

## Neighbors would rather talk over the fence than online, study finds

January 20 2016, by Christine Metz Howard

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In today's world, the old adage "good fences make good neighbors" may be more like "good Facebook privacy settings make good neighbors," two University of Kansas professors found.

Bonnie Johnson, associate professor of urban planning, and Germaine Haleboua, assistant professor of film and media studies, conducted a case study to see if social media could revive a struggling neighborhood association.

"Much of the research on social media and public engagement has been about happy, success stories. But the neighborhood we studied wasn't one of those glowing success stories," Johnson said of their work. "We found there is a mismatch between what Facebook offers and how people think neighbors should communicate."

The professors studied a Lawrence neighborhood with more than 500 homes that had a neighborhood association since the early 1970s. Over 10 years, the association's active members had dropped from more than 100 to less than 10.

In hopes of rebuilding neighborhood participation, the neighborhood association launched Facebook and Twitter accounts and an email Listserv, which they advertised throughout the neighborhood. The results yielded five Facebook likes, three Twitter followers and two new email addresses.

To find out why there was little interest in joining a neighborhood social network, the researchers sent out surveys to more than 500 homes. Of those surveys, 37 percent were returned.

Respondents indicated they weren't comfortable with neighbors seeing details of their private life on Facebook. They also feared social network sites would exclude those who didn't use or have access to social media. They also questioned the need for social media when face-to-face communication is the norm among neighbors.

"Participants tended to feel that once you are friends on Facebook, you open yourself up to neighbors knowing you in a different way than what you can regulate face-to-face or by closing your curtains or building a fence," Halegoua said.

The research could be of particular interest to technology startups launching services that aim to connect neighbors online.

"If there is something about the affordances of social networking sites that doesn't mesh well with neighborhood contexts, you might want to adjust your service to fit these conditions," Halegoua said.

Surveys indicated those most interested in participating in a neighborhood association were more inclined to choose social media as a preferred method of communication. Thus, Johnson said social media is a good starting point for neighborhood organizations with little money, but survey respondents had concerns with social media being the only form of communication.

"You can start off with social media, but at some point you have to make the jump to some other types of communication, and a big part of that is just talking to people face-to-face," Johnson said.

The researchers were surprised to learn that mailings, which are expensive and time consuming, were the preferred method of communication for those who were least interested in participating in a neighborhood association.

For the Lawrence neighborhood in the [case study](#), social media did not reinvigorate the neighborhood association immediately. But researchers found several years later that a crisis overrode people's reluctance to interact with their neighbors online. When a nearby road project created traffic congestion in the neighborhood, Facebook likes for the page jumped. The social media page allowed neighbors to organize a letter writing campaign, share information and post video of the excessive traffic.

"With a [social media](#) structure in place, they were able to activate [neighbors](#) when it was needed," Johnson said.

Johnson and Haleboua's research has been published in the *Journal of Urban Technology* and the *Journal of Planning, Practice and Research*.

Provided by University of Kansas

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