FEATURED ESSAY

Lost and Saved . . . Again: The Moral Panic about the Loss of Community Takes Hold of Social Media

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Why does every generation believe that relationships were stronger and community better in the recent past? Lamenting about the loss of community, based on a selective perception of the present and an idealization of "traditional community," dims awareness of powerful inequalities and cleavages that have always pervaded human society and favors deterministic models over a nuanced understanding of how network affordances contribute to different outcomes. The *bêtes noirs* have varied according to the moral panic of the times: industrialization, bureaucratization, urbanization, capitalism, socialism, and technological developments have all been tabbed by such diverse commentators as Thomas Jefferson (1784), Karl Marx (1852), Louis Wirth (1938), Maurice Stein (1960), Robert Bellah et al. (1996), and Tom Brokaw (1998). Each time, observers look back nostalgically to what they supposed were the supportive, solidary communities of the previous generation. Since the advent of the internet, the moral panic-ers have seized on this technology as the latest cause of lost community, pointing with alarm to what digital technologies are doing to relationships. As the focus shifts to social media and mobile devices, the panic seems particularly acute.

There is no shortage of pundits screaming about the demise of community. Sherry Turkle (2015) has raised the alarm about the decline of conversation and meaningful in-person contact. Jean Twenge (2017) has been perhaps the most chronologically specific in identifying the introduction of the iPhone in 2007 as the beginning of our demise. She is concerned not only with the decline of meaningful face-to-face contact and with the individualism afforded by mobile devices, but with how the bonds of parental watchfulness have smothered useful indiscretion. She may be the first to raise a panic by associating trends of reduced teenage sex, pregnancy, and alcohol use with signs of a technologically induced problem, claiming that youth today are developmentally delayed as a result of their technology use.

Taylor Dotson's (2017) recent book *Technically Together* has a broader timeline for the demise of community. He sees it as happening around the time the internet was popularized, with community even worse off as a result of Facebook and mobile devices. Dotson not only blames new technologies for the decline of community, but social theory, specifically the theory and the practice of "networked individualism": the relational turn from bounded, densely knit local groups to multiple, partial, often far-flung social networks (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Dotson takes the admirable position that social science should do more to imagine different outcomes, new technological possibilities that can be created by tossing aside the trends of today and engineering social change through design. Dotson alleges that when, for example, the two present authors describe what we see as the trends of today, we are guilty of appearing "to call for

citizens to adapt their expectations for social life to what dominant technologies can offer'' (p. 2). He contends that this is ''not simply the result of dispassionate social scientific analysis but rather amounts to an implicit form of political advocacy'' (p. 10).

Some alarm in the recognition that the nature of community is changing as technologies change is sensible, and we have no quarrel with the collective desire to have better, more supportive friends, families, and communities. As Dotson implies, the maneuverability in having one's own individually networked community can come at the cost of local group solidarity. Indeed, we have also taken action that does more than pontificate to promote local community, building community on and offline (Hampton 2011).

Yet part of contemporary unease comes from a selective perception of the present and an idealization of other forms of community. There is nostalgia for a perfect form of community that never was. 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. And advocates, such as Dotson (2017), who suggest the need to save a particular type of community at the expense of another, often do so blind of the potential tradeoffs.

There is failure and strength in all types of community. This is true of the type of community that Twenge (2017) rebuffs—one where close bonds provide protection but constrain behavior in broader networks (although we question the accuracy of her account; see Livingstone 2018 and Samuel 2017); the community imagined by Dotson (2017)—where ''thick,'' dense bonds of shared place create a shared moral order and sense of togetherness but, as he fails to recognize, would surely reduce social mixing, tolerance, and equity (Cote and Erickson 2009); and networked individualism—which favors breadth and individual maneuverability at the expense of densely knit, local solidarities. Valuing densely knit networks for their informal controls and generalized reciprocity ignores the corresponding repression and constraint that can come from closed networks, while promoting the value of distributed, diverse networks ignores the fact that many at some point in time experience disconnection and crave deep relationships close at hand (Klinenberg 2018).

Imagined Community

When North Americans reflect back on community, they imagine a different organization of relationships with friends, relatives, neighbors, and workmates. While some, like Dotson, protest that they do not ''nostalgically pine for romantic idealizations of community'' (p. 14), they nonetheless invoke images of community based on densely connected relations, organized around the home and small-town life. They imagine a time when people gathered on their porches to bond, to live in person and face to face. Indeed, before the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, a person's community bore some resemblance to this image. 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 (Durkheim [1893] 1993; Tönnies [1887] 1957). The vast majority of connections were strong ties between people who were in regular, often daily, contact with each other and had much in common. 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.

Yet to idealize this form of community is to pervert contemporary notions of social justice, equality, and freedom. The nature of community in the nineteenth century, or in nearly any form where people lived in a densely knit network of close ties, had its drawbacks: the density of relations implied a high degree of conformity to similar beliefs, backgrounds, and activities. 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). Beliefs were amplified through interactions that were largely confined to a closed social system,

and informal watchfulness was high. As Twenge (2017) attests, there is little maneuverability in situations when everyone keeps a critical eye on everyone else. 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. When individuals did not conform, when orthodoxy was met with heresy, there could be repressive community sanctions that might include rapid, organized, and passionate punishment.

Although such a community structure is no longer widespread in developed countries and has faded elsewhere, Dotson (2017) and others lament its loss as if it existed only yesterday and could resurface tomorrow. The informal, swift ''communal justice'' that Dotson suggests (p. 51) as a replacement for our current legal system would rarely be justice at all: a lynch mob cannot be swayed by teaching the mob ''conversation skills'' (p. 111), and ostracism would not combat social isolation. Proponents are grieving for the supposed forfeiture of social solidarity while ignoring parallel costs to the flow of information and personal freedoms.

Before We Hated Smartphones, We Hated Cities

The trends that concern the latest moral panic-ers—disconnection and isolation—are not new. An early scholarly reference can be found in the fourteenth-century 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 (''*asabiyah*'') grew weaker and civilizations declined. In the western world, the warnings go back to at least the seventeenth century, when philosopher Thomas Hobbes warned in *Leviathan* ([1651] 2003) that rapid social change in England was creating loneliness and alienation and leading to a ''war of all against all.''

Let us not forget that before we were antisocial media, we were anti-urban. Near the end of the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson followed up on a key preoccupation of 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 ([1784] 1972).

Dotson is by no means alone in suggesting that disconnection and isolation are products of suburbanization and technological change that can be reversed through better technological design and an improved ''new urbanism'' (p. 13) that promotes densely knit communities. Yet he neglects our sociological history. New urbanism is more façade, driven by the self-selection of like-minded individuals pulled together into one place by ''environmental choice'' (Michelson 1977), than it is a successful example of technological determinism. Indeed, when the moral panic switched from urbanization to suburbanization, the irony of embracing urban life as an ideal was not lost on some sociologists— and it should not be lost as our focus changes again. S. D. Clark (1966)—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. (pp. 4–5)

Technological change is no innocent bystander when it comes to community. It is the constant thread in a panic that started

with the shift away from villages to big cities and ultimately to relationships maintained online. Computerization and its extension into new digital media have become contemporary culprits. 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. The public, media commentators, and some scholars have kept on worrying that people have become so immersed in digital media—the internet and mobile devices—that they have become socially isolated (e.g., Harmon 1998; Kraut et al. 1998; Turkle 2011; Twenge 2017). They blame such digital media for pulling people away from spending quality, in-person time with their friends, neighbors, and relatives, wondering how people can have meaningful relationships through a computer or phone screen. As *Atlantic* columnist Stephen Marche (2012) proclaimed, ''Within this world of instant and absolute communication . . . we suffer from unprecedented alienation . . . . The more connected we become, the lonelier we are.''

Network Affordances

Dotson (2017) and others wrongly place too much weight on technological determinism. It is not the object, the specific technology that changes community—be it a smartphone or a house with a front porch—it is the structure of the networks. Even then, behavior is not preordained. Variation in community structure leads to different outcomes just like variation in how people interact with the physical design of objects (Gibson 1979) and with technologies (Norman 1988). While outcomes 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 both constrains and creates opportunities. Just as a chair offers most people a poor site for sleeping in comparison to a bed, a densely knit, closed community network affords much less diversity and maneuverability than one that is loosely knit (Burt 2001). Traditional community structure was a product of the constraints of being born into and dying within the same network of relations because people mostly could only move and communicate easily across short distances. The communication and transportation technology of the day only fostered local, densely knit networks that persisted over an individual's lifetime.

Newer technologies have reshaped people's networks, and this has shaped and constrained behaviors. Technology is embedded into community. What Dotson and others ignore in their eagerness to point to trends such as people increasingly living alone is that this is not so much a choice, but an artifact of contemporary social structure. Women and men live alone because they are delaying marriage and children for educational opportunity and economic independence (Klinenberg 2012), not because they have smartphones that promote individualism.

With the withering of traditional community, networks of supportive relations have undergone two major shifts. The first shift, to the ''networked individualism'' that Dotson (2017) villainizes, 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 (Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wellman 2001). The second, more recent shift, which is only now being recognized, is a result of ''relational persistence'' and ''pervasive awareness'' (Hampton 2016). The network affordances of persistence and awareness are increasingly possible because of the permanence of email addresses and mobile phone numbers, social media that allow for the articulation of social ties, and continued awareness—online and off—of the opinions and daily activities of community members. The result of these shifts is that people continue to be embedded in communities that provide informal watchfulness and awareness of an enduring set of relations—but not in the way that the moral panic-ers such as Dotson look back to in their haste to bemoan what has been lost. This is where Tocqueville (1835) would be looking for intermediate structures now, and not at bowling leagues and local political clubs.

Networked Individualism

Part of the contemporary concern is that questers for community (to appropriate

Robert Nisbet's 1953 term) have not realized that the nature of community has changed. To be sure, involvement in groups has declined, as Robert Putnam (2000) deplored in *Bowling Alone* when he found that people were staying home in the 1990s to watch TV instead of going to the local community's bowling league or civic club.

Although traditional communities were never as local or solidary as commentators have idealized (Wetherell, Plakans, and Wellman 1994), the introduction of new technologies introduces transformations in how people form and maintain relationships as well as how they gain access to information and support. Technologies that facilitate contact at a distance—telephones, steamships, railroads, cars, planes, and now digital media—allow people to escape the bonds of encapsulated social ties of kinship, locality, and occupation (Simmel [1903] 1950). Such technologies offer opportunities to form supportive social relations in multiple contexts that do not strongly overlap—family at home; colleagues in the workplace; and friends in the neighborhood, church, and voluntary associations (Rainie and Wellman 2012). People are able to escape the control of tradition and hierarchy and maneuver around the insularity of echo chambers and the constraints of primordial filter bubbles (Dubois and Blank 2018).

Community was not necessarily "lost" or "saved" as a result of the transformations that came with mobility (see also Webber 1963; Wellman 1979). 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 and Hampton 2017). As Manuel Castells (1996) has argued, new information and communication technologies allow people to overcome historical spatial limits on interaction in networked societies. The "space of flows" has superseded the "space of places." 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 and Wellman 2003; Rainie and Wellman 2012). Throughout their life course, people move

from one neighborhood to another, from one job to another, and from one interest to another. Their mobility has encouraged severing ties in one context only to form new, supportive ties in another. Home computing, internet technologies, and, later, mobile phones have amplified the trend toward networked individualism. As people and information move more freely through time and space, the structure of community tends to be less densely knit, less local, less tightly bounded, more diverse, and more fragmented. Few individuals are socially isolated, but there is little communal awareness of daily activities (Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wang and Wellman 2010; Wellman 2001).

Persistent and Pervasive Community

Yet even with the rise of the internet, the lack of persistence meant that social ties were often lost at key life-course events, such as moving, graduation, changing jobs, marriage, parenthood, and divorce (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Wellman, Wong, Tindall, and Nazer 1997) . The absence of relational persistence has contributed to a "nostalgia epidemic" (Bauman 2017): the perception that more relationships are transitory, disposable, and less meaningful than in the past. Although networked individualism provided an escape from insularity and control—the densely knit gossip networks of old—people had less relational durability and more limited awareness of the opinions and activities of those in their network.

This may no longer be the case (Hampton 2016). Recent communication technologies enable *persistent contact* by allowing people to articulate their association and maintain contact over time. Technologies such as Facebook's "friends" lists 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 more traditional communities (Wang, Zhang, and Wellman 2018; Yuan, Hussain, Hales, and Cotten 2016).

Yet unlike traditional communities, personal mobility, mobile phones, and social media provide opportunities for partial commitments to different social milieus.

A second contemporary affordance, *pervasive awareness*, results from the ambient nature of digital communication technologies, with the ability to share information and indicate the attentiveness and availability of social ties. Although the content of messages that contribute to pervasive awareness may appear trivial—a photograph of a meal or presence at an event—they can also convey subtle knowledge of friends and relatives' everyday interests, locations, opinions, and activities. Heightened awareness of network life events—stressful activities in others' lives—might even increase people's own stress (Hampton, Lu, and Shin 2016). Although it is tempting to equate persistent contact and pervasive awareness with formal surveillance, they have more in common with the shared daily experiences and gossip of traditional community networks, albeit in a partial, more segmented way (Hampton 2016).

Higher levels of awareness of diversity within social networks are natural by-products of pervasive awareness and persistent contact (Chen 2013; Hampton, Lee, and Her 2011). Network diversity can be related to improved access to information and diverse resources. The increased visibility between network members from different social milieus—often 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), increasing the density of community bonds. 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 within communities (Goel, Mason, and Watts 2010). An awareness of newfound diversity could increase access to (and possibly understanding of) diverse points of view and counter a tendency to form intolerant echo chambers (Hampton 2018). Yet individuals remain mobile, involved in multiple social milieus (Hampton et al. 2011) and connected through multiple channels on and offline (Hampton et al. 2009). Hence any self-selection into online echo chambers (Del Vicario et al. 2016; Dubois and Blank 2018) or algorithmically driven filter bubbles (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015) pale in comparison to historical examples of insular traditional communities.

Restating the Downside

Dotson (2017) notes that there is a tendency in the study of networked community to focus on the positive examples of how people thrive under networked individualism. Our own work does show that most find support and remain connected under networked individualism, but we have not always given equal weight to those who struggle—some with disconnection and isolation. Moreover, a recent East York study of older adults shows that while the great majority are socially connected, many do not exhibit networked individualism (Wang, Zhang, and Wellman 2018).

There are clear downsides to all configurations of community. Some of the potential tradeoffs are clearer than others. For example, heightened persistence and awareness have costs. While they can provide increased awareness of diverse opinions, an awareness of dissonant information about the opinions and beliefs of social ties can reduce perceived homophily, increase cognitive dissonance, and silence democratic debate by heightening the perceived risk of discussing important matters (Hampton, Shin, and Lu 2017). While knowledge of resources embedded in social networks is generally viewed as a plus—providing social capital—increased awareness of others' stresses and increased drawing on informal support can create additional demands that exhaust resources and those who provide them (Hampton and Ling 2013; Liebow 1967). This may lead some to withdraw from the uncertainties of participating in multiple partial networks and find refuge instead in more traditional, bounded tribal solidarities that protect their identity and local autonomy.

It is here that we start to see the risks of engineering community. When scholars like Dotson suggest replacing broad-reaching

social networks and institutionalized structures with local, dense networks and informal social controls, the potential to resurrect the inequalities and injustices of traditional community also returns. Might the reorganization of community into a system of persistent relationships 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, which has accompanied the online shaming of social transgressions caught by mobile phone cameras and shared through social media. Some examples are Californians' ''drought-shaming'' of excessive water users (Milbrandt 2017) and the public identification (''doxing'') of white supremacists who have attended rallies (Ellis 2017). Informal watchfulness within networks that are high in persistence and awareness allows for a speed and severity of punishment that may supplant institutional, formal law.

While some might find such informal social control beneficial (de Vries 2015) and have faith that densely knit communities with improved skills in face-to-face conversation will short-circuit repression and social injustice (Dotson 2017), we find it unlikely. Although Dotson and other neo-tribalists worry about the loss of connectivity, the evidence suggests that community has never been lost in the western world. Communication, information, and transportation systems make available and constrain the shape and composition of the networks that make up communities. When researchers look for supportive relations within these networks, they generally find thriving communities, even as people continue to fear untraditional unknowns.

The fundamental nature of community is indeed changing as social media melds with in-person connectivity. Recent technological changes are again reshaping the structure of community—not withering it. Social media is fostering networked, supportive, persistent, and pervasive community relationships. Hence, there is a 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 recurrent nostalgia for the supposed good times of the past and the unease that often comes with changing times. Dissatisfaction with community has always existed. We need to recognize that although the structure of community may change, it has never been lost and has always needed fixing.[1]

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[1] A full review of the history of the community-lost debate can be found in the forthcoming Hampton and Wellman piece ''All the Lonely People? The Continuing Lament about the Loss of Community.''

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