

# Joining forces

The way we form communities has been transformed thanks to the cyber golden age. Governments are falling and history is changing – all because we can summon a crowd in a flash. At the same time, we're still seeking out human contact – in everything from parents' groups to book clubs. SHERYL-LEE KERR, KATHRYN SHINE and GAIL WILLIAMS report

**I**T IS February 19, 2016. 7.15am. But you knew that already from your personalised computer, emailer and multimedia TV phone softly blurring you awake. The top news stories of the day roll past the small interactive net-TV screen. There's been another surge in identity theft. A top government minister has resigned for misleading the Australian people on his official public-accountability blog. A fundraiser is being held for the local primary school so the children's laptops will be able to hook into the high-speed Education Department network. Angry rioters protesting the technology divide in Africa demand free net access for all. Police have expanded their online DNA database to link with the European database giving criminals "nowhere to hide". Online forum boards are springing up globally at a rate of one a second. Psychologists urge parents to get their children to make more offline friends to learn better socialisation skills.

This might be just one vision of what lies ahead, but no matter how things unfold, the future is heading in a remarkable direction. Online communities are taking off in a way that only hints at what is to come.

Some of these possibilities were revealed to Australia during a moment of racially fuelled rage.

Last December, at Sydney's Cronulla Beach, a huge mob had gathered. Some were there because of radio reports. The rest came because of text messages, which zapped about silently, invisibly, spreading from mobile phone to mobile phone like bacteria: "Every Aussie in the shire get down to North Cronulla to support the Leb and wog bashing day."

Throughout the next few days angry groups formed, dissipated and reappeared elsewhere in the blink of an eye, faster than many police could mobilise.

But lost in the confusion was startling proof that society's way of forming communities has been transformed forever. At that moment we discovered that at any time, one person with a phone or pocket PC has

the ability to form a community – or in this case, summon a mob – from his or her back pocket.

In France in 2005, behind the youth unrest which saw cars overturned and buildings torched, was a fast and furious series of emails, blogs and text messages orchestrating the protests.

Sometimes the intentions behind the groups are more comical. So-called flashmobs in Europe and the US have taken hold as an offbeat pastime. Text messages are sent to participants to do bizarre things, such as congregate and then everyone hop on one leg or play invisible ping pong – before quickly dissipating.

Many instant online communities form for altruistic reasons, as well. After the Boxing Day tsunamis, bloggers (online diarists) and texters were able to get through some warnings of washed-out bridges, of safe areas, and offered online places for people seeking missing relatives to post messages. The e-community was in action within minutes – far faster than any country's government could act.

One man who didn't raise an eyebrow at this was Howard Rheingold, author of *Smart Mob: The Next Social Revolution*.

"I wasn't surprised when people used SMS, blogs, camera phones and wikis to organise relief efforts during the first hours after the tsunami of 2005," he writes in his blog. "If you can smart-mob political demonstrations, elections and performance art, you can smartmob disaster relief. I observed two of my friends on opposite sides of the world do just that."

He reported that within hours of the first tsunami, one blogger in Mumbai, India, had hooked up with a Helsinki blogger to mobilise and get donations flowing. An instant community formed and suddenly more than 150 volunteers were co-ordinating efforts. In Spain, an SMS campaign raised nearly \$6 million in two days.

There is no doubt that the way the world forms communities is like at no other time in history.

"You've got a generation of young people forming



**A young woman holds her mobile phone displaying an SMS message urging people to target the Lebanese at Cronulla Beach last December.**

**Below: The Cronulla riots that ensued.**

communities at the drop of a hat," says Tama Leaver, a UWA academic who explored digital communities as part of his research. "They have all of the enabling technologies. It takes them 10 minutes to find an interest and follow it and they can go from the online to the offline in a split second – to them they're not two different worlds."

This may go some way in explaining why young people can gather in great numbers at internet cafes to email people vast distances away, and yet not talk to the person beside them. Or why a group of friends going out together can spend as much time on their phones texting other people as interacting within the group. Online or offline, it's all the same to them.

Times have certainly changed, says Dr Michele Willson, an Internet Studies lecturer at Curtin University and author of upcoming book *Technically Together – Rethinking Community Within Techno-Society*.

"The internet has grown tremendously – it used to be the geeky people who were far more familiar with the technologies. Now a large percentage of the population is using the internet in some form, so it makes sense that people are incorporating the possibilities into everyday lives," Dr Willson says.

For many its popularity lies in its efficiency.

"People think 'I've got 10 minutes now, why don't I pop online and see who's there and what's happening?', instead of saying 'On Thursday night at such a time there's a meeting down at the local club, but can I get babysitting?'"

"The internet and communications technologies also offer the potential to connect with people regardless of where they live."

But the downside to this is the fear we will become a society of isolated individuals.

"The types of lives we lead, we're increasingly trying to be efficient, manage our time. We're doing all sorts of networking," Dr Willson says. "We do all our banking online, people shop online, and while they're not essentially social activities, a lot of social activities

## You have the potential to be connected to anybody

derive from that sort of environment. So to remove that to use a computer online might make some people feel isolated."

Tama Leaver is less convinced. "There's been a shift in the last three or four years from thinking that the internet is a sphere of isolation and separation, to this idea that it's actually a facilitating sphere," he says.

Even offline groups get the benefits from it with "access to a huge wealth of information that these groups might discuss".

Either way, if we're already madly forming instant communities, imagine what the future will bring.

"Wherever you can be you have the potential to be connected to anybody," Dr Willson says. "It raises questions of equity – those who have access and those who don't – information and technology literacy, how



Picture: Jody D'Arye



Picture: Jackson Flindell

to find people online. Where's it going? Where will it end up?

"I think we might belong to more communities but perhaps they'll be more specialised or are more focused on particular areas of our lives. Or maybe something grabs our attention for a short period and when that's resolved we move on to something else."

"There are lots of exciting possibilities but everything comes with a catch."

Perhaps one of the biggest catches is how we react to the technology. For every change there are the people polarised by it. Add technology into the mix and society becomes even more passionate.

Explains Howard Rheingold: "When a communication medium is young, it can serve as a projection screen for people's hopes and fears about technology and the direction society seems to be heading."

Above: The ever-growing popularity of internet cafes.

Inset left: Tama Leaver.

Inset top left: Dr Michele Willson.

You've got a generation of young people forming communities at the drop of a hat. They can go from the online to the offline in a split second.

Tama Leaver

Dr Willson is undecided about these techno trends.

"I think increasingly (online communities) are part of our everyday life. I don't think you can make positive or negative judgments just on the basis of them being online," she says. "I think that they offer incredible potential but, as with any group, there is a potential for negative outcomes."

"Like all that stuff around the Cronulla riots – the texting ..." she pauses. "I do think we need to think about the type of engagement we have online and what it means for the types of societies we want to live in."

"Online communication can be very fast, it can gather flash mobs, it can generate and connect people and bring together outcomes that may not have been possible otherwise. In that sense it might have incredible potential. The future will be interesting." >>



Firemen extinguish a burning car torched during riots in France.

Left: Rescue efforts in Aceh after the devastating tsunami.