

All the lonely people?

The continuing lament about the loss of community

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“All the lonely people: where do they all come from?” the Beatles wondered, singing in particular about Eleanor Rigby (Lennon & McCartney, 1965). When we look back, we find that many generations – perhaps each generation – have feared that community has disappeared (Image 21.1). The most recent examples can be found in the response that commentators have had to the rise of social media, mobile phones, and related digital technologies (Turkle, 2011, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Why does every generation believe that relationships were stronger and community better in the recent past?

Each generation thinks this, and each generation is wrong. We trace here the long history of misplaced grieving for a supposedly lost community – a fear that has always been misplaced – and examine how communication technologies are now transforming communities into persistent, pervasive networks. Our discussion is largely based on observations about the structure of community in North America and Europe, but our historical account has been observed in many countries (Drouhot, 2017; Xu & Chan, 2011). The changes to community structure that we describe likely apply to diverse societal contexts, although at different points in time.

Some of the current alarm about the loss of community is in the recognition that the structure of community is changing as technologies change. Another part of the unease comes from a selective perception of the present. There is nostalgia for a perfect pastoral past that never was (see the critique in Laslett, 1965). This longing for a time when the grass was ever greener dims an awareness of the powerful stresses and cleavages that have always pervaded human society. “Fings ain’t wot they used to be” (Bart & Norman, 1959), according to the English nostalgic song – but then again, they never were. In people’s haste to bemoan what has been lost and focus on what is absent from contemporary community, they have neglected to recognize those aspects of traditional community that are returning and changing everyday lives.

When North Americans reflect on the 18th century or even earlier, they perceive a different type of community: a different organization of relationships with friends, relatives, neighbors,

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Image 21.1 Statue by Tommy Steele of Eleanor Rigby, Stanley Street, Liverpool, sitting alone on a park bench and dedicated to “All the Lonely People.” Open-source image copyright Peter Tarleton. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eleanor_Rigby_Statue_Liverpool.JPG

and workmates. Before the rise of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the growth of urbanization in America, a person's community generally consisted of a relatively small number of social ties, densely connected and organized around the home and small town life. People spent most of their lives surrounded by relatives, neighbors, and friends who not only shared similar backgrounds and beliefs but also did similar tasks and daily labor. The vast majority of connections were to strong ties with whom they were in regular, often daily, contact and with whom they had much in common. Indeed, this type of community structure can be ideal for providing certain types of social support: Companionship and aid could be abundant; in an emergency, everyone knew who was in need; and people could reliably expect help when it was needed. For a lack of a better term, we call this 'traditional community.'

Much about the relations typical of traditional community has been idealized. Yet the structure of community in olden days had its drawbacks. The density of relations afforded a high degree of conformity. Similar beliefs, backgrounds, and daily labor were the norm. Rigid hierarchies governed who could communicate with whom. Adopting a term more commonly associated with social media, the structure of traditional community created “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2009). Information was not filtered by algorithms; rather, the primordial “filter bubble” (Pariser, 2012) consisted of tradition, church, and kin, all of which worked to limit exposure to external information. Beliefs were amplified through interactions that were largely confined to a closed social system. There was little maneuverability in situations when everyone kept an often critical eye on everyone else. Informal watchfulness was high. When individuals did not conform, there were strong repressive sanctions. Offenses were crimes against society and were met with rapid, organized, and passionate punishment. For better or worse, people were born into and died as members of the local community that they had inherited at birth.

Although such a community structure is no longer widespread in developed countries and has largely ceased to exist in developing nations, some lament its loss as if it existed only

yesterday. They are grieving primarily for the supposed loss of social solidarity while ignoring parallel costs to the flow of information and personal freedoms.

Since the disappearance of traditional community, networks of supportive relations have undergone two major shifts. The first shift was a result of increased mobility. It began with the Industrial Revolution and urbanization and culminated with the introduction of the Internet and mobile phone. Wellman has called this “networked individualism” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001). The second, a shift that has only begun to become apparent, is a result of what Hampton (2016) calls “relational persistence” and “pervasive awareness.” This latest shift is being afforded through the increasing permanence of email addresses and mobile phone numbers, technologies such as social media that allow for the articulation of social ties, the persistence of contact over time, and high levels of awareness of the opinions and daily activities of community members. The result is that once again people are becoming embedded in a community structure that provides informal watchfulness and awareness of an enduring set of relations. Community has not been lost but has profoundly changed.

Ongoing fears of the loss of community

Old World Fears: Although the lyrics vary, the loss of community is not a new alarm. Pundits continue to sing an old refrain in a new language, part of a long-lived line of thought that posits that the only good relationships are those nestled in rural villages or their urban imitations – neighborhoods. Their writing reflects the continuing belief that primordial village-like bonds are the ideal for a good society. They also show the recurrent worries that the shift away from villages to big cities and ultimately to relationships maintained online are resulting in disconnection, isolation, and social unrest. Literary scholars call this “pastoralism”: nostalgia for an idealized, mutually supportive, rural past that rarely was.

Perhaps the earliest scholarly reference can be found in the works of the North African scholar Ibn Khaldun (1377[2015]), who contended in the *Kitāb al-'Ibar (Book of Lessons)* that as societies progressed on a continuum from tribal to urban life, social solidarity (*asabiyyah*) grew weaker and civilizations declined. In the Western world, the warnings go back to at least the 17th century, when philosopher Thomas Hobbes warned in 1651 that rapid social change in England was creating loneliness and alienation and leading to a “war of all against all” (Chapter 1, Para.13).

As with today’s concerns about social media, mobile phones, and the Internet, many commentators wrestled to understand the ways in which large-scale social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution may have affected the composition, structure, and operation of communities. Their analyses have reflected the unease with which 19th-century pundits faced the impacts on relations with kith and kin of industrialization, bureaucratization, capitalism, imperialism, and technological developments. Although religion, locality, and kinship group had some integrative claims on such relations, the shift to mobile, market societies now has the potential to disconnect individuals from the strengths and constraints of tradition (Marx, 1964; Smith, 1979; White & White, 1962; Williams, 1973).

Ferdinand Tönnies set the prevailing tone in 1887 by asserting there were fundamental differences between the communally organized societies of yesteryear (which he called ‘*gemeinschaft*’) and the contractually organized societies (‘*gesellschaft*’) of the Industrial Revolution. Tönnies asserted that communally organized societies, supposedly characteristic of rural areas and underdeveloped states, had densely interconnected relationships composed principally of neighbors and kin. By contrast, contractually organized societies, supposedly characteristic of industrial bureaucratic cities, had more sparsely knit relationships composed principally of ties between friends and acquaintances. Tönnies argued that the lack of cohesion in such *gesellschaft*

societies was leading to specialized contractual exchanges that were replacing communally enforced norms of mutual support.

This was not only an isolated, nostalgic lament for the supposed loss of the mythical pastoral past where happy villagers knew their place. Tönnies' vision was part of a particularly European debate about the transformation of societies: aristocrats, intellectuals, and parvenus coming to terms with the transformation of ordered hierarchical societies of peasants and landowners, workers and merchants. Many analysts shared Tönnies' fears about the supposed contemporary loss of community, although they offered different reasons for why it was happening, including industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, capitalism, socialism, and technological change.

With a radically different tone but a similar premise, Karl Marx (1852) and Friedrich Engels (1885[1970]) made the loss of community a centerpiece of their communist analyses, asserting that industrial capitalism had created new types of interpersonal exploitation that drove people apart. They claimed that capitalism had alienated workers not only from their work but from each other. Taking yet another tack, the late 19th-century sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897[1951]) feared that the loss of solidarity had weakened communal support and fostered social pathology. Shortly afterward, sociologist Max Weber (1946, 1958) extolled modern rationality but nonetheless feared that bureaucratization and urbanization were weakening communal bonds and traditional authority.

On the other hand, some commentators noted that the large-scale reorganization of production had created new opportunities for community relations. Thus, Marx acknowledged that industrialization had reduced poverty, and Engels realized that working-class home ownership would heighten local communal bonds. Weber argued that bureaucracy and urbanization would liberate many from the traditional, stultifying bases of community, and Durkheim (1893[1993]) argued that the new complex divisions of labor were binding people together in networks of interdependent "organic solidarity." German sociologist Georg Simmel celebrated urban liberation but also worried that the new individualism would lead to superficial relationships (1903[1950], 1922[1955]). He recognized that the move from villages to cities meant that people were no longer totally enmeshed in one all-encompassing community but could maneuver more freely through their partial social attachments.

New World Fears: Despite different social conditions, American politicians, pundits, and social scientists carried forward European concerns about the loss of community. Near the end of the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson followed up on a key preoccupation of two 18th-century British philosophers, John Locke and David Hume: their quest to understand how primordial community relations underpinned the social basis of large-scale societies (see also Wills, 1978). Based at his Monticello plantation, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* gave the issue a clear anti-urban cast – communal bonds are not viable in industrial, commercial cities. He asserted:

The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.

(1787)

Through the US Constitution, written soon afterward in 1787, Jefferson's agrarian model of America gave more political weight to small rural states, and this rural bias has continued to shape the American political landscape. Although these small rural states now contain just 17% of the population, they can elect a Senate majority (Lee & Oppenheimer, 1999).

Moreover, American states – even those that are more urban, such as California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania – have often located their capitals away from big cities (Engstrom et al., 2013).

Americans wrestled with Tönnies' concerns, debating whether modern times have occasioned the loss of community in developed Western societies (e.g., Berger, 1960; Grant, 1969; Nisbet, 1962; Parsons, 1943; Slater, 1970). They, too, decried the loss of traditional communities bound together by custom and tradition, but they recognized the constraints of traditional community. Some analyses reflected the continuing American tension between individualism and communalism originally put forward by the influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1893). Focusing on the populace's march westward to settle the supposedly empty frontier, Turner argued that frequent mobility left little opportunity for community to develop. He maintained that what little community there was in the West consisted of transient groups of settlers helping each other, with instrumental aid overshadowing emotional support, companionship, or a sense of communal belonging. Even the cities were filled with migrants: floating proletarians who were constantly on the move, seeking work that would push them up the ladder (Chudacoff, 1972; Katz et al., 1982; Thernstrom, 1964, 1973). The rural settlers and urban migrants embodied the Turnerian spirit of individualism and practicality. In shedding stability and embracing mobility, they had avoided being embedded in traditional community bonds (Starr, 1985, 1990).

Although the urban-industrial community freed the individual from the constraints of a densely knit local network, many pundits viewed this new structure of relations with suspicion. They looked to the mythical pastoralism epitomized in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" (1938). Echoing Jefferson, they demonized urban life. Well before the advent of Facebook, scholars questioned the value of having a large number of ties with people who were not family and with whom one was not especially close – a characteristic of urban life. The city was the manifestation of the mobility afforded by the telephone, railway, and related technologies. After all, as a founding member of the "Chicago School" of sociology, Ernest Burgess, recognized:

Mobility may be measured not only by these changes of movement, but also by increase of contacts. While the increase of population of Chicago in 1912–22 was less than 25 percent (23.6 percent), the increase of letters delivered to Chicagoans was double that . . . The number of telephone calls in Chicago increased from 606,131,928 in 2014 to 944,010,586 in 1922, an increase of 55.7 per cent, while the population increased only 13.4 per cent.
(1925, 60–61)

Surely such heightened levels of communication would lead to the breakdown of social control. Would families not be destroyed as outside contact took the place of relations with immediate kin, local friends, and neighbors? As sociologist Maurice Stein argued a generation later in *The Eclipse of Community*:

The old feeling of solidarity based on a sense that everyone in town belongs to a common community gives way to sub-communities with hostile attitudes toward each other (1960, 92) . . . Community ties become increasingly dispensable, finally extending even into the nuclear family, and we are forced to watch children dispensing with their parents at an even earlier age in suburbia,
(1960, 329)

Stein's sociological contemporary, Robert Nisbet, had similar thoughts in his *Community and Power*:

The traditional primary relationships of men have become functionally irrelevant to our State and economy and meaningless to the moral inspirations of individuals.
(1962, 49)

Although such armchair lamentations were laced with anecdotes, the lamenters rarely supported their arguments with systematic research. Starting in the 1960s, scholars such as Herbert Gans (1962) countered laments with actual documentation of the supportive nature of social ties in the city, while urbanists such as Jane Jacobs (1961) contrasted the diversity and security of cities with the alienation of suburbs. By the mid-1960s, the irony had not been lost on some observers. For example, S.D. Clark – himself a product of rural Saskatchewan and then at the peak of his career in the metropolitan University of Toronto – noted:

A generation ago, the student of American society, then in background truly a man of the country, could find in the big city all that was evil, depraved, and corrupt in the American way of life. . . . In the quarter century or so that has since passed, the student of American society has learned to love the city in the manner that he has long loved the country, and now it is suburbia, portrayed in terms of slavish conformity, fetish of togetherness, and craze for organization, which is set over against a romantic image of the city.

(1966, 4–5)

Each generation has looked back longingly and nostalgically and supposed that the previous generation had better relationships. Different generations point to different sources for the supposed loss of community. This is the perennial “Community Question” debate that Wellman first identified in 1979. It has been a cyclical argument that rises in unison with major social and technological changes, with the Community Question again becoming a major issue in how people interpret change as they ponder how quickening technological change is affecting the structure of community.

Technology in the mix

Since the Industrial Revolution, technology has been a visible suspect in the death of community (Levitt, 2012). Consider George Inness’ 1855 painting of a steam locomotive chugging through green fields in Pennsylvania’s “The Lackawanna Valley” (Image 21.2). Although the



Image 21.2 ‘The Lackawanna Valley’ c. 1856. Painting by George Inness
Washington: National Gallery of Art

train might be carrying people to visit distant relatives, the image is of a monstrous interloper – a steam-puffing Godzilla – destroying bucolic country life.

Even things we now take for granted have been singled out. Thus, one of America's first sociologists, Charles H. Cooley, noted:

What a strange practice it is, when you think of it, that a man should sit down to his breakfast table and, instead of conversing with his wife, and children, hold before his face a sort of screen on which is inscribed a world-wide gossip!

(1909, 105)

A century ago, Cooley was talking about the introduction of the daily newspaper. That, too, was a time of rapid technological change associated with transformations in community. Cooley observed that new technologies – railroads, telegraphs, telephones, and a national postal system – were overcoming the constraints of time and space, creating new permanence through recorded communication, and emboldening democracy through universal access to information and debate.

Like the Devil, *Technology the Destroyer* has appeared in many aspects. For example, there are the soulless giant factory machines made famous in Charlie Chaplin's (1936) *Modern Times* movie, and the selfish privatism about which the scholar Robert Bellah complained in *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al., 1985), as did TV news anchor Tom Brokaw in *The Greatest Generation* (1998). In addition, there is the social disconnection that Robert Putnam (2000) deplored in *Bowling Alone* – worrying that people were staying home watching TV instead of going to the local community's bowling or civic club.

Computerization and its extension into new digital media are often the *bêtes noires*. As early as the 1970s, futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) argued that the rise of computers would extend human mobility to the point that community would collapse. As expressed by narrator Orson Welles in the documentary about Toffler's *Future Shock* book (Grasshoff, 1972), there is a

feeling that nothing is permanent anymore . . . man's relationship to things is increasingly temporary . . . the telephone directory is rewritten every day to keep track of the mobile society . . . as we breed a new race of nomads.

The public, media commentators, and even some scholars worry that people in developed societies have become so immersed in digital media – the Internet and mobile devices – that they have become socially isolated (e.g., Harmon, 1998; Turkle, 2011). They blame such digital media for pulling people away from spending quality, in-person time with their friends, neighbors, and relatives. They wonder how people can have meaningful relationships through a computer or phone screen. Thus *Globe and Mail* columnist Douglas Cornish worried:

Will this glow [from the Internet] produce a closed generation of socially challenged individuals; humans who are more comfortable with machines than anything else?

(2006)

Or, as columnist Stephen Marche (2012) proclaimed in *The Atlantic*:

We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible . . . Within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation.

We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. We were promised a global village; instead, we inhabit the drab cul-de-sacs and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information.

(2012)

Parallels to earlier alarms about the loss of community could not be clearer. However, while the alarm is unfounded, something *has* changed – community is not what it used to be.

Networks rather than groups

Much of the misunderstanding about the changing nature of community stems from the assumption that people have always belonged to village-like community groups. In reality, people have always belonged to various configurations of social networks. One such network structure is idealized by the image of traditional community, as depicted in Figure 21.1: a social network that is densely interconnected, with many local, strong ties.

As with variation in how people interact with the physical design of objects (Gibson, 1979) and between people and technologies (Norman, 1988), variation in community structure affords different outcomes. The structure of community is variable and malleable only to the

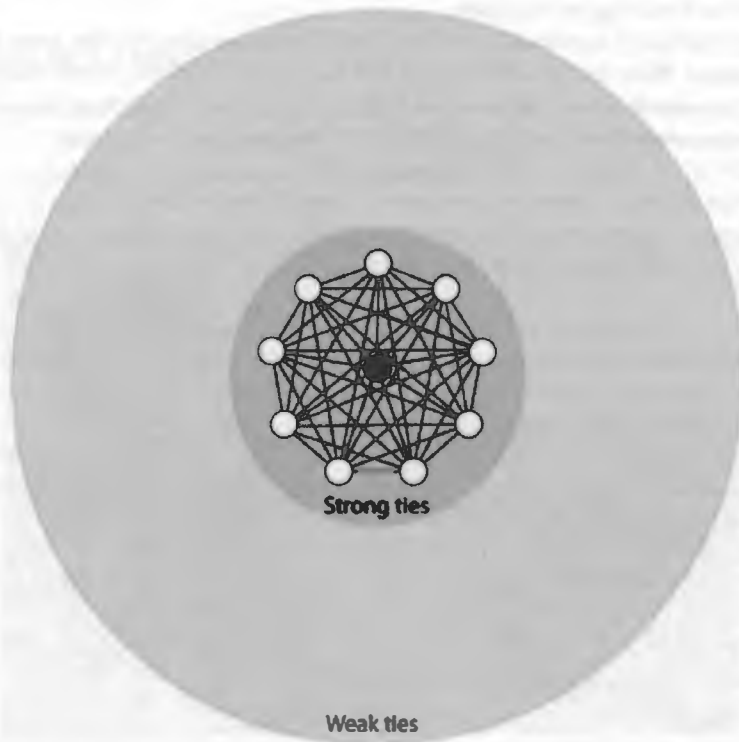


Figure 21.1 Traditional community: A dense network of closer social ties organized around a single focus of activity, such as the home and neighborhood

extent afforded by communication and transportation technologies. While outcomes might still vary based on people's traits, skills, culture, and the role of institutions such as religion and government, the configuration of people's community networks fundamentally constrains and affords different outcomes. Just as a chair offers most people a poor affordance for sleeping, at least in comparison to the opportunities provided by a bed, a dense, closed community network affords much less diversity than one that is loosely knit. Thus, traditional community structure, and in turn what it could afford, was a product of the constraints of the technology of the day. In a traditional community, people were often born into and died as part of the same network because they mostly could only move and communicate easily across short distances. The technology afforded only local, dense networks that persisted over an individual's lifetime.

Yet community never fully resembled the structure of a traditional community as the early scholars had idealized it. People have been part of far-flung, mobile networks for much longer than is usually recognized. Some people migrated between localities while keeping connections with kin near and far (Wellman & Wetherell, 1996; Wetherell et al., 1994). This was particularly true for soldiers and their camp followers, and elites and their servants. By the late 18th century, the European and North American worlds were already mobile and well on their way to becoming industrialized (Tilly, 1988). Even the scale of European villages was changing. There was a significant decrease in the population involved in agricultural production and an increase in the scale of manufacturing. Although the household remained the typical production unit, the scale of production was shifting to networks of households that produced cheap goods, particularly textiles, for national markets and international trade. The seasonal nature of agricultural production freed segments of the population to travel from village to village in search of agricultural and industrial labor. A steady flow of migrants traveled between Europe and abroad. In the 18th century alone, an estimated 45 million Europeans migrated out of Europe – the majority to the Americas – whereas 10 million returned home (Tilly, 1988).

The introduction of new technologies affords different network structures, which can transform how people form and maintain relationships as well as gain access to information and support (Hampton, 2016). Technologies that facilitated contact at a distance – telephones, steamships, railroads, cars, and planes – allowed people to escape the bonds of encapsulated social ties of kinship, locality, and occupation. Such technologies afforded opportunities to form supportive social relations in multiple contexts that did not strongly overlap – family at home; colleagues in the workplace; and friends in the neighborhood, church, and voluntary associations (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). They were able to escape the control of tradition and hierarchy and maneuver around the insular minds of densely knit networks: the original filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Wellman (1979) was one of the first to articulate that community was not necessarily “lost” or “saved” as a result of the transformations afforded by mobility (see also Webber, 1963). Mobility has liberated people from the dense bonds of traditional community, but they have continued to find companionship and support in sparsely knit networks (Lu & Hampton, 2017). Throughout their life course, people moved from one neighborhood to another, from one job to another, and from one interest to another. Necessitated by mobility, they severed ties in one context only to form new, supportive ties in another. As people and information moved more freely through time and space, the structure of community became less densely knit, less local, less tightly bounded, more diverse, and more fragmented. Such a structure no longer afforded social control through informal watchfulness alone, and social control became facilitated through formalized institutional surveillance and the rule of law, with well-defined sanctions and prescribed punishments. Such is the structure of community depicted in Figure 21.2 that is a part of modern urban life. Few individuals are socially isolated, but there is little mutual awareness of daily

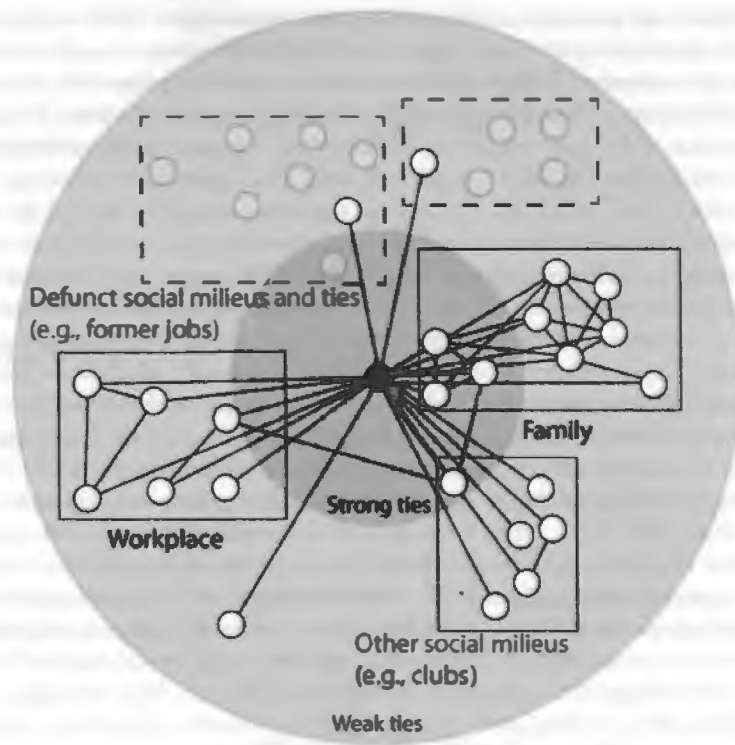


Figure 21.2 Urban-industrial community: A loosely knit network with a small number of strong ties and many weaker ties from multiple social milieus that may be active, dormant, and replaced over the life course

activities. As networked individuals, their community extends to social ties that are both local and distant (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wang & Wellman, 2010; Wellman, 2001).

Home computing, Internet technologies, and, later, mobile phones amplified the trend toward networked individualism. Indeed, sociologist Manuel Castells (1996) argued that new information and communication technologies allowed people to overcome historical limits on interaction. These limits were the natural boundaries of interaction that were possible within the spatial organization of the traditional realm of community. Castells calls this the “space of places.” Castells suggested that in the networked society, the “space of flows” had superseded the space of places; interaction was even less constrained by place than in the urban condition. Mobile phones take this trend to the extreme by allowing individuals to overcome the limits of interaction that once required them to maintain community by traipsing door-to-door or staying rooted to their desktop Internet (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Few individuals are socially isolated, but, as networked individuals, their community extends to social ties that are both local and distant (Kraut & Burke, 2015).

Although previous technologies had afforded mobility, they did not support two key characteristics of a traditional community: the persistence and sustained awareness of social ties. Even during the rise of the Internet, the lack of persistence has meant that in an urban-industrial community, social ties were often lost at key life-course events, such as moving, graduation, changing jobs, marriage, parenthood, and divorce (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Wellman et al.,

1997). The absence of relational persistence has contributed to a “nostalgia epidemic” (Bauman, 2017): the perception that more relationships are transitory and disposable and therefore less meaningful than in the past. Although lower levels of network awareness provided an escape from insularity and control, they limit people’s knowledge of the opinions and activities of those in their network.

Hampton (2016) suggests that this may no longer be the case. Recent communication technologies better afford persistent contact by allowing people to articulate their association and maintain contact over time (Figure 21.3) Examples of these technologies include Facebook’s “friends” lists and other social media that contain ties formed over a lifetime. These technologies allow people to sustain contact without substantially drawing from the time and resources required to maintain ties through other channels of communication. The persistence of ties is a counterforce to mobility and has the potential to link lives across generations and over a lifetime in ways that resemble the structure of affiliation found in preindustrial communities (Quan-Haase et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2016). Yet, unlike preindustrial communities, mobility still affords opportunities for partial commitments to different social milieus.

Another contemporary affordance, pervasive awareness, results from the ambient nature of digital communication technologies to share information and indicate the attentiveness and availability of social ties. Although the content of messages that contribute to pervasive awareness

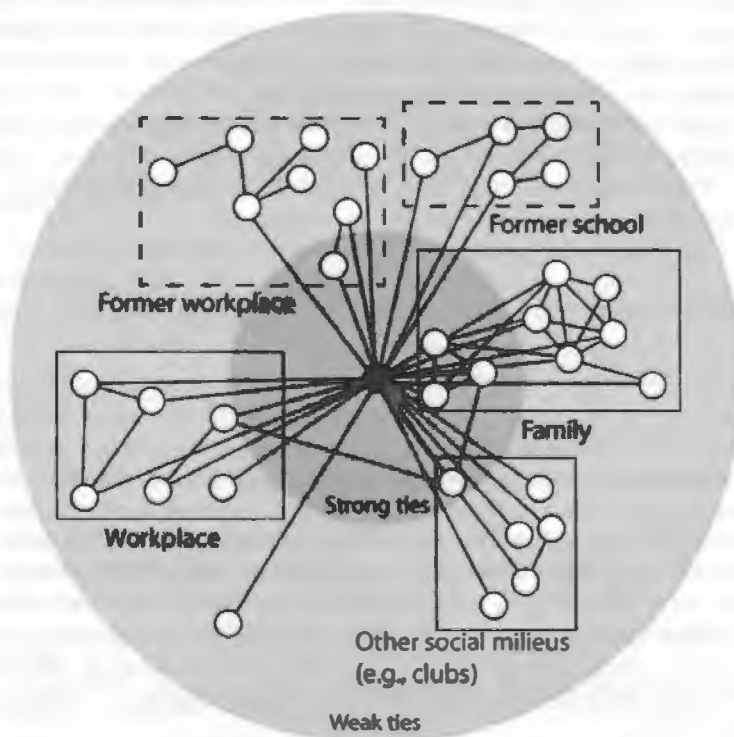


Figure 21.3 Persistent-pervasive community: A hybrid of traditional and urban-industrial community structures. Organized around multiple social milieus that persist over the life course, ties are not as loosely knit as in the urban-industrial community, ties are more persistent over time, and dormant ties are visible through chains of affiliation

may appear trivial – for example, a photograph of a meal or presence at an event – they can also convey subtle knowledge of the interests, locations, opinions, and activities embedded in the everyday lives of one’s social ties. Heightened awareness of network life events – stressful activities in others’ lives – might even increase the cost of caring (Hampton et al., 2016). Although it is tempting to equate persistent contact and pervasive awareness with formal surveillance, they have more in common with the informal watchfulness that traditional community structure afforded. They resemble the shared daily experiences and gossip of traditional community networks, but in a partial, more limited way. Indeed, a persistent–pervasive community represents a hybrid of traditional and urban–industrial community structures (Hampton, 2016).

Natural by-products of pervasive awareness and persistent contact are higher levels of awareness of diversity within one’s social network (Chen, 2013; Hampton et al., 2011). Network diversity can be related to improved access to information and resources. Such awareness may counter the loss of social capital that earlier scholars feared (Putnam, 2000). However, because persistence and awareness reduce tie dormancy and dissolution from established friends and family, it is not clear how much new social capital will be created. The increased visibility between network members from different social milieus – flattened into a single audience on social media such as Facebook – may even close structural holes that provide bridges to information and resources (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). In this way, persistent and pervasive community may make visible those resources, diversity, and activities that were always present but overlooked as a result of a lack of visibility and a tendency to assume similarity with community (Goel et al., 2010). An awareness of newfound diversity could increase access to (and possibly understanding of) diverse points of view and counter a natural tendency to form echo chambers. Indeed, individuals remain highly mobile (Rainie & Wellman, 2019), involved in multiple social milieus (Hampton et al., 2011), and connected through multiple channels online and offline (Hampton et al., 2009). Hence, any self-selection into online echo chambers (Del Vicario et al., 2016) or algorithmically driven filter bubbles (Bakshy et al., 2015) pale in comparison to historical examples of insular traditional community.

However, heightened persistence and awareness may also have their costs. Social networks allow for the flow of information in the form of opinions, resources, and life events. While the flow of opinions could increase awareness of opinion diversity, an awareness of dissonant information about the opinions and beliefs of social ties could reduce perceived homophily, increase cognitive dissonance, and silence debate by heightening the perceived risk of discussing important matters (Hampton et al., 2017). While knowledge of resources embedded in social networks is generally viewed as valuable – increasing social capital – if people increasingly draw on informal support it can create new demands that exhaust resources and those who provide them (Hampton & Ling, 2013; Liebow, 1967). Similarly, higher levels of awareness of major life course events in others’ lives, such as the illness or unemployment of a friend, can become a significant source of social stress (Hampton et al., 2016) or even spread depression and anxiety (Hampton, 2019). Such impacts are unlikely to be felt equally, but as with other types of affordances, changes to the structure of community will disproportionately affect some, based on their traits, skills, culture, and demographics. For example, women would seem to be both more aware of others’ major life events and more likely to report higher levels of stress as a result (Hampton et al., 2016).

Might the reorganization of community structure into one in which relationships are again persistent and with more awareness of others’ opinions and activities also bring about a return of the expedient and repressive sanctions that were common in a traditional community? Evidence of such a trend may already exist in the rise of mob morality and ‘cancel culture’, which has accompanied the online shaming of social transgressions and other behaviors captured

by mobile phone cameras and shared through social media. Some examples are Californians ‘drought-shaming’ of excessive water users (Milbrandt, 2017), Singaporeans censuring those breaking civic norms (Skoric et al., 2010), the identification (‘doxing’) of white supremacists who attended 2017 rallies in Charlottesville (Ellis, 2017), the pejorative reference to the activities of ‘Karens’, and the public shaming of those who refuse to wear face coverings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Once again, the structure of community affords an informal watchfulness and a speed and severity of punishment that may supplant institutional, formal law. While some might find such informal social control beneficial (de Vries, 2015), it can also take clearly destructive forms such as online harassment (Podgornova, 2014). Yet others may withdraw from the uncertainties of participating in multiple partial networks and find refuge in more traditional bounded tribal solidarities that protect their identity and local autonomy (Wellman, et al., 2020).

Despite the continuing sound and fury from alarmed publics, politicians, and pundits, the evidence suggests that community has never been lost in the Western world. Communication, information, and transportation systems afford and constrain the shape and composition of the networks that make up communities. When researchers look for supportive relations within these networks, they find thriving communities, even as people suffer from continuing fears of untraditional unknowns. Recent technological changes are again reshaping the structure of community. Social media is making relations persistent and pervasive as well as finding and maintaining new ones. The fundamental nature of community is indeed changing as social media melds with in-person connectivity. Hence, there is a pressing need to understand what kinds of relations flourish and what communities do – and do not do – in this emerging restructuring. But, in facing such change, we must temper the persistent nostalgia for the supposed good times of the past and the unease that often comes with changing times. We need to recognize that although the structure of community may change, it has never been lost.

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