

# HOW GROUP CHATS RULE THE WORLD

*They quietly became the de facto spaces to share dumb jokes, grief or even plans for an insurrection.*

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[two short excerpts follow]

I am texting all the time. I am, at the very least, receiving texts all the time, a party to conversations in which I am alternately an eavesdropper and an active participant. This is because I am in a lot of group chats — constant, interlinked, text-message-based conversations among multiple friends that happen all day long. I dip into and out of these conversations, on my phone and on my computer. Sometimes I will put both away for two hours and return to find 279 new messages waiting.

Some people might consider this a nightmare, but I am not one of them. I am a person under the age of 30 with a computer job and a Twitter habit (lately, I guess, an X one) who generally prefers to have plans most nights of the week and whose attention has long been divided, if not at times entirely shattered, by the constancy of digital communication. So I am texting the chat.

You might ask: What are we even talking *about*? Well: Someone sends a link to an article, or a life update, or a joke, another joke, a dumber joke, a reading recommendation, a funny photo. There is a heated back-and-forth concerning some controversy online that we are back-channeling about in private, or else something happening in one of our real lives that needs unpacking and cannot wait until we all meet in person. There might be a rundown of a night out. Serious news, easier to give to two or three friends at once, about the decline of a parent's health. A meme about a Bill Simmons podcast. What else do people talk about? Many things, I'm sure, but this is the particular stuff *I* am talking about. The texture of my whole life experience is colored by the sense that I am talking to all my friends, all at once, almost all the time — or at the very least that I could be talking to them all, always, and that if I am not talking to them, then they are talking anyway, without me.

This kind of communication has been technologically possible for decades now, but for much of my lifetime it had to occur in fixed locations (in front of computers) at fixed times (when you were all online; this was back when the idea of being “online” or “offline” still had meaning). Then smartphones smashed that distinction. In 2008, Apple made it possible to text-message multiple people at the same time, moving limited SMS messaging into their iMessage system — essentially conflating “texting” and “messaging,” collapsing group conversation into a single organized chain. Cell carriers and competitors followed, and slowly, over the next decade, the group chat moved from an occasionally convenient tool — say, something your sister might use to blast big news to a large family group — to a ubiquitous social phenomenon.

[...]

To me, the most notable thing about all these group chats is their essential constancy. Types of communication that were once limited by the human capacity for having actual conversations now flow at unprecedented speed, in many directions at once; we are strangely perma-linked to specific subsets of our friends and family, ceaselessly co-processing everything that happens. We feel as if we are endlessly whispering in our friends' ears at a distance. We can pick up the conversation at any time, from anywhere. My brothers and I are not the kind of siblings who keep in daily touch — a phone call from one of them would put me on edge instinctively. Still, every few weeks, one of us might say “siblings check-in” in our shared chat and give a few basic updates. Conversely, my friends Charlotte and Mack and I will spend an hour going back and forth about someone we knew in passing when we all lived in Boston; we will say nothing about ourselves, really, and in fact our dynamic is such that “updates” would feel trite and forced. We are used, instead, to the idea that the conversation can just continue wherever it was we left off, or didn't.

The group chat can sustain indefinitely this thin wire of connectedness. Some might argue that this feeling is a deception, another screen-based way to stave off loneliness; I would say instead that it glows with potential. Because there is no practical end to the group chat, it can be a means of keeping the lights on, constellating a set of people who would otherwise be entirely separate. The nature of the messages is such that they may only require a glance, a quick scroll before you return to whatever you were supposed to be doing. I might let a conversation go and then pick it up again the next week. The conversation in a good group chat sometimes pauses, but it never really dies. And this constancy has consequences that we might not recognize, that stretch beyond the little enclaves that we have created for ourselves.