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Declining Majority of Online Adults Say the Internet Has Been Good for Society

At the same time, the contours of connectivity are shifting: One-in-five Americans are now ‘smartphone only’ internet users at home

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At the same time, the contours of connectivity are shifting: One-in-five Americans are now ‘smartphone only’ internet users at home

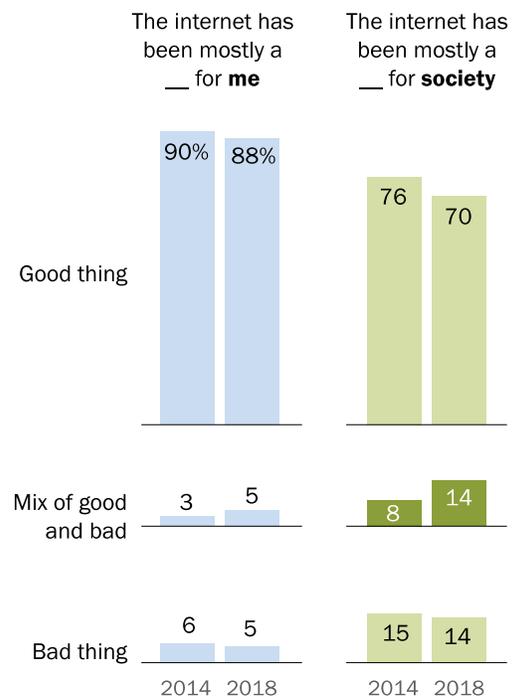
Americans tend to view the impact of the [internet](#) and other [digital technologies](#) on their own lives in largely positive ways, Pew Research Center surveys have shown over the years. A survey of U.S. adults conducted in January 2018 finds continuing evidence of this trend, with the vast majority of internet users (88%) saying the internet has, on balance, been a mostly good thing for them personally.

But even as they view the internet’s personal impact in a positive light, Americans have grown somewhat more ambivalent about the impact of digital connectivity on society as a whole. A sizable majority of online adults (70%) continue to believe the internet has been a good thing for society. Yet the share of online adults saying this has declined by a modest but still significant 6 percentage points since early 2014, when the Center first asked the question. This is balanced by a corresponding increase (from 8% to 14%) in the share of online adults who say the internet’s societal impact is a mix of good and bad. Meanwhile, the share saying the internet has been a mostly bad thing for society is largely unchanged over that time: 15% said this in 2014, and 14% say so today.

This shift in opinion regarding the ultimate social impact of the internet is particularly stark among older Americans, despite the fact that older adults have been especially [rapid adopters](#) of consumer technologies such as social media and smartphones in recent years. Today 64% of online adults ages 65 and older say the internet has been a mostly good thing for society. That represents

Growing share of online adults say the internet has been a mixed blessing for society

% of online U.S. adults who say the following ...



Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018.

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a 14-point decline from the 78% who said this in 2014. The attitudes of younger adults have remained more consistent over that time: 74% of internet users ages 18 to 29 say the internet has been mostly good for society, comparable to the 79% who said so in 2014.

As was true in our 2014 survey, college graduates are more likely than those with lower levels of educational attainment to say the internet has had a positive impact on society (and less likely to say it has had a negative impact). Among online adults with a college degree, 81% say the impact of the internet on society has been mostly good and just 7% say it has been mostly bad. By contrast, 65% of those with a high school diploma or less say the internet has had a mostly good impact on society, and 17% say its impact has been mostly bad.

Positive views of the internet are often tied to information access and connecting with others; negative views are based on a wider range of issues

Those who think the internet has had a good impact on society tended to focus on two key issues, according to follow-up items which allowed respondents to explain their views in their own words. Most (62% of those with a positive view) mentioned how the internet makes information much easier and faster to access. Meanwhile, 23% of this group mentioned the ability to connect with other people, or the ways in which the internet helps them keep more closely in touch with friends and family.

By contrast, those who think the internet is a bad thing for society gave a wider range of reasons for their opinions, with no single issue standing out. The most common theme (mentioned by 25% of these respondents) was that the internet isolates people from each other or encourages them to spend too much time with their devices. These responses also included references to the spread and prevalence of fake news or other types of false information: 16% mentioned this issue. Some 14% of those who think the internet's impact is negative cited specific concerns about its effect on children, while 13% argued that it encourages illegal activity. A small share (5%) expressed privacy concerns or worries about sensitive personal information being available online.

One-in-five Americans are now 'smartphone only' internet users at home

These attitudinal changes are occurring in a broader landscape in which the access options available to ordinary Americans are shifting dramatically. Most notably, fully one-in-five Americans (20%) are now "smartphone only" internet users at home – that is, they own a smartphone but do not subscribe to traditional broadband service where they live. This represents a 7-point increase compared with data from 2015, when 13% of Americans were smartphone-only

users. Roughly two-thirds of Americans (65%) say they subscribe to traditional broadband service at home, similar to the 67% who said this in July 2015.¹

As has consistently been true in past surveys conducted by the Center, those who rely on their smartphones for home internet service are disproportionately less likely to have attended college compared with those with traditional broadband service. They also report living in lower-income households. For instance, 31% of Americans with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 are smartphone-only internet users, more than three times the share among those living in households earning \$75,000 or more per year (9%). This phenomenon is also notably more prevalent among blacks and Hispanics than among whites.

Conversely, relatively well-educated and financially well-off Americans are substantially more likely to say they do have a traditional broadband connection at home. Nearly nine-in-ten Americans in households earning \$75,000 or more per year say they subscribe to home broadband service, nearly double the rate among those earning less than \$30,000 per year (45% of whom have broadband service at home).

One-in-five Americans own a smartphone, but do not have traditional broadband service

% of U.S. adults who indicate that they have ...

| | Broadband at home | Smartphone, no broadband | No broadband, no smartphone |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Total | 65% | 20% | 15% |
| Ages 18-29 | 67 | 28 | 5 |
| 30-49 | 70 | 24 | 7 |
| 50-64 | 68 | 16 | 17 |
| 65+ | 50 | 10 | 40 |
| White | 72 | 14 | 14 |
| Black | 57 | 24 | 19 |
| Hispanic | 47 | 35 | 18 |
| HS or less | 48 | 26 | 25 |
| Some college | 68 | 21 | 12 |
| College+ | 85 | 10 | 5 |
| <\$30,000 | 45 | 31 | 23 |
| \$30,000-\$74,999 | 72 | 18 | 9 |
| \$75,000+ | 87 | 9 | 3 |
| Urban | 67 | 22 | 12 |
| Suburban | 70 | 17 | 13 |
| Rural | 58 | 17 | 25 |

Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics.

Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018.

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¹ The Center has used several different question wordings to identify broadband users in recent years. Our survey conducted in July 2015 used a directly comparable question wording to the one used in this survey.

Beyond this growing reliance on smartphones for home internet service in lieu of traditional broadband service, it is also notable that 15% of Americans indicate that they have *neither* broadband service at home *nor* a smartphone. A large share of this group is not online at all: [11% of Americans](#) indicate that they do not use the internet or email from any location. In other cases, the share without home broadband or a smartphone represents Americans who go online using other means.

And as was the case with smartphone-only internet usage, those who lack both broadband service and a smartphone are disproportionately likely to be from certain segments of the population. Most notably, 40% of Americans ages 65 and older fall into this category. But this is also true for substantial minorities of rural residents (25%), those who have not attended college (25%) and those from households earning less than \$30,000 per year (23%).

Acknowledgments

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Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on telephone interviews conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018, among a national sample of 2,002 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (500 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 1,502 were interviewed on a cellphone, including 1,071 who had no landline telephone). The survey was conducted by interviewers under the direction of Abt Associates. A combination of landline and cellphone random-digit-dial samples were used; both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents in the landline sample were selected by randomly asking for the youngest adult male or female who is now at home. Interviews in the cell sample were conducted with the person who answered the phone, if that person was an adult 18 years of age or older. For detailed information about our survey methodology, see: <http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/>

The combined landline and cellphone sample is weighted using an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and nativity and region to parameters from the 2016 Census Bureau’s American Community Survey one-year estimates and population density to parameters from the bureau’s decennial census. The sample also is weighted to match current patterns of telephone status (landline only, cellphone only, or both landline and cellphone), based on extrapolations from the 2016 National Health Interview Survey. The weighting procedure also accounts for the fact that respondents with both landline and mobile phones have a greater probability of being included in the combined sample and adjusts for household size among respondents with a landline phone. The margins of error reported and statistical tests of significance are adjusted to account for the survey’s design effect, a measure of how much efficiency is lost from the weighting procedures.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

| Group | Unweighted sample size | Plus or minus ... |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Total sample | 2,002 | 2.4 percentage points |
| Ages 18-29 | 352 | 5.8 |
| 30-49 | 528 | 4.7 |
| 50-64 | 544 | 4.7 |
| 65+ | 529 | 4.7 |
| Total internet users | 1,785 | 2.6 |

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Pew Research Center undertakes all polling activity, including calls to mobile telephone numbers, in compliance with the Telephone Consumer Protection Act and other applicable laws.

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Topline questionnaire

EMINUSE Do you use the internet or email, at least occasionally?

INTMOB Do you access the internet on a cell phone, tablet or other mobile handheld device, at least occasionally?²

| | USES INTERNET | DOES NOT USE INTERNET |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Current | 89 | 11 |
| November 2016 | 90 | 10 |
| May 2016 | 87 | 13 |
| April 2016 | 87 | 13 |
| November 2015 | 87 | 13 |

HOME4NW Do you currently subscribe to internet service at HOME?

Based on all internet users [N=1,785]

| | YES | NO | (VOL.) DON'T KNOW | (VOL.) REFUSED |
|-----------|-----|----|-------------------|----------------|
| Current | 80 | 20 | * | 0 |
| July 2015 | 84 | 16 | * | 0 |

BBHOME1 Do you subscribe to dial-up internet service at home... OR do you subscribe to a higher-speed broadband service such as DSL, cable, or fiber optic service?

BBHOME2 [ASK IF BBHOME1=DIAL-UP:] Just to confirm, you use a dial-up connection to the internet at home, and not a higher-speed broadband connection?

Based on all home internet subscribers [N=1,466]

| | DIAL-UP | HIGHER SPEED | (VOL.) BOTH DIAL-UP AND HIGHER SPEED | (VOL.) ACCESS NET ON CELL OR TABLET ONLY | (VOL.) NO HOME NET ACCESS | (VOL.) DK | (VOL.) REF. |
|-----------|---------|--------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Current | 3 | 90 | 2 | * | * | 5 | * |
| July 2015 | 3 | 91 | 1 | * | 1 | 4 | * |

SUMMARY OF HOME BROADBAND

² The definition of an internet user varies from survey to survey. Prior to January 2005, internet users were defined as those who said yes to "Do you ever go online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive email?" From January 2005 thru February 2012, an internet user is someone said yes to either "Do you use the internet, at least occasionally?" (INTUSE) OR "Do you send or receive email, at least occasionally?" (EMLOCC). From April 2012 thru December 2012, an internet user is someone said yes to any of three questions: INTUSE, EMLOCC or "Do you access the internet on a cell phone, tablet or other mobile handheld device, at least occasionally?" (INTMOB). In May 2013, half the sample was asked INTUSE/EMLOCC/INTMOB and half was asked EMINUSE/INTMOB. Those May 2013 trend results are for both forms combined.

Based on home internet subscribers [N=1,466]

| | <u>CURRENT</u> | | JULY 2015 |
|---|----------------|----------------------|-----------|
| % | 91 | Home broadband users | 92 |
| | 9 | No home broadband/DK | 8 |

Based on Total [N=2,002]

| | <u>CURRENT</u> | | JULY 2015 |
|---|----------------|----------------------|-----------|
| % | 65 | Home broadband users | 67 |
| | 35 | No home broadband/DK | 33 |

DEVICE1a Next, do you have a cell phone, or not?³

| | YES | NO | (VOL.) DON'T KNOW | (VOL.) REFUSED |
|---------------|-----|----|-------------------|----------------|
| Current | 95 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| November 2016 | 95 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| May 2016 | 92 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| April 2016 | 92 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| November 2015 | 91 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| July 2015 | 92 | 8 | * | * |

SMART2 Is your cell phone a smartphone, or not?

Based on cell phone owners

| | YES, SMARTPHONE | NO, NOT A SMARTPHONE | DON'T KNOW | REFUSED |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------|---------|
| Current [N = 1,933] | 82 | 17 | 1 | * |
| November 2016 [N=2,926] | 81 | 16 | 3 | * |
| May 2016 [N=992] | 76 | 17 | 7 | 0 |
| April 2016 [N=1,535] | 78 | 16 | 6 | * |
| November 2015 [N=2,606] | 76 | 17 | 7 | * |
| July 2015 [N=1,903] | 73 | 20 | 7 | * |
| April 2015 [N=1,900] | 73 | 21 | 5 | * |
| September 2013 [N=5,763] | 61 | 32 | 7 | * |
| August 2013 [N=1,636] | 60 | 33 | 6 | * |
| May 2013 [N=2,076] | 55 | 39 | 5 | * |
| December 2012 [N=1,954] | 52 | 41 | 6 | * |
| November 2012 [N=1,992] | 55 | 38 | 6 | * |
| September 2012 [N=2,581] | 53 | 40 | 6 | * |
| April 2012 [N=1,954] | 46 | 44 | 10 | * |
| February 2012 [N=1,961] | 45 | 46 | 8 | * |
| May 2011 [N=1,914] | 33 | 53 | 14 | * |

³ Question was asked of landline sample only. Results shown here have been recalculated to include cell phone sample in the "Yes" percentage.

PIAL11 Overall, when you add up all the advantages and disadvantages of the internet, would you say the internet has mostly been [ROTATE: (a GOOD thing) or (a BAD thing)] for society?

| | CURRENT (BASED ON ALL ADULTS) | | CURRENT (BASED ON INTERNET USERS) | JANUARY 2014 (BASED ON INTERNET USERS) |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| % | 65 | Good thing | 70 | 76 |
| | 16 | Bad thing | 14 | 15 |
| | 14 | Some of both (VOL.) | 14 | 8 |
| | 4 | Don't know | 1 | 1 |
| | 1 | Refused | * | * |

PIAL11a What is the main reason you think the internet has been a [IF PIAL11=1 "good"; IF PIAL11=2 "bad"] thing for society? [OPEN END; RESPONSES CODED AFTER DATA COLLECTION]

Based on those who say internet has been a good thing for society [N=1,338]

| | CURRENT | |
|---|---------|------------------------------------|
| % | 62 | Makes accessing information easier |
| | 23 | Helps people connect |
| | 6 | Other |
| | 9 | Don't know/Refused |

Based on those who say internet has been a bad thing for society [N=294]

| | CURRENT | |
|---|---------|------------------------------|
| % | 25 | Isolates people |
| | 16 | Fake news, misinformation |
| | 14 | Bad for children |
| | 13 | Criminal activities |
| | 5 | Personal information/Privacy |
| | 19 | Other |
| | 7 | Don't Know/Refused |

PIAL12 How about you, personally? Overall, when you add up all the advantages and disadvantages of the internet, would you say the internet has mostly been [ROTATE IN SAME ORDER AS PIAL11: (a GOOD thing) or (a BAD thing)] for you?

Based on internet users [N=1,785]

| | CURRENT | | JANUARY 2014 |
|---|---------|---------------------|--------------|
| % | 88 | Good thing | 90 |
| | 5 | Bad thing | 6 |
| | 5 | Some of both (VOL.) | 3 |
| | 2 | Don't know | 1 |
| | 1 | Refused | * |