



THEGOVLAB

# The Power of Virtual Communities

February 2021





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Online groups are significant contemporary organizations that can generate impact, and provide their members with a strong sense of community and belonging, despite not operating in physical space.
- 1.8 billion people use Facebook Groups every month, and more than half of all the people using Facebook are members of five or more active groups. There are 70 million people active in the past month leading these groups as admins and moderators.<sup>1</sup>
- This report seeks to open a conversation about the role and impact of online groups and the factors that make some of them successful communities. It draws on interviews with 50 leaders of Facebook Groups in 17 countries and with 26 global experts in online community building, along with a literature review, internal Facebook research, and a parallel YouGov survey of 15,000 Internet users in 15 countries.
- A growing number of people around the world are finding meaning and a sense of belonging in online groups. According to the YouGov survey, in 11 out of 15 countries studied, the largest proportion of respondents reported the most important group to which they belong is a primarily online one.
- The report finds:
  1. People can experience a strong sense of community from membership in such groups despite the lack of physical proximity.
  2. Online groups are a still fluid form of human organization that in many cases attract members and leaders who are marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit, and who use the platform to build new kinds of community they could not form in real space.
  3. Many of these groups have counter-cultural norms and are what political scientists might call “cross-cleavage” communities. These groups cut across traditional social groupings, and bring together people normally divided by geography around a shared trait or interest.
  4. The flexible affordances of online platforms have enabled new kinds of leaders to emerge in these groups with unique skills in moderating often divisive dialogues, sometimes among millions of members.
  5. The leaders of many of these groups run them as a labor of love; they are neither trained nor paid, the rules that govern their internal operations are often uncodified, and the hosting platform - in this case Facebook - holds significant power over their operations and future.
  6. These groups, some of which have huge memberships, remain emergent and largely unrecognized: they are outside traditional power structures, institutions and forms of governance.
  7. More research is needed to understand whether and how these groups will operate as genuine communities over the long term, especially given the tensions that derive from conducting public life on a private platform such as Facebook, and how such groups and their leaders can be supported to ensure they provide maximum voice, participation and benefit to their members.

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1. Number of Facebook leaders counted in August-September 2020.

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

This report was written and edited before the events of January 6 where a crowd of rioters stormed the United States Capitol. The insurrection was organized by [groups online](#), including [on Facebook](#).

The online environment is an increasingly vital part of social life, and its importance is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. It would be foolish to be complacent about its impact on human wellbeing. Social media companies, governments and citizens all have work to do to ensure that the online world strengthens society and does not exacerbate its division into warring communities and tribes.

This report has been written in the belief that such a beneficial outcome is possible. It shows how groups on Facebook and other online platforms can create communities that give their members a powerful sense of connection and belonging, groups like Female IN and HumanKind Global. It highlights the many ways that such groups and their leaders can give voice to people who lack a voice in the offline world. It identifies the online group as a new form of social organization capable of bringing out the best in human beings.

The issues explored in this report are even more important in the wake of events on January 6. [In one recent poll](#), more than one in three Americans said they did not trust the outcome of the 2020 election; further, one in five voters strongly or somewhat support the January 6 riots. These figures point to frightening divisions in American society, and there is intense and needed conversation of exactly what role social media has played in fuelling them.

Online groups can of course work for good or ill. The challenge for humanity is to harness the awesome power of the digital world to shrink not only geographical distance but political and tribal differences, to build true global communities. The work of many of the groups and individuals examined in these pages provides hope that such a goal, however distant it might appear, is not out of reach.

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## THE POWER OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

When India went into lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on movement affected people's access to medicine, food and other supplies that they relied upon. HIV/AIDS sufferers feared traveling to clinics and labs to pick up their medication. Needing help, many turned to [HumanKind Global](#), a new network of thousands of volunteers who coordinate aid through a Facebook Group and WhatsApp (also owned by Facebook). Mahita Nagaraj, 39, a self-employed digital marketing professional and single mother based in Bangalore, created the group in March 2020. In just four weeks, HumanKind Global volunteers delivered lifesaving HIV medicines to more than 170 people across India. It has since grown to more than 50,000 members. Answering more than 25,000 requests for help, these volunteers have coordinated blood donations, delivered life-saving medication and provided people stranded at home with enough food to eat.

HumanKind Global is an online group, **a form of human organization that is expanding at a remarkable scale and speed**. Online groups exist for many reasons. Some offer lifesaving support while others enable people—whether they live next door or across an ocean—to trade articles, jokes, photographs, insults, ideas, advice, information, and sometimes misinformation. The space in which contemporary online groups are active is at once global and local, intimate and vast. A post can reach two million people, or spark a conversation between just two. Governed by their own members and the policies of the platforms on which they are hosted, these groups have diverse rules that seek to create a space in which their members can connect supported by feelings of **belonging, intimacy and trust**.

Online groups like HumanKind Global can be found on many platforms. There are discussion groups on Reddit, artist colonies on *LEGO Mindstorms*, player groups on gaming platforms like Twitch, or parenting groups in which members go online to organize real-life meetings through MeetUp. But in this report we study Facebook Groups, specifically, as one category of online group.

In a few short years, groups have moved from the margins of Facebook's work to the center of its corporate mission. **More than 1.8 billion people use Facebook Groups each month**. Facebook Groups can range in size from just a few people to several million, and more than half of Facebook users are members of five or more active groups. While Facebook does not disclose how many groups it hosts in total—only specifying there are "tens of millions of active groups"—company data shows that **there are over 70 million people actively administering and moderating Groups**, a population larger than Thailand, Britain or France.<sup>1</sup>

Online groups of this scale, complexity and reach were unheard of just a decade ago. And their importance has only grown as people sit at home, sometimes isolated, during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Examples include:

- [Female IN \(FIN\)](#), originally Female in Nigeria, encourages its 1.7 million female members to share stories of struggle and achievement.
- [Surviving Hijab](#) encourages its 920,000 female members to take up or continue wearing the Muslim head covering in the face of political and social criticism.
- [Blind PenPals](#) enables its 7,000 blind and visually impaired members to share stories and advice.
- [Canterbury Residents Group](#) acts as a public square in the British city of Canterbury and has 38,000 members, about the same size as the city's population.
- [Subtle Asian Traits](#), which began as a modest initiative among nine young Australians of Chinese background to share funny memes about their Asian heritage, has expanded to a group of 1.82 million people who discuss and share the experience of growing up Asian in mostly majority-White societies.

***This report seeks to understand how such online groups operate, who creates and leads these groups, why people join them, what they do in them, what impact they are having and whether they offer the same sense of trust, friendship and belonging as many traditional, physical communities do.***

To learn about these groups, we interviewed Facebook Group admins from 17 countries and reviewed a plethora of additional research documents and information (a description of research products is provided [here](#)) in order to examine four related questions:

- What motivates people to participate in online groups? What benefits do they receive from participating?
- What traits, skills and abilities are needed to run a successful online community that might have millions of members?
- What rules bind these groups, and how are these rules devised and enforced?
- What are the outputs and outcomes of these groups' work and what is the impact for their members?



**Authored in the second half of 2020 by researchers with backgrounds in political and social sciences, technology, business, journalism and data science affiliated with the Governance Lab (The GovLab),** an action research center located at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering, and with input from diverse, global advisors, this work is just the start of conversation about the nature of online groups and their impact. While our findings must be interpreted cautiously given the speed of and limitations to our work, we observe that:

1. People can experience a strong sense of community from membership in such groups despite the lack of physical proximity.
2. Online groups are a still fluid form of human organization that, in many cases, attract members and leaders who are marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit. These people use the platform to build new kinds of community they could not form in real space.
3. Many of these groups have counter-cultural norms and are what political scientists might call “cross-cleavage” communities. These groups cut across traditional social groupings and bring together people normally divided by geography around a shared trait or interest.
4. The flexible affordances of online platforms have enabled new kinds of leaders to emerge in these groups with unique skills in moderating often divisive dialogues, sometimes among millions of members.
5. The leaders of many of these groups run them as a labor of love; they are neither trained nor paid, the rules that govern their internal operations are often uncoded, and the hosting platform — in this case Facebook — holds significant power over their operations and future.
6. These groups, some of which have huge memberships, remain emergent and largely unrecognized: they are outside traditional power structures, institutions and forms of governance.
7. More research is needed to understand whether and how these groups will operate as genuine communities over the long term, especially given the tensions that derive from conducting public life on a private platform such as Facebook, and how such groups and their leaders can be supported to ensure they provide maximum voice, participation and benefit to their members.

## BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT

This report is the product of a partnership between an interdisciplinary research team at several leading universities, coordinated by The GovLab (NYU IRB-FY2020-4621) and Facebook. Facebook supported the report both financially and intellectually and we benefited greatly from dialog and collaboration with its Community Partnerships Team. The GovLab team entered this unusual partnership in order to pursue a groundbreaking opportunity to gain insight into the nature of community life on the Facebook App. However, we remain clear about the challenges such a collaboration poses.

We worked with Facebook's Community Partnerships Team to open a window into the company's vast ecosystem of Facebook Groups and communities, including in developing economies. While many researchers have done pathbreaking work on specific online groups and communities, our partnership has allowed a much greater level of access than scholars generally have to company research as well as to a range of groups across countries and cultures, and their leaders. Many of today's online groups — from *World of Warcraft* guilds to women's entrepreneurship networks on WeChat — exist on private and proprietary platforms to which researchers normally have little access. Yet these groups prompt many unanswered questions of significant academic and public interest. The partnership has enabled us to draw initial insights and articulate questions for further study and research.

For Facebook's part, this study is one strand of its broader efforts to shine a light on, and build understanding of, the work done by community builders on their platform. The Community Partnerships Team explained that, with 70 million active admins and moderators, understanding the conditions under which these Facebook Groups develop as impactful communities is of critical social importance given the wider context of well-noted civic decline. It is also the company's hope that, by increasing understanding of the work of digital community builders, a wider ecosystem of support can develop — with philanthropy, venture capital, government, brands, and academia all having important roles to play in supporting digitally enabled community leaders to bring the world closer together.

A report funded by and in collaboration with Facebook focused on Facebook Groups raised significant ethical challenges for us as a team of academic researchers, but we are committed to the independence of our analysis and judgment, including the freedom to criticize Facebook itself.

Accordingly, at every stage in the design and implementation of this research, we have sought to generate useful knowledge without regard for the commercial interests of Facebook or any other party.

Second, to uphold our ethical standards, we have insisted on the freedom to draw independent conclusions.

Third, we endeavor to be as transparent as possible in identifying Facebook's role in providing information to us, especially information we cannot verify.

Therefore, it is important for the reader to be aware that access to all groups and individuals was provided by Facebook's Community Partnerships Team, based on criteria provided by our research team. While Facebook has made certain proprietary reports and information accessible in order to inform our work, it has not permitted us in every case to check the validity of these sources, know its research methods or to publish the materials for public scrutiny. Where we rely on internal Facebook research, we make these constraints explicit.

Of course, groups convene on many platforms, not just Facebook. But because Facebook is funding this research, we did not consider it ethical or appropriate to write about its competitors, since any attempt to do so would create a conflict of interest. Rather, our focus seeks above all to understand the particularities of the experience of Facebook Groups compared to the more traditional in-person experience, and in doing so, identify conditions for the success or failure of these online groups.

In recent years, Facebook and other social media platforms have been the subject of considerable public debate and criticism in relation to filter bubbles, so-called fake news, foreign and domestic elections interference, the rise of far right groups and the issue of online hate speech and misinformation and their relationship to social division and unrest. Groups on the far right and alt-right, including neo-Confederate groups and groups dedicated to the anti-government and antisemitic conspiracy theory QAnon, have operated effectively on Facebook (although the company recently banned QAnon from the platform and [took steps](#) to remove 600 militarized social movements). The company reports that it has taken [proactive steps](#) to remove hate speech, investing in technology and hiring content moderators. However, as Facebook acknowledges, "zero tolerance doesn't mean zero incidences. With so much content posted every day, rooting out the hate is like looking for a needle in a haystack."<sup>3</sup>

While we allude to these controversies and Facebook’s response to them, this report does not examine every concern about the online space, nor the broader benefits and disadvantages of social media.

Undertaking this collaboration with Facebook has been a learning process, with frequent exchanges on how best to take advantage of the above opportunities under the ethical guidelines that govern our work. Our collaborators have been patient and gracious as we explored the inevitable clashes between corporate and academic interests. **We believe this partnership has afforded a unique opportunity to get a glimpse into a new institution – the online group – that may be forming a backbone of community and belonging for millions of people around the world.**

We hope the report helps to clarify a global research agenda on the topic of online communities, and that it may expand over time to encompass new partners from academia, civil society and the private sector.

## HOW WE WORKED

The insights in this report and its associated case studies are built on analysis of a diverse array of qualitative and quantitative research products. They include: interviews with 50 Facebook Group leaders from 17 countries; interviews with 26 digital community “experts” in 14 countries; analysis of internal Facebook research; a literature review of more than 150 academic articles and studies focused on virtual communities. In addition, we advised on, but did not conduct, a YouGov-Facebook survey that asked more than 15,000 Internet users in 15 countries about their most important online and offline groups. A fuller description of these research products is provided [here](#).



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# CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY





## CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY

From its earliest documented uses in the 14th century, the English word “community” — derived from old French (*communauté*) and Latin (*communitas*) — and later, the German term *Gemeinschaft*, have had two enduring features. First, community has been primarily, though not exclusively, linked with the idea of place. Second, it has become a warmly persuasive word. As sociologist Raymond Williams wrote in his 1976 book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*: “Unlike all other terms of social organisation (state, nation, society, etc) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the warmth of the word, communities can be stifling. Traditional communities are often marked by rigid power relations, sometimes violently enforced, and ways of thinking. Communities can bond people tightly together in ways that are both reassuring and repressive. They can reinforce ancient forms of dominance, including patriarchy and critically, they have tended to exclude outsiders, sometimes making them the enemy.<sup>5</sup>

In 1983, political theorist Benedict Anderson coined the term “imagined communities” to describe the emergence of national identities whose citizens mostly do not know one another but take part in a common political entity built on shared ideas, practices and norms, and sometimes on shared opposition to other imagined communities.<sup>6</sup> Online groups are unlike Anderson’s geographically bounded communities, yet they are also imagined in the sense that people who usually do not know each other in physical space can share bonds of identity, attachment, loyalty and belonging.

Most dictionaries hew to a definition of ‘community’ that — like Anderson’s definition — emphasizes the role of physical space and a sense of common identity. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines community as “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1993, journalist Howard Rheingold defined a new kind of community that he saw emerging on the nascent World Wide Web. In his eponymous book, he called them virtual communities.<sup>8</sup> These voluntary “social aggregations” arose “when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”<sup>9</sup> Rheingold believed that these new human assemblies exhibited the same kinds of behavior as “authentic,” real-world communities, with one distinction. He wrote: “People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind.”

Online groups emerged in the noncommercial bulletin boards, mailing lists and newsgroups of the early Internet. They became staples of many platforms, including Yahoo! Groups, MySpace, Tumblr, Reddit and the WELL, one of the oldest virtual communities, which has operated since 1985. Yet when Reingold wrote his book in 1993, the Internet had not yet entered widespread public consciousness. Today 53 percent of the world's population uses the Internet (although the digital divide between high- and low-income countries remains large) and 97 percent of human beings live within reach of a mobile phone network.<sup>10</sup> As a result, more people than ever are able to create new kinds of groupings online.

Facebook launched its Groups feature in 2010, six years after the company was formed. It was however only in early 2017, as Facebook Groups were growing dramatically in number and size, that company founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced a pivot from Facebook's original mission and brand: "To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected." In a [6,000-word letter](#) in which he used the word "community" more than 100 times, Zuckerberg argued that online communities were a "bright spot" of connection in an increasingly atomized and polarized world. Facebook's corporate mission now reads: "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together."

While critics argue that Facebook's focus on community sought to divert attention from the company's mishandling of misinformation during the 2016 US Presidential election campaign and other problems, Facebook has also invested considerable resources in developing new tools and programs to facilitate the creation and support of online groups.

***Facebook defines community as: "A collection of people, in which they receive a sense of belonging, connection and feeling of safety. They give trust and investment over time." In this definition, the positive valence of 'community' that Williams identified remains, but is no longer exclusively dependent on location or on traditional power structures.***

## THE RISE OF ONLINE GROUPS AROUND THE WORLD: A SURVEY OF 15 COUNTRIES

A 2020 [survey](#) (thus, mid-pandemic) conducted for Facebook by YouGov suggests that a growing number of people around the world are indeed finding meaning and a sense of belonging in primarily online groups. Conclusions must be tentative because the survey was conducted online. It therefore reflects the internet population in each country, not necessarily the general population; this is especially the case for middle- and low-income countries, where internet penetration is lower. (Note that the report's research team played no role in administering the survey which was run by YouGov without Facebook branding.)

In the survey, about a thousand respondents in each of 15 countries were asked whether the most important group they belonged to operated primarily online or offline, or in both those spaces.<sup>11</sup> **In 11 out of 15 countries, the largest proportion of respondents reported their most important group as primarily online**, and in three of those countries that proportion was 50 percent or more of respondents. In Australia and Kenya, the largest proportion of respondents picked a mixed online-offline group, while only in France and Germany did the largest share of respondents identify a primarily offline group as their most important. The following table shows answers to this question across the 15 countries in the survey.

### MOST IMPORTANT GROUP TYPE

	Primarily in person	Primarily online	A mixed group
Argentina	18.33%	42.56%	39.11%
Australia	23.60%	37.98%	38.42%
Brazil	13.44%	50.68%	35.88%
Germany	40.48%	30.47%	29.05%
Egypt	24.27%	44.77%	30.96%
France	40.04%	34.00%	25.96%
Indonesia	18.15%	49.28%	32.57%
India	21.83%	42.26%	35.91%
Kenya	12.01%	41.81%	46.17%
Morocco	16.86%	52.64%	30.50%
Mexico	17.03%	50.00%	32.97%
Nigeria	12.41%	45.83%	41.75%
UK	35.25%	38.90%	25.85%
US	30.11%	46.11%	23.78%
South Africa	18.72%	45.60%	35.68%

## SIZE, LONGEVITY AND LEADERSHIP: FURTHER INSIGHTS INTO ONLINE GROUPS FROM THE SURVEY

The YouGov survey points to four key features of many successful online groups that are explored in the rest of this report: their size, connection to place, longevity and leadership.

Oxford anthropologist Robin Dunbar famously argued that smaller groups of 50, 100 and 150 people have greater longevity than larger groups.<sup>12</sup> Much subsequent research has posited that smaller group size makes for stronger social ties.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between size and belonging is complex, and the debate on the subject is discussed at greater length in the [literature review](#) section on Group Structure. Indeed, the YouGov survey found that in 12 of 15 countries surveyed, the median number for respondents' most important group — online or offline — ranged from just 25 to 100 people. Only in Morocco and Egypt was the median size of these groups much larger: 100 to 1,000, and 1,000 to 10,000 respectively. In Germany the median size of the most important group is smaller: 10 to 25 people.

For primarily online groups, this result is surprising. Many scholars have characterized social media as platforms for individuals to create vast social circles, bound by loose ties, rather than discrete communities — a concept sociologist Barry Wellman calls “networked individualism.” In their 2012 book *Networked*, Wellman and Lee Rainie write: “It is the individual—and not the household, kinship group, or work group—that is the primary unit of connectivity,” which they argue “puts people at the center of personal networks that can supply them with support, sociability, information, and a sense of belonging.”<sup>14</sup>

Though humans' most important groups are often small, we focused our case studies and interviews on some of the largest Facebook Groups because we wanted to understand whether and how warmth and identity could develop without consistent physical contact. It is also worth noting that some of the large groups studied, such as Girl Gone International (a global community of women who live abroad), also operate small local chapters.

Further, another survey finding suggests that **the primarily online groups that generate the greatest sense of belonging are, counterintuitively, groups with ties to local communities and cities.** 38 percent of respondents nominated that category of group as generating “quite a bit or great deal of belonging,” while only 12 percent of respondents nominated a global group.

The survey may also cast light on the question of group longevity. Facebook’s definition of community says that people must give trust and investment “over time.” More studies, and perhaps more time, are needed to verify the sustainability of these communities. However, online groups are more than ephemeral phenomena. Among respondents who nominated a primarily offline group as their most important, 28 percent had been members for more than five years, compared to only 14 percent of respondents who named a primarily online group. Nevertheless, more than one in two respondents who named a primarily online group as their most important had belonged to that group for more than a year, and more than one in four had been a member for between two and five years.

Where groups create a sense of belonging, it is, according to the survey, because their groups have strong, inclusive leadership. In the survey, among those individuals who identified their most important group as operating primarily online, the three most important traits in a leader were **“welcoming differences of opinion among members,” “being visible and communicating well,”** and **“acting ethically at all times.”**



## WHAT IS A FACEBOOK GROUP?

According to Facebook: “Groups are a place to communicate about shared interests with certain people. You can create a group for anything — your family reunion, your after-work sports team or your book club.” In other words, a Facebook Group is a discrete collection of individual users, bound by a common purpose or topic, who can see and interact with one another’s posts and comments.

A group may either be “Public,” meaning that any Facebook user can view the group’s posts or comments, or “Private,” meaning that only individuals who have been granted membership may see posts and comments. There are also two visibility settings for Private Facebook Groups. A group that is set to be “visible” can be found via search by any Facebook user. By contrast, a “hidden” group (sometimes called a “secret” group) can only be found by current members or users who are invited by current members to join.

A group’s leadership team is composed of admins and moderators.

Moderators have the ability to

- Approve or deny membership requests;
- Approve or deny posts in the group;
- Remove posts and comments on posts;
- Remove and block people from the group; and
- Pin or unpin a post.

Admins have all the permissions above, as well as the ability to

- Make another member an admin or moderator;
- Remove an admin or moderator; and
- Manage group settings (i.e. change the group name, cover photo or privacy settings)

Members can post or comment in the group.

New members are typically presented with the group's rules (as determined by the leadership team) and asked to answer a set of membership questions which screen them for eligibility.





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# WHY ONLINE GROUPS CAN MATTER



## WHY ONLINE GROUPS CAN MATTER

*“I expected the women would come to the group and have general conversations...I was not expecting they would tell personal stories about themselves and go so deeply so quickly. There were days I'd just be sitting in this room and rocking back and forth at the depth of information that women were sharing and willing to express.”*

Lola Omolola, founder, Female IN

Our research identified the following common features among many of the online groups studied in this report:

### 1. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ENABLES GROUPS TO FORM AT UNPRECEDENTED SCALE AND SPEED

Digital technology enables online groups to grow at a speed, and to a size and global reach, unthinkable in the offline world. The number of people on Facebook makes it possible for group leaders to **make membership available to a global audience**. Thus, no matter how niche the topic, the costs of reaching new members is a fraction of that of the offline world. “Do you think that I could have been able to afford to build a platform that brings almost two million women together every single month?” asked Lola Omolola, founder of Female IN. **“What this tool allows me to achieve in such a short period of time is mind-blowing to me.”**

Standardized tools and features such as common layouts, fonts, emojis and rules (where members all understand what it means to post, tag and moderate) — not to mention the lingua franca of English, used on 60 percent of all websites<sup>15</sup> — create a universal language that helps members from diverse cultures and countries to govern themselves. Groups like Female IN and Subtle Asian Traits bring together members of the respective Nigerian and Asian diasporas in a way that would be impossible without an online communications platform.

Similarly, [African Mums in Deutschland](#), a group of mutual support for 4,200 African women living in Germany, is able to bring women from across the African diaspora into a cohesive community despite differences in religion, race, class and geographic background. The group's founder, Ghanaian immigration and shipping company manager Maame Adwoa Dentaa Amoo, says that for women dispersed across many German cities and struggling to manage work, child-rearing and survival in an unfamiliar environment, coming together online was the only possible approach.

"If someone is struggling with a mental health issue and they have to put on their clothes and come in for a meeting, you know that's gonna be hectic," she says. But online, "you go in at your convenience, you get the information, ask the questions, you don't have to wait to meet up on a certain day. Even in the dead of the night you can reach out, read some posts and watch some videos and then feel better. I just felt like it fit with our lives."

SUBTLE ASIAN TRAITS CASE STUDY

**Topic:** Asian identity

**Location:** Global

**Number of Members:** 1,843,194

**Year Founded:** 2018

*1.8 million Asians living around the world connecting over a common identity*

When a group of nine Chinese-Australian high school students created the [Subtle Asian Traits \(SAT\)](#) Facebook Group to share jokes and memes about growing up Asian in a Western country, they never expected the group to grow much beyond their own circle of friends. Instead, the group's sense of humor struck a chord with young people of Asian descent around the world. Two years since its founding, the group has grown to number more than 1.8 million members.

As SAT has grown, it has also become a place where members share more than just memes about overbearing parents or a love of bubble tea. As co-founder Tony Xie told us, "There are a lot of really wholesome and lighthearted posts, but our group also has come to be a place where people share stories about challenges they face balancing Asian and Western cultures." The group unifies people who share a common cultural background and upbringing and affords them a place to express interest in their heritage, becoming part of a majority-Asian community despite growing up as the minority. As Isabella Kwai writes in an article for the New York Times, "The endless stream of memes in the 'Subtle Asian Traits' group provides relief — it's a chance to belong for once without having to try."<sup>16</sup>

Xie and his friends appear to have created a new type of imagined community — one that is youth-led, meme-based, constantly growing, and that could not exist without the internet.



## 2. ONLINE GROUPS ENABLE MARGINALIZED PEOPLE TO BUILD COMMUNITY

While marginalized communities do not form the majority of groups studied in this report, some have nevertheless proven particularly adept at using online spaces to build connection and create impact in ways that are denied to them in the offline world. For example, Nigerian-born journalist Lola Omolola founded Female IN (previously known as Female in Nigeria) after being shocked to observe that, when Islamist group Boko Haram abducted 246 schoolgirls in northern Nigeria, media coverage focussed on the act of terrorism, not on the suffering of the girls. Her group invites members to talk about their experiences in what Omolola calls one of the world's "most unforgiving cultures for women."

Similarly, African Mums in Deutschland is governed by some of the most marginalized members of Germany society, where only one African man holds a seat in the federal parliament. Dope Black Dads, a group for men in London, New York and South Africa, encourages "positive and constructive conversations around black fathers." The group is combating the stereotype that Black men are absent fathers, an inaccurate and discriminatory view that informs policy formulation in harmful ways. While members of Subtle Asian Traits are often middle-class students from high-income countries, the group has nevertheless grown strong on the back of a shared common experience of coming from outsider, minority immigrant families.

Many of the groups we studied are connected by a desire to create alternative cultural norms to unwelcoming geographic places. When she founded Blind PenPals in 2014, Adrijana Prokopenko, a 41-year old teacher of the blind from Skopje, North Macedonia, was astonished by how willing her members were to share stories of sometimes intense suffering as blind and vision-impaired people. Some members spoke of being forced to live in assisted living facilities alongside the mentally ill. Some countries, such as Egypt, emerged as particularly harsh places for blind people.

Finally, Canterbury Residents Group is run by Edd Withers, a 33-year-old relative newcomer to Canterbury who hails from outside the city's power structure and whose online community offers an alternative to the city's traditional governance. When the group began Withers was thrilled every time the local newspaper mentioned it in an article. Before long, he says, The Kentish Gazette was sourcing articles from posts and threads in the Canterbury Residents Group. In Britain's 2019 general election, the three major party candidates for the electorate of Canterbury all conducted livestream interviews with Withers for his Facebook Group.

SURVIVING HIJAB **CASE STUDY**

**Topic:** support; religion; women's empowerment

**Location:** Egypt

**Number of Members:** 917,828 members of the private group

**Year Founded:** 2014

**Platform:** Facebook (private group, page), Instagram, Twitter

*More than 900,000 women are supporting one another to overcome hardship*

In 2014, Egyptian freelancer, athlete and former pharmacist Manal Rostom created the [Surviving Hijab](#) Facebook Group for women who wear the hijab to support one another through the personal, political and societal struggles that come with wearing the veil. "Due to all these little incidents that accumulate at the back of your head, you don't feel like you fit in, and you don't feel like you belong anywhere," she told us. Rostom's group sought to bring visibility to the struggles hijabi women face; her message caught on with Muslim women around the world.

As of October 2020, Surviving Hijab has more than 900,000 members, with more than 30,000 members joining in the last month. Thousands of women engage in the group everyday to offer each other advice and support as they consider wearing the hijab or when they struggle wearing it. They trade modesty and fashion tips, and celebrate milestones, such as anniversaries of their time wearing hijab.

According to Rostom, Surviving Hijab members report that the group has empowered them to take a stand against workplace discrimination. Others say they were considering taking off the hijab, but discovering the group inspired them to continue wearing it. "For us, for our religion and culture, to help women at that level is huge," Rostom told us. Women have contacted Rostom and said that her leadership has inspired their daughters to continue playing sports. "Representation matters," she says, "and showcasing my story to these little kids will help them feel the freedom of being whoever they want to be."

### 3. ONLINE AND OFFLINE SPACES COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER

Of the groups we studied, we found that most of them, **even vast online groups, still enjoy a strong connection to space and place**, confirming the findings of the survey. Many members of Female IN have had intense experiences of connection online, but the group has also organized meetups in more than 80 cities across four continents, some involving as many as 3,000 women.

Similarly, Franziska Kolbe, a 32-year old German business development consultant, runs the Facebook Group for Girl Gone International (GGI), a global women's expatriate network, in the Japanese city of Kanazawa. Most of the 110 women in her group were strangers when they joined. Conversations might begin as a thread and morph into one-on-one chats on Messenger before someone suggests a meeting. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of members met regularly in a park so mothers could bring young children. Kolbe says she was shy when she started the group last year "but now I have lots of friends I can call: 'Hey, I have to go to the bank or the doctor, will you come with me?' There are really meaningful connections happening."

Of course, many groups remain independent of place, but others, like Canterbury Residents, blend online and offline activities because they are expressly limited to a geographic place. Withers believes that the primarily online nature of his group has enabled it to be more effective than it would have been otherwise. For example, in 2020 he and a group of volunteers, most of whom had never met, ran a project to organize members with 3-D printers to make 5,000 pieces of free personal protection equipment for essential workers in Canterbury. Local churches and art and running clubs have used the group to strengthen their communities. The group even gave birth to an over-50s women's soccer team called Old Bags United.

## AFRICAN MUMS IN DEUTSCHLAND CASE STUDY

**Topic:** Parenting

**Location:** Germany

**Number of Members:** 4,104

**Year Founded:** 2018

*How 4,100 mothers built an online niche in Germany*

When single mother Maame Dentaa Amoo emigrated from Ghana to Germany, she found it difficult to adapt to life in her new country. “I think anybody would struggle in Germany because of the strictness of the laws and the regulations and the amount of appointments,” Amoo told us. “It’s a totally different culture.” In 2018, Amoo created a private Facebook Group to connect with other African women who faced similar challenges, from learning German to navigating the educational system to dealing with racism. More than 4,100 women have joined over the past two years.

AMD helps members to form relationships with others in their local area. For instance, one of the group’s moderators runs a WhatsApp group for members in Hamburg so that mothers are able to connect with others in their local community face-to-face and exchange advice specific to navigating opportunities and impediments in the northern German city. Amoo says that moderators or other members of the community commonly offer help to those who are not comfortable speaking German by, for instance, offering to accompany a member to an appointment at a government office to help translate. It is also common for members to organize their own meetups to make friends, especially when they first arrive in Germany or have moved to a new city.

At the same time, members also form relationships outside their local area, with community members around Germany and in neighboring countries. These relationships have spawned long-lasting friendships even among women who have rarely, if ever, met in person. “I feel like I’m a neighbor with the ladies in Frankfurt even though they’re not here with me,” Amoo told us. AMD has helped these women find one another and remain in touch. “Without online community making it possible, it just wouldn’t have happened,” Amoo says.

#### 4. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS PUT MANY ONLINE GROUPS CENTER STAGE

Severe limitations on in-person meetings and freedom to travel since the onset of the global pandemic have sharply increased the value of being able to connect online. Within about a week of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, **three women on three continents set up mutual aid and support groups.**

Catherine Barrett, a social entrepreneur based in Melbourne, Australia, established a Facebook Group to publicly celebrate acts of what she calls “intersectional kindness,” or kindness for everyone but especially those who are marginalized or experiencing difficulty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She called her group [The Kindness Pandemic](#); it took on half a million members over its first two weeks and has 563,000 today. In India, digital marketer Mahita Nagaraj created HumanKind Global (see box on page 31), while in Britain, Kirsty O’Callaghan, a local government official in the county of Essex, created the [Essex Coronavirus Action Support](#) Facebook Group to show vulnerable and often lonely local residents how to access services and support in the crisis. About 20,000 people, 80 percent of them women, joined in the first 72 hours of the group’s founding.

These three women all had a version of the insight that prompted O’Callaghan to found her Facebook Group. She had posted a message about her lost dog and spurred 500 people to start looking for her. That made O’Callaghan realize she could reach people much more directly through Facebook’s online platform than through traditional council channels.

These post-pandemic changes are borne out in the YouGov survey. Among respondents who named their most important group as primarily online, 57 percent say that they have given emotional support through a group since the pandemic began, while just over 49 percent say they have received such emotional support through a group.

Facebook’s internal research describes these benefits in terms of a “member journey,” where a person joins an online group for its functional benefits, such as meeting people or learning about a new topic, and eventually comes to receive additional emotional benefits as they invest time and become a full member of the community. Since we did not interview group members as part of this study, our research neither supports nor refutes this member journey model. However, we can state that many **Facebook Groups originally created for specific functional purposes, from fishkeeping to female entrepreneurship to COVID-19 response, have over time also become places where members turn for emotional support and validation.**

## ESSEX CORONAVIRUS ACTION **CASE STUDY**

**Topic:** COVID-19 response

**Location:** Essex, United Kingdom

**Number of Members:** 37,000 members (private group); 48,000 followers (public page)

**Year Founded:** 2020

### *Mobilizing Essex residents and Facebook Group leaders for coronavirus response*

When coronavirus began to spread across the United Kingdom in March 2020, Essex County Council (ECC) — the local government authority that oversees a county of 1.5 million people in southeastern England — turned to Facebook to connect citizens in need with public resources.

ECC created the public-facing [Essex Coronavirus Action](#) Facebook Page to disseminate county-specific public health guidance and information about pandemic-related public services (such as resources for food insecurity). By posting this information on Facebook, and working with online influencers and the admins of Facebook Groups in Essex to promote it, ECC provides accessible information to people disengaged from traditional media channels. “We write in a language that people can understand,” explains Kirsty O’Callaghan, Head of Strengthening Communities for ECC. Essex County Council also created a closed Facebook Group, [Essex Coronavirus Action Support](#), which 37,000 people have joined, for citizens who wanted to privately ask questions and ask for help.

Essex County Council also works with the Facebook Page to organize volunteer efforts. In the week after March 14, more than 7,000 volunteers signed up online to support ECC’s coronavirus response effort. Every day this volunteer force completed more than 1,000 tasks, such as delivering essential supplies to people who were self-isolating and transporting vulnerable people to medical appointments. O’Callaghan says using Facebook as a way to advertise these volunteer opportunities has helped to engage people who want to help, but otherwise wouldn’t know how to. Two-thirds of them had no volunteering experience prior to the coronavirus relief effort. “I think every public sector organization in the world needs to work like this,” O’Callaghan says.



 THEGOVLAB

# THE ACCIDENTAL LEADERS OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES: LEARNING HOW TO LEAD



## THE ACCIDENTAL LEADERS OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES: LEARNING HOW TO LEAD

*“You develop from these free and easy beginnings and then at some point you get so big and so much riding on it. You're an important thing in people's lives, you've actually got to start setting rules for your community. You've got to write things down, and suddenly you become almost like politicians in a way you never expected at the start.”*

Tony Xie, a founder of Subtle Asian Traits

The 15,000 respondents to the YouGov survey were asked to nominate three traits that make a group succeed. Across all three categories of group — primarily in-person, mixed and primarily online — respondents named having a clear purpose as the most important trait. Not far behind in all three categories, however, was having effective leaders.

Facebook Group leaders are a diverse bunch. But our research shows that many group leaders are accidental leaders. They had little idea of how leadership of their group would unfold when they took on the role. The job is complex and time-consuming, and can impose intense pressures for which many leaders are not trained or prepared. For all the focus on leadership in contemporary society, online leadership is an emerging phenomenon that has not yet been well-studied or understood.

Edd Withers, founder of Canterbury Residents Group, had enjoyed being a leader since he was a boy. But, he says, his leadership roles “were all traditional stuff: from scout leader to supervisor at work, to leading a company to joining good cause boards as a director to founding Canterbury Pride as chairman.” But when he started his online group in 2014 he didn't think of the role in those terms, let alone anticipate it would become the biggest leadership test of his life. “The unexpected growth of my role and the speed at which it happened meant that even I, with significant leadership experience, felt totally unprepared for many of the challenges I faced.”



**Being an accidental leader does not mean that Withers or others lacked a sense of purpose or skills when they started their groups — quite the opposite.** In launching Blind PenPals, Adrijana Prokopenko drew strongly on her own experience of blindness and her desire to connect with others who faced the same challenge. Brooklyn-based couple Aja Davis and Molly Ola Pinney founded White People. DOING Something., a group dedicated to fighting racism against Black people in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd. Inspiration to create the group came one day after Pinney saw an artwork that said “White People, period, Do Something...and I was like, ‘OK, I got it.’” Similarly, Lola Omolola had no idea how big her Female IN group would grow or where the members would take it, but she had the first requirement for a successful group: a powerful idea.

When asked why they lead a group on Facebook, many group leaders said that their main reason for operating on the platform was the extraordinary global reach of Facebook and the fact that the platform and its tools were accessible, easy to use and free of charge. **Many leaders we interviewed also said that they derived significant personal satisfaction and sense of achievement from their work.**

Some leaders have also found opportunities to apply their knowledge and experience of running a Facebook Group to work in related offline roles. Ruth McDonald, administrator of the Tropical Fishkeeping UK Facebook Group, has been appointed as a member of a committee advising the UK government on animal welfare; she also runs an online store, connected to her group, for tropical fish food, plants and equipment. Manal Rostom of Surviving Hijab has become a Nike Ambassador. Kirsty O’Callaghan, who leads Essex County Council’s collaboration with Facebook Groups, has started a consulting firm to apply her knowledge of online outreach to other jurisdictions.

## CURATORS, COUNSELORS AND STREET CLEANERS: WHAT GROUP LEADERS DO

In the absence of the conversational norms and rules of in-person meetings, online groups need strong gatekeepers to police who can join and how to moderate debates, promote the group and grow its membership.

Group leaders must curate the online conversation — which is not always easy. When group interactions move from face-to-face meetings to online encounters that are mostly in writing, unconscious and non-verbal cues that signal irony, mood, or friendly intent can be lost. The change can lead to more frequent misunderstandings and conflict and create more work for admins and moderators seeking to create safe spaces for civic and civil discourse. **“I think people online act like they’re three drinks in at the pub,”** says Ruth McDonald, administrator of Tropical Fishkeeping. “You’re not drunk and belligerent yet but you’re maybe doing a bit of oversharing, or flirting with the wrong people. Nothing that would get you thrown out of the pub yet but just give it another couple of drinks.”

McDonald has built up her group from 5,000 members when she took over as leader five years ago to nearly 60,000 today. Even so, she does not see herself as a conventional leader. “A lot of people think being an admin is about having power over the people but that’s not how I see it. We are street cleaners. We are there to give people space, not to control the conversations.” McDonald draws the line at allowing falsehoods about keeping fish to be published in the group, “because that’s a welfare issue for my animals.”

But McDonald’s story shows how a group leader’s role can go far beyond street cleaner or security guard. She has had to deal with trolls seeking to explode the group, ex-soldiers with PTSD and depressed men. In her early days of running the group, three or four members posted a message, often in the middle of the night, saying they were contemplating suicide.

McDonald and her admin team would search on Facebook, try to find a relative’s phone number and start messaging everyone on the person’s profile. In one case they contacted a member’s brother who reported back that the attempt was genuine. McDonald realized she had to put new procedures in place. “I used to teach forensic psychology and I know that if one person commits or attempts suicide you often get a cascade. I didn’t want that spreading on the group so we decided that if you see someone threatening suicide you make contact and you delete the thread.”

McDonald drew a further lesson from this experience: She realized that her group was now much more than a forum for sharing information about fish. She says: “If someone was sitting on their front step crying, saying, ‘I’m going to kill myself,’ I wouldn’t walk on by. So I can’t have someone sitting in my group saying exactly the same thing and me just going, ‘attention-seeker.’ The whole thing made me sit back and realize that however spread apart we are, we are a community.”

### THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Many leaders interviewed by The GovLab ran groups that grew quickly, which they found both thrilling and alarming. Sudden growth created a need to manage responses and find and train moderators. Yet when asked how much time they spend doing it, many Facebook leaders struggle to answer. They often moderate in 15- to 30-minute bursts, checking posts on their phone while cooking dinner, riding the bus, or getting ready for bed. The requirements on many women to juggle paid work with domestic chores and caring responsibilities may explain why many seem to excel as online group leaders. **The ability to moderate “little and often” may make it easier for those who rarely lead offline to do so online.**

The work involves multitasking around the clock, and it explains why many admins say they could not survive without their moderators. Lola Omolola trains new moderators over the six to eight weeks of her FINcubator program. Manal Rostom, founder of Surviving Hijab, has 10 women who “help out to moderate the posts” and protect members’ safety. She checks potential moderators’ online profiles, interviews them in person, and looks for shared values about wearing the hijab. While she lives in Dubai, most of her team is in the United Kingdom and Egypt. All need to speak English and Arabic, and all need to be fully alert — because in the group of 920,000 women, disputes break out every day, says Rostom.

A woman might share a photo showing the hijab failing to cover all her hair, and another woman will accuse her of failing to wear hijab properly. “Once a fight starts it’s hell,” Rostom says. “They start calling each other names or there’s online bullying or whatnot, and then people start to report these comments, which comes back to the admins group, and then we have to go through all these reported comments to see if we need to delete them or block the member.” She sighs. “It is so much work.”

Group leaders on Facebook and other online platforms also have an important advantage over offline leaders: They can access analytics to see who is joining and leaving the group and how much members are engaging, even at what time of day it might be good to post to get the attention of more members. “Online we can see the system,” says Rachel Happe, who studies online communities through her work as head of the US-based The Community Roundtable.<sup>17</sup> Happe’s father was a church minister and her mother was a community organizer. “In their roles they couldn’t see aggregate trends in their communities at any given time, so they didn’t always know when issues were bubbling up. For me the key difference in online communities is the ability to measure and see the breadth and depth of member behaviors — and how to influence it.”

Yet not everyone finds such data useful. “In such a large and fast growing group as ours the member journey remains somewhat of a mystery,” Edd Withers of Canterbury Residents Group says. “Members come and go. Some become avid users and then disappear overnight, some have been diehard members for years, some have been in the group for a week and it feels like they have been there forever. I’d say it’s a bit like a police call center, which can use all the data it wants to predict call volume but sometimes it just goes manic for no apparent reason.”



## HUMANKIND GLOBAL

**Topic:** Covid-19 response

**Location:** India

**Number of Members:** 51,500

**Year Founded:** 2020

*Volunteers fulfill more than 25,000 requests for pandemic-related help*

As the number of coronavirus cases in India rose in March 2020, Bangalore-based self-employed digital marketing professional Mahita Nagaraj realized that many in her city were in high-risk groups for COVID-19 because of their age or pre-existing health conditions, and would need help coping with the upcoming nationwide lockdown. Nagaraj made a Facebook post offering to deliver necessary supplies to anyone in the city who needed help, and was met with a flood of responses; for every one person requesting assistance, several more were asking Nagaraj how they could help.

Nagaraj created the HumanKind Global Facebook Group, along with a WhatsApp helpline, to coordinate the volunteer effort. “At one point we were adding 2,000 to 3,000 members a day to the Facebook Group, and the helpline was exploding,” Nagaraj told us, “We were receiving 800 to 1,000 calls a day and 2,500 WhatsApp messages.” Nagaraj and the 8,000 – 10,000 active volunteers have responded to all these requests on a volunteer basis. At times, it has been difficult to keep up with the group’s pace of growth. Nagaraj says that she spent up to 22 hours per day coordinating requests during the lockdown. While membership growth eventually slowed, she says she “didn’t have a moment to breathe” from the group’s founding until the end of July.

HumanKind Global stands out as an organized, volunteer-led crisis response platform that provides substantive help to those most in need. “We formed as a community in response to a pandemic, a certain environmental situation,” Nagaraj says, “I think one of the strengths of the group has been our ability to respond as required to whatever the situation has thrown at us.”

## SKILLFUL, SELF TAUGHT AND STILL IN NEED OF SUPPORT

Vincent Boon is founder and CEO of Giants Technology, which manages online communities for large companies. **He sees an urgent need to develop a skill set for online community managers, one that mixes strength with “sensitivity, even vulnerability.”**<sup>18</sup> Boon thinks “leaders need to be able to look people in the eye when necessary and say, ‘Look this was appalling what you wrote’, and hold them accountable, which they too often aren’t.” But Boon does not think this means shouting at or lecturing people. “A lot of community management is about placing yourself in that person’s shoes.” He describes his approach as “relentless positivity” and suggests that when people feel heard and understood, they are usually willing to change bad behavior.

The problem, says Boon, is that such an approach “obliges you to show emotion, and a lot of people don’t have this kind of emotional guidance. There are a lot of platforms out there but most aren’t being managed well. Being ‘moderated’ isn’t being ‘managed.’”

**Almost no formal academic or vocational training is available to people in online community management.** Among a range of support, Facebook provides leaders with educational material through its community [website](#), and its Community Learning Labs program provides leaders of 3,000 of the world’s largest groups with specific content. It has also just launched a [professional grade certification](#) in community management.

Yet given the importance of soft skills to the work of group leaders — let alone managing the risks and harms that can arise when people connect with those they do not know — Facebook and other online platforms, along with education and training organisations, may need to do more to give online leaders the tools to manage their challenging environment. In a recent survey of group leaders by Facebook nearly **86 percent said the skills they used as community managers were self-taught.**<sup>19</sup> Fewer than 7 percent had learned skills from peers, 5 percent deployed skills they learned in their professional lives, and as little as 3 percent had any formal education in community management.

Universities and educational institutions might consider developing further community management courses and curricula for these leaders. With 70 million admins and moderators in Facebook Groups alone, it is potentially a significant opportunity.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF RULES FOR ONLINE LEADERS AND GROUPS

On the face of it, the online space is an odd place for human connection. But research shows that safety, or the sense of being able to exist and express oneself without fear of judgment, is a prerequisite for participating in groups and organizations.<sup>20</sup> It is the safety of interaction behind a screen that may explain the sense of connection. In her 2011 book, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle, professor of social psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writes that “it is not unusual for people to feel more comfortable in an unreal place than a real one because they feel that in simulation they show their better and perhaps truer self.”<sup>21</sup> (For more information about psychological safety in groups and organizations, see the literature review section on Motivation.)

Creating this sense of safety demands active management. In groups, rules matter. Not all members respond well to having their posts blocked, or they may disagree with where they think the leaders are taking the group. Rules — which admins and moderators either create or inherit — establish a rudimentary set of laws for what is a new and sometimes raucous frontier. When we asked Facebook Group leaders what had contributed most to their group’s impact, longevity or level of activity, good rules and rule enforcement stood out as a popular response.

Axel Dauchez, former head of global consulting firm Publicis and co-founder of the civic tech startup Make.org, says that online groups need to create the “habits and expectations of how we express ourselves, react to others.”<sup>22</sup> He says that Facebook and other platforms took what he calls the “very first level of engagement” and opened it to billions of users on a vast range of subjects. However, Dauchez suggests, the movement towards more diverse experiences online also needs spaces better adapted to democracy, dialogue and citizenship where everyone has the same chance to be heard, protected from professional influencers. It can’t be anarchic space.

Groups often start with generic rules: no advertising, bullying, unkind behavior or hate speech. Most ban spammers and people who seek to profit from the group. Some (unless they are explicitly religious) ban religious posts. African Mums in Deutschland, Female IN and Surviving Hijab explicitly ban sharing screenshots, because a post shared outside the group could endanger the woman who posted it. Female IN expels violators of this rule on the spot.

Rules also help leaders manage relationships in their group by showing that a decision they made was not arbitrary but based on a pre-existing framework. Indeed, according to interviews that Facebook conducted with group members, the consistent and public enforcement of rules may be more important than simply putting down a list of rules in writing. Facebook found that while members are typically presented with the rules when they join a group, “they predominantly learn and retain the rules/norms of groups through observations of conversation and enforcement when admins and members remind others of the rules.”<sup>23</sup> Yet rules cannot solve every problem, as the next section shows.

## CLUBE DA ALICE

**Topic:** Entrepreneurship

**Location:** Curitiba, Brazil

**Number of Members:** 551,500 members (Private Group)

**Year Founded:** 2014

*500,000 women are finding empowerment through entrepreneurship*

Clube da Alice, a Facebook Group created in 2014 by Brazilian entrepreneur Mônica Balestieri Berlitz, is a network of more than 500,000 female entrepreneurs in and around Curitiba, a city of 1.8 million people in southern Brazil. Members, many of whom are independent creators with limited resources, come to the group to build business connections and sell goods and services, from beauty and fashion services to handicrafts to food, in a large and strictly-governed online marketplace.

The Facebook Group's extensive governance structure is designed to create a safe, ethical, and legal marketplace for women to sell their products. Moderators enforce more than 50 rules, many of which derive from Brazilian law and were developed by the group in coordination with regulatory authorities in response to particular issues. For instance, Berlitz says that some group members wanted to sell homemade cheeses, which can be illegal and unsafe, so they created a rule that any cheese products sold on the group must be certified by a local regulatory authority. Clube da Alice also worked with the Brazilian agency that oversees trademarks and intellectual property to ensure that posts follow national intellectual property laws. Other rules outlaw posts that promote multi-level marketing ("pyramid schemes"), sweepstakes and raffles, religious posts, sharing "controversial" publications and fake profiles.

These rules are a result of the unique space that Clube da Alice occupies as both an online community and a marketplace for the sale of digital and physical products. Berlitz says that, because of this sense of safety, women feel more comfortable conducting business within the closed Facebook Group than they would buying or selling on another online platform.

## THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL SOCIAL ISSUES AND RISKS TO MEMBERS — AND HOW LEADERS RESPOND

In recent years Facebook Group leaders have found themselves, like Ruth McDonald, having to take positions on issues entirely unrelated to the subject of the group. For groups in many countries, not just the United States, this issue came to a head in mid-2020 after the police killing of unarmed African-American George Floyd.

The killing caused an outpouring of debate and sometimes conflict in Facebook Groups of all kinds. In the United States, leaders of Boss-Moms Facebook and a Billion Vegans, among others, deleted posts protesting the killing, on the ground that the posts were irrelevant to the original purpose of the group, according to an article in technology and culture magazine *The Verge*.<sup>24</sup> The leaders' position outraged many of the groups' members, who also pointed out that the groups had no moderators of color.

Facebook published guidance on how to talk about racial justice and urged groups to ensure that their admin and moderator teams were appropriately diverse and inclusive. As new groups, such as White People. DOING Something., were formed to fight racism, older groups had to confront this issue. In Canterbury, Edd Withers and his fellow admins expressed solidarity with Black Lives Matter and personally contacted group members who made “White Lives Matter” or “All Lives Matter” posts, explaining why they thought these opinions were “problematic” at this time. The approach won some supporters but prompted others to leave the group, and in many cases to join a sister group that discouraged political threads and promoted discussion on “positive topics.”

Subtle Asian Traits had always blocked overtly political content, instead favoring humorous memes about hyphenated Asian identity. But in June 2020, a group of 45 moderators held an emergency three-hour global call to discuss how to respond to the Floyd killing, and whether it should allow Black Lives Matter content.

**The episode showed that leaders of online groups face particular challenges in balancing maintenance of group identity, civil discourse, protection of members' safety and the need to respond to contemporary political and social events.** Other challenges arise from the online platform itself, as the following section shows.

WHITE PEOPLE. DOING SOMETHING. **CASE STUDY**

**Topic:** Racial Justice

**Location:** United States

**Number of Members:** 36,647 members of the public group

**Year Founded:** 2020

*Building a racial justice community around compassion and empathy*

In response to the police killing of George Floyd on May 27, 2020, many turned to social media to share information, organize, and express their thoughts about racial injustice in the United States and beyond. New York City-based couple Molly Ola Pinney and Aja Davis decided to create a Facebook Group, called “[White People. DOING Something.](#)” to organize and to be ready when a call to action happened. More than a thousand people joined on the first day and as of October 2020, over 35,000 have signed on.

Davis and Pinney say that the group is a space for more inclusive, constructive discussions about racial injustice, which previously didn’t exist online. Members feel comfortable asking questions and discussing contentious topics in a way they may not feel comfortable doing in everyday life. These include the Black Lives Matter movement, American football player Colin Kaepernick’s take-a-knee protests against unwarranted police violence, and the place of multicultural characters in children’s books.

Davis and Pinney, along with their 15-member volunteer moderation team, have created this sense of safety by modeling the behavior they want to see in the group. Early on, the moderation team came up with the idea to interact with all members as if each was a loved one. This strategy has set the tone for how members interact, helped to combat trolling and spam, and brought in people who were previously aware of or even hostile to the movement for racial justice. “We opened up the conversation about race to a group of people on the Internet who were previously on the sidelines,” Pinney says.



 THEGOVLAB

# CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC LIFE ON A PRIVATE PLATFORM



## CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC LIFE ON A PRIVATE PLATFORM

There is a unique set of challenges that comes with operating a community on a private platform. Each platform's terms of service ultimately dictate which types of groups are allowed on the platform and which are not. Each platform has its own algorithms, which play a large part in determining which posts members of an online community see and which posts are suppressed. Some have criticized online platforms for stoking polarization between groups that hold opposing viewpoints. While many private platforms are highly profitable, much of the work that individual leaders perform to make online communities lively and engaging is done on an unpaid basis.

Leaders who want to take advantage of the scale, reach and flexibility of Facebook have to live with the challenges of governing public communities on a private platform. In every interview, we asked leaders whether they had concerns hosting their communities on a private platform. This section discusses some of the concerns that they raised.

### THE COMPANY CAN TERMINATE FACEBOOK GROUPS

While leaders have a great deal of control over their group's activities, it is Facebook that ultimately decides what is allowed to happen on its platform, including whether Groups can exist at all.

A fear that Facebook could unilaterally remove their community is common among group leaders we interviewed. As Lola Omolola, founder of Female IN, says: "They can just literally wake up and say, 'OK, this isn't going to happen anymore.'"

Similarly, the admins of Subtle Asian Traits worry that Facebook might shut down their group if political debates got too heated, for instance. "Two years of work and contacts would be lost," says admin Zoe Imansjah. Aja Davis from the group, White People. DOING Something., says that she is "keenly aware that Facebook at any moment can just be like, 'Alright, you can't have a group anymore, or you have to start paying.'"

This sense of precariousness has led some leaders to explore alternatives to Facebook. Subtle Asian Traits has opened an account on Instagram (which is also owned by Facebook) as an insurance policy. Aja Davis says her group has started to compile a mailing list to keep the community together if the Facebook Group was closed down. Lola Omolola considered starting her own platform, but the huge cost ruled it out.

These fears are not necessarily groundless. Ruth McDonald of Tropical Fishkeeping UK says she has had three fish-related Facebook Groups terminated, although two were restored after appeals. Facebook deemed them to be allowing animal sales in breach of its rules, but McDonald says: "In all cases we were not allowing animal sales after the rules were changed/clarified. The fact the groups were taken down multiple times but we won the appeals has led to a certain amount of anxiety about losing them again."<sup>25</sup>

Facebook states that it only removes groups that have violated the company's Community Standards or Terms of Service and that it does not remove groups arbitrarily (Other than Ruth McDonald, we did not interview leaders of groups taken down by the company).

## CONCERNS ABOUT THE ALGORITHM

Some Facebook Group leaders also worry about how the platform's algorithms determine which types of posts show up on each user's feed. Edd Withers of Canterbury Residents Group says he "trusts Facebook" but also feels that the algorithm sends posts to the top of people's feeds that create conflict, while happier and more positive posts that draw less response disappear. "I'm feeling frustration that even I as an admin only see posts that the algorithm thinks I should see." Social media skeptics like technologist Jaron Lanier have long criticized platforms like Facebook and Twitter for creating algorithms that seemingly amplify conflict in order to retain users' attention and increase ad revenue.

## POTENTIAL HARMS EXPERIENCED IN ONLINE GROUPS

There are potentially harmful impacts of groups on society. In what is known as the “filter bubble” or “echo chamber” effect, online platforms may exploit our unconscious preference for information that confirms views we already hold.<sup>27</sup> When added to the human desire to outcompete other members in our adherence to group beliefs, such filtering can produce groups that are intolerant of dissent and more polarized from one another. These groups can be less willing to compromise and more inclined to use violence. For example, the online growth of far-right groups is inconceivable without the internet, says Lawrence Rosenthal, chair of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies in the US. “Social media in the 2000s” allowed such groups “to create spaces in which they could not only find one another but attract other people as well.”<sup>28</sup>

Among group leaders we interviewed, few raised concerns about surveillance and data collection of groups by Facebook, as many critics from [academia](#), [media](#), and [human rights organizations](#) have done. Nevertheless, a strenuous debate is underway about whether the structure and commercial interests of online platforms amplify the potential harms and polarizing effects set out in this section. (The debate is discussed in greater detail in two literature review sections: Virtual Life and Risks.)

## WHO BENEFITS FROM FACEBOOK GROUP LEADERS’ WORK?

For some leaders, especially those who lead large groups, being a Facebook Group admin is akin to a full-time job. When Catherine Barrett established The Kindness Pandemic she found herself working 14-hour days, seven days a week, to run a group that on some days was growing by 50,000 people. Her admin team has settled at 12 — to manage a group of about half a million people, with increased volunteers brought on for potentially contentious campaigns, such as supporting the Black Lives Matter movement.

Facebook Groups are led by volunteers, usually as a labor of love. Most of these volunteers we interviewed spoke positively about Facebook and their work as group leaders, and all continue to use the platform. However, many also complained about the amount of unpaid time they spend running groups. Leaders, especially of large groups, generate significant value for the highly profitable company by creating lively and engaging spaces that attract users to the platform.

In the future, Facebook will enable admins to make some money from their groups— not by paying them directly, but by supporting them to seek private sponsorship from other companies. Facebook’s [recent](#) Brand Collabs announcement invites group leaders to “connect with brands looking to promote their products and services through the relationship you have with your followers.”

The company has also introduced a number of grants programs that Facebook says were welcomed by admins, though finding the right size of grant for admins and their emerging organizations has not always been easy. In 2018, Surviving Hijab won a USD \$50,000 grant through the Facebook Community Leadership Program. Manal Rostom says that processing the grant brought a lot of work that was difficult for the group to handle. “As beautiful as it was, it was so stressful,” she told us, “We did a lot of projects, and it grew our community, but where will this take us?”

While many admins seek to make at least a little income from running their groups, some also worry it could damage the noncommercial spirit of the liveliest groups. The experience of Clube da Alice is striking. A few years ago the Brazilian-based Facebook Group of female entrepreneurs who sell products and services to each other decided to put paid moderators on its staff. However, it eventually switched back to volunteers because they had more passion for the community says Monica Berlitz, the group’s founder and administrator.

***How online groups, which depend on successful moderation and the investment of good leaders, become sustainable as they reach scale and maturity is clearly an important and complex question for further study and action.***





THEGOVLAB

# CONCLUSION: MEANING AND BELONGING IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES



## CONCLUSION: MEANING AND BELONGING IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

*"I think that understanding our neighbours can be achieved just as well with a digital community as a physical one. It may even be easier in some respects. Imagine arriving in a new village and walking into the country pub and being stared at by every local as silence falls across the bar. That doesn't happen in digital, you can dive in. There is no cost, no commitment, no judgement, things often associated with physical communities. Our group culture is simple to learn, just stick to our group rules and you are in."*

Edd Withers, founder, Canterbury Residents Group

For a long time, the word "community" captured a deep human longing for rootedness in one physical place, surrounded by the people we admired and loved. Today the meaning of both the word and the worlds it represented are changing. In many high-income countries, and perhaps in many poorer countries as well, the fear that community is in decline – that we are no longer part of tight social networks that generate stability, comfort and meaning — is one of the great anxieties of our time.

This report has sought to examine whether online groups are helping us to build new human communities: ones that might still retain a connection to physical places, but in many cases are no longer embedded in them.

Detractors of online groups see them as poor alternatives to physical communities. Social psychologist Sherry Turkle has been a consistent critic of the idea that humans can have a rich online life. "The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy," she wrote in her 2011 book *Alone Together*.

For Turkle, online life provides a sense of being "there but not there." Online we are both constantly available and socially isolated, without the benefits that real connections bring. Face-to-face conversation forces people to be both vulnerable and present in a way that mobile devices and social media cannot do.



Can groups that take two clicks to join and two clicks to leave truly build community? In his 2016 book, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism*, political analyst Yuval Levin wrote that while the Internet was not to blame for the decline of community it nevertheless embodied the kind of society America was becoming. The Internet, he feels, creates social networks that are broad but shallow. While it allows us to construct a group with those who share a single interest or hobby, it comes at the expense of “relationships we might otherwise have had with some of the people who constitute actual real world communities.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet Rachel Happe, head of US-based The Community Roundtable, is more optimistic. On the one hand, she sees social media's primary orientation to the screen as “anti-social” by nature because of the individual stream and built-in audience. She equates this to giving everyone a soapbox in the town park with a captive audience. Online groups, on the other hand, are healthier “because they are shared spaces and the group's implicit shared purpose prompts people to self-moderation — they are not as likely to talk about coffee in a group created to discuss cocktails, for example.”<sup>30</sup>

Marshall Ganz, the famous American political organizer and lecturer on civil society at the Harvard Kennedy School, is adamant that online groups can build community — provided they build the relationships, create the norms, and adopt the practices of sound group interaction. Professor Ganz cites the example of an online student from Norway enrolled in the online course he teaches at Harvard who visited his “in person” class. When he asked her to compare the two, after a pause, she responded, “actually I thought online was more intimate. In the classroom I see the backs of heads, but on Zoom I can see all the faces. I can see the tears, I can see the laughter, so I can feel what I'm part of.” Ganz explained: It's as if our vision were impaired, our bodies would compensate by strengthening our other senses. This is why you can create — with 250 people in the class — what Durkheim called a powerful ‘collective effervescence.’ When I start a session I ask everyone to unmute and respond in your own first language. It's chaotic but it's cool chaos: ‘Ooh, that was Urdu.’ **It takes craft, but you can enable people to feel the solidarity and experience the empowerment, which is so important to religious experience and to social movements alike.**<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, **the pessimism of some academic judgments is not borne out by our interviews with the practical experts: group leaders.** Without doubt, the groups we examined — as suggested by Facebook — are among the most successful Facebook Groups. Except for the Kanazawa chapter of Girl Gone International, we have not studied the small groups that are often very meaningful in people’s lives.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, taking this self-selection bias into account, many of the groups we studied seem to offer **genuine emotional benefits to their members. Even large groups have, over time, come to be places where members reach out for help with their most personal struggles, whether it is an abusive relationship, a loss of faith, or suicidal thoughts.**

But time alone will not make such groups genuine communities. US sociologist Eric Klinenberg sets two preconditions for determining whether they are. First, groups cannot entirely abandon a tie to place. In his 2018 book *Palaces for the People*, he writes: “As meaningful as the friendships we establish online can be, most of us are unsatisfied with virtual ties that never develop into face-to-face relationships. Building real connections requires a shared physical environment - a social infrastructure.”<sup>33</sup>

Second, asks Klinenberg, “are users exposed to conversations and points of view they disagree with? What opportunities are there to build relationships with people of different political views? Do people ever change their minds as a result of these interactions, and if not, shouldn’t we be trying something else?”

This precondition is crucial, Klinenberg believes. “The great lesson about community from the past 150 years is that, lovely as it is and warm as we feel about our own, it can also quickly establish a line between those who belong and those who do not. Some communities are inclusive, of course. But many have clear lines. You are in or out... A world where people feel strong attachment to their community but strong disdain for others is going to be a very dangerous world.”<sup>34</sup>

Our research shows that Klinenberg's two preconditions are indeed reflected in the strongest online communities that we studied, in four main ways.

First, none is a wholly online group. Female IN, for example, is exploring ways to engage with women in rural areas of Nigeria, who often lack access to the Internet. HumanKind Global uses the online space to get volunteers active across a vast country. Even if it is only a sustained emphasis on arranging meetings among members, most groups that we studied, however dispersed their members are, seek to retain a connection with a physical place.

Second, what we learned from our 50 interviews, diverse case studies and work on the global survey is that the most successful Facebook Groups contain robust, deliberative and often contentious discussions about topics of importance to their members and therefore require strong moderation to manage. We looked closely at the rules that bind these groups, how these rules are devised and enforced and the key role that good governance plays in ensuring group success.

Third, these groups often empower their leaders and members by cutting across traditional boundaries of race, class and other divisions. An ability to create communities people could not create, let alone lead, in real space helps to answer the question we laid out at the beginning of this report: What motivates people to participate in online groups? Geographic space, while out of sight, is never out of mind, but virtual space creates an opportunity for non-dominant groups to convene and to govern themselves.

FEMALE IN (FIN) **CASE STUDY**

**Topic:** Women's empowerment

**Location:** Global

**Number of Members:** 1,743,400,146 members

**Year Founded:** 2015

*1.7 million women are leading with kindness*

Lola Omolola, a 44-year old mother of two based in Chicago, founded the Female in Nigeria Facebook Group in 2015. Having grown up in Lagos, Nigeria, Omolola created [Female IN](#) (as the group is known today) to serve as a safe space for women in the Nigerian diaspora to discuss and seek support for challenging problems, ranging from relationship struggles to health issues, abuse, grief and loss. Starting with Omolola's own network, news of the group spread by word of mouth, and Female IN eventually grew into a 1.7 million-person community with members in more than 100 countries.

Female IN functions as a support group where women post their experiences on the private Facebook Group and others leave comments to offer their support. Members post resources for coping with abuse and supporting survivors, publicize news of abusers who have been convicted of crimes and share personal stories about surviving abuse.

As a virtual space run by women for women, FIN offers an appealing counter-cultural community that acts as an alternative to cultures that silence and devalue the experiences of women. Ultimately, however, the goal is not simply to create a new kind of culture and community online but to change cultural attitudes in the real life countries their members inhabit. While Omolola acknowledges that this goal cannot be achieved entirely within one lifetime, she says the group appears to play an active and impactful role in the lives of many of its members. "I grew up in a society where we couldn't even express ourselves freely to family members," Omolola told us. When members join the community, "they are suddenly in a space where people actually care what they have to say. They've never felt freer in their lives."

As to the question, what is the impact of these online groups for their members, we know that online groups play a surprisingly important role in people's lives. We have offered numerous stories and anecdotes of mutual aid and lifesaving support. But much more work needs to be done to understand whether humans can build and sustain online communities that enable us to connect with each other, to experience impact, meaning and a sense of belonging, and to thrive.

Finally, in response to our question about the traits, skills and abilities needed to run a successful online community, this report charts the emergence of a new profession: Online group leaders with the skills needed to create safe, shared spaces despite considerable differences among millions of members in some cases. It is their investment of time, effort and spirit that is vital to turning mere groups into communities. Whether the issue is wearing hijab, being visually impaired, or growing up Asian, people are engaged in these groups precisely because they are not echo chambers and filter bubbles but places for intimate, often intense, conversation and reflection on a common theme. **The fact that these conversations do not devolve into flame wars is the result of successful leadership.**

If we are to advance our collective understanding of the sense of meaning and belonging members draw from these groups, much more research is needed. The YouGov survey of more than 15,000 Internet users across 15 countries provides the beginnings. But more qualitative and quantitative research could identify who participates in online groups. **Moreover, there are opportunities for governments, civil society organisations, educational institutions and philanthropists to examine how they can support online communities to thrive.** A more extensive research and policy agenda is set out [here](#).

Arguably, power is shifting away from established organizations, institutions, and professions, a consequence of technology and of declining trust. In his 2012 book, *The End of Power*, journalist and former politician Moses Naim argues that whereas power is easier to obtain today, its diffuse nature in the contemporary world makes it harder to use and easier to lose. Some Facebook Groups are revealing the potential for how to wield power more thoughtfully and ethically. **To truly understand what is possible requires researchers to shine a light on how such groups work, and how they can be supported to generate more impact and meaning in both the online and offline worlds.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to our research.

### The GovLab Team

1. Fred DeJohn
2. Anirudh Dinesh
3. Jennifer Faubion
4. Frederico Levy
5. Camille Larmanou
6. Hamza Mdarhri
7. Jennifer Nilsen
8. Valeria Gomez Palacios
9. Widya Ramadhani
10. Stephan Schmidt

### Facebook Group Leaders

1. Zeinab Al Ashry, Confessions of a Married Woman
2. Maame Adwoa Dentaa Amoo, African Mums in Deutschland
3. Rania Atef, I Make This!
4. Ehab Badwi, Syrian Youth Assembly
5. Catherine Barrett, The Kindness Pandemic
6. Mônica Balestieri Berlitz, Clube da Alice
7. Ojombo Gbemisola Boyede, Ask The Paediatricians
8. Torsten Brämer, Wir sind Garten
9. Aja Davis, White People. DOING Something.
10. Christian Delachet, Wanted Community
11. Tamanna Dhamija, Home Remedies for Babies and Moms
12. Cédric Giorgi, French Startups Network
13. Jennifer Góngora, Mamis Are Us
14. Glodri Harman, Official Info Kota Palopo
15. Kazi Arafat Hossain, PUBG Mobile Lite India
16. Fransiska Husada, Watercolor Beginners & Enthusiasts
17. Zoe Imansjah, Subtle Asian Traits
18. Saratu Kassim, Fertility Support Group Africa
19. Franziska Kolbe, Kanazawa I Girl Gone International
20. Sonia Agarwal Konjeti, PULA Pune Ladies
21. Nicolas Lemonnier, Run Eco Team
22. Mórris Litvak, Comunidade Maturi
23. Donald Mbeutcha, Dope Black Dads
24. Emmy McCarthy, Essex Coronavirus Action
25. Ruth McDonald, Tropical Fish Keeping UK
26. John Merkel, Elevation Church
27. Anastasia Michailov, Clean Cloth Nappies
28. Esther Mwikali, Mettā Nairobi
29. Mahita Nagaraj, HumanKind Global
30. Mbali Ndhlovu, I Know A Guy
31. Martin Somtochukwu Nworah, Tales of Nigerians
32. Kirsty O'Callaghan, Essex Coronavirus Action
33. Pamellah Oduor, Let's Cook Kenyan Meals
34. Lola Omolola, Female IN
35. Mercedes Palomar, Ladymultitask
36. Pilar Palomar, Ladymultitask
37. Madhura Manoj Pethe, Khadad Khau
38. Dillion S. Phiri, Creative Nestlings
39. Molly Ola Pinney, White People. DOING Something.
40. Bernard Pollack, Food Tank
41. Marina Ponzi, Comunidad LadiesBrunch
42. Adrijana Propenko, Blind PenPals

43. Caroline Ramade, 50inTech
44. Rauf Raphanus, Peri Kertas
45. Manal Rostom, Surviving Hijab
46. Ibrahim Safwat, Cairo Runners
47. Stefanie Schuberth, Upcycling - aus Alt mach Neu! Do it yourself!
48. Anne Scott, Girl Gone International
49. Neil Thompson, The Delegate Wranglers
50. Alex Urban, #ichbinhier
51. Edd Withers, Canterbury Residents Group
52. Tony Xie, Subtle Asian Traits
53. Nur Yana Yirah, MotherHope Indonesia
54. Fady Younan, Egyptian Professionals Network

### Expert Interviews

1. Eric Klinenberg (US): Sociologist, NYU
2. Lawrence Rosenthal (US): Chair, Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies
3. Sian Brooke (UK): Researcher, Oxford Internet Institute
4. Arjuna Sathiaselvan (IN): CEO and Co-founder, Gaius Networks
5. Rachel Happe (US): Co-founder, Community Roundtable
6. Vincent Boon (UK, NL): CEO, Giants Technology
7. Pablo Collada (MX): Former Exec. Director, Fundacion Ciudadano Inteligente (Chile)
8. Sarbani Belur (IN): Senior research scientist, IIT
9. Utkarsh Amitabh (IN): Founder, Network Capital
10. Ishtiaque Ahmed (IN): Professor, Dept of Computer Science, Univ. of Toronto
11. Amitabh Kumar (IN): Founder, Social Media Matters (IN)
12. Marshall Ganz (US): Professor, Harvard Kennedy School
13. Joao Vieira Magalhaes (DE, BR): Researcher, Platform Governance and Copyright, Humboldt Institute
14. Eleanor Harrison (UK): Partnerships and External Affairs Manager, Jo Cox Foundation
15. Robin Miller (ZA): Global digital lead, Dalberg
16. Axel Dauchez (FR): Founder and CEO, Make.org
17. Dina El Mofly (EY): Founder, Injaz Egypt
18. Tarik Nesh-Nash (MA): Founder, Impact for Development
19. Stephanie Arrowsmith (Indonesia): Co-founder, Impact Hub Jakarta

An additional seven experts interviewed asked to remain anonymous.



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