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

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
You have the potential to be connected to anybody

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.”

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