How Modern Technology is Effecting the Community

by Darryl Rutherford

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Introduction

There are many differing opinions about what age of technology we are in. Some people would say that we are in the midst of a technology revolution where as others would argue that the revolution is over and we are now learning how to adapt to the new technological advances. In either case, our communities are in the midst of their own revolution due to the Internet and other technological advances.

To understand how our communities are under assault we must first define what a community is. There are three key elements that make up a community, a locality, a local system and a community field (Wilkinson, 1991). Wilkinson defines these three elements as follow:

The locality is a territory where people live and meet their daily needs together. A local society is a comprehensive network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests. A community field is a process of interrelated actions through which residents express their common interests in the local society. (Wilkinson, 1991)

There are many parts of a community but unless people live and act together in a local society, they are not considered a community. The most essential ingredient to a community is social interaction.

This research paper will address different aspects involved in the assault on community. Due to modern technology, social interactions are ever changing and most people lack intimate social ties with those in their neighborhood. The ease of communication is making globalization more prolific with many cultures losing their ancestral traditions and having to transition from localism to globalization. The last aspect to be addressed will be that of technology not being readily available to poorer communities and the impact this is having on them to sustain an equitable way of life. These issues are important in keeping communities functioning properly and need to be addressed so that people are aware of the effects Internet and modern technology are having on communities.

Current Literature and Studies

As a lecturer in literature and culture at the University of California, San Diego, Marc Slouka wrote “War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the high-tech assault on reality.” This book addresses the technological revolution unfolding, by taking a satirical look at the culture of cyberspace. Different areas associated with social interaction are discussed such as the assaults on identity, community and reality. Slouka reveals the effects of
technology while offering his argument for affirming our connection to the “unwired world”. It’s a fabulous opinion of what can be if we get caught up in the cyberspace community.

Another article addressing interactions in society was written by Lance Freeman titled “The Effects of Sprawl on Neighborhood Social Ties: An Explanatory Analysis.” This article addresses social ties and how new technologies, in particular automobiles, are having a negative impact on neighborhood interactions. The research concludes by explaining the results of the existence of neighborhood social ties and the number of neighborhood social ties in the cities studied. In regards to existing social ties, the researchers found that every 1% increase in the proportion of individuals driving to work is associated with a 73% decrease in the odds of an individual having a neighborhood social tie (Freeman, 2001). In regards to the number of social ties, the researchers found that with every 1% in the proportion of individuals who drive to work is associated with a 71% decrease in the odds of a respondent having relatively more neighborhood social ties. The article suggests that modern technologies that inhibit face-to-face contact can somehow undermine neighborhood social ties.

With the increase of ease in communicating with individuals worldwide, communities are losing their sense of individuality. More and more communities are becoming globalized and sacred sites along with long-time traditions are being exploited or completely forgotten about. David Studdert in his article “Bondi, Baywatch and the Battle for Community” argues against “international communities” because of these reasons. During the formulation of the Australian Olympics, long time traditions relative to life in the bush or to communities built around fellowship were being called “Un-Australian” (Studdert, 1999). What Studdert sees as an attack on developed communities is a “…parody of a community, in which a lot of isolated people huddled together in isolation talking on their cell phones” (Studdert, 1999). Community is becoming more of a globalized community with the advents of modern technology loosing its sense of individuality.

Technology not being readily available to poorer communities and the impact this is having on them to have an equitable way of life is known as the Digital Divide. R.G. Lentz and M.D. Oden authored “Digital Divide or Digital Opportunity in the Mississippi Delta Region of the U.S.”. They address how the lack of opportunity to support modern technology, whether through the inability to access Internet use or the ability to use information technology, is aiding in poorer regions actually falling further behind in economic growth. They state that modern “technologies originate first in high-income urban regions, only reaching poorer and/or less urbanized areas with considerable lag” (Lentz & Oden, 2001). The inequities lie within communities not being able to have access to modern technologies in a timely fashion so as to support or attract businesses, which would bring more economic stability to poorer communities. This is causing certain communities to fold under economic pressure, send their residents to other communities to provide a sustainable way of life, or struggle with minimal paying jobs while having to work more often than enjoy life.

The underlying theme in all of this literature is the assault on community by modern technology. The litera-
ture doesn’t necessarily argue against modern technology, but brings to light issues that modern technology has upon building and sustaining a productive community. Modern technology has the ability to improve the “collective intelligence of humanity as a whole” (Stonier, 1992) but we must be aware of the effects that it will have upon communities. We must learn to adapt and carry on with our social interactions supporting a healthy community.

**Theory and Methodology**

Sociologists have debated the theoretical base behind community research for many years. To state one theory behind this research would detract from the validity of other theories. Keeping this in mind, this section will attempt to unify theories, which will ultimately define urban/rural sociology.

Community is defined in the introduction stating that unless people live and act together in a local society, they are not considered a community. This involves social interaction. The theory of symbolic interactionism defines the meanings used in social interaction. One theme behind symbolic interactionism states, “The focus of all interactionist work is neither with the individual nor the society per se; rather, its concern is with the joint acts through which lives are organized and societies assembled” (Turner, 2000). Social interaction is organized through the symbolic acts interpreted by each actor in society. By defining these acts, society assembles or organizes its way of life accordingly.

Another aspect of a productive community is that of there being an agreed upon order to the parts that define the function of society. Systems theory uses a functional explanation that is actually a kind of description; in the sense of saying, “here is how this element fits into this larger whole” (Turner, 2000). These elements organize the actions of individuals within the system or community.

Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are two systems involved in the paradigm known as Structural-Functionalism and define the differences of community and society. Structural-Functionalism views social order as possible because of the norms that are defined by goals and the appropriate means for reaching them. Nan E. Johnson defines the two systems of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as follows:

Gemeinschaft (community) is a system governed by sentiment, where communication is typically face-to-face, and all communicants give and receive information. Gesellschaft (society), communication between two actors serves a few specific goals, connects fewer roles that the actors share, and thus promotes an experience of impersonality. (Johnson & Wang, 1997)

Gemeinschaft is the theory used behind the definition of community. Here one would find more interactions serving diverse goals in perpetuating a social interaction.

Urban/rural sociology is in a state of transition. Some sociologists argue that the study of communities is outdated and that it needs to be redefined. Others argue that it’s in a process of needing to be redefined. The reason this argument is being made is due to the change of methods used in researching communities.

From the early 1900’s through the 1960’s, a more qualitative approach
was used for the research of communities. Researchers used ethnographies and participant observation to get involved in what was going on in communities and used these methods to describe the community. These qualitative methods supported the theories used in explaining communities and gave validity to the research because of the first hand knowledge reported by the researcher. The problem with these methods is that the information gathered could be argued as being too subjective. To counteract this subjectivity research switched to a more quantitative approach.

In the 1960’s, the qualitative approach gave way “to comparative statistical analyses of specific and limited aspects of community organization” (Wilkinson, 1991). With a quantitative method, researchers are using actual data gathered and interpreting the results making it more possible to be more objective in their analysis towards their hypothesis. The downside of this method is that there is no emic description of society and is only explained by what the researcher found in the data.

Discussion and Discoveries

The effect that modern technology is having upon communities is evident where ever we go. Automobiles make it easier to travel long distances so that neighborhood ties are not nearly as important as they use to be to engage in social interactions. Cell phones keep you in touch with whom ever you choose to call so that if you’re alone at a coffee shop you can just call someone instead of having to interact with a complete stranger. The Internet is by far the harshest weapon on the assault of community.

Through the Internet, a person doesn’t have to leave their home for anything. They can order whatever they like online, from food to clothing to even love. If a person wants to take on a totally different personality than what they have in real life, they could go into any type of a chat room and be whoever they want to be. As Slouka can see through developments in the computer world, it’s an “attack on reality as human beings have always known it” (Slouka, 1995). Just look at the class we’re in the midst of taking. How many people even know what their instructor looks like.

I’m not saying that modern technology is bad but I do believe we must be careful to what can happen if we become too reliant upon it. Through this research, I have discovered what scholars believe to be behind the make up of community. I can see how the Digital Divide can make ghost towns out of pridelful yet poor communities. Even the effect of globalization upon community traditions is threatening the lively hood of individuals worldwide.

I have gained many new insights upon the makeup of community. I can now see a difference between “society” and “community” whereas before I would use these words interchangeably. I can also see a further topic of research, maybe one that could lead my senior capstone project.

Conclusion

Through researching these theories and methods used in discussing communities, I have been able to gain valuable insight as to what it takes to make community work. We need to find a balance between community and technology so as not to loose our individuality or our social ties. We need to keep in mind the
three elements that make up a community and make use of technology to keep community alive.

Technology is changing the way we interact in communities. There is no going back to the old way of life without completely destroying technology. But we can move forward with it. The conveniences brought upon by technology can be used in a productive way to help build those social ties and organize the communities where people live and meet their daily needs together. Finding that balance will take time and lots of patience but it is the key to building a successful community.

References


