# Community Broadcasting: Publics, Participants and Policies

## 5. Community

Understanding the nature of communities and their corresponding media structures is an important subject of this thesis, and for scholars who explore the concepts of access, participation, identity, and community development. Early theoretical examination of the term 'community' is most associated with Ferdinand Tönnies (1887), the German sociologist who in the late 19th century authored the iconic text *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, in which he compared the meaning of community in the description of a small village *'Gemeinschaft',* versus a worldwide organizational network or *'Gesellschaft'*. The Chicago School of sociologists in the 20th century is generally credited with initially investigating the phenomenon of "community" in the context of urban studies. Louis Wirth (1964) identified communities' contributions to culture and inclusiveness in his book *On Cities and Social Life,* and later William Foote Whyte (1993) explored the concept in his book *Street Corner Society,* describing the social structure of an Italian slum. Other sociologists to examine the concept include (Williams 1973, Putnam 2000, and Bartle 2003), while other scholars seek to explain the subject through various frames including organizational communication (MacMillan and Chavis 1986), community development (McKnight 1989 and Bhattacharyya 2004), and mass media (Lewis 1993, Carpentier et al 2003, Howley 2005).

The idea of community as an ambiguous and multi-faceted concept presents a challenge in identifying and defining the term clearly (Cohen 1985). Morris and Morten echo Tönnies when they compare community to the larger frame of society, which is "a colder, unattached and more fragmented way of living devoid of cooperation and social cohesion" (1998:23). The phenomenon of community is often described as a subset of society defined by geography, identity, interest, social class, economic status, and/or by completely external forces and events. Indeed, community is not necessarily a static or easily identifiable entity, but more of an aggregation of its component parts (Gordon 2009). The term "knowable communities" was coined by Raymond Williams (1973:163) in his work discussing the development of more complex societies of modernity, where he described community as a collection of connections and relationships that further define social divisions and identities.

Those connections Williams refers to are described by sociologists when explaining the elements and patterns of social interaction and social networks. Social interaction requires a process and nodes of connections, described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as the rhizomatic

effect that forms "connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (:7). The term social network in the context of this thesis is a theoretical construct used to describe relationships among individuals, groups, and communities in relatively small scale adaptions, as opposed to large-scale applications such as online communities or even entire societies. Actor-network theory is used by Bruno LaTour (2005) and his colleagues to explore how rhizomes that form communities grow through activities leveraging both material and semiotic networks to create meaning. Building upon the works of Talcott Parsons (2007) and Peter Blau (1960), Charles Tilly (1973) described communities as aggregations of social networks formed around themes such as culture and politics. Intentionally-built communities access networks to assemble members with shared interests, identities or concerns including social, environmental, economic and political issues (Peck 1987). These practices and dynamics are important for understanding the importance of community development in the process of communicative action (Markova 1997).

Intentional communities are also a subject of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (1995), in which he emphasizes the importance of communities as represented in traditional civic, social and fraternal organizations. He argues that participation in community-based organizations and activities can facilitate building of social capital through interactions both among neighbors and friends ("bonding capital"), as well as other citizens outside an actor's immediate sphere ("bridging capital"). However, just as networks can connect and construct communities, the failure of connections and networks can inhibit the establishment and sustainability of communities, and contribute to the social disconnection that many communities experience in the context of modern society. In many cases, individuals encounter challenges in developing relationships into stronger community groups, and entire community groups then struggle for networking success as they seek to connect in this complex environment. Putnam describes the decline of physical intentional communities in the 1970s United States caused in part by the proliferation of highly-centralized mass media that reduce local interactions and discourse, noting that "Watching commercial entertainment TV is the only leisure activity where doing more of it is associated with lower social capital" (Putnam 2015). In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), and in the Harvard University Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement, Putnam and his colleagues explore potential remedies for the downward spiral of civic engagement, suggesting more local interaction is key: "We need to look at front porches as crime fighting tools, treat picnics as public health efforts and see choral groups as occasions of democracy" (Feldstein 2000).

Location is a frame by which communities are often identified. Originating in anthropological studies, a community of location typically requires physical boundaries to delineate the

community identity, for example a settlement, village, or city. Milioni (2009) describes community as "social integration defined by geographical proximity" (:411). Communities of location are readily identified and comprehended by typical citizens, who can physically seek out cooperation and collaboration with their neighbors without extensive need for external tools. These spatial situations are fertile environments for social interaction, and the subsequent construction of multiple social groupings as communities through cooperative efforts develop a synergy and the resulting social capital for their common good. This can be seen in Oldenburg's (1989:16) "third place" that is "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work".

Cohen (1985) suggests that culture, in addition to location, forms the basis and boundaries for many communities, noting that residents establish their membership in a community through self-identification. Hernando Rojas writes in his examination of community engagement "Communication mediates the relationship between community integration and civic participation...in an intervening process between structural location and belonging" (:4). Jankowski (2002) identifies communities of interest: "whereby members share some cultural, social or political interests independent of geographical proximity" (:6). Compared to location, intricate relationships of interest or identity are more difficult to recognize across the barriers and obstructions of modern day society (Williams 1973). This constructivist approach, relating social representations to community building, is grounded in social practices and group dynamics.

Virtual online communities of interest that characterize new online social media forms have added to the mass media options for actors' connectedness and participation. Social media has also added great vigor to debates over the primacy of proximity in identifying communities. Many scholars (Kollock and Smith 1999, Matei and Britt 2011, Marinov and Schimmelfennig 2015) exhibit optimism about the potential for social media to eliminate the need for proximity, as "virtual identity communities" successfully connect and transmit content in multiple directions. Centola (2015) suggests that social media's connectedness is actually enhanced by the the self-imposed boundaries of identity communities (see Figure 10). However, despite the widespread adaptation of the term "community" by social media, other scholars (O'Connor 2008, LoPresti 2013) remain skeptical. Tom Sander (2008:15) cautions against "romanticizing" online communities, suggesting that "just calling something a community doesn't make it one. This all needs to be empirically tested".
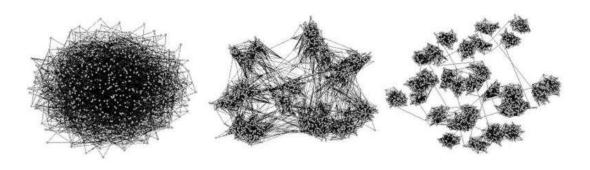
**Figure 10: Identity communities in social networks (Centola 2015)**

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