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Social Media Bots Draw Public's Attention and Concern

While most Americans know about social media bots, many think they have a negative impact on how people stay informed

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Social Media Bots Draw Public's Attention and Concern

While most Americans know about social media bots, many think they have a negative impact on how people stay informed

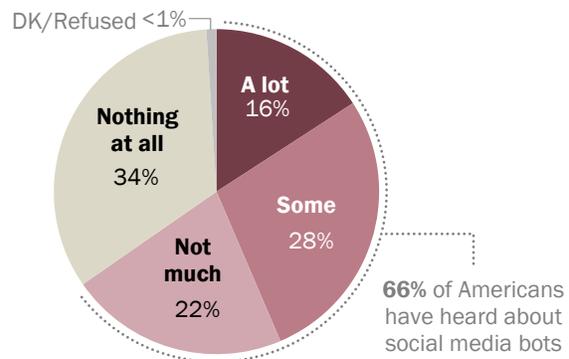
Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, many Americans have expressed [concern](#) about the presence of misinformation online, particularly on [social media](#). Recent [congressional hearings](#) and investigations by [social media sites](#) and [academic researchers](#) have suggested that one factor in the spread of misinformation is social media bots – accounts that operate on their own, without human involvement, to post and interact with others on social media sites.

This topic has drawn the attention of much of the public: About two-thirds of Americans (66%) have heard about social media bots, though far fewer (16%) have heard a lot about these accounts. Among those aware of the phenomenon, a large majority are concerned that bot accounts are being used maliciously, according to a new Pew Research Center survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018, among 4,581 U.S. adults who are members of Pew Research Center's nationally representative American Trends Panel (the Center has previously [studied bots on Twitter](#) and the [news sites to which they link](#)). Eight-in-ten of those who have heard of bots say that these accounts are mostly used for bad purposes, while just 17% say they are mostly used for good purposes.

To further understand some of the nuances of the public's views of social media bots, the remainder of this study explores attitudes among those Americans who have heard about them (about a third – 34% – have not heard anything about them).

About two-thirds of Americans have heard about social media bots, most of whom believe they are used maliciously

% of U.S. adults who have heard ___ about social media bots



Of the 66% of U.S. adults who **have heard** about social media bots, % who say bots are mostly used for ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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While many Americans are aware of the existence of social media bots, fewer are confident they can identify them. About half of those who have heard about bots (47%) are very or somewhat confident they can recognize these accounts on social media, with just 7% saying they are *very* confident. In contrast, 84% of Americans expressed confidence in their ability to recognize made-up news in an earlier [study](#).

When it comes to the news environment specifically, many find social media bots' presence pervasive and concerning. About eight-in-ten of those who have heard of bots (81%) think that at least a fair amount of the news people get from social media comes from these accounts, including 17% who think a great deal comes from bots. And about two-thirds (66%) think that social media bots have a mostly negative effect on how well-informed Americans are about current events, while far fewer (11%) believe they have a mostly positive effect.

While the public's overall impression of social media bots is negative, they have more nuanced views about specific uses of these accounts – with some uses receiving overwhelming support or opposition. For example, 78% of those who have heard about bots support the government using them to post emergency updates, the most popular function of the nine asked about in the survey. In contrast, these Americans are overwhelmingly opposed to the use of bots to post made-up news or false information (92%). They are also largely opposed to bots being used for political purposes and are more split when considering how companies and news organizations often use bots.

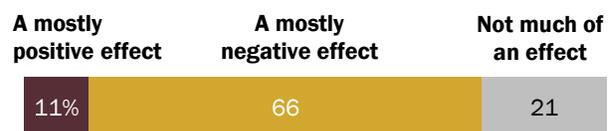
Most believe a fair amount of the news people see on social media comes from bots ...

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say ___ of the news that Americans get from social media comes from bots



... and most think bots have a negative effect on how the public stays informed

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say bots have had ___ on how well-informed Americans are about events and issues in the news



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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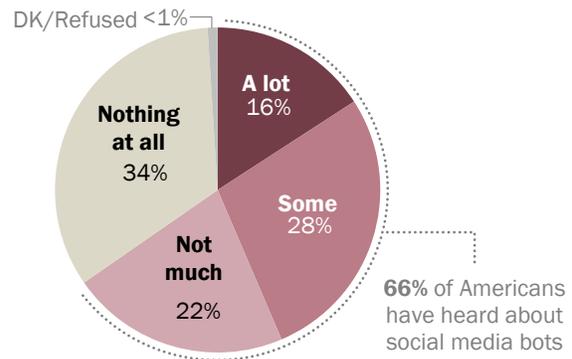
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1. Most Americans have heard about social media bots; many think they are malicious and hard to identify

Amid the ongoing debate about the role of bots on social media, about two-thirds of Americans (66%) have heard at least something about social media bots – defined in this survey as accounts that operate “on their own, without human involvement, to post and do other activities on social media sites.” But very few pay close attention: Just 16% have heard a lot about social media bots. And roughly a third of the public (34%) has heard nothing at all about these types of accounts.

About two-thirds of Americans have heard about social media bots

% of U.S. adults who have heard ___ about social media bots



Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.
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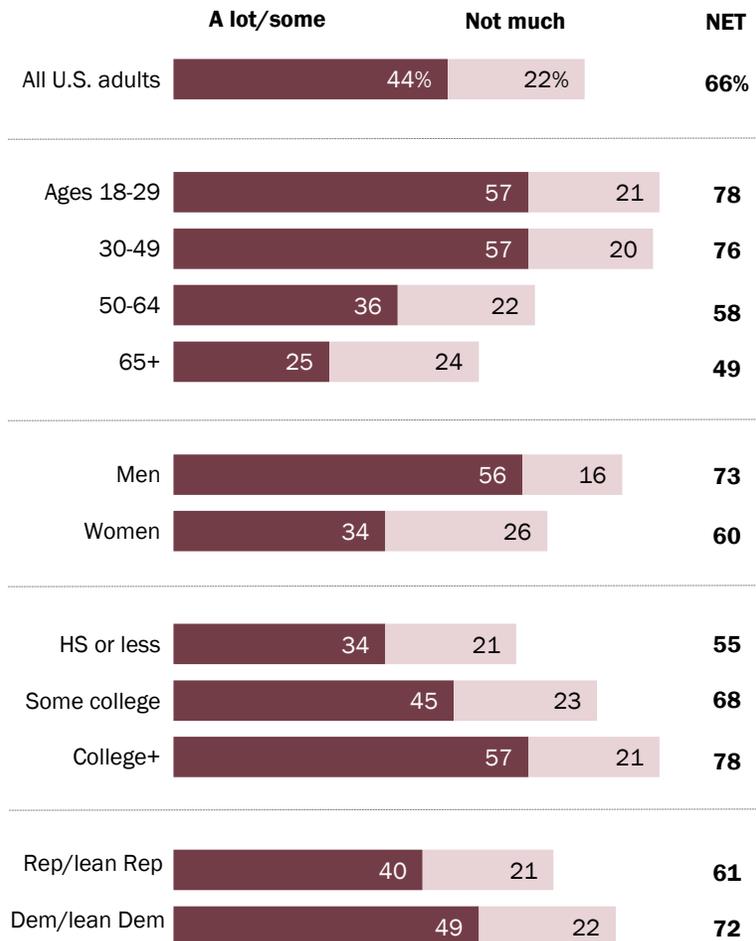
While most Americans have heard about them, the debate about social media bots has not reached all corners of the public at the same rate.

Younger Americans are much more likely than older adults to have heard about social media bots. About three-quarters of Americans ages 18 to 29 and 30 to 49 (78% and 76%, respectively) have heard of bots, compared with 58% of those ages 50 to 64 and about half of those 65 or older (49%). The same pattern holds when comparing *how much* they have heard, with younger Americans more likely than their elders to have heard a lot or some about bots.

There are also differences in familiarity by education and, to a lesser extent, by party affiliation. About three-quarters of Americans with a college degree (78%) have heard of social media bots, compared with 55% of those with only a high school education. In addition, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents are more likely than Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to have heard about social media bots (72% vs. 61%, respectively).

Age, gender, education and party affiliation all play roles in whether people have heard of bots

% of U.S. adults who have heard ___ about social media bots



Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.
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Many see bad intentions behind social media bots and find them difficult to identify

Amid the larger debate about misinformation and bots on social media, the public largely views bots negatively. An overwhelming majority of those who have heard of bots (80%) say that these accounts are mostly used for bad purposes, while just 17% say that bots are mostly used for good purposes.

This broad consensus is consistent across demographic groups. For instance, roughly eight-in-ten Republicans and Republican-leaning independents as well as Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents who have heard of bots suspect they are primarily used for malicious purposes (84% and 78%, respectively). Similarly, even though younger people are more likely to have heard of bots, there is broad agreement across age groups about their intended purpose: About eight-in-ten Americans in each age group who have heard about bots believe they are mostly used for malicious purposes.

Many believe social media bots are mainly used for bad purposes

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say bots are mostly used for ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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Not only does the public generally have a negative view of social media bots, but few Americans have a lot of confidence in their own ability to detect them. About half of those who have heard of bots (47%) are very or somewhat confident that they can recognize them, and just 7% are very confident. About four-in-ten (38%) are not very confident, and 15% say they are not at all confident. This stands in contrast to the confidence Americans had in their ability to detect made-up news: In a December 2016 [survey](#), 84% of Americans were very or somewhat confident in their ability to recognize made-up news.

Younger Americans are more likely than older adults to be at least somewhat confident they can recognize social media bots. Six-in-ten adults ages 18 to 29 who have heard of these accounts are at least somewhat confident they can recognize them, compared with about half or less for older age groups.¹

Many lack confidence they can identify social media bots

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who are ___ confident they can identify them

Very	Somewhat	Not very	Not at all
7%	40	38	15

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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¹ For more information about demographic breakdowns, see [Appendix](#).

2. Many believe at least some of the news on social media comes from bots and that these accounts have a negative impact on how the public stays informed

While social media bots can be used for many different purposes, much of the public discussion has been about their use in the [spread of news](#). The public seems to have taken notice, and many believe at least some of the news Americans get on social media comes from bots.

About eight-in-ten of those who have heard of bots (81%) think these accounts are responsible for at least a fair amount of the news Americans get on social media, though fewer (17%) think *a great deal* comes from bots. (A previous Pew Research Center [study](#) of more than 100,000 tweeted links to 50 popular news websites found that 59% of those shared links were suspected to be from bots.)

Many believe at least some of the news on social media comes from bots

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say ___ of the news that Americans get from social media comes from bots



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.
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And, just as Americans are concerned about bots generally, many in the public perceive bots' involvement in the news to be negative, at least when it comes to how well-informed the public is about the news. About two-thirds of those who have heard about social media bots (66%) say that these accounts have a mostly negative effect on how well-informed Americans are about events and issues in the news. In contrast, only 11% believe bots have a mostly positive effect, and about two-in-ten (21%) say they do not have much of an effect.

What's more, those who think bots are responsible for a sizable portion of the news on social media are also more likely to think bots have a negative impact on keeping the public informed. Among those who say at least a fair amount of news on social media comes from bots, about seven-in-ten (72%) say that bots negatively impact how well-informed Americans are about the news, compared with 11% who say bots have a positive impact and 17% who say they have no impact.

Not many differences emerge across demographic groups, with broad agreement that at least a fair amount of the news Americans see on social media comes from bots and that bots have a negative effect on how well-informed Americans are.²

Many believe bots have a negative effect on keeping Americans informed

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say bots have had ____ on how well-informed Americans are about events and issues in the news



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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² For more information about demographic breakdowns, see [Appendix](#).

3. Americans express nuanced views of many common uses of social media bots

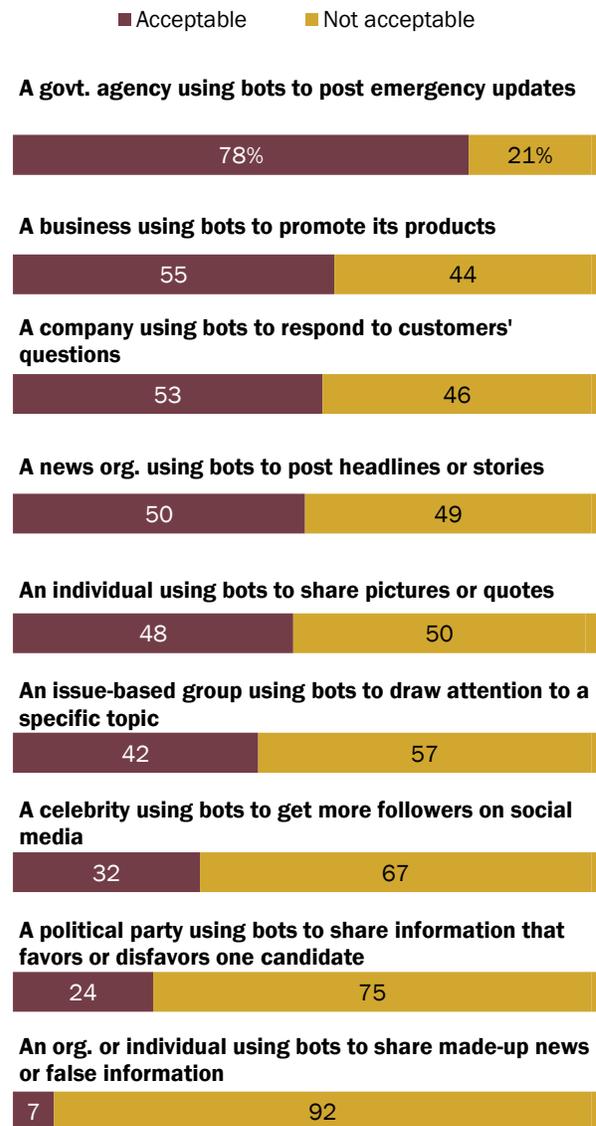
Although social media bots largely have a negative connotation among the public, certain uses of bots seem to be more acceptable than others. Those who have heard about bots were asked about a mix of nine ways that social media bots are used. Topping the list of supported uses: government agencies using bots to post emergency updates. About eight-in-ten of those who have heard about bots (78%) find this practice to be acceptable.

On the flip side, there is solid opposition to an organization or individual using bots to share false information, with 92% of those who have heard of bots saying this is not acceptable. Strong majorities also oppose a celebrity using bots to gain more social media followers (67%) and a political party using bots to share information that favors or disfavors one candidate (75%). When it comes to an issue-based group using bots for a political purpose – to draw attention to a specific topic – opposition is not as strong as to a political party using bots, though more people still find it unacceptable (57%) than acceptable (42%).

The public is more split for the remaining uses. At least half of those who have heard about social media bots find the two business-related uses acceptable: businesses using bots to promote products (55%) and respond to customers' questions (53%). Similarly, the

Strong support for bots that share emergency information, opposition to fake news bots

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say each of the following uses of bots is ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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public is about evenly split on whether news organizations' use of bots to post headlines or news stories is acceptable or not (50% find it acceptable and 49% find it unacceptable). And when it comes to an individual using bots to share pictures or quotes, about equal shares of those who have heard of bots find it acceptable (48%) as unacceptable (50%).

The more Americans know about bots, the less likely they are to find several of their uses to be acceptable

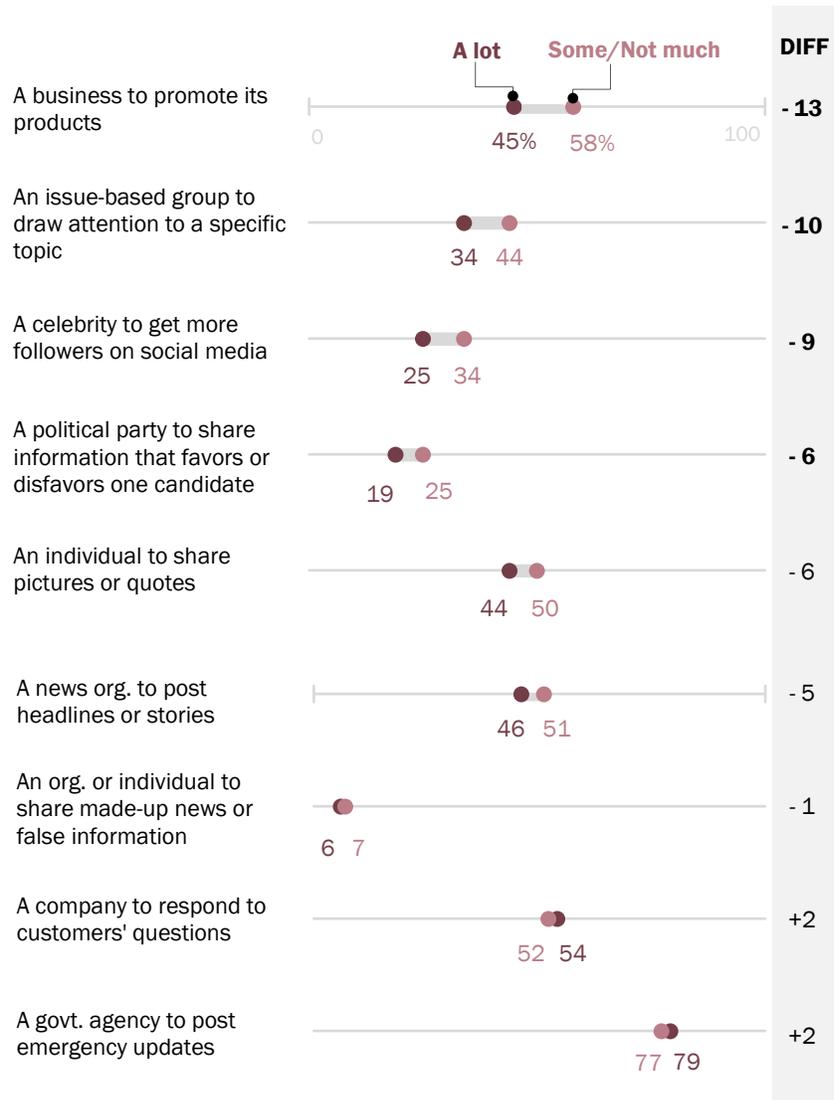
Americans who have heard more about social media bots are less likely to be supportive of a number of their uses.

This is true for the two politics-related uses. Those who have heard a lot about bots are 10 percentage points less likely than those who have heard some or not much about bots to say an issue-based group using bots to draw attention to a specific topic is acceptable (34% and 44%, respectively). Similarly, those who have heard a lot about bots are less supportive of a political party using bots to share information that favors or disfavors one candidate, compared with those who haven't heard as much about bots (19% and 25%, respectively).

Awareness about social media bots also influences views on two uses that help people or organizations promote themselves. For instance, a business using bots to promote its products is considered acceptable by 45% of those who have heard a lot

Americans who have heard more about bots are less likely to think several uses are acceptable

Among U.S. adults who have heard ___ about social media bots, % who say each of the following uses of bots is **acceptable**



Note: Statistically significant differences are in bold.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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about bots, compared with 58% of those who have heard less about them – a 13-point gap. And there is a 9-point gap when it comes to a celebrity using bots to get more social media followers.

Acknowledgments

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Methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by GfK.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018, among 4,581 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 4,581 respondents is plus or minus 2.4 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from several large, national landline and cellphone RDD surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23-March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate.³ The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27-Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.⁴ The third group of panelists was recruited from a survey conducted April 25-June 4, 2017. Of the 5,012 adults interviewed in the survey or pretest, 3,905 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 1,628 agreed to participate.⁵

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on a number of dimensions. Gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and region parameters come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey. The county-level population density parameter (deciles) comes from the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census. The telephone service benchmark comes from the July-December 2016 National Health

³ When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

⁴ Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but they were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

⁵ White, non-Hispanic college graduates were subsampled at a rate of 50%.

Interview Survey and is projected to 2017. The volunteerism benchmark comes from the 2015 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. The party affiliation benchmark is the average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. The internet access benchmark comes from the 2017 ATP Panel Refresh Survey. Respondents who did not previously have internet access are treated as not having internet access for weighting purposes. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

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	4,581	2.4 percentage points

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.

The July 2018 wave had a response rate of 84% (4,581 responses among 5,475 individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys (10.1%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the wave is 2.4%.⁶

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⁶ Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.

Appendix: Detailed tables

Heard about social media bots, by demographic group

% of U.S. adults who have heard ____ about social media bots

	A lot	Some	Not much	Nothing at all
All U.S. adults	16%	28%	22%	34%
Ages 18-29	24	33	21	22
30-49	21	36	20	23
50-64	12	24	22	42
65+	7	18	24	51
Men	22	35	16	27
Women	11	23	26	40
High school or less	10	24	21	45
Some college	18	28	23	31
College+	22	35	21	21
Republican/lean Rep	11	29	21	39
Democrat/lean Dem	21	29	22	28

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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Views of social media bots uses, by demographic group

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say bots are mostly used for ...

	Good purposes	Bad purposes
Those who have heard about social media bots	17%	80%
Ages 18-29	19	79
30-49	18	80
50-64	14	82
65+	16	79
Men	15	83
Women	20	77
High school or less	22	73
Some college	17	80
College+	12	86
Republican/lean Rep	14	84
Democrat/lean Dem	19	78

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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Confidence in identifying social media bots, by demographic group

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who are _____ confident they can identify them

	Very	Somewhat	Not very	Not at all
Those who have heard about social media bots	7%	40%	38%	15%
Ages 18-29	11	49	29	10
30-49	9	39	40	11
50-64	4	36	40	20
65+	2	33	40	24
Men	8	45	35	12
Women	6	35	40	18
High school or less	8	45	31	16
Some college	6	40	39	13
College+	7	35	42	15
Republican/lean Rep	6	41	36	17
Democrat/lean Dem	8	39	39	13

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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Views of amount of news that comes from social media bots, by demographic group

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say _____ of the news that Americans get from social media comes from bots

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not much	None
Those who have heard about social media bots	17%	64%	15%	2%
Ages 18-29	15	64	14	6
30-49	20	65	13	1
50-64	17	62	19	1
65+	13	66	17	1
Men	18	64	15	2
Women	16	64	16	3
High school or less	20	54	22	3
Some college	17	66	12	3
College+	15	70	13	*
Republican/lean Rep	15	63	17	3
Democrat/lean Dem	18	65	13	2

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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Views of effect of social media bots sharing news, by demographic group

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say bots have had ___ on how well-informed Americans are about events and issues in the news

	A mostly positive effect	A mostly negative effect	Not much of an effect
Those who have heard about social media bots	11%	66%	21%
Ages 18-29	13	64	22
30-49	11	68	20
50-64	12	66	19
65+	7	67	22
Men	11	70	18
Women	11	62	23
High school or less	16	56	26
Some college	11	66	20
College+	7	75	16
Republican/lean Rep	9	65	24
Democrat/lean Dem	13	68	18

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

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Acceptable uses of social media bots, by demographic group

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say each of the following uses of bots is acceptable

	A govt. agency using bots to post emergency updates	A business using bots to promote its products	A company using bots to respond to customers' questions	A news org. using bots to post headlines or stories	An individual using bots to share pictures or quotes
Those who have heard about social media bots	78%	55%	53%	50%	48%
Ages 18-29	80	56	53	49	48
30-49	80	59	55	53	50
50-64	72	52	52	46	48
65+	78	50	49	46	45
Men	80	54	56	51	50
Women	75	56	50	49	46
High school or less	72	53	44	48	46
Some college	77	55	54	48	50
College+	83	57	59	52	49
Republican/lean Rep	75	56	50	44	46
Democrat/lean Dem	80	54	55	52	49

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.
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Acceptable uses of social media bots, by demographic group (continued)

Among U.S. adults who have heard about social media bots, % who say each of the following uses of bots is *acceptable*

	An issue-based group using bots to draw attention to a specific topic	A celebrity using bots to get more followers on social media	A political party using bots to share information that favors or disfavors one candidate	An org. or individual using bots to share made-up news or false information
Those who have heard about social media bots	42%	32%	24%	7%
Ages 18-29	42	27	20	8
30-49	43	36	26	9
50-64	40	34	26	5
65+	40	26	21	5
Men	40	32	26	8
Women	44	32	22	6
High school or less	40	33	27	11
Some college	42	29	24	8
College+	43	33	21	3
Republican/lean Rep	40	27	29	7
Democrat/lean Dem	43	34	21	7

Source: Survey conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.
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Topline questionnaire

2018 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL

WAVE 37 JULY

FINAL TOPLINE

JULY 30 – AUGUST 12, 2018

TOTAL N=4,581

ASK ALL:

BOTS_HEARD Now we're going to ask you a few questions about social media bots. A social media bot is an account that operates on its own, without human involvement, to post and do other activities on social media sites.

With this in mind, how much have you heard, if anything, about social media bots?

Jul 30-

Aug 12

2018

16	A lot
28	Some
22	Not much
34	Nothing at all
*	No Answer

ASK IF HEARD AT LEAST NOT MUCH (BOTS_HEARD=1-3) [N=3,253]:

BOTS_MORAL Based on what you have heard about social media bots, do you think they are mostly ...
[RANDOMIZE]

Jul 30-

Aug 12

2018

17	Used for good purposes
80	Used for bad purposes
3	No Answer

ASK IF HEARD AT LEAST NOT MUCH (BOTS_HEARD=1-3) [N=3,253]:

BOTS_VIGNETTES Below are some possible uses of social media bots. Do you think each of the following uses of bots is acceptable or not acceptable? **[SHOW EACH BLOCK ON A SEPARATE PAGE; REPEAT STEM FOR SECOND PAGE, WITH "AGAIN," AT THE BEGINNING; RANDOMIZE ORDER OF BLOCK 1 AND BLOCK 2; RANDOMIZE ITEMS WITHIN EACH BLOCK]**

BLOCK 1

	<u>Acceptable</u>	<u>Not acceptable</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
a. A government agency using bots to post emergency updates Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	78	21	1
b. An organization or individual using bots to share made-up news or false information Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	7	92	1
c. An issue-based group using bots to draw attention to a specific topic Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	42	57	1
d. A celebrity using bots to get more followers on social media Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	32	67	1
e. A business using bots to promote its products Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	55	44	1

BLOCK 2

	<u>Acceptable</u>	<u>Not acceptable</u>	<u>No Answer</u>
f. A news organization using bots to post headlines or stories Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	50	49	2
g. A political party using bots to share information that favors or disfavors one candidate Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	24	75	2
h. An individual using bots to share pictures or quotes Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	48	50	2
i. A company using bots to respond to customers' questions Jul 30-Aug 12, 2018	53	46	1

ASK IF HEARD AT LEAST NOT MUCH (BOTS_HEARD=1-3) [N=3,253]:

BOTS_IDENTIFY How confident are you in your ability to identify whether a post on social media comes from a bot?

Jul 30- Aug 12 <u>2018</u>	
7	Very confident
40	Somewhat confident
38	Not very confident
15	Not at all confident
1	No Answer

ASK IF HEARD AT LEAST NOT MUCH (BOTS_HEARD=1-3) [N=3,253]:

BOTS_NEWS Of all the news that Americans get from social media sites, how much do you think gets to them from bots?

Jul 30- Aug 12 <u>2018</u>	
17	A great deal
64	A fair amount
15	Not much
2	None at all
2	No Answer

ASK IF HEARD AT LEAST NOT MUCH (BOTS_HEARD=1-3) [N=3,253]:

BOTS_EFFECT When it comes to how well informed Americans are about events and issues in the news, would you say that social media bots have had a... **[RANDOMIZE 1 and 2]**

Jul 30- Aug 12 <u>2018</u>	
11	Mostly positive effect
66	Mostly negative effect
21	Not much of an effect
2	No Answer