IT'S GOOD TO TALK

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS THAT STOP US TALKING TO STRANGERS

talk to me

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FOREWORD

DO YOU TALK TO STRANGERS?

If you live in a big city, your eyebrows may well raise in reaction to this question. After all, everyone knows the rule: strangers in cities do not talk. But we at Talk to me are among those who do. And we have had so many great conversations with people - from conversations that were serious to those that were fun, hilarious or sad. We started to ask ourselves why people don't talk to strangers more.

Our own experience and initial research showed that people wanted to talk to each other, and most of the time people reacted very positively to us starting conversations. But what was needed was a way for people to show that they were open to conversation. It seemed most people were up for a conversation but they assumed it wasn't OK to start one.

We came up with the concept of Talk to me during the 2012 London Olympics, when London came alive. United by a common cause and interest, strangers actually started talking to each other. We were inspired to create badges reading ´talk to me´ that gave people a signal that they were open to talking in public, so that the community spirit could continue.

But as we looked further, we soon realised that just badges were not enough, and that we needed to dig deeper. This realisation has taken us on a journey whereby, for the last five years, we have dedicated ourselves to experimenting with ways to encourage people to talk. As part of this journey, we have created pop-up talking bars, invited people to dine with strangers and spent a lot of time at bus stops. Our activities have directly engaged thousands of people, and have reached hundreds of thousands more via the press and social media channels.

We've also met others who are asking the same questions. Some have been doing academic research in areas relating to this topic; others, like us, are trying to create solutions to get people to talk. We've also had countless discussions with people -- our family, friends, and of course 'strangers.' And we've engaged with journalists and the general public on this issue, in particular when we announced the Kickstarter campaign for Talk to me Day in 2014.

What we have learned from the last five years is that the idea of talking to strangers resonates with people in urban areas around the world, from Paris to Las Vegas, Seoul to New York. It strikes a chord and raises questions about what we are taught as children and the world we want to live in.

More over the research now exists there that proves that talking to strangers is actually good for us, and for the stranger. So we really have no reason not to talk and we need to reinvent community cohesion so it takes this into account.

We have also discovered that there are many different angles to the discussion. This report brings together many of the conversations we've had over the years, the research which is taking place across different disciplines highlighting the many benefits of talking to strangers, and the different solutions that others are using or which we have tried ourselves. We hope that it will inspire readers to think about this issue further and to trial their own solutions.

Thank you for reading and if this report strikes a chord, we'd love to talk to you too!

Ann and Polly, Co-founders of Talk to me

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We start with an introduction which explains why this report has been written. We argue that there is a paradox in that we live in an increasingly connected world yet we are becoming more lonely, and that this is evidenced, at least in large cities, by the fact that strangers do not talk to each other.

The report is split into three main parts. The first part highlights why talking to strangers is important. We present recent research which has shown a positive correlation between interactions with strangers and levels of wellbeing. We also present evidence of rising loneliness levels in cities and a new approach for tackling it. Whilst the current discourse around so this issue from well-being, community cohesion and loneliness is all focussed on strong ties (i.e. friends), we make the case for the need to now also focus on connections with what we call 'fleeting ties' (i.e. the people you pass on the street). So in our increasingly globalised, transient world we need to reinvent how we think about community and how this affects our feelings of belonging, trust and wellbeing.
Both wellbeing and increased connectivity are linked to each other and to other factors such as increased trust, belonging and life span.

In the second part, we ask why strangers don't talk to each other, and present a number of key barriers, which we identify as both environmental and internal. The environmental factors that we present are (1) globalisation, (2) digital technology, (3) the concept of stranger danger, (4) urban design and (5) a lack of structures that allow us to talk. The internal factors we present include (1) pluralistic ignorance, (2) not thinking that talking to strangers will be good for us (3) not knowing how to start a conversation, (4) being afraid of how a conversation will go, (5) fear of how others will perceive us and (6) fear of how the other person will respond. We explain that in many cases, these factors are interlinked.

In the third part of the report, we present a number of recommendations for ways to break down the barriers to conversation presented in part 2. These include (1) shaping our environment to encourage action through designing buildings in a different way, and sometimes for the explicit purpose of encouraging interaction, (2) experimenting with fun ways to encourage interaction in public space, using smart signs like badges, creating groups and events for people to meet, (3) using digital solutions, (4) challenging existing norms through awareness campaigns, (5) reframing the teaching around stranger danger and (6) actively teaching people how to talk to strangers.

We conclude by noting that the common thread between these diverse solutions is that they increase the ability to have initial encounters with others. Having a positive initial encounter can change people's minds about others around them and can lead them to have more interactions. We argue that we need to try to do this in whatever way we can.

INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS REPORT?

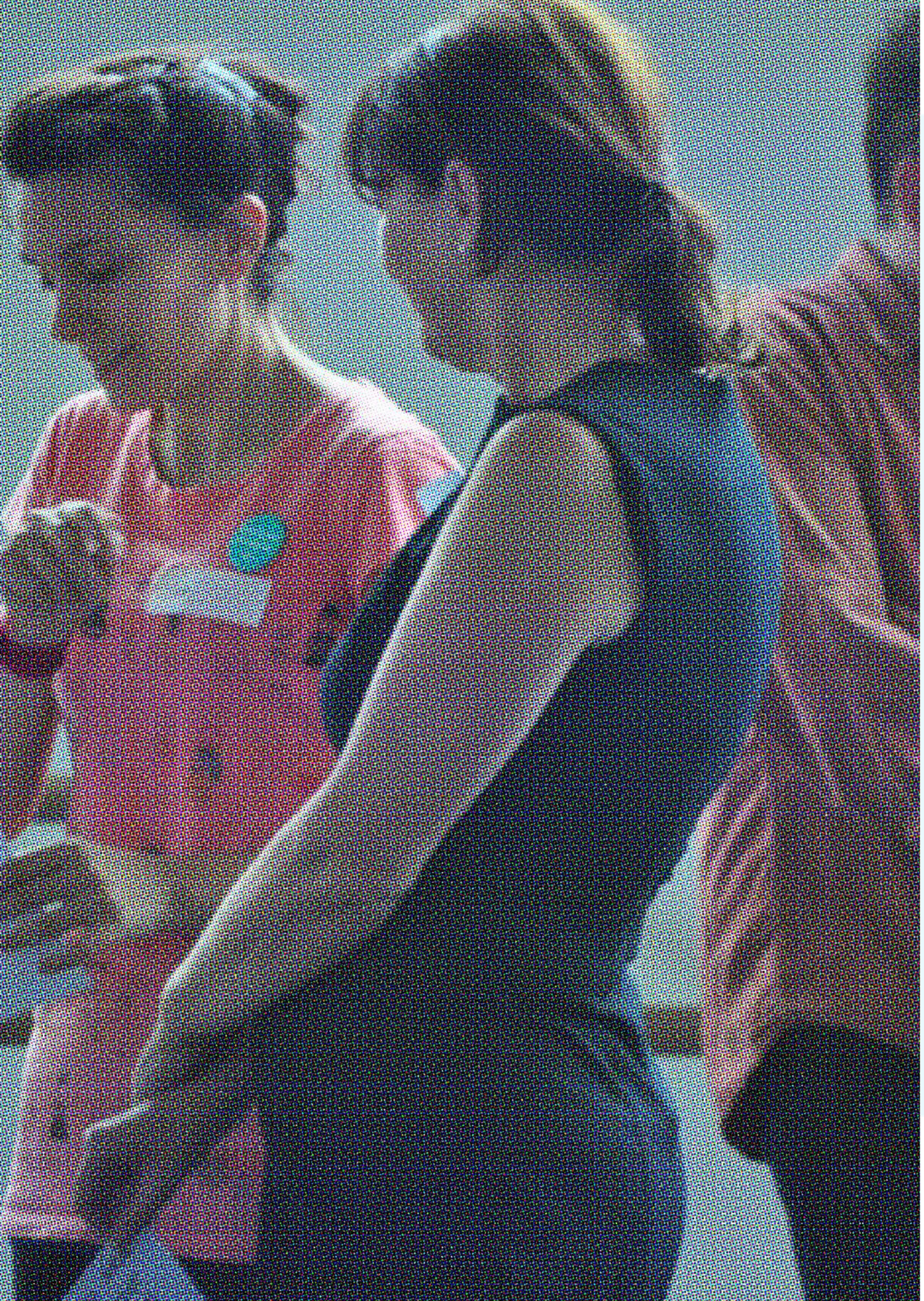
We live in an increasingly connected world. The internet, decreasing cost of technology and globalisation have allowed us to communicate easily with friends, family and strangers all over the world.

And yet research shows we are becoming more isolated. We hear stories of how the rise of social media means that children are no longer able to interact with each other in person, and reports about increasing loneliness, especially in cities and among people of all ages.

There seems to be a disconnect between virtual communication and real communication. Nowhere is this more evident than on the streets of large cities like London.

Every day we pass hundreds of people in the streets without exchanging a word. We feel alone despite being surrounded by thousands of people. Why has this become our norm? Why does it matter? And what can we do about it?

These are the questions that this report aims to answer, through combining academic research and the work of practitioners. Through examining these questions and presenting recommendations to solutions, we hope to present an analysis that will inspire more concrete action to encourage strangers to talk.



SO WHAT IF PEOPLE DON'T TALK? WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

"Americans are right that the bonds of our community have withered, and we are right to fear that this transformation has very real costs"
Robert Putnam, Professor at Harvard University

Talking to strangers is good for us

Remember that BT advert, 'it's good to talk?' It's true. The purpose of the BT advertisement featuring Bob Hoskins was to encourage people to use their phones more to contact their friends and relatives (strong ties). These are the kinds of relationships we might most typically associate with people's wellbeing and social connectedness and indeed there is a wealth of evidence that talking to these people is a good thing. There is also evidence that conversations with weak ties (more like acquaintances or friends of friends) has a positive impact. However more recent evidence is showing us that even conversations with what we call 'fleeting ties' (people you pass on the street or in public space) has a positive effect too.

For many decades, researchers have been looking into the effects close ties have on wellbeing and loneliness. It is only recently that leading academics such as Gillian Sandstrom, Elizabeth Dunn, Juliana Schroeder and Nicholas Epley have looked into the effect of talking to 'fleeting ties' such as strangers. These experts, like us, had the inkling that talking to strangers may be beneficial for humans and so they decided to put it to the test.

In the first of these studies, Sandstrom and Dunn asked people to have a conversation with a coffee barista and compared positive and negative feelings before and after, comparing people who had a conversation with those who didn't [1]. Their findings showed that those who had a conversation experienced more positive feelings than those who had not, which led them to the conclusion that having even a short interaction with a barista increased participants sense of belonging.

At a similar time Epley and Schroeder also started experimenting in this field and conducted a range of tests where they asked people to talk to strangers in a variety of different settings - from waiting rooms to trains and buses. They wanted to understand whether talking to strangers was a pleasant experience and whether people felt happier talking to strangers than they would have if they had sat in silence.

In one experiment with over 100 commuters at a train station in Illinois they found that those that struck up a conversation with a commuter had a more pleasurable commute i.e. were happier than those in a control group. On average they spoke for 14 minutes [2].

In other experiments including on a bus and at an airport taxi stand they found similar results - strangers who had a conversation with a stranger reported higher levels of happiness (and in some cases productivity) than a control group who did not have a conversation [3].

Epley and Schroeder's experiments showed that people were happier when they had a conversation than when they didn't. However they also wanted to check that the person being talked to also had a positive experience so they ran another experiment to test this. They engineered these so that between taking part in unrelated tasks in a lab, two participants would have a a 10-min break together in the waiting room. During this waiting period, they instructed one person to talk and gave the other no instructions. They found that compared to pairs of participants who didn't talk (as they weren't instructed to), those who had a conversation had a more positive and productive experience, regardless of whether they started the conversation or whether the conversation was started with them [4].

Overall these studies show, across all of these different settings, that people who had a conversation with a stranger were happier than those who didn't. They concluded: "This research broadly suggests that people could improve their own momentary wellbeing—and that of others— by simply being more social with strangers, trying to create connections where one might otherwise choose isolation." [5]

In fact, Epley and Schroeder found that people who had a conversation with a stranger reported being just as happy as people in the control group who had a conversation with their friends, and 100% of people who took part in the study had a positive conversation. In Schroeder own words "Intuitively, just like the participants in our experiments, we expected that talking to strangers might feel unpleasant. But based solely on the academic research, we predicted that it might be at least somewhat pleasant. That's why we wanted to test it. We were actually surprised by just HOW pleasant it was." [6]

Simple acknowledgment matters too

In another experiment, academics tested the impact of eye contact by asking college students to deliberately make eye contact with some strangers, smile at others and look beyond/not make eye contact with others. A researcher then appeared carrying a clipboard and surveyed the people that had been looked at. What they found was that those who were not looked at reported feeling more disconnected than those who had been acknowledged showing that even eye contact has an impact on our feelings of belonging [8]. This is backed up by other literature which shows that minimal cues convey inclusion and even the smallest actions can make people feel ostracised [9].

Talking makes people more connected and reduces loneliness

We are frequently told that rates of loneliness are increasing, in particular in large cities. A 2013 survey found that 52% of Londoners feel lonely, making it the loneliest place in the UK [11]. And we are not just talking about groups that might be more typically associated with loneliness, such as the elderly. This is affecting everyone, including young people. In fact a recent report [12] by ACEVO found that a young person in London is twice as likely to be lonely as their counterparts elsewhere in the country.

But it isn't just true for London. Cities around the world seem to be suffering from the same phenomenon. In Australia, city dwellers have fewer friends than they did two decades ago [13]. In the US, a troubling one in five people said they had only one close friend. In Vancouver, Canada, a think tank found that the biggest issue facing Vancouverites was not homelessness or poverty; it was isolation [14].

Before you ask the question, it's worth mentioning that this was the case for all individuals, regardless of personality (e.g. extravert vs. introvert) so the benefits of talking to strangers appear to be good for all humans - not just for extraverts.

These findings are also supported by research from Dunn, Biesanz, Human & Finn (2007) who found that when people interact with strangers, they put their best self forwards, which makes them happier [7] (and let's face it, probably makes the other person happier too!).
So the story from the academics is clear: talking to strangers is good for us, much more than most people (including academics) would expect it to be and it can go a long way towards improving our feelings of belonging and happiness.

When thinking about our big cities, where people are ignored by hundreds of people on a daily basis, perhaps it's no surprise that we see such high levels of loneliness and disconnection. Williams says "At some point, depending upon the individual's persistence, self-esteem and available options, targets of ostracism will succumb to the diminished levels of belonging, control, self-esteem and meaningful existence. Then they will internalise these threatened needs, feeling alienated, helpless, depressed and worthless" [10] Whilst he may not be referring to the lack of connection in our cities, it seems no stretch of the imagination to see the effect disconnection in our cities could be having on the individuals living within it.

John Cacioppo, the world's leading expert on loneliness showed us the dramatic impact loneliness has on human physiology and he like others, stresses the need for face to face communication to tackle loneliness. Traditionally this has often been linked to strong ties (i.e with family and friends). However, again, recent research shows that weak or fleeting ties have an impact. In an experiment by Gillian Sandstrom in 2013, she asked people to carry clickers -- a red one to count interactions with strong ties and a black one to count interactions with weak ties. She asked people to click the red one when they met strong ties and the black one when they met weak ties. She found that interactions with weak ties correlated at least as highly with happiness as interactions with strong ties [15].

This has an effect on a whole range of other areas

There is clear evidence that belonging, loneliness, wellbeing and community are all related [16] and so by encouraging more social interactions between strangers we can tackle a range of issues through a very simple solution.

Greater connectivity also leads to increased social capital, defined as "connections among individuals—social networking and the norm of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." [17] A study published by WHO using data from 14 European countries found a strong positive correlation between wellbeing and trust [18]. Conversely, low social capital has been shown to be linked to ill health: a survey of 13- to 18-year-old students in Sweden showed that low social capital is associated with higher rates of psychosomatic symptoms, musculoskeletal pain, and depression [19].Research also shows that people who have more types of social relationships live longer and have less cognitive decline with aging, greater resistance to infectious disease, and better prognoses when facing chronic life-threatening illnesses [20].

As the old saying goes, "Every friend was once a stranger." Initial conversations are the cornerstone of connection, and can lead to a whole variety of outcomes. At Talk to me we often hear stories of friendships, relationship and business partnerships that emerge from strangers talking. Conversations can enrich our lives in many ways.

Finally, our cities are becoming more diverse and ethnically mixed. While this contributes a huge cultural richness, it can result in a sense of 'othering' and misunderstanding of those who may look, speak differently. A simple conversation between someone from a different ethnic or cultural background from ourselves can break down barriers, increasing our understanding and sense of humanity and tolerance.

So if talking to strangers is good for us, then we need to ask ourselves...

WHY DON'T PEOPLE TALK?

If you ask someone why they don't talk to strangers, the answers you will receive are many and varied, from 'I don't know what to say' to 'what if people think I'm weird?' The reasons, or let's call them barriers, are both societal and personal, and in many cases are interlinked. So what are these barriers? Let's explore them further.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

1. The Impact of Globalisation

People are now more mobile than ever - particularly in large cities. How many of us still know our neighbours? Cities like London were once a collection of villages in which everyone knew each other. They are now metropoles that people move in and out of in a transient way. In practice, that means that while once we would have recognised our neighbours on the street, we now pass many different people that we don't know.

It is true that the movement of people is creating communities that are more mixed and diverse, or even 'super diverse' but how much do these people talk to each other? In a study by Butler and Robson featuring Brixton, hailed as one of London's most diverse areas, they showed that whilst people often cited the diversity of the area as being one of the things they loved, the people in most people's social networks were actually very similar to them [21]. There appeared to be a gulf between a widely circulated rhetorical preference for multicultural experience and people's actual social networks and connections, which were in fact very homogenous.

In fact a number of studies have shown that diverse neighbourhoods don't result in residents talking to each other. Allport (1958) [22], Pettigrew (1998) [23] and Marshall and Stolle (2004) [24] have argued that living in diverse communities is not sufficient to boost trust -- you need to have friends from different backgrounds. In fact they show that positive social interactions with diverse people in diverse settings leads to higher levels of trust than in places where people are more homogeneous. As Stolle et al. (2008) note, diversity without contact can lead members of the majority group to feel threatened by outsiders and it weakens social capital, while bridging contacts with diverse others counteracts such negative effects [25]. So the key message is that diversity is great but you need people to interact to make it really beneficial.

Brixton, which is highly diverse but where people's networks are largely similar

2. Impact of Digital Technology

We are constantly on our phones, constantly connected, but are we more alone? Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor who has studied the effect of technology on our interactions, claims that we are. In her 2012 TED Talk 'Connected but Alone?', Professor Sherry Turkle tells the story of an eighteen year old boy who uses texting for nearly everything and who told her "Someday...I'd like to learn how to have a conversation." [26]

Turkle suggests that a real conversation "takes place in real time and you can't control what you're going to say. So that's the bottom line. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be." Real conversations don't give us the power to rewrite and edit; they allow us to be present in the moment and feel appreciated for who we are (instead of the person we portray ourselves to be online). Meanwhile, when we use technology to communicate, we do not have to be present, we do not have to engage.

Research by Aric Sigman illustrates that from 1987 to 2007, while electronic media has increased, face-to-face social interaction has declined in what looks almost an exact inverse correlation . These trends are predicted to increase in the future - further showing the need for action and not rely on technology to make us more connected [27].

The 2014 (ironically) viral video, 'Look up' was a powerful reminder of this phenomenon [28]. A montage of scenes involving young people glued to their phones, against a spoken word poem, it begins "I have 422 friends, yet I'm lonely," before instructing viewers to "Just talk to one another, learn to coexist." A similar video in 2016 stated "Kind of ironic ain't it how these touchscreens can make us lose touch" and asked Mr Zuckerberg "you should reclassify Facebook to what it is - an anti-social network." [29]

The fact that these videos have been viewed over 75 million times speaks for itself.

'Look Up' video

> **"Kind of ironic aint it how these touchscreens can make us lose touch"**
> *Prince Ea, American rapper*

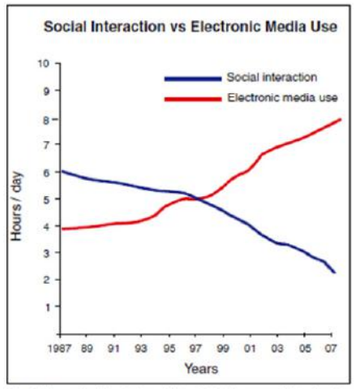


Figure 1. Hours per day of face-to-face social interaction declines as use of electronic media increases. These trends are predicted to increase (data abstracted from a series of time-use and demographic studies).

The irony is that while people are connecting with strangers much more online, evidence suggests that technology is limiting the conversations we are having in real life. But this isn't a like for like switch as real life conversations are more valuable than digital connection. Whilst the evidence shows face to face conversations have a positive impact on us, online connection doesn't seem to have the same impact and in fact can make us loneliness.

As far back as the 1990s, when the internet was still in infancy, scholars had started to note the contradiction between an increased opportunity to connect and a lack of human contact. Using a longitudinal study they showed that despite the fact people used the internet extensively for communication, greater use of the internet was associated with declines in the size of participants' social circles and an increase in depression and loneliness - they called this the "Internet paradox." [30] A 2010 analysis of forty studies also confirmed the trend: Internet use has a detrimental effect on overall well-being [31].

In an experiment a number of years later, the world's leading expert on loneliness (John Cacioppo) looked for a connection between the loneliness of subjects and the relative frequency of their interactions via Facebook, chat rooms, online games, dating sites, and face-to-face contact. The results were unequivocal. "The greater the proportion of face-to-face interactions, the less lonely you are," he said when interviewed by the Atlantic Newspaper. "The greater the proportion of online interactions, the lonelier you are." [32]

The key here is the way in which we use social media - Cacioppo tells us that if we use the internet to increase face-to-face contact it increases social capital but if you turn to social media instead of connecting with people in real life then that becomes unhealthy.

This isn't the most encouraging thought when we look at Sigman's trends showing the decline in social interaction vs. increases in electronic media use. Altogether this paints a clear picture - we're using digital technology the wrong way and it's making us more disconnected.

3. Stranger Danger

But it's not just today's young people who are learning not to talk. For decades, children in the UK (and in other countries, but importantly, not globally) have been instructed by parents and schools to not talk to strangers. Whilst this teaching may be helpful to avoid the extremely small percentage of strangers who are actually dangerous, it causes us to mistrust everyone else.

Being taught this behaviour as children means we may often carry it on into adulthood. Alan Latham, Senior Lecturer in Urban Geography at UCL notes that "Children who are told that they should not talk to strangers will need to go out and learn how to deal with people a lot later in their lives. When they do that, they are often lacking in confidence." [33] The concept of 'stranger danger' creates a society in which we're taught to distrust before we trust, from a very young age.

4. Impact of Urban Design

What makes a city or town feel like a community? How can you bring people together to co-exist and thrive? The answer often lies in some kind of common, shared space. The Ancient Greeks were aware of this need, and invented the 'agora' or market place, which dominated the centre of Ancient Athens, ostensibly for trade, but in reality as a way for people (albeit only men and strictly no slaves) to come together and discuss how they wanted to run their city. The agora was the visual representation of democracy. The tradition of public spaces in cities has continued - we see it in the piazzas of Italy and in the street markets of Asia.

But do our modern cities take into account the human need to connect? The Danish architect and professor Jan Gehl, who has documented urban design changes since the 1960s, argues that modern cities repel human interaction. Gehl argues that after changes in urban design in the 1960s, city design started being considered from the point of view of how buildings looked from above rather than how they looked for people in the streets. This led to the emergence of skyscrapers and modern, clinical designs. He claims that these structures are incompatible with humans, who like objects that are on a 'human scale'. [34]

Gehl argues that we need to build cities in a way that takes into account the human need for inclusion and intimacy. Gehl has been hugely influential in shaping the urban design of Copenhagen, and famously sat on the newly pedestrianised 'strøget' Copenhagen's main street, for a year observing people's interactions, before concluding that allowing cars on the street again would ruin the sense of community. Perhaps it's no surprise that Copenhagen is continually cited as one of the happiest cities in the world. [35]

Strøget, Copenhagen's main street, the longest pedestrianised street in the world. Gehl's study on Strøget had a huge influence on Copenhagen's shift to encouraging bicycles and pedestrians.

So, as Gehl would argue, the design of our cities can prevent us from talking. In fact research has also shown that there are strong correlations between the walkability of a neighbourhood and indicators of social capital within that area [36].

5. Lack of structures in which to talk

It isn't just 'urban structures' that play a role in our ability to talk to others: the social structures that we create for ourselves play an important role. There is no better proponent for this link than Harvard University professor Robert Putnam, whose treatise 'Bowling Alone' charts the decreasing number of social clubs in the US over the latter half of the twentieth century. The example that gives the book its name is the demise of the bowling club. Putnam argues that these clubs played an important role in creating 'social capital', and that with the loss of these kinds of clubs, people have lost social capital [37].

Putnam blames this demise partly on technology, and specifically (as the internet had not yet become widespread at the time of writing) on television changing people's social habits, making them more prone to stay in than going out to socialise with others. Putnam's concluding message is that "we desperately need an era of civic inventiveness to create a renewed set of institutions and channels for a reinvigorated social life that will fit the way we have come to live." [38]

Some may say that the internet has brought the change that Putnam was waiting for. The rise of sites such as meetup.com whereby people organise meetings around interests online before meeting up offline have arguably generated a plethora of new clubs and organisations, not necessarily by a specific geographical area but around common interests. A study by Pew Research Centre found a positive correlation between participation in groups offline and online interactions: 80% of internet users participate in offline groups, compared to 56% of non-internet users [39].

But are sites like meetup.com attractive enough to people? Putnam has argued they are not. There is also the issue of who they attract. To those with limited internet access or use such as the elderly, who are arguably those who most need social contact, there are significant barriers to finding out about such groups online, as opposed to coming across them in their local area. The results from the Pew Research Centre could indicate that the internet is making those more connected even more connected, while the less connected become more isolated.

INTERNAL FACTORS

If you ask someone why they don't talk to strangers, the answers you will receive are many and varied, from 'I don't know what to say' to 'what if people think I'm weird?' The reasons, or let's call them barriers, are both societal and personal, and in many cases are interlinked. So what are these barriers? Let's explore them further.

1. Pluralistic ignorance

When Epley and Schroeder asked people whether they would talk to a stranger in different public environments, as many as 93% said they would be likely to not talk to a stranger in a waiting room and 76% on a train [40]. Despite this, almost everyone said they would be at least somewhat interested in having a conversation with a stranger - so whilst most people would like to talk, their natural instinct is to avoid a conversation.

This brings to light the gap between what people do and what they would like to do -- in fact Epley and Schroeder found that people consistently indicated that they would be more interested in talking than they thought their fellow commuter would be. This brought to light the idea of pluralistic ignorance, whereby people privately reject a norm (of not talking to strangers) but assume everyone else still accepts it [41].

What's even more fascinating about Epley and Schroeder's research is that everyone who had a conversation reported it was a positive experience and in fact no one was rejected [42]. In fact the few who reported that they were not not able to talk said that this was because nobody sat next to them. This 'gap' in what people report the experience will be like leads us to the next point.

"Big cities are intimidating. The more people around you, the easier it is to get lost among them, to lose track of your own self - you're living surrounded by people, but connected to no one"

Gustavo, Chicago resident

2. We don't think that talking to strangers will be good for us

There appears to be a difference in people's expectations of what it will be like to talk to strangers and the reality. Epley and Schroeder found that people predicted that talking to a stranger would make their commute less pleasant, less productive and less happy [43].

However when people do talk, their opinions are affected: in an experiment at an airport taxi stand, people who usually talked predicted connection was better than solitude whilst people who usually didn't talk predicted connection was worse than solitude [44].

This led Epley and Schroeder to title their report 'Mistakenly seeking solitude' because in fact it appears that is what most of us are doing - incorrectly predicting the value of talking and so avoiding conversations.

This is perhaps more likely the case in big cities where people are used to not talking - they haven't experienced as many conversations and so they can't predict correctly how beneficial they will be. This may suggest a multiplier effect where when people talk, they know talking is good and so are more likely to start conversations. And conversely, when people haven't had conversations they are likely to predict they will be negative and so not start conversations.

3. We don't know how to start a conversation

Recent studies by Sandstrom have shown that not knowing how to start a conversation is in fact the most significant fear people acknowledge. She explains that this has been the biggest surprise in her recent work, "I would have thought people would be most afraid of others judging them, but what people are most worried about is knowing how to do it." [45]

There may be links with not knowing how to start a conversation and the messaging around 'Stranger Danger' that we are subject to as children, and the impact of technology, which means that many people don't have the skill. Remember Sherry Turkle's eighteen year old boy who 'someday' wants to know how to have a conversation.

Sandstrom also explains that this ability may depend on your personality: "You can't just go out and say to people 'talk to strangers' because it can be harder for some people. It depends on the person -- some people can do it naturally, but others have to learn it as a skill." [46] This lack of skills in starting a conversation may lead to other factors. If we do not have much experience in talking to strangers, we may well be more fearful of the unknown, which leads us to the next point.

"Urban life is such that it simply disconnects people – a gross oxymoron in the age of social media. We are training ourselves to feel at ease chatting with a stranger when we interact with a screen, but we would not dare strike a conversation with a stranger at the bus stop"

Anonymous, Helsinki resident

4. We are afraid of how the conversation will go/ fear of the unknown

If people only have a few experiences of talking to strangers, they will be more likely to worry about how the conversation will go. It may be that the only experiences they have had have been negative, for example, people asking for money or trying to chat them up.

They may therefore use these experiences to predict that a conversation will end badly, and in turn will be less likely to talk.
This was the second most common fear reported in Sandstrom's recent study. The two following fears were cited as the third and fourth highest respectively.

5. We are afraid of how others will perceive us

Interestingly, Sandstrom found that instead of worrying about how the other person would respond, people are more worried about how others perceive them. This fear could be linked to an inability or lack of confidence in starting a conversation. As noted previously, there are a number of societal conventions that inhibit us from talking, and it takes confidence and a lack of self-consciousness to break through these barriers.

As talking to strangers is seen as a taboo and something that only 'weirdos' engage in, people will naturally be afraid of placing themselves in that category.
That lack of self-confidence that people have when talking to strangers is shown by a number of people reporting that their conversation partner may find them boring to talk to.

6. We are afraid of how the other person will behave/respond

This is linked to both points above. We do not know where the conversation may lead, and what others will think of us, and how they will react. If they react badly, it can embarrass us – particularly if it takes such self-confidence for someone to put themselves out there and start the conversation.

Interesting though, in Sandstrom's recent studies, this area ranks quite low in comparison to the other factors above.
It is important to note that in Sandstrom's studies, people reported their fears, knowing that they would then have to speak to a stranger. After talking to the stranger, people rated how accurate their fears had been. Sandstrom found that none of people's fears had come true. And this aptly leads us to the next section of the report...

WHAT CAN WE DO TO SOLVE THIS?

Each of the barriers listed above plays a part in preventing people from talking to strangers. With so many barriers, it might seem almost impossible to tackle this issue. This is why one solution will not work: we need to tackle this in a range of ways. Instead, we therefore propose a number of broad recommendations to help make this happen.

Recommendation 1: We need to challenge existing norms around talking

A very important part of the solution is getting people to notice that we don't talk to strangers and that this is an issue. A core objective of our mission has always been about awareness raising and educating. Talking to strangers is often overlooked or sidelined as a solution to such big problems such as loneliness and community. And yet we see so much appetite for greater connection and it's not rare to see quotes like these in the paper.

In April 2014, we launched a Kickstarter campaign for a 'Talk to me London Day.' The day was a way to challenge people to have a conversation with each other and celebrate talking to strangers. The aim of the day was not only to get strangers talking but to challenge the norms around not talking, even if for one day. We soon started receiving donations and comments from around the world in solidarity, inspiring us to make Talk to me Day a global event.

But when an article in the Guardian [47] was published, claiming that the reason people live in London is not to talk, and linking us to 'brave new dawn of stupid', we really started to get attention. Since then we've been featured in numerous newspapers and radio shows, from ABC Australia to the Hindustani times to BBC Radio 4, raising awareness about how important it is to talk. YouTube videos such as 'Can We Auto-Correct Humanity" and the previously mentioned 'Look Up' have also played an effective role in challenging existing norms and getting people to think about the current context.

Photography projects have also gone some way to challenge existing norms - Humans of New York is one great example. Whilst capturing people's photos, Brandon Stanton (the photographer behind the project) also tells people's stories - showing us how great and interesting the diverse people within our cities can be. Another more recent project, by photographer Richard Renaldi asks people to pose in a caring way with someone they don't know [48]. Through these beautiful portraits Richard shows us 'humanity as it could be' with people from different backgrounds being more connected.

Awareness raising is important because it makes people realise they're not alone and encourages them to challenge their ideas around pluralistic ignorance (assuming others don't want to talk). And it can also be good for inspiring other ideas and people to think about it. Since launching Talk to me we've seen people starting similar initiatives in other countries - from New York to South Korea. For us this is great because we know we can't do it alone. If we want things to change we need lots of people from different fields and in different parts of the world to take action.

> **“Cultures and climates differ all over the world, but people are the same. They’ll gather in public if you give them a good place to do it”**
> *Jan Gehl, Danish Architect*

Recommendation 2: We need to change our environment to encourage interaction

As mentioned previously, architect Jan Gehl argues that we need to build cities which support human interaction. That means lots of public space that considers humans as the focus. He says our urban design has become buildings, then space then people whereas we need to flip this on its head -- start with humans, then space and then buildings. In fact, we can learn a lot in this regard from Jan Gehl’s homeland. Let’s do a case study of Denmark.

Firstly is the idea of co-housing. In fact, Denmark has more of its population living in cohousing establishments than any other industrialised nation. The idea behind cohousing is that 20 to 40 families live in private accommodation (each with their own bedroom, kitchen, living room etc.) but the families share communal space such as gardens, sports grounds or a dining hall. This enables them to form connections within their living space - each family cooks twice a month and everyone eats together, allowing people to meet each other and form new connections.

Another example of innovative Danish housing is 8 House in Copenhagen, designed by architect Bjarke Ingels. Its name derives from a figure of eight plan, featuring a continuous cycle path and pedestrian walkway that goes up to the tenth floor and back to ground level. This was designed to ensure easy access for all residence but also to ensure that neighbours pass by each other and each other’s residences.

8 House, Copenhagen

These examples seem to support Alan Latham’s hypothesis that “We need more spaces that have slipperiness between them….You can make a choice to be open or closed. In Danish culture, they make much more of a choice to be open. Whereas we put up fences around our schools to ‘protect’ them from the community, the Danes take fences down so the can community use them.”

But we can also create spaces with the specific aim of community-building. A fantastic example of this is Absalon, which is a space established Lennart Lajboschitz, the entrepreneur behind the Tiger brand. Situated in Copenhagen’s ‘Vesterbro’ neighbourhood Absalon aims to create a common space for people from the local area and from across Copenhagen to come together, through a wide range of activities, from ping pong to swing dance and a daily communal dinner. The list of activities at Absalon may be broad but are all targeted at encouraging people not to reflect on themselves but to be with others.

Absalon represents a world in which people are striving for community but are not looking for it necessarily through religion or through the more traditional spaces. How is it different? Sigrid Kipper Thau from Absalon explains that “Everything we do at Absalon has to be easy to access and take part in. We ask people to join us and they don’t have to pay a membership fee. Unlike other community institutions we can also implement things quickly and easily.”

And so Absalon may represent a new kind of community institution we are looking for: light-touch, non-religious, non-membership based and easy to join. An organisation and a space that expounds no other doctrine than that it’s good for people to be together. We would certainly love to see more spaces like this in cities globally.
Perhaps the solution, as the happiest country in the world, has shown us, is to create more of these spaces that encourage interaction. But is that enough?

Recommendation 3: We need to get people talking through experimenting in public space

We’ve found that it’s hard to sell the idea of talking to strangers to people -- you can organise events or give people badges but this can mean preaching to the converted. As we’ve seen, people don’t always know they want to talk and they’re busy and underestimate the value you get from it. So the solution -- interrupt their space to give them a taster of how good it can be. Engineer a ‘first encounter’ that gives people an excuse to connect.

The Big Lunch is a great example of this kind of intervention. It is an initiative by the Eden Project in the UK where for one day a year neighbours are encouraged to have lunch together. It is a simple but powerful concept that creates first encounters between neighbours. And the results have been impressive, with over 8 million people taking part, 88% of people saying they met new people at the event and 74% of people saying it gave them a greater feeling of community [49].

The idea behind creating a first encounter is that it will give people permission to have a second encounter. So if you accidentally have a first encounter with someone e.g. because you attend the Big Lunch, this then gives you confidence to talk to that person at later time points. This is as true when people talk naturally e.g. because their train is delayed or someone lends them money (as shown in the picture), as it is when the first encounter is more engineered e.g. the Big Lunch.

Communal dining at Absalon

Additionally, by having first encounters with lots of different people, it makes first encounters seem easier when you talk to strangers. So by creating first encounters within an artificial environment it “trains” people to have real encounters and in doing so helps to fix the overall problem.

We’ve done this at Talk to me through a wide variety of stunts - from a Talk Bar where people sit down and order from a menu of conversation to having people sleeping on top of bus stops (courtesy of renowned street artist Patricio Forrester).

Anything to break up public space and give people a taster of conversation is good. We’ve learned that you need something big and different to grab people’s attention, and that once you get people talking it’s really difficult to get them to stop.

‘Date While You Wait’ is another initiative aimed at breaking up public space and creating first encounters. Established by New Yorker Thomas Knox the aim is to make the commutes of New Yorkers more enjoyable. The formula Thomas employs is simple: he sets up a table and two chairs at a subway station and sits down, along with a board game. He’s found that people responded -.on the first day, 19 people sat and talked to him while waiting for their train.

Photo Talk Bar with Time Out

Recommendation 4: Use smart signs and nudges

As we previously mentioned, Talk to me's work all started with the idea of a badge. The barrier that we saw initially was that people would not know whether others would want to talk, and therefore an indicator was needed to signal their willingness. And so the idea of a badge was born.

The idea of a badge attracted a lot of attention - some people thought it was genius, others thought it was just plain silly. There are a few things at play here: some people liked the idea of a badge that would act as a signifier, tackling issues of pluralistic ignorance and allowing people who wanted to talk with each others. But for others, who were less confident, it was a less attractive proposition as they feared it might attract the sort of people they didn't want to talk to. And of course there was the issue of scale - the badge needed lots of people to wear it at the same time so they could identify each other and without having a very high penetration rate (and lots of money to print badges) this wasn't easy to do.

We've also seen similar 'sign-based' initiatives pop up in other places - such as Treetins in India who had a sign you could flip on your restaurant table that showed be happy for someone to sit with you to have a chat.

Ideas like these, while easy and appealing in principle, have not worked so well in our experience as they are passive. The expectation is for the other person to talk to you. So wearing the badge or flipping the 'sit with me' involves putting yourself out there but not necessarily starting the conversation. And for the person on the other end, we know there's other barriers which may stop them from talking. These types of solutions can work within a small scale e.g. in a restaurant or on a street but to work at a societal level they need scale and to be supported by a wider marketing campaign.

Signs that show a person is happy to chat by Treetins

Ticket to talk, another 'talk signal we have used:
it looks like a train ticket but is an invitation to talk to strangers.

The 'Talk to me' badge, the initial talking signal we used.

Recommendation 5: Create groups and events for people to meet

Most initiatives that we have talked to in this 'talking to strangers' space try to tackle this issue by creating groups and spaces where people can meet for the first time. Meetup is obviously the biggest example of this with over 20 million members. Couch-surfing, where people offer to share their houses with travelers as well as meeting up for coffee or a chat is also a very popular way for strangers to meet.

Here are some of our favourite examples:

Tea with Strangers - an initiative which started in San Francisco and allows people to meet up to have tea and a chat which since launching only a few years ago is now active in over 15 cities [50]

Conversations New York - curates and publicises over 1,000 conversations taking place in New York each year and encourages people to host meaningful conversations [51]

Oxford Muse Conversation Dinners - bring two strangers together over dinner, accompanied by a 'Menu of Conversation' that contains conversation starters on different topics [52]

Others include: Kawaa, City Socialiser, Free Convo, Conversation Dinners, Conversation Cafes, Socrates Cafes, Cafe Philos, Death Cafes etc. And these are just the groups which focus on talking! These groups tend to run activities that often follow quite simple formats that can be easily replicated by others, which makes it easy for people to replicate in different places. Tea with Strangers is a great example of this.

Conversations at Conversations New York

We've also seen groups that use a different focus than talking, but also aim to create community by bringing strangers together. We've tried to get people to talk to strangers in many ways -- from a pub quiz where you're placed in teams with people you don't know to drinks events where we have 'conversation cards' that prompt people to talk. And whilst some of these have been a great success, what we've learned is that it can be hard to sell conversation - people aren't always looking for it and in big cities it can be hard to be seen amongst the mountain of other events going on. Where we have seen it work and sort of 'accidentally' done is in groups that focus around other initiatives: food and sport are great examples.

With food we've seen ideas such as community cafes, Food Cycle which encourages people to cook and eat together, using food which would have otherwise gone to waste.

In the area of sport, we've seen the emergence of new sports clubs which bring people together around sport. Project Awesome in London is one great example of this: a free initiative where people meet and run together but are also welcomed into the fold and quite easily make friends. Good Gym, which enables people to get fit while doing good in their area, has also been successful.

Photo courtesy of Project Awesome

Whilst these various groups are part of the solution, we mustn't think of them as the only solution. Their strength is in connecting those who are motivated enough to attend an event and know that they want to talk to people, but unfortunately that's not the vast majority of people. There's also the factor that those who attend the group will form strong ties and so a constant stream of new people is needed to ensure they continue to connect with new people.

Recommendation 6: Use digital solutions to connect people

No report would be complete without looking to the digital world to ask what it can offer. We are increasingly seeing apps that connect people. Bumble has introduced an element that allows people to meet friends [53] and we've seen the emergence of apps such as 'Wiith'. [54] It remains to be seen how successful these digital solutions will be.

From our work in this area we think they may have potential in connecting people to make strong ties and will be especially useful for those who move to a new city. And as John Cacioppo tells us,digital technology can be beneficial if we use it in the right way - to spark face to face connections rather than online ones.

We think we have a way to go before apps like these become the norm, particularly as many people don't know they want connection, and certainly don't go looking for it. But as in the case of internet dating, which also took time to become normalised, there may be the opportunity for apps such as these to have success once our norms around friendship and connection change, and when we start to appreciate that a conversation with a stranger is likely to be a positive one.

Recommendation 7. We need to teach people to talk to strangers

This is perhaps the most controversial topic of them all. After all, haven't we already heard that children are taught not to talk to strangers? But at the same time, evidence has shown that people not knowing how to talk to strangers is a key reason for why they don't.

In this specific area, we have two recommendations.

1. We need to give a more subtle message to children about talking to strangers

The blanket message many children receive is 'Don't talk to strangers.' It seems that although this is an absolute message, it has been successful in encouraging people not to talk, even when they have got older. So how can we alter the message while ensuring that children don't talk to everyone they meet?

Kidsafe Organisation is already doing this. They say that telling children not to talk to strangers is a confusing message, in particular as children have been taught not to be rude. They emphasise that not talking to strangers is not a skill: instead parents should tell children what to do and when to talk to strangers. They advise playing the 'What if' game, where a parent asks what the child would do if they were approached by a stranger who asked for help or offers them a treat [55].

When the child gives the wrong answer, they recommend parents to "Teach your children that adults they do not know should NOT be asking a child for help. They should be asking another adult. It is in situations like this that the children have the right and your parental permission to be rude, and remove themselves from the situation."

Of course, these messages are more complex to put across than the simple 'Do not talk to strangers', but a few conversations like this could alter the child's ability to interact with strangers later on. This will require action from parents and parents organisations.

2. We need to teach talking to strangers as a skill

As mentioned above: being able to interact with strangers is a skill. We believe that in the modern world that skill has often been forgotten, as illustrated in Sherry Turkle's example of the boy who hopes to 'someday hopes to know how to talk to others.'

Can this skill be taught? Of course, like learning any new skill, it needs practice and experience, but we think it can be. We have collaborated with researcher Gillian Sandstrom to run a workshop called 'How to talk to strangers,' which explores the obstacles to talking to strangers, gives helpful tips and gives people time to practice having conversations. When we ran this on Talk to me Day 2015, it was the most popular event, showing that people really did want to know how to start that first encounter. There is a lot more scope out there for similar initiatives. Perhaps, given impact of technology in particular on young people, these kinds of initiatives should take place in schools. In fact, perhaps a combination of a) and b) could provide 'A Complete Guide' to talking to strangers.

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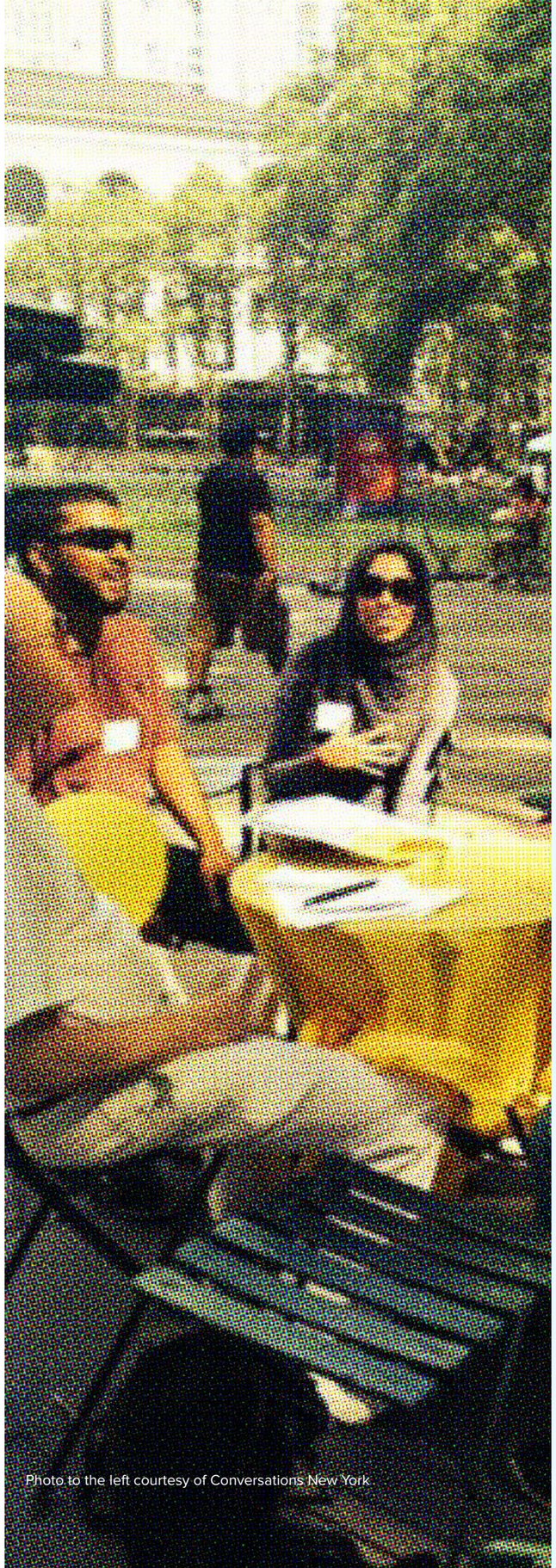

Photo to the left courtesy of Conversations New York

CLOSING REMARKS

Will you talk to strangers after reading this report? We hope that now, your answer might be closer to maybe, or even yes. As we've seen, talking to strangers can create a knock on effect on our connectedness and wellbeing. Yet there are many barriers to break down if we want to encourage strangers to talk to each other. There are factors from our environment that influence us such as globalisation, digital technology, the concept of stranger danger, urban design, a lack of structures that allow us to talk, pluralistic ignorance, and not thinking that talking to strangers will be good for us.

There are also a number of internal factors at play, including not knowing how to start a conversation, being afraid of how a conversation will go, fear of how others will perceive us and fear of how the other person will respond. There may also be other issues that come to mind that we have not recovered in this report. However, as we've seen, there are also many solutions to this issue that are being employed by individuals and organisations to break down these barriers. Architects like Bjarke Ingels are making our physical environment more conducive to interaction, entrepreneurs like Lennart Lajboschitz are building spaces specifically for this purpose, while initiatives like the Big Lunch are challenging people to talk to their neighbours.

Smart signs, like the Talk to me badge or the Treetins flag, are employed to make it easier to recognise people who want to talk, and a whole plethora of groups are bringing together people who are keen to talk to others. Mobile apps have been created - not just for dating but to make friends, while videos like Look Up and Talk to me Day are challenging the norms around talking. Organisations are also suggesting a change in messaging to children about talking to strangers, and workshops teaching the skill of talking to strangers have emerged.

All of the recommendations above are working in different ways to solve this problem. Although they are hugely varied, they have one thing in common: they increase the ability for people to have initial encounters with others. Having a positive talking experience can really change people's minds. As we've seen through Epley & Schroeder's research, those who talk more to strangers are more likely to predict that talking to new people will be a positive experience. Sandstrom's research has also shown that the more people talk to strangers the more they know how to. It seems obvious: the more we know how to start conversations and the more we appreciate how good for us they are, the more we'll attempt to break societal norms and start a conversation.

And that's where interventions should come in. It is not easy to change society: we can't just wave a magic wand to change such entrenched norms. But what we can do, and what every society can do, is to find ways create these first encounters. They may be artificial at first -- prompted by a stunt or an app or a badge, but they will in turn give people greater confidence and more impetus to change people's opinions, which in turn will change society.

with thanks to

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