on the Internet?

**Based on Internet users [N=1,399]**

<u>CURRENT</u>		
%	24	Yes
	76	No
	*	Don't know/Refused

**ONIM4** Did you actively search for those images, or did you come across them while doing something else online?

**Based on Internet users who viewed war images online [N=316]**

<u>CURRENT</u>		
%	28	Searched for images
	69	Just came across them
	3	Don't know/Refused

## Methodology and questionnaire responses

**ONIM5** In the end, did you feel that looking at the images available on the Internet was a good decision, or did you wish you hadn't seen them?

**Based on Internet users who viewed war images online [N=316]**

	<u>CURRENT</u>	
%	51	Good decision
	33	Wish I hadn't seen them
	7	(VOL) Both
	8	Don't know/Refused

**ONIM6** In general, do you APPROVE or DISAPPROVE of these kinds of images being available on the Internet, when other media outlets like television and newspapers decide not to show them?

**Based on all respondents [N=2,200]**

	<u>CURRENT</u>	
%	40	Approve
	49	Disapprove
	4	(VOL) Depends
	7	Don't know/Refused

**ONIM7** Apart from the war images that have come out of Iraq, have you ever searched online for particular news stories, photographs, or videos that media outlets decided NOT to cover?

**Based on Internet users [N=1,399]**

	<u>CURRENT</u>	
%	24	Yes
	75	No
	1	Don't know/Refused