

Just in time: a new modality for community via networks

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Abstract

My paper reviews the significance of the term community in attempts to understand the social and human dimensions of computer-mediated communication in light of the current dominance of self-interested social networking as the primary form of internet use. Exploring the two ways in which place has been used to articulate the relationship of individuals and collectives, the paper proposes the necessity of moving instead to explore time and rhythm in a world where networks are 'everywhere and nowhere', thus rendering space a consequence of our temporal synchronicities, rather than a precursor.

Keywords

community; networks; time; space; individualism

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The concept of community has played a central role in how humans have come to terms with the social effects of the internet. In practice and analysis, as well as experience and reflection, it is impossible to think of these computer networks without at some point invoking 'community'. Community has been the most significant element in our desire to show that human involvement in computer-mediated communication, far from being a "bloodless technological ritual" (Rheingold, 1993, chapter 2), is deeply social.

Yet community is a notoriously difficult concept even before we began to adapt it to understanding the internet. The more that community has defined our understanding of networked communications, the more that the word remains conceptually elusive. As Goodwin (2012, p.54) puts it, 'community' is "descriptively vague and yet positively ideologically loaded". Our long-running efforts to reach or demand consensus on community nevertheless bear continued examination as a means of grappling with the analytic complexities of what, through community, we really seek to understand: the technosociality of humanity's engagement with computer-enabled communications.

Most recently, this engagement has been characterized by the development of explicit systems of social networking. Such systems, notably but not exclusively Facebook, present to us and demand our attention to the social networks which we have always had but have never yet had to manage so directly (see Allen, 2012 and Wilson et al., 2012).. These networks have for many years been recognized as producing community, rather than resulting from community (Wellman, et al., 1996). But given the explicitness of the network experience, and the ways systems of communication instantiate "networked individualism" (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), these **self-interested** networks that dominate everyday life for many people are reshaping our sense of the collective endeavor which 'community' implies. Haythornthwaite and Kendall ponder that "early on, the question was whether community could exist online; now the question may be whether it can exist without online" (2010, p.1086): but it what **kind** of community might we have as a result? As Ryberg and Larson (2008) noted "... we are witnessing an intensified personalization and individualization [through networks], while simultaneously being increasingly dependent on, connected computer to and mutually reliant on each other." Community is intimately connected to the individuals who comprise it and the individual relations between them, unbounded by any sense of the individual collective which community implies.

For more than twenty years, place (as a particular form of embodied space) has been thought essential to understanding the relationship between individual and community moderated by the internet. Place has been mobilized in two ways. As Wellman and others have shown, community is partially about place but as much about ties between people that are experienced in proximity but not dependent upon it (Wellman et al., 2003). While technologies have expanded networks of social interaction, they have not reduced it solely to an online phenomenon (Hampton and Wellman, 2000). Furthermore, at least until the widespread global connectivity through the internet became normal, most computer-mediated communication occurred solely in work contexts (for example, Sproull and Kiesler, 1991) or was specific to local community (see Carroll, 2005, esp. pp.43-44). Even now, most online interaction maps to known spatial domains which form our places of work and social life.

Nevertheless, because of the way the internet emerged into wider social consciousness as a novel phenomenon, researchers became fascinated by the online communities emerged free from place, **without** pre-existing offline complements and that held little prospect of sustained proximate encounter. Smith and Kollock asked: “what kind of social spaces do people create with networks?” (1999, pp.3-4). In doing so they, and many others, demonstrated an eagerness to re-introduce spatiality into the virtual realm to normalise it. Nor was this effect limited to researchers: participants themselves “imaginatively constructed [space] by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by the community between and among individuals and groups” (Wang et al., 2002, p.411). This work helped meet the “communal challenge of developing and maintaining their existence as an identifiable social entity” (Butler et al., 2007, pp.3-4) when previously such entities manifested themselves through physically located traces, even while the community effects thus achieved were possible because there was no ‘actual’ location except of their private places of connection to the internet.

This place-making can now be seen as a transitional effect, of interest because it shows how humans could only assimilate the internet’s novelty within pre-existing assumptions about how to *be together*. Even as early as 2003, it became clear that:

The developing personalization, wireless portability, and ubiquitous connectivity of the internet all facilitate networked individualism ... Computer-supported communication is **everywhere**, but it is situated **nowhere**. It is I-alone that is reachable wherever I am: at a home, hotel, office, highway, or shopping center. The person has become the portal (Wellman et al, 2003)

Now it is clear that “group- or community-based social relations and practices [give way] to a more mobile, fluid, and less constrained social practice of individually constructed personal networks (aided by the increasing adoption of mobile, personalized technologies)” (Willson, 2012, p.281). While networked individualism became possible because of partially located, socially networked community, it has evolved in step with the wholesale adoption of diverse forms of informatic connectivity:

person-to-person networks show how community has transcended group boundaries...The shift puts people at the center of personal networks that can supply them with support, sociability, information, and a sense of belonging (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: chapter 5)

The effects of new technological developments and their adoption into culture mean that place becomes fundamentally individualized, even when experienced in common. Where ‘one is’ becomes increasingly important and explicitly encoded within computer networks but where ‘all are’ becomes much less relevant. Place is losing its capacity, even symbolically, to contribute to community effects by giving us a sense of collective identity; shared place becomes attenuated in the face of the self-centered emplacement of the individual **while using** placeless networks.

Critics of networked individualism often seek to re-instantiate our relationship with technology inside a local community grounded in place, enabling a return to more traditional social interactions (see Goodwin, 201, pp.50-51; also Willson, 2012). But perhaps such critics are, literally, looking in the wrong place. Networks and resultant connectivity are ‘everywhere and nowhere’. But they are always

with us. In other words, it is not space but **time** that matters, and thus place is less important as a mechanism to interrogate social life online than **rhythm**.

The specific effects of time on our sense of collective endeavor, of the way an individual exist in concert with others, are a matter for empirical investigation. However, we can already see in the world around us that, generally, people now use systems of computer-mediated networking to maintain multiple rhythms of interaction at the same time. Where a person is no longer determines shared communication because networks have irrevocably removed the necessity (if not the efficacy) of using shared space to generate shared time. Where once the rhythm of sharing was understood as a consequence of either being proximate or not, now proximity is a consequence of the continual interplay of multiple rhythms, beaten on the drums of our social networking platforms. If community still exists, it is 'just in time', not formed in place.

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