

How to Create your own #HyperlocalGroup

(companion guide [to the op-ed](#))

READ FIRST

WHO THIS IS FOR: For people who are interested in making their own #hyperlocalgroup during #COVID19.

WHAT: This document provides step-by-step instructions for how to make a #hyperlocalgroup. It's the companion document to [my op-ed where I outlined](#) why we need to go hyperlocal right now with our community networks based on my virtual ethnographic fieldwork with Wuhan based researchers, Shayla Qiu and Reginald Zhu.

THIS IS STILL EMERGENT: The goal of this document is to get you started as quickly as possible. You will need to adapt the instructions and template for your community. I've outlined ways you can do that, but it's up to you to determine the best approach.

MAKE THIS BETTER: After making your group, give feedback for how to improve this process. Contribute your templates for different [group categories](#). I've set up a [Reddit Community](#)¹ for people who are starting (or have started) their own hyperlocal community. We can share practices and ask for advice.

THE COMMUNITY MANAGER IS KEY: We are in an unprecedented time — suddenly, hundreds of millions of people have moved most, if not all, of their communications online. Most of us have never dealt with this kind of situation. A lot of the things that happen organically to build resilient communities in real life require deliberate effort online. And it's the work that's been done by online community managers for a while now. I am not a community manager, but I've researched online communities and spoken to dozens of experts over the years. One thing I've learned is that it's a thankless but rewarding role to play. It requires a lot of humility and self-reflection as your actions shape public discourse.

Please DM me on [twitter](#) for how this document can be improved or for questions.

Thank you to all the people who provided their thoughtful edits: [J Khadijah Abdurahman](#), [Lauence Berland](#), [Seiji Carpenter](#), [Samuel Curtis](#), [Matthew Block](#). Thank you to the Los Angeles #HyperLocalGroup moderated by [Elizabeth Stewart](#) and [Baratunde Thurston](#) for the iterations on the [group document template](#).

¹ I decided to go with Reddit as I wanted to have an open space where people can ask and answer questions without me being the gatekeeper.

WHAT DO I DO NOW?

1. Read the [FAQ](#) below before you get started.

2. Decide on the type of #HyperLocalGroup.

a. [Categories of groups.](#)

3. Start your group

a. [Step-by-step instructions.](#)

4. Iterate and give feedback.

- Please DM me on [twitter](#) on how to improve this document or [join our subreddit](#)
- We also need instructions for other [categories of groups.](#)

5. Join the #HyperlocalGroup Mod community

- Running a group means hard moments and questions will arise. Get your questions answered, share your experiences with other [#HyperLocalGroup moderators on our subreddit.](#)
- And if you're thinking about making your own group but want to ask questions first, come and ask away.

FAQs

What do I need to consider before starting a group? I want to be thoughtful and deliberate about it.

Adapt this to your community. You will need to adjust the language, tone, and community moderation practices depending on your group. The norms and guidelines will change between groups with coworkers, neighbors you may not have ever spoken to before, and people who are spread out.

Note that it's impossible to be totally prepared from the get-go! Thus, I always have this point in guidelines: "An understanding that all things are emergent from process and moderation - we're figuring this out as we go along." Don't become paralyzed in the thought process of answering these questions, but don't be thoughtless either!

Here are some things to consider:

- How do people know each other?
- How will you (the community moderator) keep people's information safe, keep people safe?
- How will you (the community moderator) ensure that no one unsafe, no one spreading misinformation or stealing information enters into the group?
- What is their experience with participating in online communities?
- What would be the ideal geographic scope and density of your local group to most effectively address the group's primary need[s] and purpose[s]?
 - ◆ How do you want to geographically bound your network? How dense? (this question should be answered not in the abstract, but in relation to the specific need and purpose of the group)
- How do you set an example of desired interactions for the group members?
- How diverse is your network?
 - ◆ How neurodiverse is your network? (Are there dyslexic members or people with language-based disabilities who need more support in the doc via images?)
 - ◆ Are they at-risk or marginalized? (If so, you will have to adapt how much PII is shared in the google doc, also ensure communications platform is safe enough)
 - ◆ What are the specific categories of risk? Risk plays out very differently in the opportunities and constraints for communication and organizing, such as:
 - immediate legal risk - i.e. undocumented/asylum seekers, etc.
 - financial risk - i.e. homeless, food insecure, etc.
 - health risk i.e. elderly or immunocompromised, etc.
- What is the age range of the participants?
- How will you handle and support traumatic disclosures?
- How will you protect members from police, child services or ICE from being added?
- Who will be your backup moderator if you get sick or become unable to run the group for any other reason?

What are the different kinds of hyperlocal community groups?

There are different types of hyperlocal community networks. Some examples are below. (Note: that this is not an exhaustive list. The commonality in all of these groups is that they are limited to a predetermined geographic range.)

Note that each type of group will require different styles of moderation, culture, tone, norms, and practices.

- A. **Neighbors Group** - A neighborhood based group of just the block - invite every single household (here is a template for how to find people). This is what China's hyperlocal community network were compromised of--neighbors who didn't know each other. Eventually some people became friends and formed subgroups formed that looked more like B, based on common interests and goals.
- B. **Friends Group** - All known contacts - friends can invite friends, not the random Tinder date or Neighbor. (This is the one I created in Brooklyn and have explained in these instructions)
- C. **Friends and Neighbor Group** - A mix of A + B
- D. **Work Colleagues** - your work colleagues bounded to a geographic limit
- E. **Civic Life Groups** -affinity groups, places of worship, sports leagues, political organizing, hometown associations

So what assumptions did you make about the people you invited?

We will all make some assumptions/givens about the groups we make. Based on the type of #hyperlocalgroup I created, which was a friends based network (not a pure neighbors network) I made several "assumptions" about the people I invited. I want to be explicit about the assumptions I made because we all have to make them regardless of the groups we create.

- a. have a smartphone
- b. have use of their hands (or the ability to communicate through an app)
- c. are sighted (or are otherwise able to communicate through an app that is accessible "screen readers")
- d. are literate
- e. speak a common language
- f. have or can download Whatsapp or similar platform (if they don't have access to tech, [read this](#))
- g. are not in an undocumented or marginalized situation (take greater precautions on sharing any personally identifiable information (PII) if you do)

Again, the baseline criterion for your group will be different because of the context you're in.

What happens if someone doesn't have access to technology like the internet or a smartphone?

Adapt the solution to the circumstances. It's not about the tech, it's about the design of the network and realizing that you can design solutions to work offline or in any circumstances. That is the power of design! You can help a neighbor who doesn't have access to a smartphone to use the group as a resource on their behalf. For example, the group can assign volunteers to take turns checking on that neighbor by knocking on their door. My colleagues once told me a story of an elderly woman, without a smartphone, who told her neighbor that she'd run out of food. The neighbor posted to the *xiao qu* group and her neighbors gave her a portion of their food. From then on, that neighbor checked on the elderly woman everyday.

What are some watchouts?

Do not make other people admins.
Keep the group closed.
Don't share the group link, add people directly.

Why do you urge for the Hyperlocal groups to be closed and invite only/?

It is highly complex to bring people together to interact within the culture you're building and to build resilience in the culture to direct the community in the right way. Therefore one specific thing is make the group joinable by anyone who has a link. Open links can be passed around out of your control. And if a bad actor were to join your group and you have vulnerable people in it, then that is a risk. For example, in Whatsapp if you just share the group link, a person can join directly. To keep the group trust high and the relationships protected, people should not be just allowed to join without you knowing who they are and without some kind of vetting process. For example for neighborhood based groups, you need to make sure they are an actual neighbor and not someone's relative who lives in another part of town. If you have a friends group, you need to make sure whoever they suggest to bring is a friend of theirs.

But I believe that the internet should be open, is it really that important to close the group?

Making these groups private may seem unintuitive to those who have spent the last 20 years of the internet with the notion that "information wants to be free" and should be open to all. But that's a very simple way to think about privacy and intention. We see all the ways that breaks down, such as when people have different aims or when people are bad actors or when people are looking to exploit terms of service. Simple, open networks isn't a reflection of our lived reality because of misinformation, surveillance capitalism, and trolling. The purpose of the #hyperlocalgroup is to protect the relationships in real life. The hypothesis here is to start with a controlled group and grow it slowly, and not start with an open group. When there are existing relationships, it's easier for those real life relationships to map to a virtual space versus bringing in people who you don't have a relationship with as the potential for clashes are much higher.

Can I add people who are outside of the local proximity of my neighborhood? My mom or BFF who lives in another part of the town or the state wants to see what i'm up to.

No. To develop trust, everyone needs to know everyone. Do not let another moderator join, your mom, or even a friend join if they don't conform to the purpose and local geography you've set for the group. All members must be known people in the area you've defined. Besides developing trust, you need to also protect the group from possible misinformation or leakage of information from your group. This is why in the [google template](#) there is an introductions section. People must know who else is in the group otherwise they won't be comfortable interacting.

How big can groups be?

The size of the group really depends on your context. The group size could be as little as 3 people. Technically, Whatsapp allows 259 people via direct add by the admin, but then people can still join through the invite link (but no one else should have the link but you, the admin, here's why). But you really should keep the group as small and tight-knit as possible and let it grow organically. Let the size of the group reflect the depth of friendship/neighborship you have IRL.

What should I name my group?

The most important thing is that the group name has meaning for the participants, and meaning for other groups. It could include a geographic identifier somehow (for the other groups to know where this group is located), but can have an additional (simple) name that has significance for the people who are committing to each other in the group (like an institutional name or a name that indicates their core function/purpose). It could be also a nickname that only your friends or neighbors know about. Whatever you do, be sure to give it a name that doesn't misrepresent as a public group. Also don't do what I did which was calling my group "Brooklyn Survives the Virus." I realized it sounded from apocalyptic and it's not a name that generates and inspires peace. So I don't want to look at it everyday, then neither do others. I also added several emojis to our group name.

How do I decide what kind of group to make?

You can make any kind that you'd like. This [section](#) helps you think through the types of groups. Start with the group that is most easily local to you. I happen to have friends who live locally, so that was the simplest group for me to make. I don't know if I have the capacity now to make another just local neighbors' groups, so I'm hoping someone else on my block will take that on. Community moderation takes a lot of effort and time, don't overwhelm yourself. There's nothing worse than starting a group and not giving it the attention it deserves. It's hard to get a second chance at re-wrangling people if you lose trust with them the first time around by creating a group and not nurturing it properly.

How do I decide which messaging platform to use?

There is no single best platform. Choose the one that is best for your networks - the most commonly and widely used. What to consider when choosing the platform.

1. How widely used is it already?
2. How easy is it to use?
3. How secure is it?
4. Does it support Android and IOS?
5. Does it support screen-reading technology for the blind?
6. Is it open source?

I arrived at WhatsApp as the best platform for me. Other platforms to consider: Slack, Signal, Facebook groups, iMessage, Telegram.

Why do you suggest below to shorten the url of the Google document?

The full url of the Google document is too long. Shortening the URL makes it easier to remember and to type in. I put the google document in the Whatsapp description so that people can always easily find the document. Also I used [bit.ly](#) out of habit, not because they are the best. Another shortener is [smarturl](#) that other group moderators like to use because it lets you pass through the fragment-- meaning if you need to jump to the specific section, it will shorten the link to direct people to particular parts of the doc.

Why do you ask people to introduce themselves in a [Google document](#)?

People need to know who else is in the community. Personal relationships are what keeps networks trustworthy. By having intros in the [template](#), anyone who joins afterwards can see the history and we are all more open to sharing when we know who is in the group. If you have vulnerable populations in your group, consider what kind of personally identifiable information (PII) you ask for. You may want to make PII optional or you may not ask for any PII. In my community, I prioritized asking for people's cross streets so that we could find the closest person next to them when they are in need. You need to figure out what's best for your community.

What should I be aware of as the group size grows?

Participation evolves in ways that you might have dismissed, such as people staying silent. Participation can look like reading. It can look like invisible upvoting since whatsapp doesn't have that feature. What you had in mind in the beginning as "participation" will shift.

How does my role as the community manager change as the group evolves?

I asked community management expert [Kenyatta Cheese](#) this question and this is his response: "Your role as the group moderator changes too. As your group grows, other people will take over the group moderator's job of checking in on other members, paying attention to their stories, and modeling behavior. Once they can do it themselves, this is what allows the community to scale, it no longer relies on just you to continue its existence. It's quite zen in fact. You scale a community by getting members of a community to start moderating on their own. Essentially, your role should move into the background or even better upwards, which means you start finding ways to build larger strategies into your community."

What are some best practices based on what you've seen in Wuhan, China and your own hyperlocal online community?

Community Management is Key.

Most of the time, the person who creates the group assumes the responsibility of being the community manager. If this role falls to you, take it seriously. Your job is to maintain high levels of trust among members, which can be challenging but is absolutely vital to the group's success. The community manager is accountable for setting tone and energy, modeling behavior, and creating norms that define the group. The community manager should also be the official group admin so that only one person can add new members or remove people from the group. In China, the community manager often was the main contact for placing supermarket deliveries, the point-person or project manager for coordinating group efforts.

Keep It Local.

Hyper-proximity is crucial, so set a small geographic range for your network. In Brooklyn, where most people don't have cars, I set it to three miles. But in the Los Angeles group, the range is 15 miles. In Wuhan, the xiao qu worked because people could literally take elevators up or walk over to offer help. Consider factors that make sense in your own area and culture, but try to keep the range tight. You want the group to be physically close and share knowledge of the neighborhood.

Set Guidelines.

When you bring together a group of people who don't know each other, setting guidelines helps create comfort and unity. Use guidelines to set expectations for the tone, create trust among members, and encourage beneficial practices within the community. Before someone joins my group, I ask them to agree to the guidelines. I also make it clear that moderation and guidelines will be in flux since our shared situation is so fluid. In China, groups didn't have explicit guidelines, but informal rules were enforced by the network modeling preferred behaviors. For instance, if someone mentioned a piece of news, the group members would remind them to include links to verify information.

Create An Introduction Protocol.

Another key to promoting group trust is to create a structured way to introduce new members. When I invite someone to my group, I always introduce them in a group message, and then ask them to say hi and share a bit about themselves. When someone who is already a group member wants to invite a new person, I ask the established group member to introduce their contact. This sets up a structure that removes me as the central node and distributes responsibility.

Share Information In One Document.

I created a [shared Google document](#) to house all of the crucial information about my group, including group purpose, guidelines, and introductions. I also included links to important resources such as COVID-19 statistical dashboards, advice on working remotely, and health tips. Recently, I added a new section—inspired by [Elizabeth Stewart's](#) and [Baratunde Thurston's](#) Los Angeles group's document— on Tech Tips for Whatsapp. When I noticed that new people were asking questions we'd already addressed, I created a new section, "What's Been Discussed" where I summarized commonly discussed themes. Keep this document "living", meaning be clear to group members that this document will evolve to reflect the group's needs.

Find A Decent Platform.

I chose Whatsapp for our group because I wanted a mobile-first app that operated seamlessly for Android or IOS users, and one that was widely used. While security is important to me, I prioritized popularity of use, which ruled out Signal. Consider how tech-savvy your neighbors are and which platforms they know before selecting your mode of communication. If you aren't sure, you can do an initial survey by asking people what they use to ensure that you're building off of existing practices. If you create a group but no one uses it, it won't serve its purpose. Generally, stick with making decisions on existing human behavior as opposed to introducing new ones and forcing people to adjust to a new or less used tech platform.

1. Starting the Group on Whatsapp

1. Create a Whatsapp Group and give it a name ([FAQ - how to think about your name](#)).

- a. Do not make other contacts an admin.
Here's the explanation in the [FAQ](#).
- b. Do not share the group link with anyone.
Here's the explanation in the [FAQ](#).

2. Create a google document.

Here's a [template](#).

3. Write your group purpose and your contact info as the group moderator.

Fill out the rest of the [template's](#) Guidelines, your intro, and etc

- a. In your group purpose, mention that this an invite only group. ([FAQ - why groups needs to be closed](#)).

4. Shorten the url of your google document.

Customize the shortened link so that it's easy to remember. The [FAQ explains why](#) this is important to do.

5. Change the [google template](#) share setting.

Make it possible to that "Anyone with the link" has access to it, which is different from "Public on the web" where it's indexable and searchable ([instructions](#)).

If you have at risk populations, then make the document invitation only, but note that they can only access it if they are logged into their gmail accounts.

6. Put your purpose (or a shortened version of it) in Whatsapp.

Be sure it includes a link to the shortened URL of the [group's google document](#).

7. Invite people.

Your invitation process will depend on the type of group you've created.

Below is a list of types of groups ([more detailed explanation of the groups](#)).

- a. FOR NOW I have only included a template for Version B - the Friends Group as that is the group I started in Brooklyn as I happen to have friends who live within walking distance of me. Please share your templates as you create different types of groups.



Local Brooklyn Peeps 🌈🍷📺

Creado el 12/3/2020 a la(s) 3:57 p. m.

Descripción

This group is for us BK peeps who live within a few blocks to ~3 mile radius to support and help each other through this 🦠

The google document has guidelines, intros to who is in this group, commonly discussed questions/conversations, subgroups to join, links to resources, and instructions on how to invite friends.

➡ <http://bit.ly/> [REDACTED]

TEMPLATE FOR THE GROUP ([explanation here of the groups](#))

A. Neighbors Group

- a. SUBMIT YOUR TEMPLATE (for now use [my instructions](#) and adjust it for your group)

B. Friends Group -

- a. [TRICIA'S INSTRUCTIONS](#)

C. Friends and Neighbor Group - A mix of A + B

D. Work Colleagues - your work colleagues bounded to a geographic limit

E. Civic Life Groups -affinity groups, places of worship, sports leagues, political organizing, hometown associations