

OUR DIGITAL DIVIDE

Should Volunteers go social media? A Moldova blogger asks

David Jarmul

When Ken Whiting was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Micronesia in 1969-1972, he had no “access to any communication for weeks at a time. The only way to communicate to friends and family was by mail—and I only received mail every few weeks.” In the evenings, he and his village neighbors “would talk for hours.”

I remember that feeling, too, as do thousands of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers who served years ago. We were vastly less connected than Volunteers today who have smart phones, laptops, maybe even a Netflix subscription. When I served in Nepal in the late 1970s, I’d mail aerograms home and wait a month for a response. I didn’t make a single phone call. The internet didn’t exist.

Now I’m serving again, this time in Moldova. In addition to my iPhone and laptop, I have a Kindle and a portable wi-fi router. I watch YouTube. I Skype with my grandkids. I love my gadgets but I do wonder sometimes whether their impact on my Peace Corps service is entirely positive. Am I spending too much time online and not enough with my neighbors?

I explored this question on my blog, notexactlyretired.com, and was amazed by the response it elicited from both returned and current Volunteers. It turns out a lot of us have been thinking about this.

Some Returned Peace Corps Volunteers responded with their own memories of isolation. Scott Lee, who served in Liberia from 1983 to 1985, was “forced to deal with being cut off and grapple with the fact that I had to find a new path and discover my inner strength.” Beth Egan, who served in Yemen 1979-1981, recalls “it took six weeks to get a letter from home. I spent a lot of time with the Yemenis and treasure my memories.”

Climbing termite mounds

Some newer Volunteers told similar stories, too. Ben Welna, who recently completed his Tanzania service, had “a smartphone, slow-slow 2 gigabytes, a long walk to buy phone credit and unreliable electricity. Sometimes when I was lonely, I’d look at the frozen Facebook feed saved on my phone, a 21st-century equivalent to listening to static on the radio.”

Madeline Moore, who served in Zambia a few years ago, would ride her bicycle 10 miles “to a large termite mound, climb up it and wave my phone above my head until I got signal enough to send a text message or (if I was lucky) make a quick phone call. My second year we got decent cell service in my village.”

“Social media takes you out of the moment,” he writes. “It takes you out of the here and now and connects you somewhere else into an artificial online community which is not where you need to be or where you’re supposed to be as a PCV. Being on Facebook is a distinct disadvantage to a Peace Corps volunteer whose primary job is to integrate into his real community.”

Former Uganda Volunteer Lynne McDermott called many of today’s Volunteers “way over-connected,” recalling one Volunteer whose mother Skypes her every night. “Her mom needs to have her own Peace Corps experience,” Lynne said.

“Many parents of PCVs these days hover too much,” agreed Rob Carr, a former Liberia volunteer who described current



Madeline Moore shells corn with neighbors before a child nutrition workshop in her Zambia village.

The trend toward new technology is clear, though, and some of my RPCV friends wonder whether it’s a good thing. “Contrary to what a lot of people might claim about social media connecting them to the rest of the world, it does exactly the opposite,” wrote Peter Giaquinta, who served in Nepal in the late 1980s.

Peace Corps staff “who get calls from parents if they do not get FaceTime or chat for a few days. A week is a 3-alarm panic.”

Surrounded by smart phones

Still, when I look around my office or bus stop in Moldova, I’m not the only person with a smart phone. They are

omnipresent, and not only in eastern Europe. “Yes, some volunteers are too distracted with modern gadgets and such,” wrote Craig Chavis Jr., who recently completed his Peace Corps service in Peru, “but Peace Corps could not proceed the way it used to with today’s current laws, generational lifestyles and expectations.”

“Social media and cell phones are pretty much everywhere and being used by people of all ages the world over,” agreed another recent returnee, Mark Largess, who served in Kazakhstan. “We can’t have Peace Corps with volunteers ‘off the grid’

THEN AND NOW

Sara Feldman says she is “in the fortunate position of having experienced both extremes. As a Peace Corps Volunteer on outer islands of Yap (Micronesia) in the early 1980s, I had no electricity and no communication with the outside world for months at a time, other than a shortwave radio net that we used once a week and was confined to islands in Yap. Letters came every three or four months or so on a ship. I’d answer them and send them on the next ship three months later.

“Now, at the other end of my career, I just finished two years as a 50+ Peace Corps Volunteer in Georgia. I served in a medium-sized city and had reasonably good Internet access the entire time, both at work and at home. I used Facebook, watched TV and movies, sent emails, kept a blog ... I was very connected. I never felt it impeded my integration or work within the country. In fact, I would say that my work here was much more successful than when I was in Yap.

“While there’s no doubt some volunteers may immerse themselves in the e-world to their detriment, I think most volunteers use it as both a support system and a tool to further Peace Corps’ third goal, via blogs, Facebook and many other platforms. To me, the sole thing is the work. If you are doing good work and having success, then as far as I’m concerned you can look at Facebook all you want because obviously you are doing something right. I’m not gonna judge.”

like in the 1970s, because the world as a whole, especially the developing world, is simply not like that any more.”

Being connected, moreover, doesn’t necessarily mean ignoring your neighbors. A fellow volunteer in Moldova, Sarah Haas, said, “I spend a lot of time hanging out with locals and conversing. While I chat with friends at home, I know I need friends here. Face time is different than FaceTime. I need the human interaction face to face.”

And as for volunteers isolating themselves from their neighbors, well, I remember seeing that in Nepal long before anyone had a smart phone. “Put it this way: The guy or girl on Facebook instead of talking to their neighbors in the shade is the same guy or girl 20+ years ago, holed up with paperbacks and rambling letters instead of talking to their neighbors in the shade,” wrote Ronald Meyer, who served with his wife in Tanzania.

Yes, new technology may compound the problem. “If I had social media back then, I was such an introvert and very homesick, I would probably not have connected well with my host family or village and probably would have ET’d,” said Mary Beth Cox, who served in Togo 1999-2001, a sentiment that others echoed.

Doing the job

But social media and other new technology are now unavoidable, and I see every day how volunteers are using them to speed development. Peace Corps Volunteers and their partners around the world can now download lesson plans, research HIV programs and help women entrepreneurs find new markets.

“Life is what it is,” says Barbara Corrigan, who served with her husband in Morocco from 2013 to 2015. “Younger PCVs aren’t joining Peace Corps for reasons that are any different than pioneer PCVs, but communication has completely been transformed. Today’s Volunteers come with the usual passion and technological know-how, which is great for their communities.”

Personally, I think Volunteers have no choice but to embrace new technology—

Madeline Moore rode her bike 10 miles to hike up a small termite mound ‘and wave my phone above my head until I got signal enough to send a text message...’ The next year her Zambia village received cell phone service.

and should be supported in doing so regardless of whether some of my fellow old-timers prefer aerograms and shortwave radios. I agree with Paul Box, a Tanzania returnee who said “Social media and constant connection make for a different experience than what we older Volunteers had, but that’s the reality of today. The job is to be the most effective and best possible Volunteer you can be in 2017, not to replicate what people did in 1985 or 1965.”

I also agree with Mark Largess, who said, “Peace Corps isn’t a camping trip or a spiritual retreat. Anything that helps PCVs to deal with the world as it is should be encouraged, with thought put in to proper guidelines for use.”

My favorite answer came from Steve Bennett, who served in Kenya a decade ago: “I think we should be careful when comparing service and experience; everyone’s experience is their own and should, in some ways, stand on its own merits. I’d hate to bemoan advancements in other countries simply because we don’t get the experience we wanted. There is something oddly very Western and very privileged about going to another region of the world that probably at this point uses technology and saying, ‘I’m not going to use it so I can get the real experience.’ The world is progressing. Go with it.”



David Jarmul was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal from 1977 to 1979 and is currently serving again with his wife, Champa, in the Republic of Moldova.

This article is derived from posts on his blog, *notexactlyretired.com*, and related conversations on Facebook.