

Impact of Electronic & Web 2.0 Interpersonal Communication On First Class Mail Service Use

by Peter von Stackelberg

The evolution of web technology since the introduction of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s has driven a series of changes in how people communicate. The use of first class mail service has declined as a result of the introduction of electronic and Web 2.0 interpersonal communications technologies.

The introduction of new forms of interpersonal communications has happened frequently as web technology changes. The diffusion of these new forms of communication among users has varied widely, with some forms like e-mail being used on a daily basis by about half of all Internet users while other forms like instant messaging or tweeting are used by a very small percentage of Internet users.

has leveled off over the past five years. By the end of 2010, Internet adoption among Americans reached 79 percent of the population. While some growth may be expected over the next five years, it is likely to be slow. The rapid growth period of the 1990s is behind us and the Internet in the United States has entered maturity in terms of the number of users.

First Class Mail

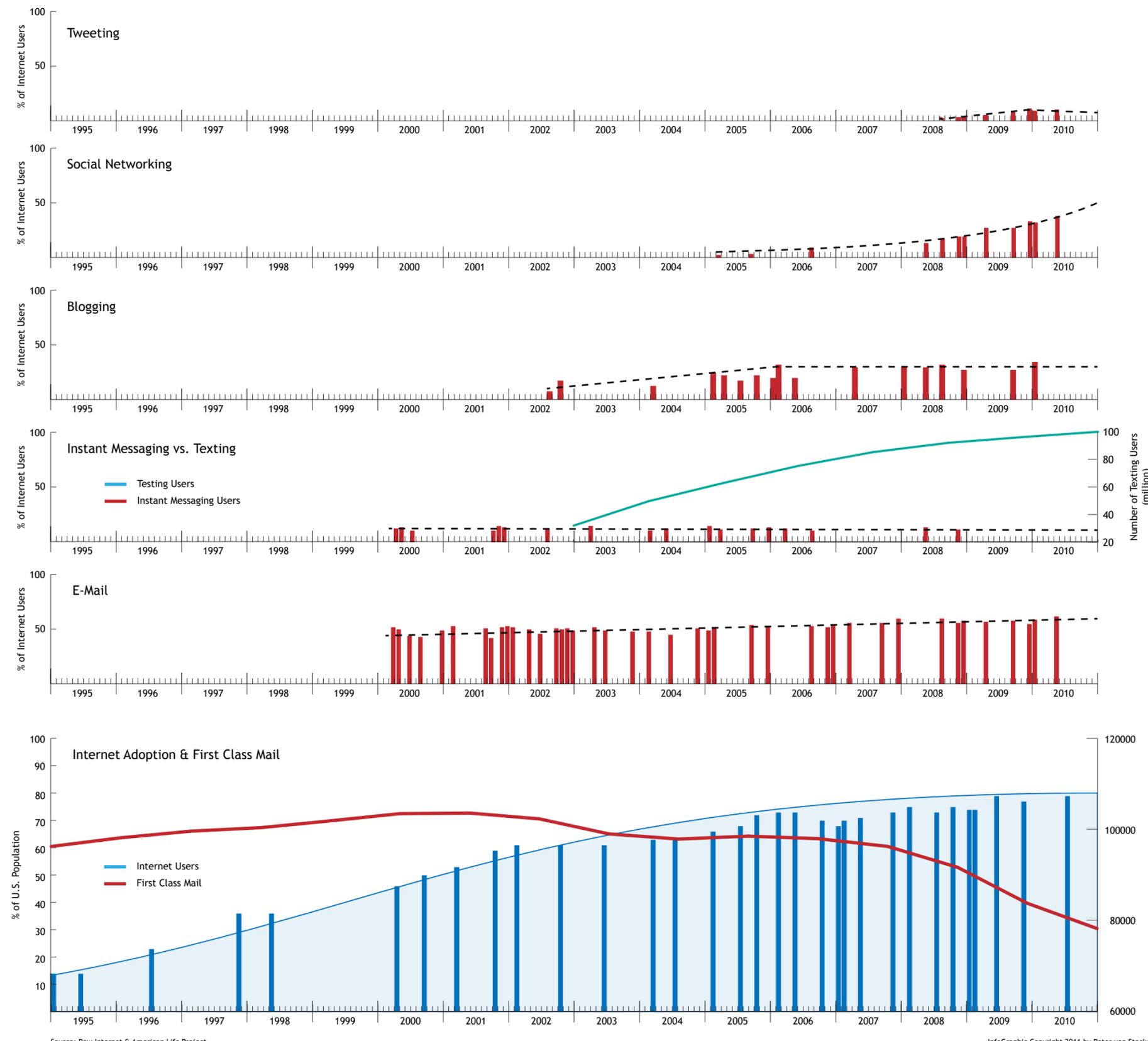
First class mail sent via the United States Postal Service (USPS) has been a vital form of interpersonal and business communication since shortly after the founding of the American republic. The volume of first class mail climbed consistently, decade after decade, from the late in the 18th century until the beginning of the 21st century. In 2000, however, the amount of first class mail peaked at over 103 billion pieces. (United States Postal Service, 2011)

This was the same year in which half of the American population was using the Internet. In 2004 and 2005, the volume of mail stabilized before beginning to drop again in 2006 at a pace that accelerated through 2010. It was during this period that Internet adoption among Americans rose from around 60% to almost 80%.

E-Mail

E-mail was developed as early as the 1960s, but it wasn't until the release of an easy-to-use e-mail systems in the late 1980s that e-mail became more widely used.

At the turn of the 21st century, a large number of Americans were using e-mail on a daily basis. More than half of Americans, when asked by the Pew Research Center if they had "used the Internet yesterday", said they had. (Pew Research Center, 2010) The



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Internet

While the first nodes of what became the Internet were established in late 1960s, it wasn't until the early 1990s that the World Wide Web (WWW) was created and browsers that allowed easy access to the web emerged. Adoption followed a classic growth curve (also known as an S-curve). In the mid-1990s, about 15 percent of Americans were connected to the Internet. By 2000, the number had tripled to about 45 percent and by 2005 more than 70 percent of Americans were using the Internet. (Pew Research Center, 2010)

Growth in the number of Internet users in the United States



trend for e-mail use has increased slightly over the past decade, indicating that the use of e-mail is likely to continue to remain at roughly current levels for at least the next five years.

The impact of e-mail on the use of first class mail from the 1990s through about 2000 appears to be inconclusive. A lack of data about e-mail use in the 1990s makes a definitive conclusion difficult, but extrapolating the trend line backward in time indicates that use of first class mail service probably continued to rise even as the use of e-mail increased.

After 2000, however, it appears that the increase in the number of Internet users and an increase in the number of e-mail users may have contributed to the initial decline in use of first class mail service.

E-mail, however, is probably not the only form of electronic interpersonal communication that contributed to the decreasing use of first class mail.

Instant Messaging

Like e-mail, instant messaging (IM) was developed in the early 1960s. IM-like systems were widely used in the 1980s with the introduction of online bulletin board systems and remained in use until the early 1990s, when they were replaced with Internet-based systems.

When surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2000, about 12% of Internet users said they had used instant messaging “yesterday”. That number remained stable, varying now more than two percentage points, through 2008 when the question was last asked on a Pew survey.

SMS (Texting)

Short Message Service (SMS or texting) was developed in the early 1990s, but it wasn't until the early 2000s that it began to grow in popularity. In 2003, about 32 million people in the United States used texting. (CellSigns, 2010) By 2010, the number of texting users was about 100 million.

While texting didn't have any significant impact on the use of instant messaging, it is possible it was a contributing factor to the decline in the use of first class mail service. The rapid rise in the use of texting corresponds to the period during which the number of pieces of first class mail declined.

Blogging

Blogging emerged slowly in the late 1990s and by the early 2000s about 40% of Internet users had seen a blog at one time or another. However, the regular use of blogs in the period between 2005 and 2010 appears to be very low. Between 3% and 5% of Internet users surveyed by the Pew Research Center said they had written on their own blog “yesterday” and between 10% and 12% had read someone else's blog. (Pew Research Center, 2010)

Social Networking

Social networking via sites like Facebook and LinkedIn emerged around 2005 and grew rapidly. In 2005 just 2% of Internet users surveyed by Pew said they had used a social networking system “yesterday”. By 2010, that had increased to 38% and the growth curve was still upward. (Pew Research Center, 2010)

From 2008 to 2010, a period of rapid growth for social networking, the volume of first class mail began a sharp decline. This would indicate that social networking could be a significant contributing factor to the declining use of first class mail service.

Tweeting

Twitter is an Internet-based system that is similar to SMS/texting on mobile phones. It was developed in 2006. By 2008, about 2% of Internet users said they had used Twitter “yesterday”. This rose to 10% in 2010. (Pew Research Center, 2010) Because of a lack of data, it is difficult to assess whether Twitter's growth curve will be like that of social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. It is also dif-

difficult to tell if it has had any effect on the use of first class mail service.

Conclusion

While it may be difficult to attribute the decline of first class mail service to any particular form of electronic interpersonal communication, it seems clear that the adoption of the Internet and the use of electronic communications had a significant impact on how Americans communicate with each other.

Works Cited

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