

## *The Internet and the Evolution of Community*

The advent of the internet has revolutionised the way we live our lives. We work and play on the internet as if it were another physical place – most of us exist in some capacity in this other dimension, as do our extended networks and communities. Delanty (2018) describes the community offered by the internet as a thin version of what we experience in person, and many people in our current pandemic consumed world would argue that after months of lockdown, this thin version of community offered by the internet is not an adequate substitute for face to face connections with family and friends. However, we are increasingly finding an internet enabled community is a suitable substitute for the kind of extended community we require in today's world. Most of us learned very quickly that a Zoom call with our nearest and dearest is just not the same as a hug, but the reliance we have on those individuals on the fringe of our community - neighbours, special interest groups and our extended social network - is happily and seamlessly replaced with the thin community enabled by the internet. Many of us no longer need favours from our neighbours, we can mix with like minded people virtually, and receive up to date information directly to our phones. Over recent decades, our lifestyle has changed enabled by the functions of the internet, and it is only fitting that our evolved requirements of community are happily fulfilled by the internet also - just because something is virtual, does not mean it is not real. While living our lives on the internet is not the same as existing within a more traditional form of community, it is an appropriate platform to operate day to day in our internet reliant 21<sup>st</sup> century civilisation.

Generations before ours will remember popping over the road to borrow a cup of sugar from a neighbour if they found themselves short when baking a cake. Whereas now, when we find ourselves in need, many of us would not dare knock on a neighbour's door for a favour - many of us do not even know our neighbour's names. Should we not be up for a trip to the shops, an UberEats driver is only a few taps away and the sugar will soon be at our door, without even the need for a conversation thanks to contactless delivery. In fact, if you do not want to even bake the cake, your UberEats driver will deliver one instead, along with a myriad of both edible and non edible supplies. Out of

toilet paper? No problem, your delivery driver will have that to you in less than thirty minutes. Headache? Your Panadol will be on its way before you have even finished reading this paper. The quintessential neighbourly duty of lending a cup of sugar is no more, and its replacement is an app.

We do not require a lasagne dropped at the doorstep when someone is sick or has just brought home a new baby - YouFoodz will drop off prepared meals, the Woolworths app enables us to get our groceries delivered and Amazon will get just about anything we need to our door in a matter of hours with the promise of drone deliveries enticingly close. Dablanc et al (2017) asserts, "Instant delivery services provide on-demand delivery within two hours – by either private individuals, independent contractors, or employees – by connecting consignors, couriers and consignees via a digital platform." We do not rely on our local community for help anymore, we rely on our smartphones – our command centres. While one may argue that a reliance on share economy based apps is still a reliance on people within the community, ordering from such an app is simply a business transaction that is occurring enabled by the internet - a simple equation of supply and demand supported by the platform the internet provides with no such neighbourly connotation. "The improved match-making between supply and demand facilitates the use of spare transport capacity and new sets of providers also on short distances with little time available." (Dablanc et al, 2017). We no longer require what we may think of as a traditional idea of community because the internet has replaced many facets of it with increased availability of services in real time. Community, as previous generations experienced it, has evolved to an internet dependent society with little reliance on other individuals.

Scenes of family and friends being reunited following pandemic lockdowns have flooded our newsfeeds for the past year, and many of us can relish in the joy that was seeing a loved one in person after weeks or months of Facetime conversations which instead should have been face to face. But beyond our immediate social circle, other social groups seamlessly operated online during lockdowns. Even prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, many of us were finding like minded strangers online and enjoying this

opportunity to interact with them, all from the comfort of our own homes. Gone are the days of a church hall meet up for a special interest group – groups such as these are increasingly taking to social media, particularly Facebook, to connect their members. Whether it be crafting, parenthood or gaming, all these connections can be facilitated by social media, sometimes to even better effect. We do not need to wait for a letter, or a telegraph. Issues such as geographical proximity can be instantaneously overcome as Wellman (2007) asserts, “Internet accounts and mobile phone numbers are person-based and not place-based.”

Community members of generations past may have met new friends or their romantic partners at a local community function, a party, or at work. And while this may still be true when these events do take place in person, is it so surprising that as we now meet, socialise and work on the internet, that we form new relationships, whether it be romantic or otherwise, on the internet also? Rosenfeld & Thomas (2012) concurs, “The Internet appears to be displacing, to a certain extent, the more traditional ways of meeting partners, such as through friends, through family, in school, or in the neighbourhood.”

Facebook is the local church hall of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and no matter how obscure your chosen hobby or interest may be, you can bet that there are dozens, potentially hundreds or even thousands, of groups available to you to join on Facebook and similar social networking applications. Rosenfeld & Thomas (2012) assert, “While it is true that the Internet has made communications within existing social networks more efficient (as did the telephone), the Internet also has dramatically improved the efficiency of searching for and finding new people outside of one’s pre-existing social network.” The use of hashtags enables the user to find specific content instantaneously on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram and allow interactions between the content creator and the viewer, enabling them to form a connection. While from the outside this may be viewed as a thin connection compared to one that may occur in person, the substance of the connection can realistically only be determined by the people participating in it. It is their perception of the interaction that really matters after all.

As with many aspects of our lives that have now become redundant since the advent of the internet, for many of us, the physical community noticeboard is a thing of the past, with the spread of information and communication with those in our local area now taking place virtually. “Interactions have moved inside private homes—where most entertaining, telephoning, and emailing takes place—and away from chatting in public spaces such as bars, street corners, and coffee shops.” (Wellman, 2007). We do not need to knock on a neighbour’s door to see if they have lost power when our power goes out - we get a text to our smartphones from our energy companies confirming the fact that the power has indeed gone out, or we can simply check their website for up the minute outage information. Lost something at the park? Post on your neighbourhood’s Facebook group and chances are you will have it back soon enough by engaging with your local community digitally. If you are looking to dodge a speed camera in your local area, there is an app for that too. The internet has facilitated many methods of communication with those in our surrounding area, and beyond, with all the information being user generated but without ever having to know a name or even acknowledge someone’s existence. Wellman (2007) asserts, “Online relationships are filling empty spots in people’s lives now that they no longer wander to the local pub or café to take up with their neighbors.” And why would you when you can gain any relevant information through your smartphone?

Facebook groups, apps and text alerts are all the norm now, and while the spreading of information via the internet is nothing new, its effectiveness, speed and reliability of communication increases our dependency on this method. This is in stark contrast to the physical noticeboard, or Chinese whispers of generations past and instead provides us with up to date, to the minute, and reliable information directly from the source. While there may be those who still idealise a community where these interactions occur face to face, and view these interactions as the core of community, Delanty (2018) asserts, “It cannot be denied that virtual communities are no less real than other kinds of communities. They constitute an important dimension of cosmopolitan community more generally.” We cannot reject the notion that the

internet's interpretation of community is no such community at all, because while it may not look the same as it used to, it has evolved to support what we now require from a community today.

The Covid 19 pandemic has cemented for many of us in our minds how reliant we are as a society on the internet, but it has also highlighted the capacity that the internet possesses to facilitate our contemporary concept of community. While many will argue the internet is a poor and incomprehensive substitute for the kind of community previous generations enjoyed, we no longer require that kind of community, and as such the internet is a sufficient space for what we now require from our extended network. We work online, manage our lives online, order such basic necessities as food online, so why are we surprised that our social networks and our extended network of community also operate and have adapted to existing online effectively? We do not lean on neighbours for favours as we can access alternative services in real time ourselves. Our reliance on social interaction with those in close geographical proximity to us is no longer as we can gain this social connection seamlessly through social media websites with only the user able to judge how substantial, fulfilling and 'real' these interactions are. The internet has also replaced the need for face to face communication with those surrounding us to spread information, as all relevant information can be accessed in the palm of our hand on our phones. While the internet has changed the landscape for what community looks like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has also provided the appropriate platform for this new look type of community to exist.

### ***Works Cited***

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