

Communities of the Future: Technology, Failure and the Joy of Tinkering

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Contemporary social science is filled with lament for the decline of community and the sense of social connectedness that term has come to imply (e.g, Putnam 2000, Wolpert 2014).

Traditionally theorized as centered in a physical places, this ideal of community is defined through face to face interactions deliberately situated in real time and space. This vision contrasts sharply with a more dystopian view in which technology degrades the quality, variety and quantity of social relations. In the words of Sherry Turkle, technological and social changes conspire to create an irony widely held as central to modern life: we find ourselves increasingly together but alone (Turkle, 2012).

There are other representations of community, including those formed by groups through a shared sense of identity rather than through networks of kinship or ties defined by use of shared spaces (e.g., Anderson 1983, Weston 1997). There is also a significant body of work about the social spaces created by and through technological innovation (e.g., Drew 2001). Much of this work focuses on the technologically-mediated communities formed around the internet and has led to methodological contributions for adapting social science to the challenges of field research in these new social spaces (e.g., Miller 2011). Here, we focus on the intersection formed by the nostalgic ideal of community on the one hand and, on the other, a vision of design as a future-making enterprise. We're inspired by work from the design anthropological future series focusing on the temporal dimensions of social science and design (e.g., Anusasand and Harkness, 2014; Otto 2014) as well as the idea of stagecraft as core to the practice of design research in corporate contexts (e.g., Clark and Caldwell, 2014). We'd like to explore some of the historical and theoretical possibilities lurking within notions of nostalgia and stage, especially as they concern a popular representations of a technological future that makes us pine for a more authentically social past.

Technology change

The commercial internet's first offerings focused on email and other channels that connected those who already knew each other but other possibilities quickly followed. Since the first bulletin boards, member profiles on AOL, online communities have proliferated among those who may not have otherwise met. What started as a way to break the social isolation of computer usage has grown into vast sphere of social engagement built through the display and sharing of the evidence of social life such as photos, videos and narratives that others react and respond to online. Today, commercially important networks are built around these so-called "loose-tie" communities in which the primary or only social connection comes from the internet itself (Adams 2011). Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Flickr and Facebook are examples of channels that leverage such loose-ties to create communities capable of powerful, real-world feats ranging from flash mobs to boycotts to political revolutions to episodes of binge watching kitty-cat videos. As with prior periods of technological change, voices from the social sciences were quick to decry the unanticipated and negative impact of these developments, which have been theorized as ranging from cognitive decline to the spread of new and pernicious forms of capitalism (e.g., Wolpert 2014, Keen 2015).

Whether we feel "alone together" or stuck in the past, popular accounts agree on the importance and speed of technological change. Once limited to the physical extension of our kin and friendship networks, sociality today extends to the far reaches of the internet, at least for those with access to working technology. The notion of "digital natives" takes these possibilities and refashions them as a boundary between past and future, between young and old, between those who "get it" and those who don't. This assumption of widespread social change bounds the present by, on the one hand, a more authentic social past and, on the other, a techno-mediated future. But this leaves us in a present that is more concerned with its past and future than with what people are actually doing with technology now.

Technology Failure

What do anxieties about future communities tell us about the present? As researchers working to craft consumer products, we're struck by many aspects of the intersection between design future and anthropological past. The juxtaposition we've described here imagines the underlying technology that drives change as both accessible and reliable. Our ethnographic research with consumers suggests that this assumption paints an intriguing but largely apocryphal portrait.

In our field and lab research, we see a world where network signals disappear, data plans leave consumers stranded, batteries drain, screens break and software requires updating. Next generation technology means cutting edge headaches, breakdowns that seem intractable and difficult to comprehend let alone solve. Just as important, the gaps between expectations and experience often leave consumers feeling more challenged and activated than satisfied with their purchases. So, how is digital technology driving us to the future if it won't stop breaking down in the present?

Bake-offs: The Joys of Tinkering

Our focus on the future and past distracts us from the role of enthusiasm for sociality and its impact on technology. In our work, we've observed a certain pleasure in the tinkering, the fussing and the chatting-with-others that goes with even present day techno-connectedness. Rather than being a side effect of imperfection, what if we reframed this enthusiasm as a central proposition of the technology, now or in the future? Today, no one questions the social or technical validity of the bake-off, even though the need to create standardized recipes for industrially milled flour is a long-lost artifact of early industrial history. The bake-off is even enjoying a revival as a form of popular entertainment in the English speaking world. Might we one day see similar revivals of online forums and chatrooms? What might nostalgia for forums like Stackoverflow look like? Examining our efforts to stage the future may hold opportunities to improve the present. For example, what if virtual communities were charged with solving problems together? New technologies might explicitly theorize forms of sociality as means for consumers to become co-creators, much in the style of bake-offs. Theorizing social interaction as an integral element of new technology rather than as a bolt-on to account for imperfection allows us to revisit the work of design research by shifting the focus of our work from the technology to a broader view of the motivations of technology consumers, including the desire to use technology as a platform for social interaction.

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