As a hyperlocal form of social media, Nextdoor helps neighbours connect – but not always for the better

Amanda Druck

Stream

Communities and social media

Abstract

While much social research has been dedicated to how the Internet generally, and social networking sites specifically, enable people to connect across great distances, little attention has been paid to the impacts of these technologies on more local communities other than to suggest a negative correlation between online communications and neighbourly behaviour. This paper explores how the locally-focused social media platform Nextdoor supports theories that contend social networking sites' unique affordances have the potential to support connection and engagement within communities – in this case, local communities specifically – unlike any that has been observed since the beginning of the industrial era. While this has resulted in positive effects such as enhanced community safety and providing for vital assistance to those in need during times of crisis, it has simultaneously facilitated repressive behaviours such as racial profiling, and the rapid spread of misinformation with dire implications for public health. The observations discussed here support the position that, while technology can empower participants' capacity to connect and engage with each other, it is only how the participants choose to behave which will determine the social impacts of this engagement.

Hashtags

#nextdoor #hyperlocal #safety #racism #COVID-19

As the Internet's user base has increased around the world, online social networking platforms have grown and evolved, increasing the scope for communication on a global scale. However, while there has been a great focus on the Internet's ability to connect people across great distances, research has often neglected to investigate how social networking sites are used in a more local context (Hampton & Wellman 2003, p. 278; Page-Tan, 2021, p. 2223). In fact, many scholars, such as Sherry Turkle (2016; 2017) and Taylor Dotson (2018) have maligned a supposed 'decline in neighboring as people get drawn into online interactions', suggesting that online communication is fundamentally antithetical to local community building (Hampton & Wellman 2003, p. 284; Hampton & Wellman, 2018). In contrast, sociologists Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman have long argued that social networking sites 'afford many types of community, including neighboring' (2003, p.284) and that '[s]ocial media is fostering networked, supportive, persistent, and pervasive community relationships', including in a local context (2018, p. 649). The social networking site Nextdoor, established in 2011, focuses specifically on connecting people within their local neighbourhoods, and demonstrates how pre-existing local communities can use social media to build and strengthen ties. However, it also illustrates the potential downside of the changes to the 'fundamental nature of community' that Hampton and Wellman argue is occurring in the wake of recent technological changes, leading to increasingly insulated, segregated and repressive behaviours within local communities (Hampton & Wellman, 2018).

Since its inception, much discussion about the Internet's social impact has centred around the 'community question', a 'debate about how large-scale social changes affect ties with friends, neighbors, kin, and workmates' (Hampton & Wellman, 2003, p. 278; Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Wellman, 1979). Hampton and Wellman identify three key fears at the heart of this debate: '[t]he weakening of private (interpersonal) community' including reduced social contact with neighbours, '[d]isengagement from the neighborhood', and '[t]he decline of public community' including less civic involvement and less commitment to community (2003, p. 278). According to Wellman and co-author Lee Rainie in their book *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, '[t]he basic argument is that community is falling apart because internet use has led people to lose contact with authentic in-person relationships as they become ensnared online in weak simulacra of reality' (Rainie & Wellman, 2018, p. 118).

While it has recently been framed around Internet use, this is far from a new argument. Similar fears have been expressed around various social and technological changes since the beginning of the industrial revolution, often focusing on those technologies that connect people in new ways, such as railroads, radio, and television (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 117). As Hampton & Wellman identify,

> part of contemporary unease comes from a selective perception of the present and an idealization of other forms of community. There is nostalgia for a perfect form of community that never was. Longing for a time when the grass was ever greener dims an awareness of the powerful stresses and cleavages that have always pervaded human society (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 644).

In demonstration of this, Rainie & Wellman note that Wellman's sociological studies in the East York area of Toronto, Canada, found that few residents had strong ties with their neighbours. These studies were published in 1968 and 1979, decades before public access to the Internet became widespread (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman 1979).

Far from being detrimental to community, computer-mediated communication can be seen to have significantly expanded opportunities for community building. danah boyd presents the concept of 'networked publics'; publics – a collection of people who share a common understanding of the world, identity, or interest; locally or broader – that are restructured by networked technologies (boyd, 2010, 39-40). boyd describes these networked publics as being both 'the space constructed through networked technologies' and 'the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (boyd, 2010, p. 39). She notes that while they share much in common with other types of publics, the influence of technology introduces four distinct affordances: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (boyd, 2010, pp. 39 & 48).

Keith Hampton builds on the work of boyd and others to present a theory of 'persistent-pervasive community' which is currently emerging, and is made possible by the affordances of social media (Hampton, 2016). Like boyd, Hampton focuses on the fact that communication on social media is *persistent* – automatically recorded and archived, allowing for asynchronous communication and searchability – and *pervasive*, providing for an ambient awareness of the interests, locations, opinions, and activities of their social ties in a way direct, one-to-one communication does not allow for (boyd, 2010, p.48; Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Hampton, 2016, p. 119). Hampton argues that these factors result in a structure that 'resembles a hybrid of preindustrial, and urban-industrial, community structures' (Hampton, 2016, p. 103). He states:

> We are entering a period of metamodernity that renews many of the constraints and opportunities of the premodern community structure without discarding all of the affordances of mobility that have perpetuated through late modernity. Not since the rise of modern, urban-industrial civilization has there been the potential for such a significant change to the structure of community (Hampton, 2016, p. 103).

Thus, the 'community that never was', where members have a pervasive awareness of their peers' lives akin to that experienced by pre-industrial villagers, but in a modern context, is possible – and,

indeed, emerging – in the wake of social media technologies (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 644; Hampton, 2016). With its focus squarely on the hyperlocal neighbourhood community, no social media platform provides as clear an example of this as Nextdoor.

Nextdoor was launched in 2011 as 'the first private social network for neighborhoods' (Lambright, 2019, p. 87). The company states that its mission is 'to provide a trusted platform where neighbours all over the world can work together to build stronger, safer and happier communities' (Nextdoor, 2018, para. 2). Initially focused on the developers' own local region of the San Francisco bay area, it has expanded across the US and worldwide, with the Australian launch taking place in October 2018 (Nextdoor, 2018). Their promotional material focuses on the same imagined nostalgia discussed previously, with references to neighbourhood barbecues, trick-or-treating and 'online chats that lead to more clothesline chats' (Lambright, 2019, p.89). Co-founder and former CEO of Nextdoor, Nirav Tolia, declared that, '[w]e created Nextdoor to bring back a sense of community to the neighborhood and help create safer, stronger places to call home' (cited in Nextdoor, 2012, para. 7).

Unlike other social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, Nextdoor users must not only use their real name while using the site, but also verify their residency in a specific neighbourhood, either through geolocation technology, being vetted by a neighbour who is already an approved member, or by submitting evidence to the company (Kurwa, 2019, p. 113; Page-Tan, 2021). Once admitted, users can only see content within their own neighbourhood or those directly bordering it (Kurwa, 2019, Lambright, 2019). These constraints aside, Nextdoor functions similarly to other social networking sites, with features including a personalised news feed; adding friends; the ability to post text, images or videos, and comment on the post of others; direct messages; and interest-based groups (boyd & Ellison, 2007, Kurwa, 2019). However, its hyperlocal focus puts it in stark contrast to most other social networking sites, with their focus on the ability to access wider communities, and to connect and re-connect over long distances (Lambright, 2019, Mosconi et al., 2017, p. 960).

While Nextdoor, as a purpose-built platform for local communities to connect, is somewhat unique among current prominent social networking sites, there is a long history of locally-focused electronic communication networks, even pre-dating the Internet. The earliest examples included networked computer systems situated in public libraries and other public places within a local area, which were later superseded by electronic bulletin boards, discussion forums, local email lists and listservs (López et al., 2017, p. 3). User-created and -managed groups within larger social networking sites such as Facebook also emerged, and continue to be popular in many localities (López et al., 2017; Mosconi et al., 2017).

Nextdoor differs from these other examples of hyperlocal social networks, however, in one key way. While each of the networks described above is a discrete, self-contained group focused entirely on one specific place, Nextdoor, as mentioned previously, allows visibility across adjoining suburbs. For example, I am able to see activity within my own suburb of Doncaster, Victoria, and all the suburbs that directly surround it, and anything I post is visible to residents of those suburbs (Page-Tan, 2021). However, if I am to comment on a post made by a resident of the suburb directly to the west of my own, Balwyn North, this can then be seen by residents of all suburbs adjoining Balwyn North, including those areas that do not abut Doncaster. Similarly, I will be able to see content posted by residents of Doncaster East, but residents of Balwyn North will not. In this way, my social network within Nextdoor is different to, but has overlap with, that of those in nearby areas. As Rainie and Wellman note,

> It helps to think about communities as fluid personal networks, rather than as static neighborhood or family groups. For too long, the model of community has been the preindustrial village where people walked door to door and all knew, supported, and surveilled one another. These bygone village groups have largely transmuted into multiple, fragmented personal networks connected by the individuals and households at their centers (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 6).

This can be seen, through the example above, to be true in even the most hyperlocal of social media. This distinguishes Nextdoor from its predecessors, which, while featuring some of the affordances of a networked public, do so to a lesser extent, particularly in regard to scalability (boyd, 2010).

It is this potential for scalability that is one of the most noteworthy ways in which Nextdoor exemplifies the 'period of metamodernity' presented by Hampton (2016, p. 103). As Hampton and Wellman note, offline relationships between suburban neighbours rarely extend more than a few houses away:

> Local social ties rarely extend around corners or down the block. The limited range of local ties has the effect of limiting residents' familiarity with others in the community. In turn, this generates low levels of community solidarity, limits neighborhood surveillance, and reduces attachment to the broader neighborhood (Hampton & Wellman, 2003, p. 297).

Hyperlocal social media such as Nextdoor, then, has the potential to create the imagined ideal suburban community more effectively than offline ties between neighbours alone. This has the potential to result in 'an increased awareness of and engagement in both online and offline spheres' (Mosconi et al, 2017, p. 962).

The neighbourhood surveillance alluded to by Hampton and Wellman above has become one of the most popular features of Nextdoor. While it was initially created with the intention of being 'a hyperlocal Yelp or Craiglist' according to Tolia (as cited in Lacy, 2013, para. 30), it quickly became

popular for its potential safety and crime prevention applications. Neighbours can report crimes or other safety concerns in the area among themselves using Nextdoor in a way that is far more effective than in person or relayed one-to-one communication such as phone calls and text messages (Lacy, 2013). The persistent-pervasive nature of the medium affords not only the immediacy and scalability of the initial message, but also the capacity for it to be referenced at a later date: with the benefit of an archive of community-sourced information, neighbours can note patterns in strange or concerning occurrences, and new residents in an area can quickly become aware of common local issues (Hampton, 2016). As Hampton notes, '[p]ervasive awareness brings us full circle in the advent of surveillance', allowing for a return to the local awareness levels of the pre-industrial village, within a larger urban or suburban area and population (Hampton, 2016, p. 114).

But it is this same capacity for neighbourhood surveillance that has resulted in a persistent and concerning issue of racial profiling on Nextdoor (Lambright, 2019). In 2015, it was reported that residents in Oakland, California would frequently post on Nextdoor regarding unsubstantiated 'suspicious behaviour' by black residents, salesmen and mail carriers for 'walking down the street, driving a car, or knocking on a door' (Kurwa, 2019, p. 111). In a country with a long history of racial segregation and unrest, Rahim Kurwa argues that white users of Nextdoor in the United States use it as 'a tool to build a digitally gated community'; a historical 'site of race and class exclusion enforced through private policing' whereas 'today digitally gated communities achieve these ends through social policing' (Kurwa, 2019, p. 112). This aligns with the broader social network research of boyd and Nicole Ellison, who argue that 'it is not uncommon to find groups using [social networking] sites to segregate themselves by nationality, age, educational level, or other factors that typically segment society' (2007, p. 214), and Hampton and Wellman, who warn that 'repression and constraint…can come from closed networks' (2018, p. 644).

While the negative social impacts of the kinds of persistent and pervasive surveillance afforded by a hyperlocal social network should not be understated, there have undoubtedly been benefits to the local ties created and reinforced within Nextdoor as well. The ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic has given the platform a new relevance and increased popularity, with its capacity for immediacy and reach of information, along with searchability, making it an ideal channel for local discussion around obtaining and sharing resources, trading favours, and reaching out to vulnerable members of the community (Koeze & Popper, 2020; Mosconi et al., 2017; Page-Tan, 2021). For elderly people, the pandemic has presented not only a significant health concern but also social isolation, and while connections through any social media is able to provide relief from loneliness, the connections made through Nextdoor with neighbours can help to fulfill other needs such as access to food, medication and transport (Brooke & Clark, 2020; Brooke & Jackson, 2020). However, use of Nextdoor during the

pandemic has also had problematic effects, with mass distribution of misinformation about the virus and vaccine leading the developers to include new barriers to posting, with any health-related content now prompting the poster to consider whether it is in line with medical advice before publishing (O'Brien, 2021).

While local communities' use of Nextdoor can be seen to have been both beneficial and detrimental, it is ultimately the communities themselves, and not the platform, which are responsible for these social effects. As boyd notes, [n]etworked publics' affordances do not dictate participants' behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement' (2010, p. 47). With its hyperlocal focus, Nextdoor provides a particularly cogent demonstration of Hampton's new era of persistent-pervasive community, and demonstrates how social media combines both the constraints and opportunities of the pre-industrial village with those of late modernity (Hampton, 2016, p. 103). Nextdoor provides powerful opportunities for engagement within local neighbourhoods that comes as close as contemporary society ever has to achieving that perfect community that never was, but only the behaviour of the community's members can determine if this is for better or for worse.

References

boyd, d. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A Networked Self* (pp. 39–58). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876527-8

boyd, d, & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 13(1), 210–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

Brooke, J., & Clark, M. (2020). Older people's early experience of household isolation and social distancing during COVID-19. *Journal of clinical nursing*, *29*(21–22), 4387–4402. https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15485

Brooke, J., & Jackson, D. (2020). Older people and COVID-19: Isolation, risk and ageism. *Journal of clinical nursing*, *29*(13–14), 2044–2046. https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15274

Dotson, T. (2018). *Technically together: Reconstructing community in a networked world*. MIT Press.

Hampton, K. N. (2016). Persistent and pervasive community: New communication technologies and the future of community. *American behavioral scientist, 60*(1), 101–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215601714

Hampton, K., & Wellman, B. (2003). Neighboring in Netville: How the Internet supports community and social capital in a wired suburb. *City & community*, *2*(4), 277–311. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1535-6841.2003.00057.x

Hampton, K. N., & Wellman, B. (2018). Lost and saved . . . again: The moral panic about the loss of community takes hold of social media. *Contemporary sociology*, *47*(6), 643–651. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306118805415

Koeze, E., & Popper, N. (2020, April 7). *The virus changed the way we Internet.* The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html

Kurwa, R. (2019). Building the digitally gated community: The case of Nextdoor. *Surveillance & Society*, *17*(1/2), 111–117. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i1/2.12927

Lacy, S. (2013, January 22). *Nextdoor's unexpected killer use case: Crime and safety*. Pando. https://pando.com/2013/01/22/nextdoors-unexpected-killer-use-case-crime-and-safety/

Lambright, K. (2019). Digital redlining: The Nextdoor app and the neighborhood of make-believe. *Cultural critique*, *103*(1), 84–90. https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2019.0023

López, C., Farzan, R., & Lin, Y.-R. (2017). Behind the myths of citizen participation: Identifying sustainability factors of hyper-local information systems. *ACM transactions on Internet technology*, *18*(1), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1145/3093892

Mosconi, G., Korn, M., Reuter, C., Tolmie, P., Teli, M., & Pipek, V. (2017). From Facebook to the neighbourhood: Infrastructuring of hybrid community engagement. *Computer supported cooperative work (CSCW)*, *26*(4–6), 959–1003. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-017-9291-z

Nextdoor. (2012, August 6). *Nextdoor survey shows over two-thirds of homeowners feel safer when they know their neighbors* [Press release]. https://au.nextdoor.com/press/20120806/

Nextdoor. (2018, October 30). *Nextdoor, the world's largest private social network for neighborhoods, launches across australia* [Press release]. https://about.nextdoor.com/nextdoor-the-worlds-largest-private-social-network-for-neighborhoods-launches-across-australia/

O'Brien, S. (2021) *People are turning to Nextdoor for tips on getting a vaccine. Why that may be a problem*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/05/tech/nextdoor-pandemic-sarah-friar/index.html

Page-Tan, C. (2021). Bonding, bridging, and linking social capital and social media use: How hyperlocal social media platforms serve as a conduit to access and activate bridging and linking ties in a time of crisis. *Natural hazards*, 105(2), 2219–2240. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11069-020-04397-8

Rainie, L., & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/8358.001.0001

Turkle, S. (2016). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age.* Penguin.

Turkle, S. (2017). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (third edition) (3rd ed.). Basic Books.

Wellman, B. (1979). *The Community Question: The intimate networks of East Yorkers*. American Journal of Sociology, 84(5), 1201–1231. https://doi.org/10.1086/226906