

COMMUNITY AND TECHNOLOGY

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Does technology create healthier communities or sicker ones? Ah, if only that were a simple question. The answer is actually yes, no, both, neither, and it depends. So let's examine some of the dimensions of this question.

The first dimension to examine is what we mean by the word community. In the "old days," for the middle and working classes, the question of community, in rural areas, was fairly simple. Community was very much place-based—the people you knew because you interacted with them in multiple roles as coworkers, church goers, shoppers, parents, volunteers, and others. But after that things got more complicated. They got more complicated in cities because inter-ethnic conflict helped define community—the Italian versus Jewish neighborhood, the African American versus Puerto Rican neighborhood, and so on. Such conflicts existed in rural areas as well, especially between Native American and Euro American communities, but the factor of distance made such conflicts more sporadic and focused on specific issues such as fishing and hunting rights. They got more complicated for the professional and upper classes because their network ties were as likely to be extra-local as local. After all, part of their role was to find ways to control the lower classes, and there were too few members of the upper class locally to do that by themselves. And the question of community got more complicated for everyone as transportation and communication technologies became more widespread and available across classes. As it became increasingly possible to call Joe on the phone, it became less important to live next door to Joe, especially in cities.

Today, as the Internet and long-distance travel becomes integrated into more and more people's lives, some people ask whether the concept of a place-based community is even relevant. How many of us have more strong friends in our neighborhood than across town or in the next town or in the next state or even in the next country. My friends are as much in Canada, Australia, and the UK as they are in Madison, Wisconsin.

Some will argue that these new forms of community, which are place-less, are actually not communities at all. And they have a number of points in their favor. Such communities are often one-dimensional. In contrast to place-based communities, where people interact with each other across multiple roles and see each other in all kinds of circumstances—in place-less communities people often interact in very specialized ways. You have your Yahoo Group on diabetes, or bicycle maintenance. So you don't really know those people. You can't ask them to watch your kids, they won't bring over soup when you are sick, and they won't mow your lawn when you are away. Instead, all those services must be purchased. We refer to this as commodification—when people are no longer able to do things for themselves or their neighbors and instead become dependent on a capitalist market for those services. We've heard the stories of people sitting in front of their computers at night rather than on their front porches. We've heard the stories of local businesses going under because people are buying things on the Internet.

But it's not so clear cut. There is evidence that most of our on-line time is actually coming from our TV time rather than our friend time. And people write far more e-mails to friends than they wrote letters. And there are cases where technology-mediated place-less communities have

achieved amazing things. This talk is being typed on a computer running a Linux operating system, using a software package called OpenOffice. All of this software has been developed by a vast place-less community of people, and is provided to the people of the world without charge. The place-less community, in this case, is fighting against commodification. The place-less community can also fight against discrimination. I work with nonprofit groups all over the place. One group happens to be led by a person with physical disabilities that prevent walking and make her speech very difficult for me to understand. I have told myself that this is a smart professional regardless of appearances. But it was only when I recently received an e-mail from her that I realized I hadn't overcome my own prejudices. I was surprised that I was surprised by the highly intellectual tone of the e-mail. Over the Internet we don't know the color of a person's skin, what disabilities they may have, what age they might be, their sexual orientation, and all the other characteristics by which we discriminate in our society. It is entirely possible that our place-less communities are much more desirable than the many place-based communities that seem so ready to oppress and exclude.

Perhaps the most interesting case is the hybrid community that is both place-based and technology-mediated. My daughter will be an entering student at Howard University in Washington DC this fall. I remember when I started college, where a "computer" was a machine that required at least a 400 square foot space to house. I knew exactly one person who was going to the same college, and it was only about an hour away from my home—UW-Whitewater. That was a person from my high school. My daughter also only knows one person from her high school going to Howard. But because of Facebook, she has a vast and tight network of friends from across the country. Many of them have already met face to face at a new student early in the year, and by the time of this conference, they will all be together in place at Howard. And they will likely still be communicating on Facebook. It is on Facebook that they are already discussing and organizing around campus issues. I pity the administrator who has to deal with students organized both in cyberspace and in person. I know another housing co-op of young professionals—busy people who work long and odd hours. They use e-mail to make many of their decisions even though they live in the same building. In their case, it allows for fuller participation than a face to face meeting that half of them would be unable to attend.

Now, all of this implies something about what a "healthy community" is. It is, minimally, a group of people that can achieve collective and individual goals. The collective part is the most interesting, because we can talk about embeddedness. Think of collectivities that are part of collectivities that are part of collectivities. So a collectivity that excludes or oppresses one of its sub-collectivities is not a healthy community. In this way we can think globally, locally, and every layer in-between. We can also think about horizontally overlapping collectivities as we recognize that people are members of both place-based and place-less communities.

The standard for technology, in such a community, is the extent to which that technology enhances a community's ability to achieve collective and individual goals, again keeping in mind the reality of embedded and overlapping collectivities. So technology that is available only to some, or that separates rather than connects, does not move us to healthier communities. And that means putting the community in front of the technology. I've written about the concept of community information technology, or CIT. And it has to go in that order. First, we need to understand the community and what it wants to accomplish. Then we look at the information (including communication) issues that must be managed to accomplish those goals. Then we look at how to shape technology to manage those information issues to accomplish those community goals. I've been part of a number of such projects. I've worked with subsidized housing communities, nonprofits, and people with disabilities to put technology to use for them.

But in all cases, the most important part of the process was the engagement of those constituencies in planning and designing the technology process to work for them. We don't even talk about technology until we've gone through the process of looking at community goals and context to make sure that the technology enhances rather than disrupts.

So, does technology create healthier communities or sicker ones? The answer is actually yes, no, both, neither, and it depends.