

Australian farming communities use social media to connect with each other.

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Emily Buddle

Curtin University

**Author note**

Emily Buddle, Graduate Certificate of Internet Communications, Curtin University and

Open Universities Australia.

Correspondence for the article should be addressed to Emily Buddle,

[18516210@student.curtin.edu.au](mailto:18516210@student.curtin.edu.au)

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### *Abstract*

Since the introduction of the internet we have seen a shift in the way which farming communities connect, particularly through the use of social media. This paper will discuss the importance of social media in creating a sense of community for those that may be spatially isolated from other people and present some case studies about how farming communities are using social media to create their own communities. It will also shed light on how being physically isolated does not make people immune to typical digital issues such as cyber bullying, but how these virtual communities can band together in to protect and support each other during times of despair. Despite farming communities facing some challenges relating to digital technologies such as access to reliable internet, there is no doubt that social media has become important for rural communities to remaining connected.

*Keywords:* Social media, farming, rural communities, communication

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Technology adoption by rural communities to connect with one another predates the introduction of the internet. For example the telegraph followed by the landline telephone were important means for connecting rural communities with each other and the broader community. However, since the introduction of the internet we have seen a shift in the way that farming communities connect, particularly through the use of social media. Social media has played an important role in creating a sense of community for those that may be spatially isolated from other people (i.e. farmers who live in rural and regional communities). Farming communities are using social media to create their own communities despite facing some challenges including the reliable access to internet. Social media has also changed how farming communities are receiving information about best-practice farming methods and engaging with agricultural extension officers. Social media has also become important for rural, farming communities to come together in times of sadness and despair.

Traditionally, rural communities have been close-knit groups of people made up of like-minded community members. However these communities are becoming smaller and more spatially separated due to the ever-growing urban centres, leaving many of those involved in primary production increasingly isolated. Despite being geographically separated from others, communication technologies have become so advanced that communication is now instantaneous and distance does not matter, being close or being remote no longer matters as far as communication is concerned (Bauman and May, 2001; Katz et al. 2004). Although these communities remain physically isolated, the

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Introduction of digital communication technologies have expanded the connection of these communities to one another and further into other communities (Allan 1989; Allen and Sillman 1994; Wellman and Gulia 1997). Social media in particular has allowed farming communities to create their own online communities, breaking down the physical distance they may experience offline. A participant in Martlew's (2015) study suggested that "agriculture can be a lonely industry...so having social media helps to remain in constant contact with people working in similar situations" (p. 1247). Despite being geographically isolated, the introduction of digital technologies has allowed these communities to still create close-knit structures with like-minded individuals but has taken these communities into online digital spaces.

Traditional communities are built not only to foster social interaction but also as a means for information exchange. The introduction of social media has transformed how those in farming communities share information between one another. For example, traditional agricultural extension relied heavily on face-to-face 'top-down' communication between the extension officer and the farmer. However, social media encourages collaboration, cooperation and sharing through its ability to support multi-directional communication between the extension officer, the farmer and other farmers within that community (Carr et al., 2018). In Australia, many farmer groups have established Facebook profiles to support the offline community and share information with a broad range of people. Some groups also host webinars on topics which may be of specific interest to the community and are made possible through the use of social media sites. Online information exchange also allows for farming communities to engage more with those outside of their community who may be facing similar challenges whereby

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they can adapt ideas to solve their own issues. Asking and answering questions online breaks down the physical distance between farmers and establishes a new ‘digital age’ method for information exchange.

Despite the great deal of praise which social media has received in building a sense of community online, it has not come without its criticisms. In the early days of internet-based communication, many writers expressed fears that virtual communities will move people away from their involvement in “real life” communities as supported by face-to-face, telephone and postal contact (Wellman and Gulia 1997). Stoll (1995), Noll (1997) and Nie (2001) argue that the internet removes the social interactions experienced within real-life communities, which are considered far more significant than the interactions within virtual communities. Katz et al (2004) further argue that the ability to communicate online may “strengthen the participation in one’s [online] community of choice but often at the expense of the physical community at hand.” (p. 342). However, these arguments do not consider that some people are not afforded the luxury of having a physical community in which to make contact. When talking about geographically isolated individuals, particularly in countries that are so geographically sparse such as Australia, being involved in some kind of community albeit online is still important for human wellbeing. While some people may be able to have face-to-face contact with their communities such as those living in large regional centres or cities, there are clear benefits for creating online communities for those who live in isolated, rural communities rather than not belonging to a community at all.

Rural Australians have often highlighted the potential which social media has to build communities online (Martlew 2015; Given, Winkler and Wallies 2017). These

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communities can take form of open or closed Facebook groups or developed around the use of platform specific functions such as hashtags. One example of an online community which has been built online is the AgChat network which relies on the use of the hashtag function on Twitter. The foundation of the AgChat network is to use the hashtag dedicated to your location i.e. in the USA it is #AgChat while in the UK it is #AgriChatUK. The Australian variant is #AgChatOz which was developed to increase the profile of Australian agriculture. Weekly discussions conducted on Twitter using the #AgChatOz hashtag capture the discussions of interest to the self-identified agricultural community (Burgess, Galloway and Sauter 2015). Outside of the scheduled Tuesday evening discussions, the hashtag was also used by those within the community to chat about issues and current happenings affecting the industry and share any events which may be of relevance to the community. As the Twitter platform can be used across the world, anyone can use these hashtags to be involved in discussions thus extending the communities beyond geographical boundaries. Although time zones may pose as a potential issue, the use of hashtags in this way demonstrates the ability for those involved in the agricultural community to not only communicate with those within their own country, but can participate in discussions across borders.

Hashtags have also been used by the agricultural communities to come together and advocate for the industry (Fairleigh, 2013; Given, Winkler and Wallis, 2017). One example is the use of a hashtag relevant to the suspension of the live cattle trade to Indonesia. It was in the early days of social media use within the agricultural industry when the exportation of live cattle to Indonesia was suspended in 2011 after ABC's Four Corners aired the expose "A Bloody Business" (Doyle, 2011). The trade suspension sent

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shockwaves through the Australian livestock industry which resulted in later legal action against the Australian government (Farm Online, 2018). While animal activist organisation Animals Australia had a well-structured social media campaign to complement the television broadcast (Buddle, Bray and Pitchford, 2017), the Australian farming communities responded with their own form of protest. Western Australian farmer Michael Trant developed the #hadagutful hashtag as he was fed up of the negativity which was being generated about the live export trade. The hashtag brought together an online campaign where people shared their support of the live export trade. The hashtag was so successful that it brought together over 2000 farmers, workers, truck drivers and industry supporters from all over Australia to congregate in Fremantle to counter a protest organised by Ban Live Export supporters (Fairleigh, 2013). In this case, social media allowed those supporters of live export, who are predominantly those within the agricultural community, to rally together and get their voices heard on a national stage. The #hadagutful hashtag and subsequent rally is an example of how online communities can support interaction within the offline “physical sphere” (Wellman and Gulia, 1999), emphasising that online communities do not replace “real-world” communities but rather that digital technologies support other everyday forms of communication.

A more recent example of how farming communities are using social media to connect is the #DoItForDolly hashtag campaign which was seen across multiple platforms including Facebook and Instagram. The impact which cyber bullying has on regional and remote communities received significant attention in 2018 when Northern Territory teenager Amy ‘Dolly’ Everett took her own life after allegedly becoming a

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victim to cyber bullying. In the wake of such tragedy the Australian community, most notably the Australian rural community, showed a significant outpour of support for the victim and victim's family on social media by sharing images and comments using the #DoItForDolly hashtag. Such events resulted in cyber bullying becoming a prominent issue discussed in the mainstream media and in parliament by then Prime Minister of Australia Malcom Turnbull (Dolly's Dream, 2019). While the bullying experienced by Amy Everett was enabled by social media and her case is an example of the power which social media provides bullies and trolls, it was the same platforms that were used so rural communities could rally together in solidarity and support for her family and other victims, particularly rural victims, of cyber bullying.

Although digital technologies have become ingrained in the lives of many Australians, and despite the clear benefits of being involved and connected with digital technologies, many are left without reliable access or without access at all to the internet. Australian regional and rural communities in particular are continuing to battle with the little to no reliable access to internet, despite this being an issue for quite a number of years (Curtin, 2001; Carson and Cleary, 2010; Park 2016; Laskie 2018). Not only is the infrastructure not there to support reliable internet connections, the cost of internet access remains significantly higher for those who live in rural and regional Australia relative to those who live in metropolitan areas (Curtin 2001). Thomas, Wilson and Park (2018) highlight that the difference in internet access between those in major cities and the Australian bush has not decreased over time, where 87.9% of those in major cities have internet access at home while only 77.1% percent living in remote areas have internet access at home. Beef producer from regional Victoria Carolyn Suggate tells of her three



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children's extended visits to the local McDonalds restaurant in order to connect to the internet to make up for their shortfall at home (Laskie 2018). As more of the Australian community turn to the internet for basic everyday activities such as communicating with their networks on social media, the lack of access and prohibitive cost of internet (alongside the declining number of members within Australian agricultural communities) further exacerbates social exclusion (Carson and Cleary 2010; Park 2016) and further feelings of isolation. More needs to be done in order to provide farming communities with reliable infrastructure in order for them to receive the same affordances as their city cousins or they face further isolation and exclusion as the digital world continues to evolve and grow.

Social media has become an everyday part of life, even for rural and remote Australians. They have adopted social media to establish discussion groups and virtual communities in order to share information and create friendships. Such platforms have also broken down the feeling of isolation for many. Despite the size of physical rural communities declining, social media has allowed farmers and their families to remain connected and even create new communities which stretch far beyond their physical locale. The benefits which creating online communities provide to isolated members of our community provides further argument for the establishment of better internet infrastructure so those who are currently without reliable internet can benefit from online communities and access to information. Social media has definitely played an important role for farming communities to remain connected.

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