

Computer literacy, Internet access growing in Tenderloin

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as a way of measuring and improving them. In 1998, when the survey added two questions about computers, 60% of respondents said they had one at home but less than half could get onto the Internet.

Digital glossary

A NETWORK is two or more computers or other digital devices that are linked to share information. A third of the 1,200 network names Robert Dampousse found in the Tenderloin look like cyber-jumbles — “IqzAsNet2xl” or “2WIRE138,” for example — that probably were randomly assigned and perhaps suggested a business, not an individual. The rest incorporate names, like “davidsnetwork,” or are cute takes — “frazzychik” or “MYBLUE-HEAVEN.”

A single network name can represent one computer and printer in an apartment or it can be as vast as “hhonors,” the Hilton Hotel’s network name. The Hilton, at 333 O’Farrell St., has 150 access points — 5% of those Dampousse sniffed out — with a heart-shaped network signal that blankets the Tenderloin, reaching above Geary down to McAllister and from Leavenworth past Mason. Wireless users within the network’s boundaries need a password to tap into it.

A CCESS POINTS usually are boxes that sit on a desk or are mounted on walls. Dampousse compares them to cordless phone base stations that must be plugged into a telephone jack to use the phone cordlessly. The access device connects with a cable or phone line, either directly or through a router or modem, then operates as a two-way antenna, pulling in information from the Internet as radio waves and transmitting them, wirelessly, to devices such as laptop computers, smart phones and printers.

Dampousse couldn’t “hear” those transmissions because he’d set his sniffer to survey passively, not actively. “Passive scanning is like reading the TO and FROM addresses on an envelope, not opening it to read its contents,” he said. ■

— MARJORIE BEGGS

are reported by supervisorial district and city-wide, though the controller’s office can “geocode” the data, refining the numbers by neighborhood, which it did at The Extra’s request.

Using SFPD district boundaries for the Tenderloin (the triangle formed by Larkin, Geary and Market streets), the survey found that 63 of the 101 respondents (61%) had computers at home, compared with 76% in the Southern police district, which includes SoMa. Overall, District 6 residents had the fewest home computers in the 11 supervisorial districts.

Asked if they used their home computer to surf the web, 56 of 103 Tenderloin respondents (55%) said yes, far fewer than in the Southern district, where 78 (77%) had Internet at home.

Another question asked those with home computers and Internet was whether their connection was high-speed, dial-up or wireless. In the Tenderloin, 46 people (83%) had a high-speed connection, 2 (3%) had dial-up and 13 (24%) had wireless. The percentages total more than 100% because many people have both wired and wireless connections. (At home, for example, this reporter has a wired DSL, or digital subscriber line, from AT&T as well as a wireless “Airport” base station that allows friends and family with laptops to use my Internet connection.)

The survey also parsed the data for poor and older residents citywide, not by supervisorial district. The results: They’re still falling through the digital cracks — 36% of people 60 and older and 38% of those in households with incomes below \$25,000 have no home computer. (According to the 2000 census, almost 1 in 5 TL residents is over 62, and 15% live below the poverty level.) For access to high-speed Internet, only 42% of seniors and 41% of low-income residents citywide have it.

NEWSOM’S SPIN ON FREE WI-FI

Such statistics have started a rush of city projects to get more San Franciscans computer- and Internet-literate. In December, among Mayor Newsom’s final press releases was one crowing that free wi-fi had been installed in 33 public housing sites, 6,000 units citywide, giving the residents wireless access to the Internet. Turns out it wasn’t that big a deal.

In reality, says David Rosario, Housing Authority information technology director, the project simply extended existing fiber optics cables to buildings where access points allow users to connect to the Internet. Tenants with laptops can sit in a courtyard or in a “hot spot” in a community room where an access device provides a wireless signal.



James Gordon, seated, 13-year resident at 111 Jones, gets pointers on connecting his laptop to free broadband services from Lee Davenport, One Economy’s director of strategic initiatives.

PHOTO BY MARJORIE BEGGS

“The signal strength will vary from unit to unit,” Rosario said. “I’d say we’re enabling the buildings with wi-fi technology, but not assuring it to each tenant.” The project cost a modest \$250,000 because it piggy-backed on fiber optic installations going on throughout the city. “To get high-speed access into every apartment would cost millions of dollars.”

The supes passed a resolution in October supporting the goal of assuring that 90% of city residents have high-speed Internet access by 2015, and directing the Department of Technology to report back by April on how it will achieve that.

And last year, the city snagged a \$7.9 million federal grant — a three-year project to help 25,000 seniors, disabled and low-income adults and ESL youth get access to computers at community rooms, schools or other sites where they can learn how to email, surf the Web and, especially for youth, create high-end digital media.

Three city departments — Technology, Aging and Adult Services, and Children, Youth and Their Families — will coordinate the project with 11 other public and private partners. The grant is expected to create 200 new jobs, mostly trainers, and includes more than \$600,000 to buy computers for new labs or to upgrade existing ones.

“Our focus is on teaching to function,” said Sybil Boutlier, Department of Aging senior analyst. She cites the example of a grandmother learning to use Skype, a software program for making free or low-cost voice and video calls over the Internet. “She may learn nothing else but Skype, but with it she can see and talk to her grandchildren in Taiwan or Mississippi, and that will make a huge difference in dispelling her sense of isolation from family.”

Boutlier says Aging and Adult Services’ piece of the project includes placing 200 new computers at 48 sites citywide this year. To help its clients get jobs, Conard House will put a couple of computers at each of its eight supportive housing residences in the TL and SoMa as well as at its two case management centers.

Eastern Park Apartments, 201 units for low-income seniors at 711 Eddy St., will build a ground-floor cyber cafe where customers can get training. The San Francisco Senior Center at 481 O’Farrell St. also is slated for computer labs and training, as are seven Adult Day Services central city locations and public housing sites at 350 Ellis St. and 666 Ellis St.

Projects like this come after years of false starts. Newsom began hatching plans for free citywide wi-fi back in 2004, and in 2006 was negotiating with Google and Earthlink to provide it. A tentative agreement was signed in January 2007, but eight months later Earthlink

pulled out and the deal fell through.

That same year, a Google-funded pilot outfit nine TNDC SROs with DSL, rooftop radio antennas and — to pull the data deep into the building — wireless repeaters on each floor. The project never was completed. It’s unclear what happened.

“We had two Meraki repeaters on each floor and some, but not many, of us residents took advantage of them,” recalled community activist Michael Nulty, who lives in TNDC’s Alexander Residence. “Both repeaters on my floor are gone now, probably stolen, and Merakis on other floors are gone as well.” So is the free wi-fi.

Nulty got his own AT&T DSL line: “It’s reliable — the other never was — and I need a reliable connection to do my community work.”

Executive Director Don Falk says TNDC tried to “make [free wi-fi] work in our existing portfolio. As I understand it, the challenge is not in getting the signal to the building — that’s relatively straightforward and not terribly expensive. The challenge is in getting the signal from the building roof through concrete walls into individual units.”

One TNDC building is wired for residents. Curran House, TNDC’s 67-unit family housing at 145 Taylor, opened in 2006 touting high-speed Internet access — though not free access — as a resident perk. Every unit was built with a hard-wire connection that residents can use with cable or Internet access services that they buy. The same kind of wiring is going into TNDC’s new housing for the homeless at 220 Golden Gate Ave., the old YMCA building, Falk said, “but we haven’t decided whether to do wi-fi/free Internet for tenants.”

Another nonprofit developer, Community Housing Partnership, hasn’t wired any of its seven District 6 residential buildings, except for use by office staff. “But we do get a lot of residents asking about it,” said James Tracy, CHP community organizer.

One is David Elliott Lewis, who’s lived at a CHP building for three years. He has a Gateway computer and pays Comcast to stay digitally connected for his social and political activities.

Lewis estimates that 10 to 15 residents in his 74-unit building have computers with an Internet connection, and believes more people in the Tenderloin have Internet access at home than one might expect. “Everyone I know in District 6 is connected — some are in survival mode or have very low incomes, but they still manage to keep online,” he said. “It’s a matter of how you spend whatever money you have.”

Compared with other nonprofit developers, Mercy Housing’s buildings are Internet hotbeds. Marlton Manor at 240 Jones and Padre

Apartments at 241 Jones have five computers for residents; 205 Jones has 14, though these are used mostly by kids from the Boys and Girls Club down the street. In a joint effort, the club runs the lab and maintains the Mercy-owned computers, serving about 40 kids a day plus an occasional resident.

Housing Developer Sharon Christen says Mercy is committed to wiring all its properties, and last fall its Tenderloin buildings became a showcase for a new program called We Are Now Connected.

One Economy, a nonprofit headquartered in Washington, D.C., got a \$28.5 million stimulus grant to subsidize broadband services in underserved communities from the Department of Commerce’s Broadband Technology Opportunity Program, the same funding source as the city’s three-year program.

We Are Now Connected will eventually be in 31 states, but its kickoff was here in the Tenderloin, for residents in Mercy’s buildings at 111, 205 and 240 Jones, 300 apartments in all. No computer giveaways, but for two years, residents can get free wireless email and Internet access via AT&T, plus online search training. For three years after that, each household pays \$10 a month for the Internet connection.

Tenderloin residents Josh Farria and Damien Ramos were hired by One Economy for a year to help make Mercy residents computer- and Internet-literate. They’ll train a couple of residents to take over as trainers when they leave.

At the Oct. 21 program launch at 111 Jones, Ramos, who lives at the Marlton, said he and Farria had started training residents even as the network connections were being installed. “I’ve worked with about five residents so far,” Ramos said, “and a couple consulted with me about what computers they should buy.”

By February, One Economy had trained 190 residents, whose major interests are in learning how to set up email accounts and surf the Web for job, education and health information. From mid-January to mid-February, 420 residents logged onto the Net, either in their apartments or in the buildings’ common areas.

Christen says Mercy will wire future housing for broadband from the get-go. The first may be the St. Anthony Foundation-Mercy collaboration at 121 Golden Gate Ave. — the planned 10-story building with the dining room at ground level and residential units upstairs that will replace the existing structure.

Mercy will offer free Internet “regardless of whether [the buildings] serve very low-income, single-person households, people with special needs, seniors or families,” Christen wrote in an email. “We believe everyone will be using the Internet a lot for basic needs and feel strongly that [they] should have full access to digital services in their homes.”

COMPUTERS THE PUBLIC CAN USE

Central city residents without computers or with laptops and no Internet service have two options: The Main Library and the Tenderloin Tech Lab.

Some of the library’s 240 computers are dedicated to specific uses: The 21 at the children’s center are for kids only; the Library for the Blind and Print Disabled has 14 fitted with features for various disabilities. The fifth-floor training center — offering 30 computer classes monthly and a twice-weekly job-search lab — has 21.

That lab is always filled, says Michelle Jeffers, library spokeswoman. So, too, is the once-a-month Job Resources on the Internet class. Nearly 500 people a month attend computer classes at the Main.

On a Thursday morning, The Extra stopped by to count heads. On the third floor, all eight express computers — you must stand to use them and there’s a 15-minute limit — were in use, and a man was waiting. Another 24 people tapped away or surfed at the stationary computers at the sleek wooden library tables, and seven more were using their own laptops, either plugged in at special stations or connected to the library’s wireless network.

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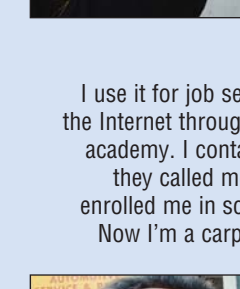
What do you use the Internet for?

Asked of Tenderloin residents at various neighborhood locations



Roberto Bune

I haven’t used it. I wouldn’t mind learning, but I haven’t had time. I’d like to, though. I’d like to use it to get in touch with my parents — I lost my mom’s number and it’s unlisted. I could use the Internet to try and find it.



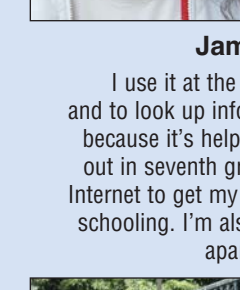
Jeremy Wilson

I use it for job searches. I found a job on the Internet through City Build, a carpenter academy. I contacted them by email and they called me in for an interview and enrolled me in school for two semesters. Now I’m a carpenter at Peck and Hiller.



Remo Rivera

Occasionally I use it for general information and exploring. There aren’t that many computers in the Tenderloin, but I don’t use them much anyways because I’m always out here on the street.



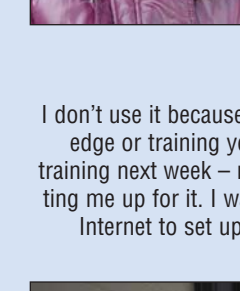
Jamie Lynn Westgate

I use it at the library mostly, for email and to look up information. It’s been good because it’s helped me learn — I dropped out in seventh grade. I’ve been using the Internet to get my GED and find grants for schooling. I’m also using it to look for an apartment and a roommate.



Kreshna Kouma

I don’t use it. Haven’t learned. I don’t have interest in it. I’m so busy smoking cigarettes, eating food and doing illegal drugs I don’t have time for it.



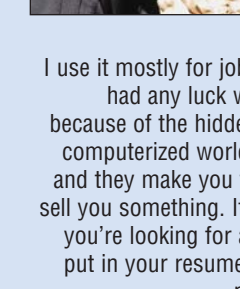
June Johnson

I don’t use it because I don’t have the knowledge or training yet, but I’m going to start training next week — my case manager is setting me up for it. I want to be able to use the Internet to set up some kind of business.



Amy S.

I use the Internet on my phone to access Facebook. I got in touch with my family — I hadn’t talked to them for eight years. They’d been looking for me. I talk to them a lot now. I found out my sister got married.



Derrick Adkins

I use it mostly for job searches, but I haven’t had any luck with that. I think it’s bad, because of the hidden job market inside this computerized world. I try to apply for a job and they make you fill out a survey or try to sell you something. It’s very frustrating when you’re looking for a job and you can’t even put in your resume. Meanwhile, you’ve got people out here starving.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO