Community and Urban Places in a Digital World

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The sources of big data of most interest to urban social researchers arise from the adoption of digital information and communications technologies (ICTs)—especially Internet-connected smartphones and computers—by city residents themselves for nearly all aspects of economic and social life. As much as might be learned from this new data, they also reflect broader changes in the nature of urban community. ICTs are not only loosening ties among residents and their neighbors, but also enabling urban residents to remain deeply connected to places regardless of where they live. These trends promise to have profound consequences for local civic participation, since it increases the number and variety of interested stakeholders for any given place. The comment concludes by observing that since ICTs mediate urban life for many residents, researchers should explore the myriad ways they shape cities.

INTRODUCTION

The sources of big data of most interest to urban social researchers arise from the adoption of digital information and communications technologies (ICTs)—especially Internet-connected smartphones and computers—by city residents themselves for nearly all aspects of economic and social life. Although the new data sources derived from these activities hold research insights, this comment addresses the broader question of how these technologies have changed the nature of urban community itself. Unlike traditional perspectives, which strongly link communities to physical places, I argue ICTs have loosened the ties between community and place. However, instead of primarily creating placeless or virtual community, ICTs allow urban residents to participate in multiple place-based communities at once, even as their time and motivations to do so vary. I then speculate on the consequences of this for local civic participation, and conclude with a suggestion that social researchers adopt the perspective of many urban residents themselves, for whom places are merely the venues for social and economic exchanges primarily orchestrated through digital systems. For the most part, the argument here builds on ideas proposed by other theorists, but seeks to link theory, empirical evidence, and practical consequences, three areas that have hitherto remained relatively scattered in the scholarly literature.

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Before considering the impact of ICTs on community, we should pause to note that the proliferation of digital technologies in urban spaces is creating a portrait of cities with unprecedented detail. Researchers have processed data from cell phone providers to trace the movement of people to various events (Calabrese et al. 2010), mapped social media data to understand neighborhood boundaries (Cranshaw et al. 2012), and produced novel measures from citizen service requests (O'Brien et al. 2015). However, much of this big data research carries with it a whiff of positivism. Even with perfect knowledge of the behaviors of all urban residents, surely, the readers of this journal would have a host of unanswered questions about urban social life that can only be answered by probing the subjective worlds of residents through conventional methods such as surveys, interviews, and observations. Even the much-ballyhooed social media data, which hold the promise of revealing details about previously obscure social worlds, carries with it limitations: the content poverty of an unobtrusive measure, a focus on statements and not actions, and a limited ability to explore subjective experiences (Goodspeed 2013).

As much as might be learned from these new data, they also reflect broader changes in the nature of urban life itself. Billions of people around the world engage in continuous communication with far-flung contacts through social networking services. Citizens choose to be deeply engaged in urban places regardless of how much time they spend in the place. Transnational migrants maintain deep social ties in multiple places simultaneously. These developments have not attracted the scholarly attention they deserve. After describing the new picture of community that is emerging, I consider some of the profound consequences it has for local civic participation in particular, and urban life in general.

ICTS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PLACE-BASED COMMUNITIES

Researchers have long assumed that communities existed primarily in particular places, even as they disagreed about their nature: Tönnies's concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* clearly described ideal types of rural and urban societies, Gans's (1962) subjects resided in Boston's West End, and Jacobs (1961) described the intimate community that existed on Hudson Street. Of course, many city residents know people elsewhere, but the obstacles of travel and communication meant these ties were necessarily weaker than those with immediate neighbors. One of the first scholars to consider whether changing technology was undermining this assumption was Melvin Webber, who speculated that changes to transportation and communications—along with other changes like rising incomes and education levels—would loosen the historical relationship between physical place and community (Webber 1964; Webber 1963). He predicted that over time, city residents might shift their time and attention from "physically based communities" toward other, more geographically dispersed communities.

Superficially, it might seem Webber was correct. Today's average urbanite can easily remain in touch with more people than ever before, due not only to the precipitous fall in the cost of long-distance communication, but also to the rise of social networking services. Facebook is now used by 68 percent of all U.S. adults, and the average Facebook

user in 2014 had over 338 "friends" (Greenwood et al. 2016; Smith 2014). The proportion of Americans using social media increased from just 7 percent in 2005 to 65 percent in 2015 (Perrin 2015). Today, over two billion people log into these services monthly, and the most popular sites around the world include not only Facebook, but also Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, V Kontakte, Facenama, Odnoklassniki, Qzone, and Sina Weibo (VincosBlog 2016). The full consequences of their explosive growth are only now becoming apparent, but an empirical study by Hampton et al. (2011) seems to confirm Webber's hypothesis. This study found American users of social networking services reported *fewer* neighborhood ties than nonusers, although overall social media and Internet use was related to *greater* network diversity.

However, the replacement of neighborhood ties with far-flung ones on social networks is only part of the story. As Tayebi (2013) points out, *all* communities are today spatial and mediated by ICTs to a certain extent, differing only in how each community mixes face-to-face and digital communication. Furthermore, Webber's analysis overlooks the many ways physical places remain important. As Tayebi observes, physical neighbors remain affected by common issues, such as crime, pollution, and the quality of local public services, like schools. In the place of old dichotomous thinking that opposes neighborly, face-to-face communities with placeless, virtual ones, he proposes the concept of *communihood*, which recognizes that all communities are today based on mutual interests (including place interests), influenced by physical proximity, but are also often mediated through ICTs.

Adopting this more flexible perspective allows us to see more clearly a trend impacting cities worldwide: the rise of voluntary participation in communities concerned with multiple places. Even as they have loosened ties to immediate neighbors, new technologies have enabled interested residents to follow developments in urban places that interest them more closely than ever. In a study of gay neighborhoods, Greene proposed the term "vicarious citizen" to refer to "nonresidential stakeholders who personally identify politically, economically, or socioculturally with a local community," and who utilize social media to participate in the community affairs of these places (Greene 2014). I have stumbled across different categories of vicarious citizens in my own work: a third of the readers of a website about local urban planning issues (like new buildings and transit) I cocreated in College Park, Maryland, were not residents of the city at all, but instead University of Maryland alumni and others who lived elsewhere but followed local initiatives intently (Goodspeed 2008). More recently, I conducted a survey of 154 donors to 10 civic crowdfunding projects (such as community gardens and arts events) that found only a quarter of donors lived in the same neighborhood as the project they had donated to. The remainder of donors reported living elsewhere in the same city or even outside of the region, and this group included former residents, those with family and friends in the neighborhood, alumni of local universities, and some interested only in the project ideas (Goodspeed forthcoming).

Such diverse ties to place are well established in the literature on transnationalism, which has documented how low-cost international communication has transformed the migration experience for many immigrants. In a dissertation that discovered most long-distance calls from New York were to immigrants' home countries, Francisca Rojas interviewed residents of the immigrant neighborhoods that placed the most international calls. One informant from Corona, Queens, whom she calls Marta, used the telephone to remain in touch with her three daughters and five grandchildren in a remote town in Oaxaca, Mexico, whom she had not seen in 10 years due to her undocumented

status (Rojas 2010:145). Rojas called the informants she met who made one or more international calls per day *constant callers,* and concluded that the low-cost connectivity was particularly important for female immigrants who engaged in transnational motherhood. Other informants managed economic ties in both places, such as managing rental properties remotely. She calls this, after Levitt and Schiller (2004), a state of *simultaneity.* More formal examples of transnational ties also abound. Immigrant communities worldwide form so-called hometown associations (HTAs), organizations that are typically comprised of first-generation immigrants who raise funds for or engage in other activities with communities in their country of origin (Orozco and Garcia-Zanello 2009; Lamba-Nieves 2014). Linking these findings, it seems possible that many urban places are both of interest to external stakeholders (like vicarious citizens or HTAs aboard) and home to residents who retain deep ties to other places.

SEARCHING FOR THE NEW LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERE

This new perspective on urban community might also explain the uneven nature of efforts to foster local democracy with ICTs. Today, millions of Americans are members of place-based virtual groups (Hulsman 2012), an invisible digital infrastructure that exists practically everywhere. These groups generally began in the 1990s as humble e-mail lists among the residents in a particular physical neighborhood, but have migrated to commercial websites, such as NextDoor, or even customized technologies, such as the e-mail and web-based discussion system developed by the Minnesota group E-Democracy.org (Dahlberg 2001). However, for the most part, these lists have served as forums for sharing neighborhood gripes or swapping suggestions for handymen, and not as hotbeds of local democracy. The limited scholarship on them have found evidence of modest social capital benefits for their users (Hampton 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Afzalan and Evans-Cowley 2015). This is perhaps to be expected, since these networks typically struggle to obtain regular participation from more than a small slice of neighborhood residents.

Efforts that focus both on particular places *and* conduct extensive outreach through social media seem more successful at catalyzing participation than exclusively local virtual groups. To succeed, online outreach depends on whether a community with a shared interest in place exists. Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010) describes two examples of Facebook groups created to organize residents for or against proposed Walmart stores: In Canfield Township, Ohio, despite attracting more than 400 members, the local zoning officials were unaware of the group and reported no greater participation in the proposal; in Austin, Texas, a proliferation of Facebook groups for and against a controversial redevelopment seems to have increased participation. Another example of using social media to foster participation is civic crowdfunding, an emerging community development practice where leaders raise donations for place-based projects through in-person outreach and social media (Davies 2014; Stiver et al. 2015). More systematic studies are beginning to find similar results; researchers found informants in Boston using social media to stay connected at the local and global scale. Furthermore, they discovered that informants provided a more diverse range of responses about their civic participation if they asked about not only formal organizations, but also engagement in broader issue domains (Tran et al. 2013).

A second, broader consequence of the changes to urban community described here is that normatively motivated activists and professionals seeking to catalyze changes should expect not only far-flung interested participants, but also participants who may be unfamiliar with either their physical neighbors or details about local issues. Fortunately, a rich suite of methods have been developed which center on forming what Fung (2006) calls "mini-publics" and organizing the collaborative deliberation that is required to generate consensus about what should be done (Booher and Innes 2002; Susskind et al. 1999). Of course, these practices raise questions about the legitimacy of who should have a say for particular places, and the equity of processes that engage stakeholders with widely varying resources at their disposal.

CONCLUSION

Not only have ICTs loosened the relationship between place and community, they allow people to be engaged in communities anchored in multiple places. To take the argument a step further, perhaps, it is inappropriate to adopt the physical environment as the primary starting point for other types of research on cities. After all, the rich empirical research on activity spaces has highlighted the limitations of focusing only on places of residence (e.g., Inagami et al. 2007; Zenk et al. 2011). Most city residents commute to work, school, and other locations, carrying with them smartphones as ubiquitous companions. For many, the digital interfaces on smartphones provide the means to discover and navigate the city. Apps and websites facilitate discovering destinations (Yelp), navigating there (Uber, Google Maps, real-time transit apps), and coordinating with others (social media). The act of finding a place to live is facilitated through data-rich interfaces (Zillow, Redfin, Craigslist, and AirBnB). City governments have created websites and apps to allow citizens to request repairs, obtain permits, or obtain other information or services. In this world, bars do not need signs and food trucks do not need fixed addresses, since digital technologies link patrons with their locations dynamically. This ever-shifting digital landscape has resulted in far-reaching consequences, including greater information and choices for some, disruptions to certain industries and government services, the potential for new forms of discrimination and exclusion, and the growing power of new technology corporations in cities.

There is no shortage of commentary bemoaning these developments, often calling for a return to a presumably preferable past. However, although inspired by historical perspectives, the field of urban planning is oriented toward the present and the future. The students in my classroom are motivated by the desire to work with urban communities on issues like improving environmental sustainability, preparing for climate change, revitalizing low-income neighborhoods, and providing affordable housing. For them, the key questions are about how cities work and how they might engage constructively with urban places in the future. Doing so requires professionals who will work to shape digital technologies to meet social goals, not only as responsible designers and users, but also through public policies and political protests that reject technology companies' self-interested rhetoric of neutrality and inevitability. It also requires professionals who are as adept at navigating digital worlds as they are urban streets. It is my hope that current and future research results in a deeper understanding of the ways ICTs are transforming urban life.

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