TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING
ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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Socio-Political Theory

by
Christina Salva Dreifort
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As many great scholars and feminist theorists have said before me, *I did not get here on my own but through the help of others*. I want to thank my committee and my undergraduate professors for being so much more than the title professor could ever convey.
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ABSTRACT

TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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Information and modern society are interconnected with interpersonal relationships and the technology that is used by the masses to facilitate communication that makes those relationships possible. Social Networking Online Communities (SNOC) such as Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter have gained increased popularity with the public as well as significant media attention. By examining differences between traditional communications and internet-based social networks, potential consequences that could result from supplementing or replacing the traditional face-to-face communication of social information with internet based social networking are explored.

The transition of communities from face-to-face communication to technology-based communication, such as telegraph, telephone, and eventually the Internet, are described and diagramed. As the origins of communities are discussed,
theories from Émile Durkheim and Amitai Etzioni are detailed. Also, primary research on Social Networking Online Communities was conducted by creating a user account on each social networking site.

By comparing and contrasting Social Networking Sites with communities as defined by the theory of Communitarianism, the question to be answered here is “Are Social Networking Online Communities true communities?” Tensions exist in relationships that are built on technology. Society, by trying to build communitarian type relationships, becomes overly complex because the flow of information has drastically changed. For example, when using modern technology to communicate, the individual may abbreviate words or use made up words or symbols (like abbreviates, emoticons, acronyms).

The results suggest that Social Networking Sites do not constitute true communities, because the technology that allows access to SNOC is a gatekeeper of communication: if one is unable to use the social networking technology to reach out to another user, that mode of communication is rendered inoperative.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We argue instead that the idea of information – the social attitude that considers information an abstract essence and treats it as a thing – currently operates as a key term for understanding social change, so much so that it lends itself to the characterization of the times as an information age or information society.

Schement & Curtis, *Tendencies and Tensions of the Information Age*

Information is intrinsically linked in modern society through the interconnectedness of interpersonal relationships and the technology that is used by the masses to conduct communication within the community. In this paper, I am defining and explaining traditional communities as relationships based on group members being in close physical proximity to each other. More and more citizens are depending on technology to exchange information and maintain their societal connections.

Communities are the foundation of society, according to theories by Émile Durkheim (2009), which were later fleshed out by Amitai Etzioni (1993) in *The Spirit of Community*. These communities have been traditionally maintained by human-to-human, face-to-face interaction with friends, neighbors, business associates, etc. This interaction allows for individuals to fall into one of three modes of face-to-face interaction: primary, secondary, and tertiary relationships, each of which are pivotal parts of the function of societal communication. Today, more and more citizens are depending on technology to exchange information and maintain their societal connections.
Over the years communications have been carried by message runners, mail carriers, the telegraph, the telephone, and other various forms of continually developing technology, but for the most part communities have been founded on social relationships based on proximity. If humans are capable of coming into physical contact with each other (i.e. in close proximity) then they will develop a society and a community based on those relationships. They will attach and associate a higher amount of value built upon said relationships within the community, which according to Etzioni brings about a concern and later action by the community’s citizen to participate as a full member of that community.

Over the past decade, there has been a rise of Social Networking Online Communities (SNOC), also known as Social Networking Sites that create virtual communities through use of the internet. These sites have users create an online representation of themselves via a profile of vital personal statistics, and interact with other users by linking their profile with other profiles of their friends or other persons of interest. Users can then exchange information with each other via messages sent and received over the public internet.

A user can be available to converse (“chat”) anywhere there is internet access: real time doesn’t cause a hindrance. This “linking” allows for a virtual community to be created within specific parameters, which in turn allows for a flow of information to be created, changed, and manipulated as well as sustained. Sustainment only occurs as long as the participants continue to be “connected.” However, the moment that the individuals sever their connections, the “virtual reality” of community no longer exists. This paper will examine the idea of communities in society, how they developed in terms of
importance and communication, and their migration to the internet via SNOC. The ramifications of long-term societal and individual effects of Social Network Online Communities may be a furthering dependency on techno-society. This paper examines this idea by exploring the differences between traditional communications and internet-based social networks, and drawing conclusions about consequences that could result from supplementing or replacing the traditional face-to-face communication of social information with internet-based social networking. More importantly, this paper asks the following questions: Are Social Networking Online Communities redefining the notion of traditional communities as is presented in this paper’s preceding analysis? Are Social Networking Online Communities “true” communities? How is membership determined? Do the members of the Social Networking Online Communities have social responsibilities towards each other? Through the theoretical lens of communitarianism, this paper seeks to grapple with these questions.
CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE FOUR TENETS OF COMMUNITARIANISM

A communitarian perspective recognizes both individual human dignity and the social dimension of human existence.

Etzioni, *The Communitarianism Network*

According to tenets put forth by the great mind of Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “As individuals or as peoples, by fighting for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity” (Freire 1970, 45). If we look to educate society, the individual will be awarded personal self-respect through the achievements of education, which allows a fundamental amount of human dignity. Human dignity can be described as the schematic that affords all human beings value and worth, regardless of race, class, or gender. Each individual is allowed equality as well as equity, that no human being will be forgotten or marginalized. Human dignity, when freely given to individuals within a society can accomplish great things. As part of the shared common goal, you want to assist another member of the community when they are down. Community based organizations build up their members in order to further the sustainability of the individuals and neighborhoods. Civil service allows community members to have a common amount of responsibility for one another. This action is the basis for shared human dignity that is possible within the community.
Liberty

A communitarian perspective recognizes that the preservation of individual liberty depends on the active maintenance of the institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect; where we acquire a lively sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, along with an appreciation of our own rights and the rights of others; where we develop the skills of self-government as well as the habit of governing ourselves, and learn to serve others--not just self.

Etzioni *The Communitarianism Network*

The purposeful use of preservation of liberty as a tool to maintain communitarianism is critical. Communitarianism is defined as a social movement aiming at shoring up the moral, social, and political environment--part change of heart, part renewal of social bonds, part reform for public life (Etzioni 1993). Preserving the liberty of others allows one to protect one’s own liberty. Respecting and honoring the rights of others are clear viewpoints that must be shared among communities’ members. All public institutions within society must acknowledge the importance of all citizens’ rights. Granting equal access, choice and mobility allows the individual to experience value as well as worth. The primary principles of access, choice, and mobility permit the possibility of authentic equality and equity in society and community.

Responsibility

A communitarian perspective recognizes that communities and polities, too, have obligations--including the duty to be responsive to their members and to foster participation and deliberation in social and political life. (Etzioni 2000)

The concept of responsibility includes both personal responsibility, along with the responsibility for those who are your fellow citizens, to bring about an interconnectedness that builds a bond between the individuals. The ability to learn these
necessary skills is to actively move towards communitarianism; persons as well as their surrounding communities must learn these values, not only from home, but from all of life’s associations. These actions will forge a sense of responsibility for one another, and that directly reinforces stewardship of self and others.

Information flow can be directly affected by trust and how those who are in power utilize their authority when gathering information and what actions are directly taken because of said information. Part of the problem of instilling a sense of community responsibility is how you construct relationships of authority exchanging information between the community and the police and build a sense of community. One example of how neighborhoods build social responsibility when there is such lack of trust can be seen in Russia, where official organizations like the old USSR’s Committee for State Security better known as the KGB, were seldom trusted with community responsibility. One public patrol group has a solution: regular citizens form the “Druzhiniki” to monitor police and citizen interaction, and the legislators have debated on how they should support the patrol group Druzhiniki as well as what their exact role is.

…volunteers, called Druzhiniki, who patrol with increasing frequency in the capital alongside the professionals to bolster their ranks and, at times, counter their belligerence … A group of lawmakers in Russia’s Parliament is pushing legislation that could enhance the authority of existing volunteer patrols. Today, these volunteer groups appear little different from the civilian neighborhood watch organizations found in many countries. But in Russia they offer a rare example of volunteerism in a society that remains largely skeptical of civic groups after years of forced social activism in the Soviet Union, though some fear a return to the days of civilian informers … ‘We should be working on those issues that the police simply don’t have time for, like small street crimes and crime prevention,’ Mr. Kharlamov said … Critics, however, worry that this emboldened civilian police force could easily succumb to the corruption that already pervades Russia’s law enforcement agencies. (Schwirtz 2009)
The community is assuming an amount of responsibility for one another to build mutual respect. This level of responsibility can only come to a community that is experiencing face-to-face connections; these face-to-face connections are what build the bridges between individuals. When participating in responsibility to self and others, a higher sense of community people coming together has a positive impact such as with safety of the public.

There is another side to this argument: Openness of community, or information accessibility, allows for the potential for communication tensions as well as positives. Consider that information can be considered an “item of exchange” in the marketplace, so to allow for open communication may constitute a value loss for other individuals who depend on the regulation and control of that information for a profit. So there is an impetus for some to keep information closely controlled and regulated; however, when this happens responsibility for community is denied.

. . . in order to protect the democratic process, government must insure the availability of information, since information is the means by which the citizenry can achieve the informed status necessary for them to make democracy work. (Schement & Curtis 1997, 139)

The ability to have access to data online has the power to either enforce or dismantle values.

Open Discourse

A communitarian perspective does not dictate particular policies; rather it mandates attention to what is often ignored in contemporary policy debates: the social side of human nature … The political views of the signers of this statement differ widely. We are united, however, in our conviction that a communitarian perspective must be brought to bear on the great moral, legal and social issues of our time. (Etzioni 2000)
Open discourse fosters discussion that allows for everyone to be accepted at the table (hooks 1973). Within hooks’ writing, she talks about making a place for everyone at the table so there can be an open dialog and make sure that all members are validated within the community with equal shared expression. Members of the community are given an open forum for discussion, giving voice to all those involved in action without marginalization. When applying open discourse principals, human dignity is going to be a core motivator.

These are theoretical conclusions that were drawn out by the use of communitarianism as a framework, based on these tendencies that erupted out of the support of face-to-face communities turning out to be the basic issues that bond and unify communities, enhanced under the umbrella of communitarianism. Creating lasting social networks greatly depends on the commitment to ethical behavior that is based around common sense logic, which opens the door of inclusion to all parties to participate in the open dialog. The intersectionality of community members can be a solidifying action that allows for the possibility of a broader perspective of hope to be embraced. Focusing on the Four Tenets of Communitarianism - human dignity, liberty, responsibility, and open discourse allows for the members participating within the tenets to actualize the building of the foundation of Communitarianism. As earlier stated by Paulo Freire, “As individuals or as peoples, by fighting for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity” (Freire 1970, 45) these ideas can be used as a step towards recognizing that there is a daily dependence on the community by the individuals who are relying on the goods and services that are provided by fellow citizens. The social bonds that can be forged over every day encounters allow for the
participants to actuate goals that are supportive of the communitarian philosophies and the tenets that provide the foundation.
CHAPTER III

TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

In *Community and Society: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Ferdinand Tonnies’ (1958) theories centered around two forms of human will: the essential will that drives human force’s basic instincts and needs, and the arbitrary will that is goal oriented and purposeful (Tonnies 1958, 223-231). Gemeinschaft (community) serves the essential form of the human will, where individuals get out of the community what they put into it, and do so to gain benefit for themselves.

Gesellschaft (society) has a more goal oriented, socially conscious conception, focusing on the involvement of community members having a need for participation in order to ensure a cohesive community network for members to utilize. The norms of community-oriented ideals became second nature to the community members. The use of the tendencies became normalizing social markers that collectively obey and respond to the needs of the society (Tonnies 1958). Tonnies’ Gemeinschaft theory is an integral part of the foundation and the driving force of Etzioni’s communitarian principles. When utilizing the theories set forth by Tonnies and Émile Durkheim’s “De la division du travail social” (Müller 1994, 73), which, explores connections between individuals and society in 1893, we are able to broaden our theoretical perspective. Members of the community as individuals are drawn to action on behalf of others for the betterment of
the community, while at the same time improving themselves. Etzioni presumes that with freedom comes responsibility to be a community bond maker.

However, the modern community that makes use of technology as a primary mode of communication may find difficulties maintaining cohesion. There are fast paced changes that greatly affect the community and its members. Changes within society happen at such a high speed that social and moral rules do not always get made in time to have a stemming effect on a critical situation. The rules and resulting order lag behind technology mainly due to the fact that not every member of the community can afford to keep up with competing factors that drive technology to change rapidly.

Controlling technology and the information associated with the advances, changes the way a society communicates and allows for those who are the over-seers of such technology to possess a certain amount of societal power. This power within the society tends to become unbalanced. In addition, the structural and cultural domain has been controlled by the dominant few in society who have set the rules up to preserve an unequally controlled society. One could argue this societal-inheritance of power passed from few to few caused more social and individual damage than if there had been social equality.

Durkheim in his writing *De la division du travail social* (2009) explores the French socialistic tradition of what can be called *communal associationalism*. Communal associationalism is people coming together for companionship and cooperation to improve life and the standard of living for all members of the community. Within this is a concept of the “industrial society” a new type of society to be driven by engineers and technicians to achieve technological progress and increases in productivity (Müller 1994,
Durkheim’s (2009) views sometimes represent a pessimistic opinion, like his beliefs that capitalistic division of labor always leads to exploitation, alienation, and pauperization. Durkheim’s (2009) theories on relationships start to follow a transition from labor-based societies to information and relationship-based societies. Starting with the concept of mechanical solidarity in which society’s members’ relationships are linked based upon labor and labor services rendered to each other, Durkheim (2009) then transitions into the concept of organic solidarity which states that individuals are linked into communities based on their differences and specializations.

Traditional communities are birthed from within these concepts creating closely knit groups of people who are at the core of communities. These communities allow for bonds to be made between the individual members of families as well as reaching beyond the family to include friends and neighbors, hoping to connect on the most fundamental level of humanity. This is building on the foundation that the we cares as much as the I cares about the community and the society that is surrounding the places where they work and live. The social behaviors and attitudes exhibited by those participating within the traditional communities will display certain characteristics, which allow for the communitarian tenets to progress.

Within this paper there is a reliance on Etzioni’s usage of the term traditional. Loosely defined, traditional principles would imply a handed-down set of behaviors and belief systems that the individuals within the communities demonstrate within their daily lives. The definition of traditional becomes increasingly complicated when considering the different philosophies that are associated with the usage of the term. For the purpose of this study we can apply the term traditional using the parameters which allow for the
consideration of the philosophies of shared common values within the society that strengthen communal ties of the individuals as well as allowing for the freedom to be flexible when considering who lives within the said community. Both the micro and macro community operate within the guidelines set by the parameters of the communitarian belief system. Etzioni uses the term community or communitarian nexus to sum up the bonds and values that are at work within the community. Also within Etzioni’s (1993) explanation of communities he explains that there is need for inclusion of community members who are beyond the qualifications of community member by proximity. Etzioni acknowledges the new non-geographical community. He mentions that there are new, non-geographical, communities made up of people who do not live near one another. Their foundations may not be as stable and deep-rooted as residential communities, but they fulfill many of the social and moral functions of traditional communities. Work-based and professional communities are among the most common of these. That is, people who work together in a steel mill or high-tech firm such as Lotus or Microsoft often develop work-related friendships and community webs; groups of co-workers hang around together, help one another, play and party together, and go on joint outings. “As they learn to know and care for one another, they also form and reinforce moral expectations” (Etzioni 1993, 121). Face-to-face interpersonal communication provides communitarian tenets due to the proximity. SNOCs may have a more difficult time maintaining and sustaining the bonds of community. I will return to this point later in my discussion.

Commonality is not a coercive component to traditional communities, but a binder of the people. Another aspect of the traditional community can be described as the
shared and expressed values that are enforced not only by the family, but by education and religious systems within said community. These are the driving forces maintaining the parameters of community values. “Most important for the issue at hand is the sociological fact that we find reinforcement for our moral inclinations and provide reinforcement to our fellow human beings, through the community. A common belief in communitarianism is that “We are each others’ keepers” (Etzioni 1993, 31). Concern for the well-being of others, in order to foster connections between individuals, is an important factor of traditional communities, lending to the ideals and tenets of communitarianism. Domination of others or coercion are not on the agenda as Etzioni continually brings into focus within his pedagogy of community. The above mentioned tenets as well as alienation are not the tenets practiced or promoted by communitarians.

Difficulties Maintaining Community

Technological advancements have both positive and negative repercussions for society. On the positive side of the argument, technology allows for individuals to increase productivity, efficiency, and overall profits through the use of new machines, assembly line techniques, as well as communication technologies. This same technology serves to dismantle the labor force system by limiting the amount of bodies needed for jobs because automation allows for fewer workers to be needed. The argument can be made that technology lessens the value of the human worker. With the move into an Industrialized Society coupled with the technology revolution, the worth that was placed squarely upon the worker was removed and not returned. Communities relied upon the commonality of being fellow citizens, as well as employees. The familiarity of being in
proximity both in the work place and within the greater community allows for communal principles to be exhibited. How, if at all, does either one of these dismantle Etzioni’s foundational theories that comprise his communitarianism theories - specifically concerning the four tenets of communitarianism, or at least the underlying motivators of communitarianism? Does the overall commitment to technology based communication formats further fragment the already fragmented society instead of actually bridging communities and strengthening interpersonal bonds? Employers must become more diligent in supervising employees who have access to technological communication devices due to the mere fact that it is a distraction from work tasks. These behaviors can be problematic and have the possibility to become a legal issue, which is beyond the scope of this study, however, worth noting since cyber law programs are being formed at some of the most prestigious universities around the globe.

Considering the lack of responsibility to one another outside of communicating to others, Schement and Curtis (1997) discuss how targeted television programming that selectively formats its content to serve a specific demographic of the community is an effective way of creating a virtual community by means of technology. It’s an easy transition to the world of internet based virtual communities. Bringing up the issue of all again, this creates a problem for citizens who wish to participate in technology-based communication, but have no means to do so because of economic limitations. Some individuals cannot afford to own a computer. For those who can participate in SNOC, it allows for the chaotic nature of community communication to become more streamlined, converting it from a disorganized cacophony of random information exchanged between individuals, to a flow-controlled prescription of
processed information. The ramifications of this involvement can be either positive or negative, depending on your level of isolation.

Etzioni (1993) contends that creation of equality and desegregation of the classes actually promotes more tensions in society’s communication, as a new dynamic of communication is created when social groups form after a period of being formless. Will you help someone because it’s the “right thing to do”, or because of a need for self-preservation as you consider your own situation? Even without an immediately present danger at hand, you may be thinking ahead for strictly selfish reasons. What happens when you are stranded and need help? A communitarian perspective views society as a fragile ecology of families and their supporting communities. If the family is not whole, help is not solidly available. If the family unit is not strong, they cannot participate in the community. The ripple effects and long-term consequences of present decisions are interconnected like a Venn diagram; what I do directly affects my neighbor as well as my global neighbor. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said that everything affects everything else, and that we are all part of what he calls a “global village” (Iconoclasts 2008). The freedom granted within society must come with the reality of responsibility.

Communitarian Principles

Take care of yourself and others will follow suit. If you contribute to society and to yourself, you get something out of it. If from birth, you are conditioned to respect yourself as a valuable human being, also being schooled and trained to respect every other human being as a worthy, respectable person, you will have a natural tendency to follow the natural morality that states you will take care of one another because you care
about one another. If you are vested in your own life, then you are vested in other people’s lives.

By taking care of the individual self, and by seeing one’s self having a positive place within the community, the individuals are going to want to see this positivity for others as well. There becomes a desire to see this communitarian desire spread to other people, hoping that those ideals will be reflected, and then reciprocated on a common level because we all have something at stake. As part of the “positive value system” with the majority of society, holding the same values of fabric of community and neighborhood is more attainable than the larger ideal of “society.”

Communities can tangibly belong to a neighborhood as well: if respect of self and others is shared equally, then we will have a shared equity in supporting our community. In urban low-income, high density populations known as ghettos, people want to make the best of a negative situation, and they find strength in each other and form relationships within said neighborhoods even in the midst of poverty. A similar, slightly less impoverished example exists in Chico, California in the University Housing project known as University Village and within the common language the “student ghetto”: a communal pool, shared grass area, and closely located, small apartments meant to be shared by students. They try to create a community that supports each other, so that if an individual is in trouble, others in the community will respond and assist. There are many different types of communities where people find themselves living close together that try to create communal ties.

The community needs to protect the dignity of its members and resist the industrial society’s attack on the social value of the persons in the laboring classes.
Society often socially constructs the labels that are about the persons directly related to labor classes. Affording the community and its individual members equal amounts of dignity and social worth allows for the forging of communitarian principles.

Every level of society can become extremely fragmented if not given value by the means of equality and community equity. Dignity within the human landscape will bring forth a new perspective of responsibility for one another. According to Durkheim (2009), social value is related to the value of labor. Human dignity is also related to the division of labor insofar as certain members of society may look down on those who hold positions of service some may consider “low class.” As an example, some people may associate social class with labor class and consider sanitation workers “trashy.” Biases are often based in straw man fallacies, substituting one argument for another. Dignity in direct relation to the position held in labor sector can be seen in a positive light when marginality is not the main factor within the societal and communal equation.

Etzioni (2000) makes note that an individual’s action is directly affecting someone else’s action and that level of responsibility is tied directly to communitarianism. One of the positive aspects of having a community that is closely connected is there will be “good will” between neighbors who feel solidarity for one another. When a group of people share a similar set of values they have a bigger stake in what goes on within their community.

Coming out of the 1950’s, a decade characterized by a widely shared set of core values in America that had citizens united against a common evil of communism, when President Kennedy called Americans in 1961 to national service, they responded by establishing the Peace Corps (Finlayson 2003, 283). This organization is an excellent
representation of communitarian principles, as the members travel world wide to perform services to improve communities like planting trees or digging wells, acting out communitarian principles in face to face proximity. The Peace Cops participation in the community they are visiting becomes a peculiar type of community based on a temporary involvement utilizing the communitarian spirit.

The stake that Etzioni mentions can be loosely described as that which a member or members have put into said community; the effort, care, and time dedicated to empowering each member of the community regardless of class, race, age, etc. The value placed upon the actions associated with what is at stake becomes critical to moving forward into the embrace of communitarian principles. A strong community that has the ability to foster mutual interest as well as believing in a greater good and betterment of all humanity has a greater chance with the embodiment of communitarianism. The level of personal investment becomes embedded in the community member’s actions that are carried out through a personal commitment to outreach programs, service, as well as provision of safety. Access, choice, and mobility are therefore tangible for community members. The ultimate litmus test of community is known as the *Cup of Sugar* test. At least in terms of using proximity as a defining factor, you are part of a community if your neighbors can count on you to borrow a cup of sugar if they run out, and reciprocate if you need to borrow a cup of sugar. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, SNOCs lack the ability to foster such dynamics due to lack of common access and proximity; they cannot pass a litmus test of a community because of the problematic nature of the technology-based framework of relationships.
Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that traditionally based communities allow for the blossoming of individuals as long as they are willing to participate in the fostering of shared values, negotiated within the parameters that everyone has worth and value. Proximity allows for the face to face interpersonal communication to be established, which in turns secures the ties between human beings.
CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL NETWORKING ONLINE

COMMUNITIES

In 1844, with the first completed telegraph line (Bellis 2009) a new way of communicating as well as a new group of telegraph operators was created. Along with it came unique dialects, slang, abbreviations, code of conduct, level of community and responsibility, as well as a new way to express interpersonal communication within the community. In short, the telegraph allowed for a new flow of information that connected people and bridged the problem of proximity for that era.

The advancements of the flow of information allowed a community to develop relationships of interpersonal connectedness over distance. Although face-to-face contact wasn’t the ultimate goal of the telegraph, its emergence filled a void in the information flow that was needed to keep people informed over distances. As telegraph, telephone, ARPAnet (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), and eventually the public internet technologies allowed people to exchange information and ideas (communicate), the methodology of their communication has morphed based on the technology. The latest permutations of communication using technology over the public internet are Social Networking Online Communities.

Friendster was founded in 2002 as the first “social networking site” before the creation of Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, or others (Schiffman 2009).
Friendster is focused on helping people stay in touch with friends and discover new people and things that are important to them…from any Internet-ready mobile device… [and] has a growing portfolio of patents granted to the company on social networking… (Friendster 2009a)

Friendster can be fully text based and can work on any computer, including those starting to be distributed to people in other countries where there is no computer access or electricity grid, that run off user-generated energy. It can also be accessed by mobile phone. It is the largest networking community globally with a significant amount of its traffic being generated through south and central Asia (Friendster 2009a; O'Neill 2008). As the original SNOC, Friendster has had the most time to change, adapt and grow. As a result, they showcase a variety of features for their users, including photo gallery, creation of custom avatars, blogs, and a variety of applications to customize the look and feel of the profile, as well as provide additional functionality. Being the first has also enabled Friendster to become a very popular SNOC, boasting 90 million users with profiles and in excess of 61 million unique visits a month globally (Orelind 2009).

However, it is becoming eclipsed by its more modernized and hip competitor, Facebook.

Facebook was created originally for college students to use, but its use has spread beyond this demographic to a wider public audience, growing to be one of the most popular SNOCs. Their mission statement is: “Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook 2009). According to their official statistics, Facebook reports more than 200 million active users, and more than 100 million Facebook users that are looking at their profile and logging on at least once a day.
An interesting aspect of Facebook is the way the business model is set up: Facebook has the appearance of a community rather than a business running for profit. Evidence of this is found in the Terms of Service for Facebook, that states,

If more than 7,000 users comment on the proposed change, we will also give you the opportunity to [vote] …vote shall be binding on us if more than 30% of all active registered users as of the date of the notice vote. (Friendster, 2009b)

This was recently an issue when Facebook wanted to change the way it dealt with users who had deleted their profiles and did not want their information to continue being displayed on other user’s profiles. After a vote, Facebook decided not to implement new policies that could affect those users.

LinkedIn was created for business professionals to interact on a SNOC that wasn’t bogged down with graphics and unnecessary fluff. LinkedIn’s mission statement pushes the idea that their SNOC does what others cannot do for professionals by providing a professional look and feel, business professional specific services, and the ability to maintain the privacy or availability of your profile and image online. Users can use the site to search for other users, find jobs or post available jobs, find companies in their field, and post questions and answers to other professionals.

MySpace was started in 2003 as an offshoot of Friendster, taking all the popular features of that original SNOC and putting them together (Lapinski 2008). MySpace users can join up and “Stay in touch with friends & family, share your photos albums & videos, and find old classmates & co-workers” (MySpace 2009). They also promote the fact that the service is free, something which, at this point, is common among all SNOCs. MySpace offers users the ability to customize their page or profile. One application providing such customization is called “webfetti” by Mindspark
Interactive Network, Inc., where users are encouraged to “Pimp [their] Profile.” Users can run a variety of applications on their page, use it as a blog site, share photos, or just use it to communicate and exchange messages with their friends.

Orkut is Google’s permutation of the SNOC, promoting itself as a way to “Connect with friends and family using scraps and instant messaging, Discover new people through friends of friends and communities, Share your videos, pictures, and passions all in one place” (Google 2009). All the usual features expected are there - users create a profile, add friends, exchange messages, and follow communities. Orkut’s application features are very interactive, and include the ability to customize it with applications that heighten the interaction of the users. These apps let users do everything from create a virtual 3D Avatar (BuddyPoke) to buying and selling your friends with virtual credits (Buy Your Friends - Divyansh Sharma) to online games that integrate themselves into the SNOC like ICL (International Cricket League - Games2win.com). These applications are free to use and add to the interactive community “feel” of this SNOC. There is more to do here then just talk to your friends – you can buy and sell them too.

Twitter is unique in the type of social network community it supports. Not different from other sites that have you maintain a page, a profile, etc, and then exchange messages with other users – what is different is the way messages are exchanged between users. Short updates (140 characters or less) are sent to Twitter by users, then other users can choose to follow their Twitter streams, or “tweets.” The name comes from the “short, trivial bursts of information that birds make” (Stone 2003). Originally created to exchange information between friends about what a certain individual was doing through
the course of a day, it is now used to spread information from a variety of individuals and news sources, including news giant CNN (and CNN personality Larry King “@kingsthings”) and online publisher Huffington Post. Evan Williams and Biz Stone on “The View” (2009) explain Twitter in the following way:

…Twitter is not a social network, Twitter is an information network. You go on and you say ‘I’d like to follow this source of information, I’d like to follow The View, I’d like to follow CNN, I’d like to follow Ev [Evan Stone, Twitter co-creator], I’d like to follow my mom, I want to curate this information and receive it in real-time because it’s meaningful to me.

In this way it has a dual role of serving as a communication tool between close friends who already have community established, connecting singular users to otherwise unreachable public figures and public information. Part of the point of Twitter is to get to the multitudes, not necessarily to build a lasting commitment to one another seeking the furtherance of community.

Online communities fuel the need for instant gratification which supersedes the root of communitarianism by providing the ability of modern technology to keep individuals connected without face to face contact twenty four hours a day as well as reachable in most corners of the globe. Reachability is a convenience that the virtual communities express as one of their greatest assets - the data collected concerning the virtual communities reveals that the availability factor doesn’t bring them in line with the foundation of communitarianism. Availability doesn’t ensure responsibility to those also within the community and ends when the technological device is turned off, connection is terminated, and the community connection is severed.
Tensions exist in relationships that are built on technology. Society, by trying to build communitarian type relationships, becomes overly complex because the flow of information has drastically changed. You have the ability, in an interpersonal relationship, whether business, private, or public (like you and your dry cleaner), to control how information is exchanged. This information can be immediately extended, and can be uploaded in a moment to the internet. If you are walking down the street behind a complete stranger, that person can take pictures of you or transmit other information to the internet. You’ll be instantly on the net and they won’t even know your name. Online social networking communities are able to circumvent responsibility or communitarian response to fellow community members by shutting off, powering down, or disconnecting. Without physical interconnection, SNOCs remain disconnected from the larger society.

Language can also be affected—when you use modern technology to communicate, you may abbreviate words or use made up words or symbols (like abbreviations, emoticons, acronyms). Even though translations exist on the internet for this sub-language, this doesn’t mean that outside of the online context this
communication makes sense. When you leave your “control center” and go out into society (public) and have face-to-face encounters on the sidewalk, if you haven’t developed traditional communication skills, how will you know the other person’s intentions? How will you read their body language at the grocery store or doctors’ offices? In these secondary relationships, how will you be able to interact effectively? The conventions of tertiary relationships in SNOCs cannot adequately transfer to face-to-face tertiary relationships.

Corporate monitoring of employees means companies can know where you are at any given moment via GPS monitoring or cell phone triangulation. Companies are monitoring, by the minute, how long you talk on company time, counting keystrokes, counting words typed, and gathering a multitude of other data to help track and monitor employees. This is a micro level communication that is focused on extracting communicated data from raw information.

The ability to communicate 24 hours a day allows for interpersonal communication to be experienced in new ways. For example the doctor/patient relationship has expanded because of communication advancements. A patient now has the ability to access a doctor at any time of the day. Email, SMS message, and text updates have the ability to enhance the face-to-face interaction; however, these forms of communication cannot replace the necessity of effective interpersonal communication.

The idea of an omnicitizen is formed out of the Dewey and Lippman (Shcudson, 2008) debates. The philosophical idea of a citizen who have the ability to understand the society in which they live, as well as the governing ideologies that set up the parameters of the society. Etzioni’s communitarian citizen relies on those same
principles of the omnicitizen. An individual who is highly involved in SNOCs as well as being fully vested in face-to-face communication would represent the omnicitizen of the information age, a participant in both sets of communities. As we give up face-to-face communication, will all relationships become pseudo-tertiary relationships as opposed to true Gemeinschaft communities?

Both the communitarianism based face-to-face communities as well as online based communities fall into exhibiting similar tendencies when creating parameters of operation, where rules of conduct create tensions within the group. Community unison can provide an enormous amount of support in order to exert action on behalf of the community as well as its individuals. SNOC can rally the troops via viral messages, however, the lack of face-to-face interpersonal contact allows for the further fragmentation of society. Sustainability becomes an issue for a community without proximity and face-to-face communication. The passing of one type of society into another allows for the morphing society to create new common goals and rules of order.

According to sociologist Spencer Cahill, the self is rapidly learning behaviors and attitudes that are absorbed by verbal cues and direction. The second form of learning is through silent learning that can be described as “non-verbal” learning; all the cues that one picks up that are informational but yet at the same time non-verbal. When observing both modes, positive modes to express human dignity and universal liberty allow for a civil system of institutions to operate without prejudices that directly allow for discrimination. This can lead to ignoring basic human rights. Civic duty along with the ideology of service can directly promote communitarianism. SNOCs do not promote this set of values. SNOCs are not based upon the notion that you will be experiencing
physical involvement, but virtual involvement which trumps the ideology of proximity to constitute a community.

Within communitarianism Etzioni uses the juxtaposition between the need for equitable human dignity as well as the need for a socially based existence that allows for an understanding of the divergence between communitarianism and SNOC. The drive within the individual to have interactive connectedness with other members of society gives way to the push-pull factors that become the building block of the importance of human dignity. Human dignity allows society to participate in social equity which allows for a more balanced society and individual existence. The emergence of the technological society challenges the foundation and motivations of communitarianism. Neighborhoods, and the individuals within their community have a stake in how they interact face-to-face with one another and the level of responsibility that becomes a motivating factor when encountering one another throughout the community. We belong to more than one community at once; our lives are intertwined with those with whom we are associated. That knowledge in itself is information - it’s the stuff in the flow (Schement & Curtis 1997). The flow is the formation of an individual’s life and all of the factors cumulating within their day-to-day activities. Building social ties and making friends online does not make you responsible for other human beings, like true community.

Facebook and Twitter communities can be used without a computer thanks to the SMS text messaging services on cell phones, but physical participation is very limited. Supportive bonds don’t mean anything when you are online and want to transition the support to the “real world.” Community depends on the physical interaction
that can be made when participants communicate utilizing proximity. Facebook, Myspace, and other SNOC claim to be “social networks” that further your friendships and relationships online. These services actually function as social isolators, reducing or eliminating face-to-face interaction.

If the only way you are communicating is through IM, email, or SMS, there may be a problem that develops in society over a period of time where large groups of individuals within society will not have face-to-face communication skills, which will hinder them in all relationships: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

A fourth kind of relationship is created when you use a SNOC or SMS service, where people communicate in a coded language that is pared down for a specific purpose (usually to fit in SMS character length limitations) that doesn’t allow for the ability to understand people. Social communication skills – body language and facial expressions mean – becomes harder if people don’t learn how to conduct face-to-face communication.

Also, the value associated with the information goes to both of the extremes: information becomes marginalized because it is widely available. The internet is the source of almost anything you may want to read (low cost or free). However, there are a variety of topics that are considered taboo within the social fabric that an individual can readily gain access to via the internet, which has the potential of creating tensions within the community. At the other extreme, some information is exchanged at the cost of millions of dollars on a day-to-day basis. Government intelligence information about society or social groups has been assigned a value, which creates specific tensions as information becomes a commodity. Information becomes a tangible item to be obtained
through different means of exchange. Because of the value put on the community, solidarity is created among its members. Solidarity may not necessarily exist in Twitter, Facebook, or Myspace. These groups do not imply social responsibility to another human being, and these groups don’t create social responsibility as part of the function mechanism of that group. The parameters of SNOCs allow for certain people to be given a release from communal responsibility. The questions posed throughout this paper may all be considered links into the future research of information, society, technology, interconnectedness, and politics.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

How does this ideology fit into the flow of the current technologically based society? How can the SNOC be highly probable with a true commitment of responsibility for one another regardless if there’s face-to-face contact or not? Is this what SNOC is or trying to do? Or are they fostering a new type of culture before the decaying community based culture loses itself within the new societal flow?

Online communities may not make a physical impact or change, or help in a physical face-to-face way. The technology of SNOC is a gatekeeper of the communication: if one is unable to use the social networking technology to reach out to another user, whether it is because they are impaired or injured, or economically disadvantaged, the ability to use this type of communication is lost. There may be a problem that develops in society over a period of time where large groups of individuals within society will not have face-to-face communication skills because they will grow up in a society where SNOCs dominate the communication realm and face-to-face communications happen less and less.

The element of reliability within the physical realm of the neighborhood can be interchangeable with Amitai Etzioni’s definition of community. The communitarian community cannot exist within the realm of virtual communities that have been created with the sole purpose of technological social networking ventures. The participants

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within SNOCs can’t be expected to have any sort of sense of responsibility to one another if the relationships lack face-to-face interconnectedness, verifiable with the *Cup of Sugar* test, to be observed within both the schema of practical and technical involvement.

Virtual communities can fragment themselves to the extreme end of the community continuum so much that they don’t amount to what Etzioni calls a community, becoming a counter perspective to the principles surrounding responsibility. This is due to the disconnectedness, lack of face-to-face experience, and the ability to skew the facts about said individuals by the creation of an avatar. The effect of creating a virtual self is a move to separate the self from any true sense of responsibility. This becomes problematic when considering Etzioni’s definition of the community and human existence. There is a separation of the two ideologies from one another. SNOCs could be the answer to the restless striving of humanity towards the ultimate communication method, but only if you have access, choice, and mobility to be engaged. The SNOC has the potential to offer society more opportunities to be full participants within both realms of communities discussed throughout this paper.

Limitations of the Project

Proximity and face-to-face relationships have a similar disadvantage to those based in SNOCs. The ability to communicate effectively is necessary in both face-to-face relationships and in SNOC based relationships, except in cases of extreme isolation, where it is actually more expedient to use technology for communication to span long distances to interact. These extreme rural situations, however, have their own set of
operational communication limits that are beyond the scope of this study and are therefore not considered.

Ferdinand Tonnies today would add technology to this deep type of influence within community. Tonnies would expand on technology’s ability to affect every aspect of society and the individuals living within the society. These influences are clearly complex beyond Tonnies’ imagination, when it must include a micro look into the home to examine technological advancements, computers, laptops, cell phones, palm pilots, etc. However, capitalism puts a price on every exchange and this includes information and this becomes problematic. This could possibly lead to a societal breakdown causing the decay of certain groups within society. Societal relationships have economic connections which have the ability to bring people together or separate them further. Those who are able to keep current with technology will not be left out of the societal embrace of new forms of communication.

Future Work / Recommendations

Future studies and research should explore many aspects of social networking. How authentic can relationships be when the contact is not face to face, but predominantly over technological modes like social networking web sites or mobile phone text messages? How will society move on to the next level of communication when such isolation within interpersonal relationships can exist? How will such isolation perpetuate itself within the interconnectedness of social networks?

If modern technology like computers and cell phones is used to build personal relationships, and they are maintained primarily through these modes of communication,
you may be unable to develop certain communication skills. The individual will not be able to read someone’s emotions, attitudes, or behaviors from their facial expressions or body movement if interpersonal communication is not done face-to-face. Even if the two-way communication includes two-way video over the web, the picture may be skewed or altered lending to possible misinterpretations of emotions. This can cause enormous problems in the society and community, because the individual won’t have the proper communication skills needed.

You may abbreviate words or use made up words or symbols (like abbreviations, emoticons, acronyms) for communicating and conveying mood. This could be an exciting change within society for linguists and sociologists to examine. Individuals may experience problems in the workplace because they haven’t had the need to develop the proper communication skills. The process could be seen as the development of a new, different language, or as an evolution of the existing language. Emoticons may become a substitute for sentence-long expressions of feelings and opinions. As we become further steeped in technology as a society, we will be forced to examine the relationships between technology and interpersonal communication and the self.

A plethora of academic fields of research will be able to study, analyze, and theorize about the future communication skills of American society as well as the larger global village that forges its identity on the foundation of technology interconnectedness. Future studies should be able to probe the psychological aspects of isolation and connection in technological relationships, including potential use of SNOCs in the legal, medical, educational, and political systems. The importance of utilizing Etzioni’s
communitarianism to critically analyze the future of interpersonal communication will allow for society to make choices to preserve the nuances of face-to-face communication.
REFERENCES
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