# The role of technology in connecting people during the pandemic

*John Vines, Northumbria University*

The quarantine, lockdown and social distancing measures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic mean we have been living in a time where, for a large proportion of the population, our in-person contact with one another is incredibly limited if not non-existent. Because of this, digital technology has taken on new importance and relevance in many people's lives, underpinning how we keep in touch with families, friends and colleagues even more so than it did before. Many people are adapting to new work, home and social lives that seem to be lived through a camera lens and a plethora of instant messaging, social networking, and video conferencing platforms. These platforms enable us to keep in touch with each other while at a distance; but they also help the public keep abreast of pandemic developments and allow information to be shared quickly amongst communities and networks.

As a researcher in the field of human-computer interaction, with an interest in how technology becomes woven into the messiness of people's daily lives, the time we're in now both excites me and deeply concerns me. It excites me as the situation presents a wonderful opportunity for technology to positively improve, or at least significantly mitigate against, some of the effects social distancing and any resulting isolation may have on people's lives. But it concerns me because much of the research I've been involved in over the last 6 years or so highlights how it is important to avoid seeing technology as a solution to complex problems. Viewing technology without due consideration to wider human factors, social practices, and unanticipated uses can give rise to more problems than are resolved.

**Technology, loneliness and social connectivity**
To give a bit of background, between 2014 and 2019 I worked on an ESRC funded project called [Loneliness and the Digital Age](). This project brought together researchers in different disciplines (psychology, computing, design and drama) across six Universities (Loughborough, Bath, Exeter, Newcastle and Northumbria) to conduct research into the experiences different communities have of loneliness and social isolation, and how digital technology can both be a negative and positive factor when it comes to these experiences. We focused our work specifically on groups of people who may be especially at risk of loneliness as a result of significant life events and disruptions – such as [becoming a parent for the first time](), [retiring or leaving employment to care for a loved one](), [moving from a team oriented workplace to working on your own](), and [young people leaving home for the first time to go to University](). In the project we saw the ways in which people experienced great amounts of loneliness even when seemingly spending much of their time with others, and how even short spells of perceived social isolation could cause anxiety, especially when there was uncertainty over when these spells would end.

Digital technology – especially social networks and instant messaging platforms – provided participants across all the groups an important means for keeping connected with others. It supports being connected with loved ones while working alone or settling into a new home. It can enable connectivity with other people in similar situations to your own and share advice and experiences. And even, at times, just being able to see that there were other people out there that could be reached out to, if you needed it, was enough. But these technologies also

come with problems – it's easy for technology to become a crutch in these periods. Social networks give a sense that if you post a status update, send a tweet, or add a comment to a forum thread, then someone will respond. But that's not always the case, leading to an increased sense of not being listened to, heard, and being alone. It's also easy to be led into making comparisons between yourself and others, possibly giving a sense that you are lacking in some ways. In our project, this is something that we saw a lot of among University students who were struggling to make new friends, and among new parents who were quick to judge their parenting abilities in relation to others. In these cases, seeing the experiences of others would often increase a reluctance to actively seek support or social connections with others. We also saw how one of the great powers of social networks – the ability to be connected with others experiencing similar situations – can also lead to becoming immersed in misinformation, especially when people felt like they had nobody to talk to in person to make sense of it all. And in the case where we were doing research with lone workers, we saw how technology was increasingly being deployed by their employers to mitigate some of the concerns of working remotely on your own. These technologies allowed lone workers to be socially connected to their teams, to see how people were doing in their work, and to have remote breaks with their co-workers. But these same technologies also gathered a lot of information about their performance on the job. So, we saw how many staff purposely avoided using the technology, even if it was detriment to their relations with some of their colleagues, to avoid being monitored by their employers.

Coming back to the pandemic, you can see how a lot of these tensions are being played out at the moment. There are obvious concerns with how misinformation about the pandemic is rife on social media platforms, which are having implications for how people make sense of the pandemic in their own lives and how seriously they take the social distancing measures. For instance, misinformation and media portrayals shared online have led some people to dismiss Covid-19 as a conspiracy theory, while some have become anchored to their homes due to fear propagated by misrepresentative images of busy beaches and parks. It's also not hard to find examples of where social media is being used to "other" certain groups for not adhering to distancing measures or for being to blame for the spread of the virus. Often, these do more harm than good and also can be laden with assumptions and, at times, xenophobia. And with the NHS contact tracing application, and more research being funded into using social media as a source for understanding the spread of the virus, more tensions are emerging around the enabling qualities of mobile technologies and social platforms at a time of physical separation, and the potential privacy concerns and impacts on our personal freedom that come from gathering data from these devices we rely on.

**The rise of hyper-local digital networks**
That said, there are also some really positive endeavours as well. Something that has emerged over the last two months are the ways in which technology is being utilised by communities at a hyper-local level – at the level of several houses, streets, or neighbourhoods – to provide solidarity and to support those who might be most at risk during the lockdown. A couple of months ago we started to see situations where a small number of households across the country started putting postcards through the letter boxes of the other homes in their street, and establishing almost protocols for looking out for each other. In one case, there was a street where people put green and red cards in front windows to alert others if they needed someone to knock on the door and help them. In others people filled out information on

postcards with telephone numbers and if they are shielding or experiencing quarantine measures. Social network platforms have been critical in the uptake of these around the UK as people started to share templates for cards that can be created at home, alongside tips and advice for streets to self-organise in ways to support vulnerable, isolating and shielded households.

Instant messaging platforms have been critical to co-ordinating these endeavours, with WhatsApp and Facebook groups being created where households collaboratively keep a watch on others in their street, reporting to each other when certain residents may need more support, or raising concerns if a neighbour has not been heard from or seen for a day or so. There has also been a resulting growth in popularity of community social networking site Nextdoor, which is intended to provide a social networking type platform for people living on the same street or in the same neighbourhood. Nextdoor has existed since 2011 and has waned in popularity over time, but now they have taken on a renewed purpose, with features like "help maps" where users can make requests for support from neighbours, or make requests for help on behalf of other local residents who may not have access to the Internet.

**Being connected via voice and audio**
At this time, we're also seeing a renewed interest in what might be viewed as older and less sophisticated technologies like radio. Wavelength is a UK charity who has a mission to provide people at risk of social isolation with communication technologies, especially digital radios, in order to continue to have a sense of connectivity to the world outside their homes. During the pandemic they've been inundated with requests for support during the lockdown period, particularly by the families of older people living alone who are living in shielded households. With the BBC and other organisations they have coordinated a response to get DAB radios distributed to vulnerable people during the pandemic. Relatedly, in the North East of England I've been observing the work of the Later Life Audio and Radio Network (LLARN) and the Manchester based Sondor Radio. They are both playing an important role in sharing information to older listeners about the specific risks associated with age and Covid-19. They are also doing important work bringing this community together to advocate for less stigmatising representations of older people and old age in the media and by politicians at this time.

Radio also emphasises the importance of being connected with other people through voice and sound. Our prior work on the Loneliness in the Digital Age project highlighted how being able to talk to someone else in a similar situation was critically important to certain groups experiencing deep feelings of loneliness, especially older people and carers. Sometimes just being able to hear someone else's voice was enough to give a sense that they could be talked to, if needed. Outside of our work, we're starting to see how relatively simple digital solutions are starting to apply this learning into practice. For instance, a start-up in Liverpool are developing a service called "Push to Talk" that literally enables vulnerable community members to press a button, either in a dedicated smartphone app, or via a dedicated physical device in their come, and be quickly connected to another person who wishes to talk at that time.

- - - - -

In summary, it's quite easy to be seduced by the power of new technologies, but we must be careful not to see digital technologies as separate from the social practices that surround them and that give them purpose and meaning. While the evidence at this time is entirely anecdotal, there are clear opportunities to learn from the ways that social networks are being formed and strengthened at highly local degrees of granularity in order to provide community-driven responses to the lockdown measures. Going forward, thinking about future crises and potential pandemics, it would put us in good stead to consider the ways such networks could be established and co-ordinated more effectively, especially within communities where residents are at higher risk. But also, we must not lose sight of the power of older, simpler, and often more familiar or reliable technologies like radio at times like this. The seduction of new technologies can lead to innovation for the sake of innovation, and simpler, cheaper and more effective solutions have been with us all along.