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Understanding communities in an age of social media: the good, the bad, and the complicated

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Not only does this special issue of *Information, Communication and Society* bring you seven fascinating articles, it also brings together contemporary thinking about community and social media. The study of community no longer must keep to a parallel track with the study of digital media. We intertwine and integrate the two, celebrating the people who are connected in a community, by whatever means.

Once upon a time, we thought we knew what communities were: small knots of people in local areas (‘neighborhoods’) where people knew each other and were mutually supportive. This golden narrative is repeated throughout time: nearly 80 years ago, American authors such as Thornton Wilder wrote romantic pieces about ‘Our Town’ (1938), and the play has been in production ever since. Even in 2016, U.S. presidential candidate John Kasich’s campaign is based on anecdotes about community’s social supportiveness.

Yet, such pastoralist nostalgia for community is wrong in two ways. First, most people in neighborhoods do not know one other – much less like or support one other. Second, if we focus on the sociability and supportiveness of community ties, rather than on their putative neighborhood location, it turns out that in the developed world, most of the ties people have will stretch well beyond their neighborhoods and often well beyond the sea. All of this was shown to be true well before the advent of the internet (Darin, 1959; Fischer, 1976; Wellman & Leighton, 1979).

Several things have happened to affect our understanding of ‘community’ over time. For one thing, politicians use the word to refer to aggregates of people with similar attributes or characteristics (such as ‘the gay community’) even if few of these people have ever met. That is quite different than a community based on connectivity and support. Political scientist Anderson (1991) expanded the term even further: ‘imagined communities’ which referred to nations to which people thought they were members. In Anderson’s imagined communities, ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (p. 6). Anderson’s concept has served as an illustrative lens through which to understand and appreciate online communities, such as *World of Warcraft*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game that brings people together around the world in short or long-term clans or conflicts (Nardi, 2010). Even in such amorphous, less-bounded milieus, people may need to imagine that they belong to a community; in this way, community is a mental conceptualization of the people with whom they are

communicating (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011), with whom they believe they are sharing sociability, support, and a sense of identity (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011). They are either 'broad abstract imagined audiences or more targeted specific imagined audiences composed of personal ties, professional ties, communal ties, and/or phantasmal ties' (Litt & Hargittai, 2016, p. 1); or they may be real people connected in real relationships as revealed in most of the papers in this special issue.

Computer scientists have focused on connectivity without mindfulness. They use 'community detection' algorithms to compile networks of people or websites who are linked to each other online, or as the leading review article states, 'the organization of vertices in clusters, with many edges joining vertices of the same cluster and comparatively few edges joining vertices of different clusters' (Fortunato, 2010, p. 75; see also Watts, 2004). For example, Valdis Krebs used Amazon's reports to identify which people who bought Book X also bought Books Y and Z to show that Democrats, Republicans, and Obama-supporters rarely read books from each other's camps in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign (as cited in Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

For a time, traditional community scholars stuck to their neighborhood focus and lamented the 'eclipse of community' (Stein, 1960). It took a while for some to come around to the belief that community is community, no matter where the networks may lead. Even more challenging was having online communities accepted as communities. When one of our coeditors (Wellman) led the founding of the *City & Community* journal in 2000, he had to argue repeatedly that online relationships can be real relationships – and that relationships often combine interactions in-person, on the internet (from email to Facebook), and on mobile phones. And still the bleat goes on, with some insisting that social media destroys community, their laments suffused with never-never-land nostalgia for happy villagers exchanging deep thoughts in local coffee houses (Turkle, 2011).

Once non-local relationships were accepted as constituting communities, the concept also expanded from residence to work; management analysts spoke of 'communities of practice' as networks of people who were in similar lines of work that shared lore and gave advice, either within an organization or between organizations (Wenger, 1998). These were workers who recognized that their tacit knowledge of information was more expansive, nuanced, and tailored than what rulebooks had previously indicated. Moreover, they also could tell you about which others could answer the questions that they themselves could not: 'Who knows who knows what,' as Contractor, Zink, and Chan (1998) put it.

Some of the articles in this special issue show the intermingling of online and offline connectivity. Some articles are about working together; some are about community interactions; some are about how community ties provide support on and offline. All of the articles go well beyond the neighborhood – both residential and workplace. We asked what it is to manage, inhabit, and build such communities. By analyzing specific communities and participants, these papers help explain how the purpose, the size, the structure, and the online platform affect practices.

Considering the number of peer-reviewed articles on online communities peaked pre-social media (in 2004–2005), the time is ripe to revisit the nature of communities in the age of social media. The articles in this issue are revised and peer-reviewed versions of those presented at the 2015 International Conference on Social Media and Society¹ organized by Ryerson University's Social Media Lab. Considering the conference's focus, it is not

surprising that social media is a key part of all interactions studied. These interactions are not between soulless automata, rather the *social* scientists here evidence how real people interact in real milieus.

We divide the issue into two partially overlapping sections: the first section analyzes communities themselves, and the second section emphasizes how communities provide support, information, and various forms of social capital.

Communities

Twitter is a platform where people can hang out, share what is happening in their lives, or link to interesting on the news (Gruzd et al., 2011). Twitter also supports so-called light-weight ‘communities of practice’ (Haythornthwaite, 2009), where those with common interests or in spatially distributed teams can make tacit knowledge visible to improve their work or leisure-time practices – 140 characters at a time.

For example, all of the editors of this special issue use Twitter as a primary news reader, whereby relying on the ‘tweeps’ they follow to bring interesting stories to their attention. So, too, do the journalists that **Bahareh Rahmanzadeh Heravi** and **Natalie Harrower** describe in ‘Twitter Journalism in Ireland: Sourcing and Trust in the Age of Social Media.’ With the cutback in correspondents, journalists now rely on social media to fill news vacuums, both in crises and in everyday situations. But, who should journalists believe in the deluge of breaking news? The authors use a national survey of Irish journalists in 2013 to describe how journalists rely on Twitter in their work practices: filtering for newsworthy and trustworthy stories to source new leads, monitoring social media trends, publishing and promoting their own work, and networking for current and future contacts. Internet experience matters more than age; media-savvy younger journalists are more active users of Twitter.

Twitter can also be more than a means for chatting about ‘what’s happening,’ to use Twitter’s catch-phrase. **Sarah Gilbert**’s ‘Learning in a Twitter-Based Community of Practice’ uses 24 semi-structured interviews to show how the tightly bounded Health Care Social Media Canada community of practice uses the hashtag #hcsmtca to aggregate and focus their Twitter discussions. Unlike the receiving and filtering conducted by Irish journalists, the members of this small community have weekly focused discussions, often led by a guest host. At least one participant makes use of Twitter’s ability to search an archive of hashtagged comments: ‘It’s become a way to aggregate learning processes and learning opportunities as well as go back and look at things historically.’ Online interaction on Twitter is not enough for some members, and they also meet regularly in-person on Canada’s west coast. The participants use the #hcsmtca hashtag to learn, identify who’s who in various parts of the healthcare field, and gain a sense of learning in a supportive community.

The third paper in this section, **Bree McEwen**’s ‘Communication of Communities: Signals of Online Groups’ is a linguistic analysis of 15 Reddit message boards, where subreddits encourage more focused conversations. The author argues that language use on these subreddit message boards are signals of online community viability. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) analysis shows that highly active message boards are more likely to use terms referencing past discussions. They assume stability among veteran users and have more developed conversational threads. By contrast, moderately

active message boards – with subscribers in the tens of thousands rather than the millions – use a greater amount of ‘we-ness’ and sociability words. In comparison to larger, highly active message boards, the moderately active boards are more apt to give users a sense of community and the feeling of potential access to social capital.

The last paper in this section analyzes 140 networked scholars who actually work together in teams, even though they are in multiple disciplines and geographically dispersed across Canada. These scholars belong to multiple teams: unlike traditional community studies, no one workplace or neighborhood commands all of their allegiance. This multilevel paper takes into account the characteristics of the communities (in this case, work teams) and their participants. While hierarchical linear modeling is well suited for multilevel analysis of people embedded in a single community, it cannot take into account for participants’ multiple team memberships. Hence, **Guang Ying Mo** and **Barry Wellman** use the recently developed technique of *multilevel multimember modeling* (MMMM) to find that disciplinary diversity in these work teams enables individual and team learning in ‘The Effects of Multiple Team Membership on Networking Online and Offline: Using Multilevel Multiple Membership Modeling.’ Their results suggest that while a specific communication medium is important, it is often useful to look at all the ways community members interact by any means necessary and available.

Interactions in communities

This section presents three articles that analyze the consequences of online community membership for the participants’ behavior and psyches.

In ‘Digital Media and Stress: The Cost of Caring 2.0,’ **Keith Hampton**, **Weizu Lai** and **Inyoung Shin** challenge the prevalent notion that community is almost always a good thing. Using national American survey data, they show that extensive use of digital media provides heightened awareness of events in the lives of network members: the more people you know, the more you know about the good and bad things that have happened to them. They argue that the psychological stress from this is ‘the cost of caring.’ Thus, their analysis turns on its head the pastoralist notion that the only good community is a small in-person community. The authors identify that use of digital media increases contact and awareness of more people and their lives, but for better or for worse.

On a happier note, **Anne Suphan** and **Bozena Mierzejewska** find that university students get positive emotional support in both the U.S. and Germany, and that such ‘social grooming’ increases their sense of well-being. Their survey research in ‘Boundaries Between Online and Offline Realms: How Social Grooming Affects Students in US and Germany’ presents the only internationally comparative findings in this issue – although taken together, the entire special issue is implicitly comparative. The cultural difference is striking: where social support spreads from online to offline interactions among American students who use social media for sociability, online and offline boundaries are stricter among German students whose social media use emphasizes information seeking and de-emphasizes sociability.

The issue concludes with a discussion of the social media use of mothers, perhaps the world’s most active social supporters. **Andrea Hunter** tells the story of commercialized motherhood. In ‘Monetizing the Mommy: Mommy Blogs and the Audience Commodity,’ Hunter describes a blog that started as a mother finding community by talking openly

about the blogger's experiences as a mother. But, as the blog developed a large following, it attracted advertisers and some criticism of blogging for profit rather than for community.

Social media and community: the good, the bad, and the complicated

This special issue shows that an understanding of community has expanded to include how people use social media to conduct work, to acquire knowledge, and to accomplish their collaborative projects. The issue outlines the complexity of community and social media; it integrates multiple strands of thought so that the sum presents a snapshot of current thinking and research in this area. The special issue contains research that profiles online-only communities and those that show the intertwining of community offline and community online – or what some computer scientists call ‘meatspace’ and ‘cyberspace.’ For some, social media interactions are merely part of their daily lives, while it has become central to others (such as highly involved mommy bloggers). Where some analysts have worried that ‘context collapse’ could be a problem for those only interacting online, the authors in this issue show how social media have become contexts in themselves, although embellished at times with in-person encounters.

We are delighted that the papers cohere well, and that the authors show how a variety of methods can accomplish their goals: in-depth interviews, large surveys, linguistic analysis, and multilevel social network analysis. The authors examine multiple sites of analysis, including blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and even plain old email. The articles offer fascinating comparisons with authors from diverse disciplines and located in 10 universities across four countries.

As scholars we are often asked by journalists, ‘Is community a good or a bad thing?’ and ‘Is social media a good or bad thing?’ We answer, ‘It is a *thing*, for good or bad.’ Taken together, this special issue shows that community can be burdensome – from the cost of caring to the commercialization of bloggers seeking communion, enlightenment, and support. Yet, it also shows how people actively seek out and use social media for community: ‘social grooming’ presents this reality well.

We are past the pastoralist myth that community is always a good thing, and we are also past the dystopian screech that digital media has killed community. Human beings are, by nature, adaptable and predatory. The widespread adoption and use of social media has added to the array of ways in which people connect with each other. We have colonized social media and made community work – both online and offline.

Note

1. Conference participation was widespread with 400 authors from more than 100 institutions in 28 countries. Many of the participants were enthusiastic rising stars: young faculty and doctoral students. We thank William Dutton (keynote speaker), the program committee, and the volunteers for their involvement; and Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management for their support.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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