

The New York Times

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Business ■ Innovation ■ Technology ■ Society

NOVEMBER 5, 2009, 5:15 PM

Does Technology Reduce Social Isolation?

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Update | 11:19 p.m. Made slight clarifications throughout.

Hundreds of daily updates come from friends on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), but do people actually feel closer to each other?

It turns out the size of the average American's social circle is smaller today than 20 years ago, as measured by the number of self-reported confidants in a person's life. Yet contrary to popular opinion, use of cellphones and the Internet is not to blame, according to a [new study released Wednesday by the Pew Internet and American Life Project](#).

In fact, people who regularly use digital technologies are more social than the average American and more likely to visit parks and cafes, or volunteer for local organizations, according to the study, which was based on telephone interviews with a national sample of 2,512 adults living in the continental United States.

The study found some less-than-social behavior, however. People who use social networks like Facebook or LinkedIn are 30 percent less likely to know their neighbors and 26 percent less likely to provide them companionship.

Pew asked questions that would get at the heart of the link between social isolation in America and use of digital technologies, with an eye toward debunking earlier thinking that suggested technology caused people to hole up in their pajamas or lose some friendships.

Two years ago, a General Society Survey hypothesized that the average American was feeling more socially isolated because of the rise of the Internet and cellphones. That study found that from 1985 to 2004, the number of intimate friendships people reported dropped from three to two.

The Pew report confirmed those findings. But it also deflated other data in the previous study that indicated the number of people saying they had no one to confide in had nearly tripled from 1985 to 2004. Pew reported that only 6 percent of the American population fell into that category of isolation — with no significant change over the last 25 years.

The circle of close friends for mobile phone users tends to be 12 percent larger than for nonusers. People who share online photos or instant messages have 9 percent larger social circles than nonusers.

Pew also confirmed that Americans' social networks were becoming less diverse, defined as relationships with people from different backgrounds. But on average, the social circles of cellphone and instant-message users were more diverse than those of nonusers.

“We identified Internet use, and especially using social networks, contributes to having more diverse social networks,” said Keith Hampton, lead researcher for the report and an assistant professor of communication at the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

The study also found that people still prefer face-to-face communication as the primary means to stay in touch with friends and family (people see loved ones in person an average of 210 days a year). Respondents said that they were in touch via mobile phone an average of 195 days a year.