

Forget fixed broadband—large phones and 4G drive UK over mobile tipping point

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UK Phone Users. Credit: Julie Kertesz/flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

UK communications regulator Ofcom has released a [report](#) that gives a

fascinating snapshot of digital society in the UK. It highlights the dominance of mobile, and the centrality of social media in social interactions and relationships. The change has been brought about, not by improvements in fixed broadband but by the availability of larger, more capable phones and faster 4G mobile networks. Phones and 4G are in turn facilitating communication through a variety of channels, especially social media.

Bigger phones allow people to do more

In terms of the importance of mobile, 33% of UK residents now view their smartphone as the most important device to connect to the Internet compared to 30% who chose their laptop. This switch in preference has come about because of the general increase in the size of phones. The release of Apple's iPhone 6 and 6S in response to the popularity of Android phones of the same size has helped cement the larger form-factor as a standard. People can now comfortably carry out many of the tasks that would have normally been reserved for a laptop, PC or tablet.

4G is the other key enabler of move to mobile

The second reason has been the increase in speed of the average smartphone connection. 45% of UK smartphone users have access to 4G networks, a 28% increase on the previous year. The faster speeds have not only resulted in greater use of mobile data generally but has shifted what users will do with their phones. 4G users are more likely to use their phones to access audio-visual content (57% 4G users compared to 40% non-4G users). They are also more likely to use their phones to make online purchases and use online banking.

Faster fixed broadband plays a smaller part

What is interesting is that the changes brought about by the increased use of smartphones have had more impact than the increase in speeds of fixed [broadband](#) services to the home. 83% of UK premises are able to receive broadband speeds of 30 Mbit/s or higher. 30% of homes have connected to broadband at these higher speeds. Mobile 4G users were less likely to use their home wireless than those not on 4G showing a general trend to "cutting the cord" even in the area of Internet access.

Changing communication and social media

UK Internet users believe that technology has changed the way that they communicate and that these new forms of communication have made life easier. Traditional forms of digital communication such as email and text messaging are still dominant but 62% of online adults use [social media](#) and 57% instant messaging to communicate regularly with family and friends. Technologies such as Skype, Facetime and Google Hangout are also used by 34% of adults.

In terms of social media use, Facebook is by far the dominant platform with 72% of adults having a social media profile and 97% of those having one on Facebook. Although teenagers are likely to use other social media platforms, 48% of social media users use Facebook exclusively.

People are also spending greater amounts of time on Facebook than any other service. In March of 2015, users spent 51 billion minutes on Facebook's website and apps compared to 34 billion on Google's. YouTube was also watched by more people via mobile devices than on desk/laptops.

Change, but not in productivity

Although digital technologies have brought about a major change in society in the UK, this hasn't been reflected in any [changes](#) in productivity in the UK economy. The UK continues to rate behind France, Germany, US and even Italy in terms of worker productivity.

The results of surveys such as these enable several important points to be underscored. The first is that investment in fixed broadband infrastructure is not necessarily as important as investment in universal high speed wireless access in terms of its impact on society. Second, although we may see radical changes in social norms through the use of digital technologies, it won't show up in increased productivity. The last point has to be qualified however. It may well be that existing businesses do not show any improvements in productivity but new forms of industry and business are enabled by a mobile economy which may well bring about radical changes in productivity. [Uber](#), [Airbnb](#), and other industries as part of the so-called "gig economy" threatens to disrupt industry and this will only be possible through the use of mobile phones and high speed wireless.

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