



# Loretta Baldassar

Transcript

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## Varnya (intro):

Before the pandemic, every second week you'd hear a story about the possible evils of digital social connection. Were we spending too much time connecting with people online, rather than face to face? How was the digital world helping us connect and how was it hindering connection?

Then, the pandemic hit and if you're anything like me, you were just grateful for the social lifeline offered by the digital world. During the shutdown, I used to try and get my kids to imagine how it would be with no texting, no skype or zoom, no email...of course they just looked at me in complete incomprehension.

Dr. Loretta Baldassar has been thinking about these issues far longer than most of us. Loretta is a professor of anthropology and sociology at the University of Western Australia and a research fellow at Monash University. She specializes in migration studies with a particular interest in the importance of digital communication, amongst migrant communities.

I caught up with her back in the naive days of January - before the pandemic - but I'm sure you'll agree that much of what she has to say also seems prescient! It's kind of weird actually.

I began by asking her what she thought of the fact that technology was so often derided for making us feel more isolated, not less.

## Loretta:

...I like that question. I think it's a really important question. In my experience of the kind of research that I've been doing and the kind of people that I've been working with, actually the opposite is true.

Social technology has been critical to increasing social engagement for the people that I work with. They're migrant families, so families who have members in living in different countries, in different time zones, who still remain connected as a family, and who still feel very much a sense of familyhood.

For them, being able to be connected across distance requires, absolutely requires, the use of technology. Without it, they would have a much harder time staying connected. My work is about caring across distance and we can't care across distance today without using technology.

## Varnya:

It's pretty incredible when you think about migrant families of even 30 years ago, 40, and how completely isolated they would be from their family of origin back where they came from. Now, today, we have a completely different experience or the potential for a completely different experience.

## Loretta:

Exactly. What's created the potential for that different experience is new technologies. I've tracked that comparison in my research using the 100-year history of Southern European migration to Australia and you're right, 40 years ago, before what we now call the polymedia revolution, means that now we have a set of options available for how we stay in touch across distance.

We've got different technologies, from phone calls to SMS texts, to email, to video calls, to social networking sites, etc. That's a huge change -- a revolution -- it really is a revolution -- and it's changing the way we can care across distance, and that's really important to people's sense of well-being.

40 years ago people had letters. Eventually they had phone calls, but the phone calls were so expensive they would be focused on how long they were on the call...

**Varnya:**

[laughs] I remember that.

**Loretta:**

...rather than what they were saying.

**Varnya:**

I remember the beeps, and then looking at your clock and thinking, "Oh, no, [laughs] I've already spoken for six minutes. That's going to cost me \$25."

**Loretta:**

I don't remember the detail of the amounts, but a number of people I've interviewed have said, "When it first came out, it was easy to spend your whole week's pay packet on a call. It was that short."

Back before the polymedia revolution, you had people mainly communicating by letter. It was usually the responsibility of one of the women in the network, in the family, so a daughter or a mother. They would write letters. They would collect all the information from the family members wherever they were. Write it all up in the letter and send it across the seas. Those blue...

**Varnya:**

Aerograms.

[laughter]

**Loretta:**

...and the Aerograms. You'd be lucky maybe if some of the other members might sign their name or a little "Hello" in the corner, but...

**Varnya:**

[laughs] They took weeks. They took...

**Loretta:**

...and some people would dutiful. I've got people who wrote weekly, dutifully stayed in touch. That's changed now, because what you find is that you have an expansion of support networks, because of new media, where in the past those networks were contracted. That's a really amazing outcome, isn't it?

That means migration results in increased support, potentially, than in the past. The classic scenario in my transnational families research is that the family back in Italy for example, grandma needs grandson to help set up the Skype call. That grandson finds that he's sending a text message to his cousin, who in the past he would have never had any reason to contact.

**Varnya:**

[laughs]

**Loretta:**

They end up becoming Facebook friends. That cousin is helping his mum set up a Skype call, because she needs his help. Immediately you have more people involved, and you have men involved, and you have young people involved. In the past, it was just the older women.

**Varnya:**

That's really interesting. I hadn't thought about that. I guess when we think about technology and communication, we do often almost default to younger people, but of course, you're right in that older generations are just as interested in keeping in touch.



In fact, you could argue that they're more interested in keeping in touch, especially in a migrant experience, but then you need that learning that's facilitated by the younger members of the family.

### **Loretta:**

Exactly. That is often completely missed out, the use of technology for social support and social care. That's often not part of the discussion. In my research, that's what I focus on. I really don't see the negatives. Of course, there are some negatives. But really, the emphasis is on the wonderful possibilities this provides.

What we know also is that older people require help to use the technology. We talk about facilitated digital citizenship, and it's younger people and often men, (because men have become the custodians of the technology) who were participating so they're becoming more involved in the care work.

### **Varnya:**

How do you think people misuse technology...this line of argument is almost ubiquitous in the media about the increased sense of social isolation because of technology.

It must be they're almost different case scenarios, aren't they? The migrant experience and the experience of perhaps people who are younger or don't have anyone to keep in touch with overseas. Can you categorize for us what the misuse of those technologies might be?

### **Loretta:**

There's a problem when we set up what we might call online and offline worlds as in competition. My work suggests that we need to think about the online and the offline in relationship with each other. So that often, what I find in my work, is that they support each other.

For example, if you have more face-to-face, offline contact with someone that will likely increase your online contact with them and vice-versa. We have to shift the way we frame that question, to not set those two sets of practices up in competition, but rather in relationship.

That's the first thing I'd say. The second thing I'd say is there's a lot of assumptions about young people sitting in their rooms being isolated. I know from youth studies research that

if you dig down a little more deeply and speak to them, often they're actually really socially engaged.

There's a big phenomenon in Japan, for example, of the kids locked in their bedrooms, not going out at all. Often there are reasons like, they don't have enough money to wear the right gear. There's a bit of social stigma and concern about being in the world. In their bedrooms online, they may be playing video games, but they're actually also engaging socially. It might be a virtual community.

Again, I think we can't just label a set of practices as negative without understanding really what they're about. That's not to say that there are addiction levels, but what I can say that's negative that I found in my research is less about addiction and more about exclusion.

People can be excluded from the social uses of new technologies by the digital divide, by lack of digital literacy, with older people particularly. It's really too limited to say to an older person, "do you want to learn how to use a computer, you can go to the library and do a digital literacy training session." They're likely to say, "No, thank you. It's not for me, I'm too old."

That's not enough, I don't think, because they don't really understand what they're missing out on. We know that if you're not digitally literate, if you're not able to use the Internet, with some degree of facility, then you're missing out. You're missing out on social engagement, you're missing out on information.

Most importantly, for older people, you're missing out on social services, and access, because more and more of our services are what they call digital by default. They may not even realize it but all of their information, sometimes their main access point, is a website. This, ironically, is the case for the National Aged Care Service. It's a website.

## Varnya:

I want to go back to something that you said earlier. I do find it really interesting...there's a real sense of judgment about the inferior quality of online social engagement, or online social support when contrasted with offline social engagement.

I'm interested in unpacking that a little bit. The other thing that occurs to me, because I was a very shy child but that I always liked to write. Despite my profession, that's my [laughs] natural mode of being. I would have loved to have been able to text or email!

My daughter, who's very shy, loves to chat on WhatsApp or whatever, but I'm absolutely guilty of not crediting that social engagement in the same way that I would if she was



having a playdate. Not stepping back and going, "Well, actually this is a much more comfortable way for her to engage."

### **Loretta:**

I agree, totally. Again, I think that the question often comes from that inadequate framing of setting the online and the offline in competition. The more you're online, the less you're offline and then the less have in your life. That's really an inadequate assessment.

[crosstalk]

### **Varnya:**

Why do you think we do that?

### **Loretta:**

It's easy. Offline, good. Online, bad. But I do think that the gold star of engagement is probably face-to-face.

The reality is we have very busy lives. We are separated by distance, but we love the people who live far away from us. Some people are shyer than others. Why not use all of the possibilities available to us and think about them in relationship to each other rather than in competition?

### **Varnya:**

Why not just adapt to a more flexible approach - what is beneficial for someone might be more beneficial to this person than it is to that person?

[crosstalk]

### **Loretta:**

Yep, and it may be the case that we need some protocols, we need some guidance. I can give you a few examples from some of my really memorable interviews. One young man said, "Look, I never told my mom I love her when I lived in the same house as her. But now



that I live thousands of miles away, I have to type it out in my text message I love you." And he does. That's beautiful, isn't it?

**Varnya:**

[laughs] That's really lovely.

**Loretta:**

He would never say it to her face.

Other people say that because they have to put more effort into long distance communication, they take more care and that's more meaningful as a result. The quality of communication, that is. I've had people say that I'm more in touch with my mum when I'm living at a distance than when I'm living down the road.

**Varnya:**

Well, I know with my mum -- because sometimes we live in Canada -- it's a different relationship when I'm away. We talk about things in our emails that we would never talk about face to face. Almost more theoretical questions, or like more...

[crosstalk]

**Loretta:**

More reflective.

**Varnya:**

Yeah, much more reflective. Rather than that reactive stuff that you tend to get face to face.

**Loretta:**

Yep. I think because we have polymedia, multiple options, it introduces a moral element. "Is it OK to text my mom 'Happy Birthday,' or do I have to phone her?" or "Do I have to have a video call?"



Sometimes, we can inadvertently offend people because we're using technologies in ways that they're not happy with. And so because we haven't been at it for very long, we don't really have the right protocols or etiquettes.

**Varnya:**

Yes.

**Loretta:**

One thing I found that's a common pattern in my research that seems to work really well, is the routine. People end up having a routine around their communication. This is often younger people trying to manage the needs of their parents.

**Varnya:**

[laughs]

**Loretta:**

I had one young guy say, "I had to train my mom that one Viber sticker a day is enough."

It can be overwhelming. As a lot of young people say, they have a Skype call every Sunday. That is a way of managing expectation, managing the communication. It's a very meaningful time because they really put a lot of effort into it. One of the problems is when do you hang up on a Skype call?

**Varnya:**

Yeah. [laughs]

**Loretta:**

It just goes on and on and on because it can just hang out in the background. You can go off and do stuff. Video calls have been really important for children who are too young to talk on the phone or to write to grandparents.

The grandchild and grandmother, they can actually have quality time together over a video call that was totally unavailable in the past. You hear about reading stories, minding the



children in a way across distance. There's lots to think about there, which is often just overlooked.

**Varnya:**

It's interesting what you say about how we haven't been doing it for very long. It's almost like we all need a course in digital manners.

[laughter]

Because we don't really know what we're doing.

**Loretta:**

It's true.

**Varnya:**

We're just blindly trying stuff out.

**Loretta:**

I remember the first time someone wrote LOL. It was a senior male academic. He wrote LOL at the end of his email, and I thought, "Is that lots of love?" That kind of thing.

[laughter]

I hope that's not lots of love.

**Varnya:**

Inappropriate.

**Loretta:**

Yeah, but he says it's "laugh out loud."

[laughter]

**Varnya:**

It's funny. It's a whole different language.

### **Loretta:**

Yeah, and it's a whole different way of caring, being social, and being engaged. It is different to face-to-face or offline, but it also informs the way we are together in face-to-face situations.

We shouldn't really compartmentalize it. It really needs to be seen in a relationship. And then we have a different relationship with material things. People talk about losing their phone is like breaking a leg or losing an arm because this symbolizes their dearest family members who are not near them. They can carry them around in their pocket.

### **Varnya:**

I wonder if, in part, it's just that humans tend to be sometimes just a bit fearful of new stuff, fearful of new ways of doing things, and fearful of progress. I wonder if there's a little hint of that there, just in our judgment about online versus offline.

### **Loretta:**

Definitely, there's that. The other thing that I think that feeds into it is our ontological understanding of care and being together.

That's such a strong normative belief that I remember when I used to first present my findings to an audience and if there was ever anyone medical in the audience like nurses or medical doctors, it was just so against the idea of proper care to not be physically present.

My argument that people are caring really profoundly and really well even though they're at a distance is deeply, deeply challenging to our normative understandings. For example, the big example in migration studies is the domestic care worker who's often a mother of young children.

That really goes to the heart of what we think is sacred that a mother should be near her children. I don't think anyone would dispute that physical proximity, face-to-face closeness with small children and parents is the gold star standard.

In some cases, this is not possible because people need to earn a living, and they often migrate in order to support their children. What they have instead is the ability to be connected across distance using technology.

## Varnya:

Tell me about digital kinning.

## Loretta:

Digital kinning is a new term that my colleague Raelene Wilding, from La Trobe University, and I have been playing with. We're wondering if it's useful to think with, to try to understand what's happening in these families that are spread across distance. We use the word kinning, which comes from kinship, which is about familyhood.

Kinning is from the anthropology of adoption studies, where they look at how a non-kin person, a newly adopted child becomes kin. That means that even if you're not a blood relative, you can become kin.

We like the kinning term for that reason, because in families separated by distance, the way people become kin or become truly connected and special, loved and cared for, is through digital technologies. We have some lovely examples.

The one that got us thinking about this is where, for reasons beyond their control, a lot of families cannot bring their aging parents to live with them in Australia. We have very limited ways that you can do that. The government's really against it. They don't help that happen.

When older parents begin to become very frail and they're no longer able to travel to visit, what do you do? The adult children maybe they can visit for a little while, but unless they give up their jobs completely, they've got to do it across distance.

The older person needs someone to help them set up the call, and often they don't have family members nearby. Today our world is characterized by mobility. They might have a care worker, who sets up the call.

That person becomes incorporated into the family network, and sort of digitally kinned in. To the older person, your relationship with them is one of digital kinning. You're showing all that kin work and kin care, but it's entirely done by proxy using technology.

We're just exploring the usefulness to try and open up our understanding about care and distance and push back against the dominant normative idea that to care you need to be physically present. That's another reason for us not to draw a distinction between online and offline. It's actually our world. Some of it's online, some of it's offline, but it's all the same world.



## **Varnya (extro):**

Dr. Loretta Baldassar, talking about the importance of digital connections in our modern social world.

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