



The new SOCIAL NETWORKS

As we continue our campaign to combat loneliness, we spotlight three virtual communities pioneering new ways to reach those in rural isolation

WORDS BY LAURA SILVERMAN

Isolation does not have to lead to loneliness. Chatting to friends and family over FaceTime, WhatsApp or just the regular phone can help us feel connected – up to a point. But not being able to mosey down to the shops to see whether Mrs Jones has recovered from her hip operation or Daisy the Labrador has had her puppies would leave anyone disorientated. If this year has taught us anything, it's that we need a support network on tap: we need a community. Whether it's taking part in a quiz, joining or starting a craft workshop, or reaching out to those in need, this could be a time to strengthen your community. Here, we meet three people who are leading the charge to build the networks of the future.

The PUB QUIZ



Gary Wigglesworth, a publishing sales executive, likes nothing better than a good quiz. He has appeared on *The Chase*, *Two Tribes* and *Eggheads*, and has been hosting a book quiz at London pub The Betsey Trotwood for a year. When the pub closed in the spring, he didn't want to stop doing it, so he moved the quiz onto Twitter. "I didn't know whether anyone would take part," says

Gary, who had under 1,000 followers, "but I thought I'd give it a go. I hoped it might cheer people up and make me feel better – and it did."

He composed ten regular word questions, keeping to the 280-character limit, and five picture questions. Online quiz-goers were asked to recall the second line of Spike Milligan's *On the Ning Nang Nong* (answer: "Where the Cows go Bong!") and guess which one on a list was not a Sherlock Holmes story. Gary is also a big fan of a good 'Say What You See' challenge, where he posts a picture representing a book title; a Hollywood mirror, for example, would be Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light*. Kick-off was at 8pm one Tuesday. Gary posted a question and waited three minutes before tweeting the answer. "I wanted to keep the quiz brief and fast-paced so that people wouldn't drift off," he says.

Gary was prepared to be typing into the ether. "Twitter can be frustrating," he says. "You might have some great questions and get no replies, then make a casual remark and get 50 jolly comments." The response, however, was "terrific". Some people dipped in and out; others set up teams through WhatsApp or video conference platform Zoom. Gary has since been asked by Orion, a book publisher with 84,000 followers, to run the quiz from their account. "That's quite something," he says. "I think it helps people to know there are others out there with the same interests. It helps me. I can't wait to do it again." Follow Gary on Twitter at @gpwigglesworth. His book, *The Book Lovers' Quiz Book* (Hachette), is published on 5 November 2020.



The CRAFT WORKSHOP



One Tuesday evening, on her farm in County Cavan, Ireland, Sandra Coote was demonstrating how to make yarn birds. "Any questions so far?" she asked, cutting into a piece of cardboard. "Tonight I'll be making a robin..." Silence. The room was empty. But in fact, hundreds of people were looking on, cutting into their own cardboard, watching Sandra live on

Facebook. They could type in questions and Sandra would reply in the video. So far, the 20-minute film, which is still on Sandra's Facebook page, has been viewed more than 1,800 times.

Facebook Live is not new. What's new is the audience – people who would have gone to a class are now attending online – and the teachers. "I didn't see the need to do videos before," says Sandra, who has been running workshops in person for two years. "But this is a great way to keep in touch for me and the crafters."

Sandra now broadcasts a baking workshop almost every day at noon and a craft workshop nearly every evening. "I want to keep it easy and make it doable," she says. The night before, she posts the materials and ingredients needed for the next day, so that people can prepare. This also encourages followers – Sandra currently has more than 9,200 – to share what's coming up with others.

Sandra enjoys talking to a camera, but admits she gets nervous at the start. "It's not like TV – there are no out-takes, anything could happen. I recently baked some soda bread and cut the loaf live," she confesses. "It probably wasn't the wisest thing to do, but I took a chance. If it's not perfect, it's not the end of the world." This relaxed approach is important for her. "I'm in my jeans and a jumper; I haven't had my hair done, I'm just as I am," she says. The videos feel intimate and personal.

A new post pops up on Sandra's screen. "I love seeing what people have made," she says. One of her followers has crafted a maroon and white bird following a recent class. The species is unidentified. Post your answers on Sandra's Facebook page... Join Sandra's virtual workshops at facebook.com/craftsofireland.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER; GETTY IMAGES

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The THERAPY SESSION



Ruth Chaloner knows a thing or two about isolation – she used to work on a conservation project in Antarctica, with just ten other people for miles around. For the past 15 years, however, she has been a psychotherapist in a village in West Oxfordshire, seeing people all the time. That was until spring this year, when so many people had to start self-isolating.

"I've had to stay in with just my dog and two cats for company," Ruth says. "I've got Lyme disease and didn't want to risk catching the virus. My clients agreed to have online appointments, over the phone or using a live chat function. It worked really well. Then I thought about others who might benefit. Lots of people were staying indoors. Not everyone has a therapist, or can afford one."

Within two weeks, Ruth had set up The Help Hub, a group of almost 100 therapists across the country, all offering free 20-minute virtual sessions to people who could benefit from support. Users just go online or call a number to book a slot. "Even before this, so many people struggled with anxiety," Ruth says. "Then there was the fear of the virus on top of that... It's even worse for people who already feel cut off. If they didn't get help, I felt it could be catastrophic."

As soon as Ruth shared her idea on a local Facebook page, people offered to help with a website and technology. The scheme has even been backed by Blenheim Palace. "It has really taken off," she says. "We've had so many volunteers."

Ruth is keen to reach "hidden people" – those not often online, who might be especially isolated, so she has posted a template of a leaflet on Facebook asking if they need help and is encouraging people to post them through neighbours' doors.

She recognises that people who don't want support from a therapist may well benefit from a chat, which is where we can all step in, looking out for those around us. "I think we're all looking for ways to help isolated people at this time," she says. "It's difficult to think of positive things coming out of this, because we're all going to have losses, but actually it is going to result in bringing communities together."

To find out more about The Help Hub, including how to volunteer, visit thehelpclub.co.uk.

TAKE ACTION – HOW TO GET INVOLVED

To find out more about how to set up your own virtual community, go to countryliving.com/uk/loneliness-countryside. You can also join our Postcard Project, sharing what loneliness means to you and what one thing would help or has helped, by emailing us at standuptoloneliness@gmail.com.