

Is Less More? The Long Tail Consumer (Part 1)

By Jon Gibs, VP of Media Insights

I am what you might call a long tail cynic. It's not that I don't believe there is value in creating long tail (i.e., small audience) Internet content or targeting long tail Web sites for marketing. What I do question is the idea that the Internet is driving us to a business environment where most of the value lies in the long tail.

I'm certainly not the first to call the long tail concept into question. Since this hypothesis was introduced by Clay Shirky in 2003 and then popularized by Chris Anderson in 2004, there have been many detractors -- notably, a paper by Anita Elberse in the Harvard Business Review applies a quantitative critique to Anderson's theories. (The ongoing discussion on HBR between Elberse and Anderson is an excellent read, too.)

Thanks to recent improvements in Nielsen's ability to measure traffic across more than 30,000 Web sites, we can now peer deeper into the Internet's long tail, more effectively determine the nature of online content, and provide insights into the long tail consumer. The goal of this series is to shed some light on the Internet's long tail and the people who spend considerable time there.

This report will consider four important questions:

- How do we define the Internet's long tail?
- Do consumers spend more time on long tail sites than they do on short tail?
- What content is featured on short and long tail?
- Who is the long tail consumer and where can you find them?

Defining the Long tail of the Internet

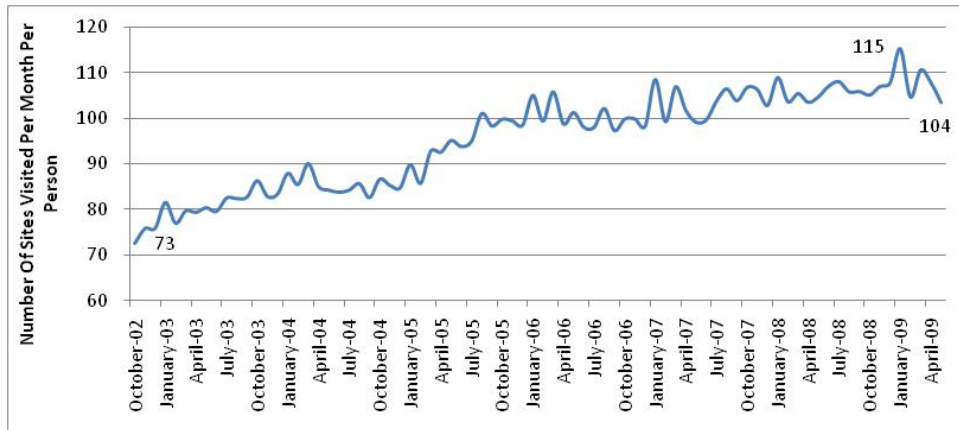
To start, we must agree on a definition. Long tail by nature is a subjective term. The long tail for books is different from the long tail for music, and is different from the long tail of consumer goods. For our purposes we have defined the Internet's long tail as any Web site with less than a 1 percent reach to the online population.

	Number of Measured Sites
Domains < 1% Reach	38,700
Domains ≥1% Reach	1,641

Source: Nielsen NetView

Do Consumers Spend More Time Using Long Tail or Short Tail Web sites?

One of the tenets of long tail theory is that in an increasingly fragmented world, mass media is dead. Without a doubt, the average media consumer does have more choices than ever before, as illustrated by the number of sites the average consumer visits in a given month:



Source: Nielsen NetView

However, just because the online experience is becoming more fragmented for consumers doesn't mean people are using new sites more or portals and other short tail sites less. Conventional wisdom is that consumers gravitate to, and are more engaged with, long tail content because it is core to their specific interests. Looking at our newly expanded panel's Internet usage (more than 200,000 people-strong) we find that the short tail—those sites with a greater than or equal to 1 percent reach—remain the most visited places online.

	Average Sessions Per Person	Average of Time Per Site Per Person (Seconds)	Average Web Pages Per Site Per Person
Long Tail	2.5	721.8	15.3
Short Tail	3.4	1,756.9	27.9

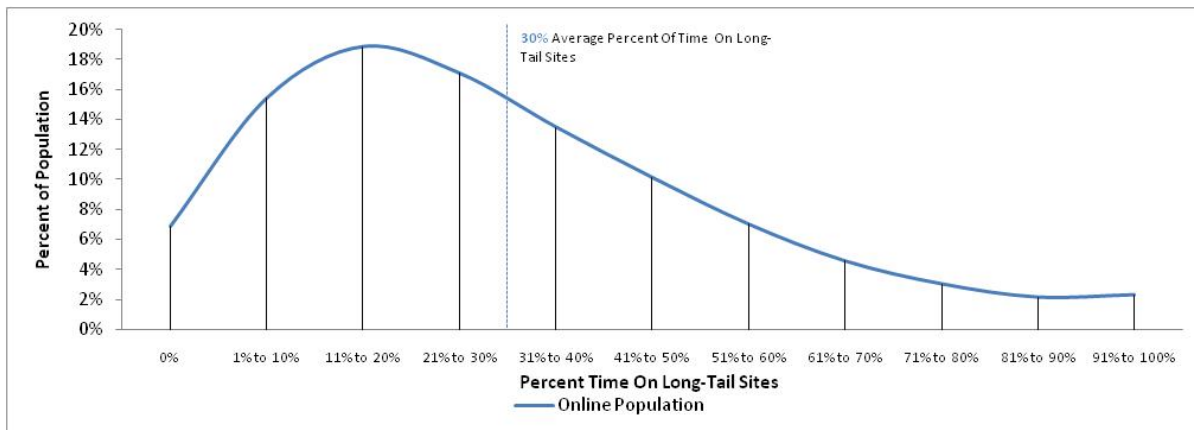
Source: Nielsen NetView

But the table above doesn't even tell the complete story. Separating the Top 10 largest sites within the short tail makes it clear where consumers continue to spend more of their time:

	Average Sessions Per Person	Average of Time Per Person	Average Web Pages Per Person
Long Tail	2.5	721.8	15.3
Short Tail	3.3	1640.2	25.7
Largest 10	12.7	9947.8	181.1

Source: Nielsen NetView

Let's now take a look at recent audience distribution within the long tail:



Source: Nielsen NetView

The chart above, and the table below, illustrates the distribution of time spent in the long tail during May 2009. A few things pop out from the data:

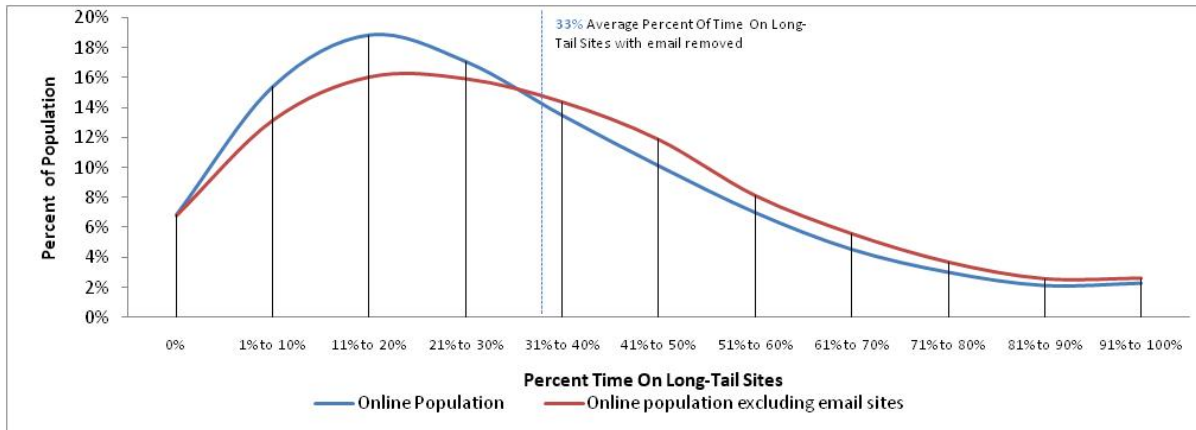
- The largest segment of the online population (about 19 percent on the Y-axis above) spent 11 to 20 percent of their time on long tail sites
- Another 19 percent of the population spent 50 percent or more of their time in the long tail (from 51 through 100 percent on the above chart). If an advertiser wants to reach that 20 percent of long tail consumers effectively, they will need to use the long tail as a marketing outlet. In other words, ignore advertising on long tail sites at your own risk
- The data show that on average, people are spending 30 percent in the long tail

	Online Population	Online Population, Excluding E-Mail Sites	% Increase in Long Tail Use When E-Mail Is Removed
0%	7%	7%	-0.1%
1% to 10%	15%	13%	-2.2%
11% to 20%	19%	16%	-2.8%
21% to 30%	17%	16%	-1.1%
31% to 40%	13%	14%	0.9%
41% to 50%	10%	12%	1.8%
51% to 60%	7%	8%	1.1%
61% to 70%	5%	6%	1.0%
71% to 80%	3%	4%	0.6%
81% to 90%	2%	3%	0.4%
91% to 100%	2%	3%	0.3%

Source: Nielsen NetView

What Type of Content Makes Up Short and Long Tail Consumption?

The question remains: what makes the short tail so time consuming? One of the easiest ways to figure this out is by removing certain known content types. For example, in the chart below, we take a look at a similar distribution to the one above, but removing e-mail use (such as Yahoo! Mail, Hotmail and Gmail) from short-tail content.



Source: Nielsen NetView

With e-mail removed we see a flattening of the curve and movement to the right for the average use of long tail sites. The peak population is still using the long tail only 11 percent to 20 percent of the time, but that population percent has dropped from 19 percent to 15 percent, with 1 to 2 percent population increases for categories with 31 percent long tail use and greater. Overall, when e-mail is removed, 33 percent of users' time is spent in the long tail, an increase of 3 percentage points.

All of this suggests that e-mail is one, but not the key, driver of short-tail use. Removing other types of content from the sample yields some additional insight into how consumers are using the long and short tails.

	Average % of Time Spent in the Long Tail
Online population	30%
Online population excluding e-mail sites	33%
Online population excluding adult sites	29%
Online population excluding social media sites	33%
Online population excluding video sites	31%
Online population excluding e-mail, adult, social media and video sites	37%

Source: Nielsen NetView

By analyzing the way the average moves (above or below the overall average of 30 percent), we can see where specific types of content consumption tend to live in the short or long tail. In the chart above, if the adjusted time consumers spend on long tail consumption is higher than the 30 percent average, the content tends to live in the short tail. If the adjusted average is less than 30 percent, it tends to be long tail. Adult content, not surprisingly, tends to be in the long tail; however the consumption of all of the other content tends to be in the short tail.

Many will look at social media and video and be surprised at this finding. The truth is that as much as we might like to believe that social media and online video are long tail phenomena, they are not. YouTube, Hulu, MySpace and Facebook are among the largest sites on the Internet, with huge traffic.

The Long and Short of It: Conclusions and Questions

Do the numbers dispute the long tail? No. Our ability to analyze the Internet's long tail demonstrates that it is still an important place to be – especially if reaching the 20 percent of the online population that spends more than 50 percent of their time online on long tail sites is important to you.

Do the data support the long tail as *the* force of nature Anderson makes it out to be? Not entirely. One thing is certain: mass media online is alive and well.

What we need to do is better define the demographics of the long tail consumer and answer the questions of who they are and what they do online. In doing so, we can move beyond using the term long tail as a convenient way to describe Internet phenomena – and potentially determine if the Internet is changing the rules on aiming for mass or niche markets. How we evaluate those sites and the consumers that use them will be the subject of our next post in this series: *The Hunt for the Long Tail Consumer: who are they and where can you find them?*

About the Author



Jon Gibs, Vice President, Media Analytics, Nielsen Online, specializes in research methodology design and development using Nielsen's wide array of media measurement and market research products. With more than 10 years of market research experience, Jon previously managed the survey group for Nielsen Online. He is called upon frequently by the press, including MSNBC, CNBC, the Investor's Business Daily, and MarketWatch. Prior to Nielsen Online, Jon was an analyst and analytics director at Jupiter Research where he developed client reports based on primary survey analysis. Jon earned a M.A. in Geography, specializing in spatial statistics, from the State University of New York at Buffalo and a B.A from Clark University, also in Geography.

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