

Place-Based and IT Mediated “Community”

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Neighborhoods and whole cities are increasingly being designed with a broadband telecommunications infrastructure that provides access to the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) (for example CityPlace, Toronto, Canada; Arabianranta, Helsinki, Finland; Kenniswijk, Eindhoven, the Netherlands; and Playa Vista, California, U.S.A.). This access has ignited a debate into the nature of community and the effects of cyberspace on social relationships. On the one side, technological dystopians argue that in an information society where work, leisure and social ties are all maintained from the “smart house,” people could completely reject the need for social relationships based on physical location. While on the other side, technological utopians argue that the Internet has created a whole new form of community, the “virtual community,” which frees the individual from the restraints of geography and social characteristics like gender, race, and ethnicity. What this “either or debate,” arguing community either to be lost or recreated, fails to recognize, is that community has long been freed from geography, and that new ICTs may hold as much promise of reconnecting us to communities of place as they do in liberating us from them.

For the most part, “community” still refers to neighborhood. Yet most of the social support, and much of the information and resources that people require to function in their day-to-day lives, comes from sources outside of the local setting (Fischer 1982; Wellman Carrington and Hall 1988). Cities are extremely heterogeneous, residents are highly mobile, and people regularly come in contact with diverse others in a variety of social settings. As suggested by Fischer (1975) in his “subcultural theory,” individuals in an urban environment are not limited to those who are close at hand, but seek out social ties based on shared interest and mutual identification. While this does not exclude the possibility that people can form social ties based on shared place, it does suggest that similarity of interest is more important in forming relations than similarity of setting. When one defines communities as sets of informal ties of sociability, support and identity, they are rarely neighborhood solidarities or even densely-knit groups of kin and friends. Communities consist of far-flung kinship, workplace, interest group and neighborhood ties that together form a social network that provides aid, support, social control and links to multiple milieus. Within these personal communities people use multiple methods of communication: direct in-person contact, telephone, postal mail, and more recently fax, email, chats, and email discussion groups. Looking for community in one place at one time (be it in neighborhoods or in cyberspace) is an inadequate means of revealing supportive community relations. Indeed, “community without propinquity” is hardly a new concept, but it is one that is often neglected (Webber 1963).

The creation of a whole new type of community, the “virtual community,” has done much to highlight the potential for communities to form beyond the confines of geographic space (Rheingold 1993). Technological utopians have found community in cyberspace. Largely anecdotal evidence emphasizes the ability of computer networks to connect people across time and space in strong supportive relationships, blindly extending beyond characteristics of ethnicity, religion or

national origin. As Phil Patton proclaimed: “Computer-mediated communication . . . will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a ‘vehicle’ and yet not detach us from the rest of the world” (1986: 20).

On the other side of the debate, critics of new ICTs argue that the Internet contributes to an incomplete lifestyle, which they see as a consequence of turning away from the full range of in-person contacts believed to be a part of our daily lives. As Paul Saffo, Director of the Institute for the Future remarks:

Another danger of a technologically bound culture is a fraying of the bonds that bind us. Whether it's a cellphone glued to the ear or enough Web sites and newsgroups to satisfy every possible taste and interest, we see less and less opportunity for shared experience as we each pigeon-hole ourselves into separate worlds of interests. Do we care, or have the time to know our neighbours anymore? (Nelson 1997).

In a longitudinal study of new Internet and computer users in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Kraut, Lundmark, Patterson, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) concluded that home-based Internet use displaces time previously spent on more social activities. “Greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants’ communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circles, and increases in their depression and loneliness” (Kraut et al. 1998). Similarly, Nie and Erbring (2000), in a study of 2,035 existing Internet users who use WebTV, reported a relationship between increased time spent online, and decreased attendance at social events and in visiting and telephoning friends and relatives. They concluded that “the more hours people use the Internet, the less time they spend in contact with real human beings,” and that “the Internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities even more than did automobiles and television before it” (as quoted in O’Toole 2000).

The biggest concern with the findings of Kraut et al. (1998), Nie and Erbring (2000), and other dystopians, is their tendency to privilege the Internet as a social system removed from the other ways people communicate. The study of cyberspace has largely maintained the frame of “community” as something that is physically bounded, by geographies of bites and bytes, if not by streets and alleyways. While the “social presence” (Short, Williams and Christie 1976) and “media richness” (Daft and Lengel 1986) of CMC may mean the exchange of fewer social cues than with in-person interactions, there is little doubt that CMC can be used in the maintenance of community relations and in the exchange of aid and support (for example see Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998). It is impossible to determine if the size of peoples' social networks in Kraut et al. (1998), or the frequency of contact in Nie and Erbring (2000), decreased as a result of Internet use, or if the use of CMC allowed people to shift the maintenance of social ties to a new communication medium. Alternatively, the Internet may even allow people to reinvest time spent on in-person or telephone contact to maintain a greater number of social network members online, as was the case with the adoption of the telephone (Fischer 1992). Peering into cyberspace and ignoring the network of social relations that extended to other social settings, fails to consider the crosscutting nature of community, including the many ways and the many places people interact. Online relationships should not be treated as entities in themselves as if existing social networks and existing means of communication did not exist.

Research that accepts CMC as a form of communication that can be used in the formation and maintenance of social relations has generally concluded with more optimism (for example see Rainie 2000; Cole 2000). Survey and ethnographic data from the long-term study of “Netville” suggests that CMC builds community, in the form of community involvement and in the expansion and strengthening of social networks (Hampton 2001). Netville was one of the first residential

developments in the North America to be built from the ground up with a broadband high-speed local network. Netville residents had access to services that included: high speed Internet access (10 Mbps), a videophone, an online jukebox, online health services, local discussion forums, and a series of online entertainment and educational applications. The “wired” residents of Netville were compared with a similar group of non-wired residents who lived in the same neighborhood, but who were never connected to the local computer network. In a situation where there was near ubiquitous access to CMC, Internet use encouraged visiting, surveillance, neighbor recognition, collective action and the maintenance of local social ties (Hampton 2001). There was no indication that Internet use inhibited or substituted for other forms of social contact. Contact lead to contact, CMC encouraged additional social contact through multiple means of communication: online, in-person and over the telephone.

One of the most startling findings of the Netville study was the extent to which ICTs encouraged the formation of local community. Compared to non-wired residents, wired Netville residents recognized three times as many of their neighbors, talked to those neighbors twice as often, visited 50 percent more often, called them on the phone four times as often, and further boosted their local communication through the use of email (Hampton 2001; Hampton and Wellman 2002). As previously discussed, strong supportive community relations exist in the urban setting, but they generally are not neighborhood based. On average, most North Americans have few strong ties at the neighborhood level (Wellman 1979; Fischer 1982; Putnam 2000). In Netville, not only did ICTs build community, but they encouraged it where intuitively it was least expected, at the neighborhood level. Why were neighborhood based social relations amplified in Netville as a result of access to a series of ICTs? The answer relates back to our understanding about the formation of social ties in the urban setting.

Fischer (1975) argues that the existence of diverse subcultures in the urban environment allows people to place similarity of interest over similarity of setting in selecting social ties. I argue that the availability of a large, diverse urban population, and more recently a large, diverse online population, with subcultures matching every interest, is only part of the explanation as to why people tend to develop few strong neighborhood ties. Access is equally as important as social similarity in determining the likelihood of tie formation. Homophily, the tendency for people to associate with similar others, has as much to do with a preference for tie formation with people who are socially similar as it does with a tendency for people to meet others while participating in activities that tend to attract homogeneous sets of people (Feld 1982). If people are given the opportunity to interact and exchange information in the local setting, they are more likely to form local social ties of all strengths.

Use of ICTs to facilitate the exchange of information, communication, and other resources at the neighborhood level encourages place-based community. This expectation is supported by research on neighborhood common space. Research into urban design has shown that the provision of neighborhood common spaces increases local tie formation, stronger local ties, and higher levels of community involvement (Kuo, Sullivan, Coley and Brunson 1998). Similarly, “New Urbanism” and “neo-traditional” planning advocates the use of neighborhood common spaces, front porches and other design factors to encourage surveillance, community participation and a sense of territoriality (Atlas 1999). Instead of arguing environmental determinism, or technological determinism, I suggest that it is the opportunity for local social interaction that is ultimately responsible for increased community involvement, in the form of local tie formation and increased public participation. North American neighborhoods generally lack institutional opportunities for social contact. Local institutions that do exist to promote local interaction (cafés, bars, community organizations, etc.) are

in decline (Putnam 2000; Oldenburg [1989] 1999), and are in many cases absent from the suburban setting (Jacobs 1961). As a result, it is simply easier to gather information on the suitability of others for tie formation in social circles that are not neighborhood based. The introduction of ICTs specifically designed to facilitate communication and information sharing in a residential setting could reverse the trend of neighborhood noninvolvement. Local use of CMC might improve the flow of information and serve to expand local social networks, generating high levels of social capital, reducing the cost and increasing the speed of community involvement.

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