Socializing in the time of COVID

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If working practices and education have been compromised by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, then so too, obviously, have our social lives. The limitations of lockdowns and keeping apart to reduce the risk of catching or passing on the virus have been at the forefront of our minds for many months now. The usual places we might gather such as

pubs and restaurants, theaters and festivals have all been off-limits periodically in many parts of the world in response to the disease.

How might we stick together even while we are apart? Ardion Beldad of University College Twente in Enschede, The Netherlands, discusses a possible answer to that question looking at how we might sustain our "social capital" through our online activity and the web-based communities in which we dwell, virtually speaking.

As a social animal, the concept of social distancing is very much at odds with our inherent nature. Of course, over the last few years before the COVID-19 pandemic, many people had adopted online technologies for many aspects of their lives. The difference now is that many are essentially obliged to now adopt an online-only social life because of the risk of infection. Unfortunately, the digital divide can now be seen as a gaping maw given that there are many less privileged in society who simply do not have the economic means to access the internet from home, for instance. How we might address this problem is discussed in Beldad's paper.

Beldad also looks at the implications for privacy of the increasingly widespread adoption of online socializing for those who do have access as well as the potential implications for mental health of spending increasing amounts of time in a virtual world, rather than the physical world.

It is worth noting that at the time of writing this article, more or less effective vaccines are now in place in various parts of the world, but much work remains to be done in terms of vaccinating a sufficiently large proportion of the world population to allow us to overcome this pandemic. There are also the ongoing issues of the inevitable emergence of genetic variants of the original virus, which may well have a different susceptibility to the original vaccines.

"The clamor to return to normal face-to-face interactions is expectedly intensifying after months of social distancing measures, Beldad writes. "But until an effective vaccine for COVID-19 is developed, people are left with no other choice but to maintain their connections and interactions online."