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Tech experts reflect on social media boom

Most surveyed in Pew Internet/Elon University study say social benefits of Internet use far outweigh negatives; some say it robs time, exposes private information, engenders intolerance

Nearly 900 Internet experts and technologists expressed provocative thoughts on the impact that rapidly expanding social media systems are having on individual lives and society in general in a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and the Imagining the Internet Center at Elon University. While most respondents acknowledged that the Internet has both positive and negative effects, 85 percent of the people participating said it improves social relations and will continue to do so through 2020.

The Web-based survey gathered opinions on 10 important issues from a select group of experts and the highly engaged Internet public. Results from this survey are being released in six major 2010 reports; this is the fifth. (*Details about earlier reports can be found here:* <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/predictions/expertsurveys/2010survey/default.xhtml>. *Deeper details from this report are here:* http://www.elon.edu/e-web/predictions/expertsurveys/2010survey/future_social_relations.xhtml.)

In this canvassing of a diverse set of experts, 85% agreed with the statement:

"In 2020, when I look at the big picture and consider my personal friendships, marriage and other relationships, I see that the Internet has mostly been a positive force on my social world. And this will only grow more true in the future."

The rapid development of messaging and appealing new social applications has created a relationships boom online over the past few years. Facebook now has nearly 500 million registered users. Millions also use applications such as Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and other online tools. People also connect by instant messaging and text messaging, through blogs and by communicating "face-to-face" using video chat functions such as those offered by Skype.

The majority of the people surveyed noted that the Internet allows people to create, cultivate and continue bigger social networks than they had been able to maintain in pre-Internet days. They said they like the advantages offered by the easy sharing of personal details in a one-to-many form that they can control. They noted that richer social relationships emerge from greater awareness. They said that over the next decade people will continue to invest themselves in building communities via these personal broadcasts.

Some survey participants pointed out that geography is no longer an obstacle and the Internet is also eliminating some or all of the constraints of time and cost when it comes to human connection and sharing. Some said that it is possible that these new ways to interact will inspire more tolerance and global understanding.

Some observed that technology will continue to reconfigure how we live our lives at home and at work, and that "virtual friends" in more developed social networks will become more common in the future. They said the definitions of "privacy" and "friendship" are changing. They noted that new social norms are evolving to take account of changing realities.

While not in the majority, some respondents pointed out negatives of the connections people are generating online. These included observations that people lose time online that could be spent in face-to-face relationships; social networks can be a distraction; online relationships are not deep and meaningful; the Internet allows people to silo themselves and incite more intolerance.

Some survey participants said our tools are changing quickly but basic human nature doesn't change that quickly and technology amplifies existing tendencies, both good and bad.

Following is a selection of respondents' remarks:

"Today's trend of e-mail replacement by messaging (think Twitter and SMS) will continue, although e-mail will still be useful for file sharing and interpersonal correspondence. I hope that the walled gardens like Facebook will have passed away, and that open networks of friends and colleagues will be enabled by semantic web tools in public-domain services." —**Frank Paynter**, Sandhill Technologies, LLC

"I got involved in social networks as an adult. I wonder about younger people who haven't yet formed a solid Web of real-life relationships or learned how to function in a meat-space social environment. I think there's a real downside there." —**Reva Basch**, consultant for Aubergine Information Systems

"The net is about people connecting online, for commerce, politics, and personally, and we already see that enhances real-life relationships. Location-based social networking, in particular, will be a big part of our lives." —**Craig Newmark**, founder and customer-service representative, Craigslist

"Fifty years ago emigrants left their family and friends behind. Now people who move from one country to another simply enlarge their social networks, building truly global communities." —**Hal Varian**, chief economist of Google and on the faculty at the University of California-Berkeley

"Two opposing forces are at play: Cocooning and Connecting. Cocooners talk only to their 'in' group and seek little exposure outside. Connectors listen widely and are heard widely. I think the Connecting energy creates positive dynamics and overwhelms the Cocooning." —**Jerry Michalski**, founder, Relationship Economy eXpedition and founder and president of Sociate

"The Internet is a tool, one which reduces the costs of communications. I will have better awareness of all the people in my life who are important to me." —**Hal Eisen**, senior engineering manager at Ask.com

"Where you stand depends on your circumstances. For me, the net is a wonderful learning network and for some it is a lifeline and for others it is a tether to their boss or a source of harmful misinformation, disinformation, and distraction. Since when is the world starkly divided into either-or alternatives? For many, life will be alienated, rushed, and confusing because of their involvement online. Others will choose or will learn or be trained to cope with dangers of an always-on lifestyle." —**Howard Rheingold**, author of many books about technology including *Tools for Thought* and *Smart Mobs*

"The enemies of social connectivity are silence, disengagement, distance, and abandonment. In the past, how many individuals and families have suffered from these degenerative influences? Now we have the Internet. High school sweethearts are reunited. Strangers meet and form personal unions. Families are brought together. Adoptees find reunion, too. Interest groups thrive. Businesses leap borders. Genealogies are learned, and one person in his lifetime can place himself into history, and comprehend his place in the span of time. On the Internet, social alienation remains a factual force. But never before has a person had more opportunity for

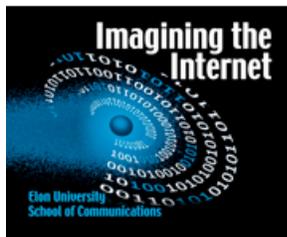
social integration. More than ever, being inside or outside now is a matter of personal choice.”
—**Eric James**, president of the James Preservation Trust and publisher of *Stray Leaves*, author and lecturer

The Internet is the opposite of suburbanization: suburbs took us away from other people and locked us into houses; the Internet opens a door from the house into a potentially shared place. That does not mean that physical presence is not important in relationships. Lack of physical presence is not the fault of the Internet; rather, it stems from the way the world is configured (globalization, suburbanization, increased population, etc.) predating the Internet. The Internet replaced lack of physical presence with social presence.” —**Zeynep Tufekci**, assistant professor, University of Maryland-Baltimore County and author of the @technosociology blog

“Humans are hardwired to connect and relate on a personal level. They need social validation and group membership. Technology and Internet use will support people's interpersonal and social goals because social needs dominate all others.” —**Pamela Rutledge**, director of the Media Psychology Research Center, at the UCLA Extension

“Now, the social grid gives us the luxury to keep low-involvement relationships – past contacts, former classmates, etc. – together, but the serious friendships, spouses, those can continue at their high involvement.” —**Dave Levy**, senior account executive and media trend researcher in digital public affairs at Edelman

Many additional thought-provoking responses to the question on social relations can be found here:
<http://www.pewInternet.org>
http://www.elon.edu/e-web/predictions/expertsurveys/2010survey/future_social_relations.xhtml



The Imagining the Internet Center (<http://www.imaginingtheInternet.org>) is an initiative of Elon University's School of Communications. The center's research holds a mirror to humanity's use of communications technologies, informs policy development, exposes potential futures and provides a historic record. Among the spectrum of issues addressed are power, politics, privacy, property, augmented and virtual reality, control and the rapid changes spurred by accelerating technology. *Imagining the Internet* is directed by Janna Quitney Anderson, an associate professor of communications at Elon.



The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project

(<http://www.pewInternet.org>), directed by Lee Rainie, is a nonprofit, non-partisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It produces reports exploring the impact of the Internet on families, communities,

work and home, daily life, education, health care and civic and political life. It is one of seven projects of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization.

The survey results are based on a non-random online sample of 895 internet experts and other internet users, recruited via e-mail invitation, Twitter or Facebook. Since the data are based on a non-random sample, a margin of error cannot be computed, and the results are not projectable to any population other than the experts in this sample.