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A Window on Ourselves -- Our 2003 Selves, Anyway

By Frank Ahrens

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Nothing says "can't-put-it-down reading!" like census data.

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But the folks at the U.S. Census Bureau give us the best regular updates on who we are and what we do -- sometimes at great personal risk to census-takers. Census data expose educational and economic gaps that can be addressed with government and private efforts. The data reveal new categories of Americans that savvy marketers can reach -- consider the minivan, which no one knew they needed until Chrysler realized that families were changing.

The most recent round of data spewed forth by the green eyeshades over at Census tells us how we use our computers and the Internet. Well, owing to the significant lag time between collection of the raw numbers and the shampooing, scrubbing and manicuring of them, the new data -- released Thursday -- tell us how we used our computers and the Internet in 2003. Which, in many ways, given the warp-speed evolution (or intelligent design) of the Internet and technology, is sort of like telling us how we used our computers and Internet in 1990.

But you work with what you've got.

In 1984, only 8.2 percent of U.S. households had computers, and they were diesel-powered. By 2003, that number was up to 61.8 percent, which still seems amazingly low. On the other hand, everyone I know has a TiVo, while only about 5 percent of all U.S. households have digital video recorders. Which just goes to illustrate, once again, what a bubble we live in. And by "we," I mean "you," because I am omniscient. But that's another column.

According to the census data by state, Alaska has the most residents with Internet access, at about 63 percent of all households. Makes sense, I suppose. Alaska's female population portion is lower than the national average. Lotta guys. With a lotta time on their hands. No daylight from October to March. You do the math.

After Alaska, the top Internet-access states are New Hampshire, Colorado, Connecticut and Utah. (Huh?) From the bottom up, the list goes: Mississippi (about 39 percent), Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico and Alabama.

Computers are no longer a boys' club, says the census. In 1984,

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63.1 percent of men who had a home computer used it; only 42.8 percent of women did. In 2003, more women (83.5 percent) than men (81.5 percent) used their home computers.

And there is this soul-crushing statistic, for anyone who lost it all in the dot-com bust by assuming shoppers were ready to flock to the Internet: In 1997, only 2.1 percent of adults used the Internet to buy products or services. By 2003 -- is it too late to get venture capital for a start-up e-tail site? -- that number had soared to 32.3 percent.

Ah, the perils of being ahead of your time. Oh, yeah: and blowing all your money on a Super Bowl ad.

Excess Income Dept.

Boy howdy, the market moves fast.

Apple Computer Inc. introduced its video iPod only two weeks ago, and already the add-ons are coming. Faster than you can say, "Hey, what you need on your new Mustang are some phat 20-inch chrome rims," a German company has begun selling screen savers for the vid-iPod.



Here come the add-ons: A German company is already selling video iPod screen savers. (Paul Sakuma - AP)

Oh, yes. God forbid there should be a blank screen anywhere on this planet for even a moment.

The company's Web site, <http://www.showfootage.com>, sells video clips ranging from two to 20 seconds for \$4.99 (plus that darned 16 percent value-added tax). Like a screen saver, the clips continuously loop. Also like with a screen saver, we're guessing that soon enough, there will be plenty of iPod screen savers you can download for free.

Is There a Grown-Up Here? Anywhere?

Patrick Byrne, the 42-year-old president of Overstock.com, a seller of excess retail inventory, apologized to investors yesterday for a \$14.2 million third-quarter loss thusly, and we quote: "My bad."

Later in his conference call, he warned of a potential hostile takeover of his company being orchestrated by a "Sith lord," forcing the poor Bloomberg writer to explain what a Sith lord is. Perhaps investors can look forward to the company's Q4 earnings being dramatized with the aid of scale models and action figures. "Okay. Here's the Ewoks. That's us . . ."

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