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Networked communities: an answer to urban alienation?

By Marcus Foth
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Widespread use of mobile and ubiquitous information and communications technology by urban dwellers remains in stark contrast to endemic forms of urban alienation - and the disappearance or non-existence of urban neighbourhood community identity.

In today's networked society, e-mail, instant messaging, online chats and other applications are instrumental in establishing and maintaining social ties, so creating what [Manuel Castells](#) calls a private 'portfolio of sociability'.

Neighbours may still be part of a resident's social portfolio, but the communication devices used to maintain social ties are inherently place-independent and ephemeral. Getting to know someone in their role as a neighbour is less likely than getting to know them in their role as a co-worker or being the friend of a friend.

Sociologists such as [Barry Wellman](#) describe how people construct their social networks with the help of new media tools.

Wellman argues that while people become more accustomed with the features these tools offer, the nature of the social ties people establish and maintain is changing. What used to be door-to-door and place-to-place relationships are now person-to-person and role-to-role relationships. Wellman terms the emerging qualities of this behaviour 'networked individualism'.

[Paul DiMaggio and others](#) (pdf file 240KB) review previous studies that tried to make sense of new media usage. Some of them rely on simple binary oppositions such as individual v community, physical place v cyberspace or online v offline.

Departing from this approach requires a holistic theoretical framework that builds on the dual nature of the community and the individual inherent in networked individualism.

For example, [Richard Florida](#) argues that place-based units such as home, work and school remain at the core of our understanding of everyday life, even as the Internet grows exponentially. He also says 'the economy itself increasingly takes form around real concentrations of people in real places'.

According to Castells, human interaction thus takes place seamlessly in the virtual and physical 'space of flows' that modern transportation and modern communication afford.

Place and proximity continue to matter in every socio-economic aspect. This is evident, Wellman argues, by rising car and air travel sales, by people commuting to work instead of working from home, and by the formation of economic clusters, precincts and hot spots where industries based along the same value chain co-locate to take advantage of synergy effects.

However, researchers have yet to find an empirically proven rationale that clarifies the conditions under which these synergy effects apply in heterogeneous new residential urban developments.

[Ethan Watters](#) describes 'urban tribes' - social clusters of under 35-year-old urban dwellers. They represent a social network - a swarming group of friends who live in the same city and are connected through a meshwork of strong and weak ties, and who supplement face-to-face interaction with new media and ICT applications.

His analysis of urban tribes provides further evidence for the shifting quality of community formations in urban settings towards social networks. He, and others, critique [Robert Putnam's](#) narrow interpretation of social capital.

Watters argues that 'social capital comes from much more fluid and informal (yet potentially quite close and intricate) connections between people. It could as easily accrue among a tight group of friends yet still have an effect on the community at large'.

Community assets include the formal skills of individuals and the tangible associations and institutions in a given locality. However, the informal, proximity-based social clusters and intangible networks of weak tie relationships that people build and maintain through new media and network ICTs should also be considered.

How can these tacit and soft assets be elicited, connected, networked and harnessed to become 'smart' assets in the service of both social and economic innovation in metropolitan areas?

West Australian urban planner Patric De Villiers describes urban renewal and new urbanism. In this context, networked individualism introduces challenges to conventional understandings of place and public places.

It opens up opportunities for architecture, city planning and urban studies to reconceptualise understandings of community and neighbourhood planning in the light of new media and network ICTs.

But before such a reconceptualisation can be achieved, there is a need for a theoretical and practical understandings of the freedom and constraints, and the social and cultural meanings that urban dwellers derive from their use of location-based ICTs.

[Brendan Gleeson](#) in particular contends that in master-planned communities, traditional conceptual models of community development limit action to tangible places of public interaction such as kindergartens, public schools, parks, libraries, and so on.

This 'build it, they will come' approach lacks engagement with recent community development and community informatics research findings that call for an engagement with yet unanswered questions around the significance of social networks in urban neighbourhood community building.

It also ignores both the human factors involved in urban renewal and socio-cultural animation of neighbourhoods, as well as the potential that media and communication technology can offer urban residents.

This resonates with developments in new media research which have moved on to analyse the new qualities of the 'third wave' of community media. These include web-based systems such as indymedia, community networks and other location-aware 'smart mob' technologies.

In this light, [Nicholas Jankowski](#) rightly argues there is an unfulfilled promise to establish theoretically grounded models, and a need to depart from simple dichotomies.

[Robin Dunbar](#) suggests the size of human social networks is limited for biological and sociological reasons to a value of around 150 people. But [Albert-Laszlo Barabasi](#) provides a more far-reaching overview of recent advances in network theory and their impact on business, science and everyday life.

Some ideas are crucial in understanding the dynamic nature of social networks, which decrease or increase in size. Their structure is not random or chaotic, but follows preferential attachment ('rich get richer') and fitness ('fit get richer').

Research by Jankowski and others supports this thesis in the context of community networks by pointing out that 'those geographic communities already rich in social capital may become richer thanks to community networks, and those communities poor in social capital may remain poor'.

Supporting this notion, [Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman](#) state that 'connectivity seems to go to the connected: greater social benefit from the Internet accrues to those already well situated socially'.

Yet unanswered questions are: what constitutes richness and fitness in urban social settings, how do residents get rich and become a hub in their social network, and how can social networking systems facilitate enrichment and inclusion?

A recent Australian Government Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts discussion paper suggests there is 'vast potential to use ICT to build social capital and contribute to community development and formation, but it is largely untapped and unrecognised in many areas?.'

The paper maintains ICT needs more attention to the type of social capital being developed if it is to move beyond bonding - to harness its power for bridging and linking to resources that enhance economic and social development.

[William Davies](#) asserts that research which situates itself in the nexus between people, place and technology, and which contributes to a broader understanding of the dimensions of social capital in the context of ICT and place, will benefit society in a number of ways.

And, Richard Florida and [Michael Gurstein](#) argue, it will also contribute to a greater understanding of the factors and conditions that stimulate an innovation culture in local communities.

Developing methods and systems to foster effective information use in and across inner-city neighbourhoods and residential apartment buildings will, Gurstein contends, assist local and state government efforts to encourage public consultation, civic engagement and open debate.

Furthermore, understanding the issues and challenges - as well as opportunities and strengths in forming a local meshwork of social networks - will help Australians negotiate the complex web of daily choices, access a greater social safety net, and participate in the socio-cultural and socio-economic life in their city.

This, in turn, will lead to greater social inclusion, urban sustainability and healthier local economies.

A full copy of this article with references can be found at [here](#). (pdf file 274KB) For more information on this research go [here](#).

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