

Changing Social Ties and Social Media: Social Contexts for Care and Kindness:

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Introduction

Social and personal ties are undergoing significant changes in western societies, provoking public anxieties that traditional associations of family, neighbourhood and community are fragmenting. It is in this context of social change that care, responsibility and acts of kindness are redefined, articulated, and conveyed. This paper draws together aspects of debates from two books I wrote, *News Social Ties* (2006) and *Social Media and Personal Relationships* (2013) to address changing social ties and values that underpin the work of the *Campaign to End Loneliness* and current issues relating to care and kindness. Academics, politicians, and policy makers have expressed great concerns that growing self-reliance and transformations in personal relationships are eroding a culture of trust, leading to a decline of community values and personal responsibility: fundamental social values underpinning discourses and acts of care, support and kindness. The ongoing withdrawal of state welfare provision in many areas of life in western nations generates fears of a deficiency in the kinds of community networks needed to replace the state's former role in redistributing wealth and maintaining well-being.

Interestingly, the word 'community' has almost no negative connotations as Raymond Williams (1976/2014) points out in his analysis of the origins, and alterations of the word. The legacy of nineteenth century thinking has been the use of 'community' as a catchphrase that held together myths and illusions about societies of the day. Related to this social bond is another bond that has emerged to have extraordinary current appeal, that of 'friendship'. Both 'community' and 'friendship' are fluid, ubiquitous and positive terms relating to social ties that frame, correspond with, or throw light on notions and values associated with care and kindness. Whilst social and cultural theory has engaged with the idea of *community*, it has tended to neglect *friendship* ties (see Chambers 2006). Yet among policymakers of western nations, the informal but often intense and intimate bond of friendship is now being recognised as an essential social resource, as part of 'social capital' in the organization of wider social support networks (see Chambers 2006). This neglect of the values associated with friendship corresponds with a lack of scholarly attention to the significance of acts of *kindness*. Current work by Julie Brownlie and Simon Anderson (2016) highlights the significance of 'ordinary' kindness. They identify the key features of what they call "everyday acts of low-level help and support which render it sociologically relevant: its infrastructural quality; its unobligated character; its micro or inter-personal focus and its atmospheric potential" (Brownlie and Anderson (2016: 1; 14).

Within past debates about social ties, the term 'community' had strong nostalgic connotations: traditionally generating feelings of friendliness, kindness, trust and belonging. Nineteenth century intellectual founders of the sociological tradition, including Tonnies, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel advanced the broad thesis that modernity leads to an accelerated *depersonalisation of social relationships*. A key theme of much sociological work of that period was the collapse of traditional community-based relationships in industrial

society and the associated rise of anonymous, self-interested, and fragmented individuals in urban cultures: individuals who no longer represent the spirit of collective life.

In the early sociological writings, the sharing of a *geographical space* was perceived as a key marker of traditional community. For example, Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/2001) argued that industrialisation, urbanisation, and rapid geographical mobility have undermined traditional cohesive and supportive communities that were once linked by ties of kinship and locality. Similarly, Georg Simmel (1905/1950) held that life is becoming increasingly impersonal in modern society. He pointed to a commodification of urban relationships focused on material gain and profit. Simmel accurately predicted that, in the future, individuals would define social encounters as *sociability* - as ends in themselves. People would be more likely to describe themselves by their personal relationships rather than by their heritage or by the old community traditions of class, ethnic identity, and nation.

Twentieth century community, family and friendship

The nineteenth century ‘death of community thesis’ underpins the rise of a new ‘self’: a self-centred individual. The pessimistic sense of social decline invoked in earlier interpretations of change then fed into the 1950s and ‘60s notions of ‘modernity destroys community’. The classic British community studies of the early twentieth century identified a pattern of privatisation, in the sense of a loosening of community and neighbourhood ties corresponding with a strengthening of family ties and personal networks. This privatisation was described as a trend led by the middle classes and perceived to be spreading to the working classes (see Allan, 1979, 1989; Willmott, 1987). During this period, scholars of community change assumed that people were hesitant about being friendly with neighbours, and extending acts of kindness to them, for fear of being dependent on one another.

In a 1920s study of community in the US, Robert and Helen Lynd (1929) observed that neighbours no longer knew each other, and that they spent time visiting friends that lived elsewhere. Such findings fuelled the nineteenth century mourning of a loss of community, leading sociologists to debate about the growth of a form of *possessive individualism*. The rise of this individualism was said to be prompted by geographical and social mobility, and associated with social isolation. Yet, closer inspection revealed that ‘community’ was being defined narrowly, as ‘local neighbourhood’ which favoured *physical proximity* over all other forms of social contact. Physical presence was considered paramount in defining the intensity of a relationship. Within forms of social interaction, visual cues and face-to-face communication were viewed as vital. However, this made it more difficult for later writers to acknowledge that modes of social interaction involving transport, telephone, social media and other computer-mediated modes of communication could be as *genuine* as face-to-face modes of social integration.

By the mid-twentieth century, several sociologists were bemoaning the passing of traditional forms of social solidarity and rise of more individualised modes of sociality characterised by corporate connectedness and networking. For example, David Riesman et al’s (1951) *The Lonely Crowd* represents a cluster of sociological writings in North America that continued to interpret social change negatively. This underpinned the nostalgic sense of community deprivation. The individual was now viewed as an isolated unit forced to search for solace and acts of kindness within privatised spheres of life (Berger, et al. 1973; MacFarlane, 1978). The time-honoured values of care and guardianship once promised by ‘traditional

community' were overtaken by explanations of society based on instrumental and expressive individualism.

Talcott Parson's (1949, 1951, 1966) American functionalist theory is a classic example of an influential approach that repositioned the nuclear family at the centre of the social order. The idea of a small, agile, modern family form contrasted with that of a past, extended family with all of its attendant responsibilities. Contrasting with the pessimistic tone of the search-for-community studies of the early twentieth century, Parsons believed that the contemporary Western private, nuclearized family was the most adaptable to urban society. It was unencumbered by social, political, religious and educational obligations. Wider kin and friends were marginal to this emotionally self-contained unit. Older men and women living alone - whether grandparents, cousins or aunts and uncles - were now regarded as peripheral. This attitude was compounded by geographical mobility of the offspring who left to create families of their own. Inevitably, this fragmentation led to significant problems concerning the mental and physical care of the elderly and prompted public debates about their social marginalisation. The breakdown of traditional kin and community ties provoked by industrialisation and urbanisation compelled individuals to become self-reliant, not only materially but also emotionally.

Late twentieth century social thinkers

A late twentieth century pessimistic reading of individual agency by Christopher Lasch (1979) sustained the earlier, nineteenth century thesis of community decline, marked by anxieties about the shortcomings of the individual. He observed a rise in narcissism, characterised by self-love and self-indulgence. This condition was expressed as an increasing reluctance by individuals to *share* with one another. However, in contrast with the gloomy predictions of Lasch, two decades later social theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 1996) were offering a more optimistic analysis of the shaping of the modern individual's identity. These late modern scholars claim that today's erosion of traditional authority allows individuals to *actively choose* their families, their sexual partners and their community ties rather than rely on traditional family and community alliances. How does this affect the context in which care and acts of kindness may flourish? A clue lies within the fluctuating metaphor of 'friendship', a metaphor that embodies late modern acts of reciprocity and kindness.

Today, the concept of friendship has become a major social tie to describe today's more transient yet intense social bonds. For example, Giddens talks about the 'pure relationship' between couples and scholars such as Spencer and Pahl focus on 'family as friends' and 'friends as family'. While certain authors focusing on LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) relationships emphasise the importance of 'friends as family' within new kinds of late modern social ties, other members of the LGBT community adopt the concept of friendship to describe the complexity and 'queering' of today's social ties. Within a postmodern shift of emphasis from kinship and community networks to *personal* bonds and *choice* in intimate relationships, this notion of *friendship* is now being privileged. Friendship emerges in the late twentieth century as a dominant social bond: it functions as a *model relationship and a modernising impulse*. This value draws attention to the context in which random acts of kindness occur. These modes of compassion and reciprocity may no longer be associated with kin, yet they form a significant part of today's more transient community culture. It also explains why Facebook has adopted the term 'friend' to encourage people to

share intimacies on social media. Friendship becomes a powerful symbol, binding social media networks (see Chambers 2013).

The friendship ideal is a chosen relationship that transcends obligation, apparently fitting neatly into a society characterised by what has been called *expressive individualism* (Bellah et. al 1985/2007; Taylor, 2007). It represents a shift from an emphasis on *obligation* to an emphasis on *choice* in modern confluent, fluid relationships (Pahl, 2001: 120). Although the appeal of the term ‘friendship’ corresponds with today’s emphasis on self-individualisation as a virtue, it also signals an acute ambiguity about *choice and commitment* in elective (chosen) relationships during a period characterised by high divorce rates, social and geographical mobility, and migration. An emphasis on this transient social tie seems to question and undermine traditional values of duty and care. The accent on *choice* invokes the sense that associated acts of kindness are *random* deeds detached from former deep ties of family and wider kin (see Brownlie and Anderson 2016). Random acts of kindness are habitually expressed via phrases such as ‘the kindness of strangers’ to emphasise the short-term, casual and somewhat disconnected nature of the undertaking, distinct from an enduring relationship. These notions of friendship and kindness then raise questions about continuous responsibility, caring and commitment - the kinds of values and practices once formalised by legal and religious regulations in marital, kin and hierarchical community relationships.

Today’s social anxieties about a fragmented society

These questions about care and kindness correspond with present-day deliberations about the changing meanings of ‘community’ amongst academics, politicians and policy makers, framed by concerns that *modernity has undermined traditional communities*. The present-day discourse of community decline is, then, a legacy of early sociology. The numerous factors identified as probable causes of community decline today include: globalisation, spatial and social mobility, the welfare state, women’s independence, a decline in marriage, higher divorce rates, and the rise in single person households. Public anxieties about a decline of community and civic duty have been invoked in relation to a rise in anti-social behaviour and a decline of commitment, care and reciprocal responsibilities. These concerns are exemplified by the influential work of Robert Putnam. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) argues that societies that have better organised cooperation and civic cohesion also have better government, schools, economic growth, health and well-being. Whilst he draws on Bourdieu’s (1983) concept of ‘social capital (as ‘bridging’ and ‘participatory’ capital), the mechanisms that underlie these social connections are vague and imprecise

Women have been consistently noted as having higher levels of social capital than men. This is unsurprising, since social responsibility is mainly borne by women in the form of charity work, parents associations and religious activities, as indicated by the millennial General Household Survey (National Statistics 2001). Yet Putnam links the post-war rise in female employment to a decrease in former levels of civic participation among married women. Rather than proposing that men share in women’s caring activities, Putnam expresses disapproval of women for following men in the trend towards personal pursuits, careers, and consumption at the expense of *collective values*. Given that early twentieth century women’s organisations tended to be geared to homemakers, and that women’s paid employment has risen dramatically, it is hardly surprising that women’s homemaking organisations such as the Women’s Institute have declined significantly across western nations. And Putnam claims that the younger generation have more privatised lifestyles, are more passive, less philanthropic, less socially engaged and more likely to be estranged from the political system.

However, a Health Education Authority report on *Social Capital and Health* in the UK was critical of Putnam's approach (Campbell et al., 1999). Researchers found little evidence in England of the atomised self-absorbed individualism identified by Putnam. The report regarded Putnam's conceptualisation of a cohesive community as essentialist, arguing that it "bore a greater resemblance to people's romanticised reconstructions of an idealised past than to people's accounts of the complex, fragmented and rapidly changing face of contemporary community life – characterised by high levels of mobility, instability and plurality" (Campbell et al., 1999:156).

It is noteworthy that, in the UK, the working classes are more likely to engage in forms of sociability that lie outside the definition of 'social capital'. Their networks involve contacts with kin and small groups of friends that are closely connected to one another. These are often long standing associations such as school friends. By contrast, social networks among the middle classes tend to be more diverse, wide-ranging, fragmented, and ephemeral. This suggests that, as well as being culture-bound, the concept of social capital favours middle class lifestyles (Chambers 2006; Anderson et al. 2015a, 2015b). It further suggests that a re-evaluation of social capital as a measure of connectivity and kindness is needed. Putnam (2000) calls for a return to a golden era of civic participation in post-war America where social capital corresponded with "middle-class sensibilities". But Putnam is right when he argues that participatory capital has waned. Some findings indicate that this is due to voter apathy and distrust of politicians (Zmerli and Van de Meer 2017).

So how are people relating to one another during an era when high importance is placed on individual self-reliance, choice in relationships and geographical mobility? Can we suggest that changes in people's social relationships are leading not to social disengagement but to new forms of social connections and new modes of networking?

New social ties?

Postmodernist thinking stresses the emergence of new kinds of social cohesion in which social ties are characterised as fluid and permeable. We can argue that emergent forms of social cohesion such as gay and lesbian LGBT communities and 'friends as family' and social media network communities re examples of new forms of belonging. Government data collected on indicators of social capital in the UK are related to five main areas: civic engagement, neighbourliness, social networks, social support, and people's perceptions of their local area, and now also social media ties. The levels of associational membership, number of charities and donations in Britain were as high by the end of the 1990s as they were in 1959 according to evidence from local and national studies (Hall 1999).

For example, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations reported a significant increase in new voluntary organisations and in voluntary work between the 1970s and 1990s, and a growth in new forms of sporting organisations (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 1996, quoted in Hall 1999). And, at the turn of the millennium in 2002, the National Trust had three million members, more than ten times the number in 1971 (*Social Trends*, 33, 2003:19). All levels of community involvement have remained buoyant in Britain despite the view that more home-based or privatised form of leisure taking hold in the post-war years. This is also confirmed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation *Liveable Lives Study* conducted by Simon Anderson, Julie Brownlie and EJ Milne (2015a) who found that community engagement and the informal help comprising acts of kindness are flourishing in traditional and new contexts such as libraries, among walking groups and even in local

supermarkets. And we now have highly successful innovative social media campaigns such as *Movember* fundraising for men's health, the *#nomakeupselfie* campaign raising funds for cancer research and UNICEF's campaign to show that 'likes' on Facebook aren't enough to help save children's lives.

Government and charity responses

Despite the rise in community involvement identified above, the British government's first ever national strategy for carers in 1999, *Caring for Carers*, expressed concern about which factors might be shaping the practice of caring in the future. It was emphasised that changes in patterns of marriage, rising numbers of lone parents and people living alone, and family mobility may mean that people are less likely to form relationships that support informal caring when someone becomes sick, disabled, vulnerable, frail or lonely (Department of Health, 1999:20). This shift in living arrangements across western societies (including the United States, Britain and other parts of Europe), raised questions about changing social values and patterns of living and interacting with others. Five years later, in 2004, the Salvation Army conducted a study of the key themes of community, individuality and responsibility (The Henley Centre/Salvation Army, 2004). The charity identified a 'responsibility gap' resulting from a growing deficit of care for vulnerable groups including the elderly and those with physical, learning or sensory disabilities. The organisation also identified a lack of support for informal carers caring for people in need in their own homes and the critical shortage of childcare places, exacerbated by women taking on more of the economic responsibilities for providing for their households. The report stated:

Our research shows that in contemporary British society, many people do not feel an obligation of care to their extended family, their local community or vulnerable sections of society. At the same time, however, they have increasingly accepted responsibility for their own health, financial well-being and the care of their immediate families. They have diminished expectations of what governments can or should do for them (Henley Centre/Salvation Army 2004:8).

These social trends have, then, generated deep uncertainties about how informal networks and forms of care-giving are being sustained in contemporary western society. They fuel public fears that we now live in a society characterised by an erosion of responsibility, morality and trust in personal relationships and everyday transactions. At the centre of these uncertainties are ageing, the changing values of youth and the changing social roles and aspirations of women. By appearing to choose independence and careers over marriage, and preferring divorce over bad marriages, younger women's growing personal autonomy is thought by many commentators to lead to women relinquishing their traditional feminine caring roles in society. Putnam's assertion of community decline is founded on a version of community that privileges family, neighbourhood, and face-to-face interactions over long-distance and 'virtual' communication. For example, young adults aged 16-29 are the least neighbourly and least likely to be civically engaged. Yet they have more active social networks and are more likely to phone, text, hook up with friends via social media and meet them face-to-face more frequently than older adults, according to government data in *Social Trends and Ofcom*. This confirms that we need to take account of the role of social media in changing social ties. Yet where do these kinds of changes leave time-honoured values of community responsibility, trust, commitment and care?

The convergence of 'family' and 'friends'

Given the shortcomings of a society with a shrinking welfare state, an innovative approach to ideas of belonging, community and social ties is needed in order to take account of new communities and forms of belonging. Does the concept of 'friendship' have a place in these changes? Significantly, a friendship discourse is being superimposed on an entire range of relationships considered to be in a state of crisis or transition. At the start of the millennium, an important empirical study of family and friendship in the UK by Ray Pahl and Liz Spencer (2001) found evidence that friends are taking over some of the functions of family, with friends now more important in support networks than in the past. A blurring of the categories of family and friends is being experienced with individuals becoming more selective in choosing the relatives to socialise with and keep obligations. Spencer and Pahl (2006) found that friends are viewed as *chosen* while family are defined as *ascribed*. They also identified a blurring of the relationships of kin and friends. 'Kin' and 'friendship' were terms used interchangeably yet with differing meanings. On the one hand, when the term 'friend' was used to describe family relationships, such as a family member viewed as 'like a friend', the association was treated as something positive and valued. And likewise, when a friend was considered as kin, the comparison was positive and indicated the strength of the tie. On the other hand, when a friendship was regarded as a 'duty' then the term 'family' was introduced as a negative term if described as 'family-like'.

Are friends now *more* important than family and wider kin during late modernity, or are family and friendship somehow converging, in terms of expectations and behaviour? The boundaries between family and friends are becoming more permeable but 'friendship' is clearly being used to authenticate family relationships that are cherished, to signify the worth and appeal of the bond. Non-random acts of kindness are intrinsically imbedded in this value of friendship, as a transient relationship. During late modernity, then, more informal networks are sought, based on non-hierarchical yet ephemeral relationships. Friendship is used as a metaphor to express people's aspirations for new, flexible kinds of personal ties.

These changing ideas about family as friends, and an emphasis on choice returns us to questions about women's traditional roles as carers. The cultural accent on women's 'natural' nurturing role as wives and mothers justifies the responsibility placed on women to cement domestic ties among kin and the wider community. Within their caring roles, women regularly perform unacknowledged acts of kindness vital to the community. Mothers continue to undertake most of the work involved in caring for children and the elderly, and take time off work to care for their children when they are sick (see Fawcett Society report by Jemima Olchawski, 2016). Yet women have persistently been represented in academic research and popular discourses as self-interested. Social responsibility falls on the shoulders of women in the form of voluntarism: charity work, parent's associations and the kinds of collective values that, according to Robert Putnam (2000), sustain civic society. A failure to identify women as key carers and a failure to consider caring as a responsibility of society as a whole, to include men, implies that somehow women are shirking *their* caring responsibilities during periods of rapid social change.

For working class women with families and children, friendships are often a vital means of domestic survival rather than a way of enhancing either community, political or work ties. Middle class married women are more likely to have moved away from communities of origin and seek attachments and security among friends. In both cases, though, the availability of support services and networks - such as childcare, nearby relatives and partners - is crucial in determining the kinds of associations mothers make. The lack of affordable childcare restricts the friendship networks of women in poorer families (Chambers 2006). A

key point concerning research and policy on care is that women use personal networks as an essential resource (Hey, 1997; O'Connor, 1992; Allan, 1996; Olchawski, 2016). Yet, unlike men, women find it much more difficult to use these networks to access power. We need, then, to acknowledge the structural subordination of all carers – the low pay, the lack of recognition of mothers' and carers, the invisible nature of caring. This indicates that we need to extend the responsibility for caring to wider society, not just women, yet also find ways to strengthen personal networks of care by extending them to help vulnerable members of society.

New forms of belonging?

Emergent social ties ignored in Putnam's thesis, are being approached as part of identity politics and the emergence of what has been called postmodern communities. Groups have come together, through oppression or marginalisation, to contest their inferior position in society and celebrate their uniqueness. These are often supported by charities and non-government organisation groups such as Stonewall, Friends of the Earth, Amnesty International, Save the Children, and the Refugee Council. Relations of friendship are crucial to stigmatised groups such as those who come out as gay, lesbian or bisexual. 'Coming out' is a process of new identity formation that brings about key changes in communication with existing personal networks and involves a renegotiation of closeness and distance with existing family and friends. 'Families of choice' is a term now adopted by friends and by gay and lesbian couples to valorise non-heterosexual relationships (Weeks et al, 2001). From the 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic required the building of a community of care-giving, to support those who were suffering and dying from the illness and to offer counselling to loved ones. This community of care has consisted of a tight network of friends, experts and relatives and forced hospitals to relax family-centric visitation policies to include same-sex partners and wider circles of friends.

Personal communities and networks

What makes today's social media ties so interesting is not just the strong emphasis on informal, intimate and sociable affiliations of friendship but also the clear link between offline and online connections as a cultural framework for these connections. Digital media technologies are facilitating emergent social identities and communities with the internet being integrated in the lives of individuals (Chambers 2016). The question is whether traditional community ties have been recovered in a new setting by reintegrating fragmented individuals through online networks. Is it appropriate to call social ties on social media 'communities'? Are close, face-to-face, geographically-based, affective communities being recuperated in innovative ways online?

For many users, social media interactions are not marginal experiences or weak ties in the manner suggested by researchers such as Sherry Turkle (2011) in her book, *Alone Together: What We Expect more from Technology and Less from Each Other* (also see Turkle 2016). These new kinds of ties can form a major, structuring part of people's 'real' lives. But, modes of interaction developed through social network site engagement can vary widely to encompass either 'thick' ties of family, kinship, friendship, and neighbourhood or 'thin' ties of acquaintanceship (see Granovetter 1983; Morgan 2009). From the 1960s onwards, the idea of a 'personal community' emerged as a more self-selected and more individuated source of

support was developed and extended in sociological discussions (Wellman 1979: 1211, 1993: 433).

While the term ‘personal community’ emphasises the significance of chosen ties in the context of family and friends, ‘*personal community*’ implies that a personal commitment can achieve collective outcomes: that is, as a source of social capital and resource for public policy. These emphases are supported by studies of family, kinship, social movements, and community life in Britain which have challenged the disjunction between ‘community’ and ‘individualism’. Graham Crow and colleagues (2002) highlight individualised patterns of connectedness in their research into neighbour relations in the South of England. Most people they interviewed had strong neighbourly connections and were likely to identify neighbours in their street as friends or best friends. But the study suggests that modern social bonds do not arise from a *conscience collective*.

However, Jennifer Wilkinson (2010) suggests that *personal community* and new solidarities that include friendship ties may offer the possibilities of more public and more *collective* forms of expression and kindness. She emphasises that the term ‘personal community’ relies on the integration of two seemingly incongruent sociological principles: ‘community’ and ‘individualism’. Wilkinson points out that the concept of community has been linked with accounts of belonging, local solidarities, social commitment, and public and collective interests while individualism encompasses ideas of self-actualisation, individual achievement, identity and personal autonomy. This apparent contradiction raises questions about whether individualism has the capacity for realising collective outcomes. Research on personal communities has addressed this problem by approaching friendship as a *resource*: as social capital with public value. Spencer and Pahl (2006) suggest that personal communities can be used to achieve collective consequences. It does not necessarily occur through a collective forum, but instead through casual, private informal social support.

Virtual communities of care

Social network sites seem to be well placed to offer social benefits from weak ties (known as bridging capital). Whilst earlier scholars such as Rheingold (1993) invoked the idea of a wide division between online and offline reality, we now tend to think in terms of a convergence between virtual and face-to-face relations. Social media experiences are just as real as those associated with communicating by phone. Online interactions can complement other forms of communication since they often facilitate face-to-face interactions (Wellman et al. 2001). Malcom Parks (2011: 108) suggests that the concept of ‘virtual community’ can help to explain social network sites in the sense that these websites provide the technological and social affordances for pursuing online ‘communities’. For example, Facebook a) offers easy access to diverse groups of people, b) a variety of options for users to focus on and communicate their personal interests, and c) is organised in such a way as to foster communication and relational links among members.

Virtual communities of care already involve internet-based self-help groups operating by computer mediated communication, used as a source of information and support. Support groups can be ‘safe’ environments in which individuals can discuss personal problems without being insulted. Studies of Internet use among socially disadvantaged and minority groups indicate that the Internet has enormous potential for enhancing social equality and empowerment (Mehra et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2001). Members of the LGBT community perceive online communication to be a positive development in their sexual identities by

promoting LGBT participation at local activities such as political events and rallies, by contributing to policy and planning on issues affecting their lives, and by fostering support groups and cultural events. The rise of digital media has therefore generated hope about the recovery of community in an electronic form through sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These individualised networks may have highly personalised networks articulated in public spaces. Yet, importantly, these online networks tend to have *geographical significance*. People regularly use social media to plan events where individuals meet face-to-face and gather together in physical proximity (Chambers 2013).

It would not be impossible to transform the algorithms of social media sites to ensure the development of new kinds of sharing based not on advertising but on caring and acts of kindness. We have already seen the development of several mobile apps to support caregivers, such as *Jointly* by Carers UK. And most new smartphones are now equipped with a voice-activated AI system such as Microsoft's Cortana, Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa. Not only do these smart devices give weather forecasts and other basic information but they can engage in conversations, learn users' speech patterns and offer advice. Comparable "chatbots" are also likely to become widespread, using advanced AI models and machine learning to recall conversations and develop a rapport with their users (Kellaway et al. 2016). That said, we must not forget that everyday forms of help, support and acts of kindness provided by individuals, groups, and organisations are embedded in the routines of everyday life, and therefore rely on close proximity and face-to-face interaction (see Anderson et al 2015a). Whilst community and friendship are now negotiated online, it turns out that these virtual ties regularly support geographically-bound *local* networks, involving the sharing of a *geographical space*. We should not lose sight of the significant point that *physical proximity* and *locality* remain fundamental contexts for supporting both time-honoured and new social ties of care and kindness.

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