

IT STARTED with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the anodyne [casual game](#) where you are on an island populated by cute, talking animals. You can go fishing for bits and bobs, or try out other gentle activities like fossil collecting, shopping and chatting with your friends. Released for the Nintendo Switch in March, just as the coronavirus was spreading across the world, it became an enormous hit and continues to be a cultural obsession.

Shoot-em-all games like [Fortnite](#) are still popular during what some Californians are calling “the ronnie times”, but *Animal Crossing* is the clear winner in the war to distract us from death and politics. This game is the apotheosis of fluffy. It also offers a comforting dose of nostalgia – kids who grew up playing the early-2000s titles in the series are now adults who really don’t want to think about how their jobs are disappearing.

As the pandemic encroaches on every part of our lives, from schooling to elections, the [hunt for internet fluff](#) has reached fever pitch. The most recent example is the [strawberry dress](#) created by New York designer Lirika Matoshi to look like a pink cloud of strawberry studded candyfloss. People are obsessing over the dress on Instagram and TikTok, taking selfies in it and even sewing their own versions. Wearing it makes them feel like fairy princesses hiding away in flowery castle gardens – rather than disease-fearing moderns in hot, lonely city flats.

This is truly the era of the [“wholesome meme”](#). Online entertainment has become like *The Great British Bake Off*, with conflict reduced to fears about the structural integrity of sugary toppings. The original *Bake Off* presenters, Sue Perkins and Mel Giedroyc, have even managed to make assassination wholesome in their delightful new series *Hitmen*.

In the US, psychologists are calling this phenomenon [toxic positivity](#). We are acting like we can cure any ill with aggressive optimism. Sadly, this urge to cheer up can make us more unhappy – and unprepared for the inevitable setbacks to come. That doesn’t mean we should shut down our computers. Instead, we could embrace a very different class of wholesome meme that was viral back when people were playing the original *Animal Crossing* almost 20 years ago. I’m talking about the netizenship meme.

### **“Netizenship and fluff seeking online both reflect an urge to turn to the internet for comfort and support”**

Popularised by a young internet theorist named Michael Hauben in the mid-1990s, the term netizen referred to people on early forums and chat rooms who became actively engaged in their communities. Hauben believed that the world was on the brink of recognising a new kind of citizenship, global in scope, where people could form political alliances that had nothing to do with nationalism, traditional party systems and the old bureaucratic ways.

Though he died in 2001 at the age of 28, Hauben’s ideas stayed relevant in the noughts and teens. Researchers like Zeynep Tufekci and Molly Sauter took the notion of netizenship in new directions, exploring “networked protests” in Turkey and digital activism in electoral politics.

What Hauben couldn’t have foreseen was the degree to which nation states would get involved in online politics: surveilling protesters, arresting people who liked allegedly subversive topics on Facebook and shutting down access to platforms like TikTok when it suited them. Not exactly wholesome.

That is why it is time to reinvent the idea of the netizen, an upstanding citizen of the internet, for the twenties. We may be restrained by what our nations do to us online, but we are also part of larger,

international communities on social media. We are helping each other out with apps such as GoFundMe, like good neighbours. Now it is time to act as netizens to solve global issues like election meddling and misinformation about the pandemic.

Two internet companies that own platforms where good citizenship really matters are Google and Facebook. They are wealthier than many nations and arguably wield as much power. What sets them apart from other corporations is that their status comes directly from the content their users put into them – just the way nations' wealth can come from the people who live within their borders.

In a sense, netizenship goes hand-in-hand with fluff seeking online. Both are wholesome memes that reflect an urge to turn to the internet for comfort and support. The difference is that netizenship demands that internet companies give us more than escapism. We also need rights and protections. We deserve accountability from the corporations whose products are built on our shared personal information and public debates.

Put another way: come to the internet for the cute bunnies, but stay for the growing body politic.

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