Communication in City and Community: From the Chicago School to Digital Technology

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The study of urban and community issues from a communication perspective has a long history that can be traced back to the Chicago School of Sociology. The Chicago scholars were interested in the role of ecology in social change, but they also wanted to understand how changes in communication technology influenced the everyday lives of individuals, their families, and communities. The sociologists of the Chicago School considered public opinion and communication to be "inseparable from the School's broader inquiry into 'collective behavior' and its part in social order and disorder" (Pooley & Katz, 2008, p. 767). James Carey (1996) called their approach "the most useful view of communication and the mass media in the American tradition" (p. 30). The intellectual connection between the study of communication and the study of city and community was instrumental for addressing the social and intellectual problems of the time.

By mid-century, however, the uncoupling of sociology and communication was well underway. Communication research focused increasingly on the study of propaganda, campaigns, media events, and media effects (Katz, 2009). From these roots, communication became a distinct field, influenced more by social psychologists than sociologists (Pooley & Katz, 2008). Within communication research, sociological questions about the role of communication technologies in community and ecological perspectives on communication processes and social change (e.g., Park & Burgess, 1925) began to fade from view.

The split between sociology and communication has had consequences for scholars in both fields. As these traditions moved further from each other, sociologists concerned with local ecologies, place, and "neighborhood effects" (Sampson, 2012; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002), have generally neglected the role of

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media and variation in access to communication technologies. Researchers who have focused on media, information, and communication processes have neglected the role of place and have decoupled communication technologies from the contexts in which people use them (Hampton, 2010). This schism has inhibited the advancement of a common interest in understanding the factors that influence social integration.

This special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* intends to bridge the gap between research by scholars in sociology and those in communication, information, and media studies about the role of new technologies in everyday life. The interests of the Chicago School in how communication technologies reorganize work, home, and community life have captured the attention of a new generation of scholars. Contributors to this issue highlight the role of the city and community in the study of technological change and communication processes. Through the study of people and the places they inhabit, these scholars emphasize the centrality of communication and technology for understanding the social processes that guide, and are guided by, how people interact within their environments.

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen provides one perspective on how the Chicago School's ecological focus has evolved within scholarship on media and communication. She links the Chicago School's empirical approach to the study of social organization through the development of media ecology, actor network theory, and more recent attempts to use ecology as a means to understand globalized and networked media practices. Wahl-Jorgensen takes particular note of Robert Park, one of the Chicago School's central figures, and his interest in the role of newspapers within communities, and particularly in immigrant communities. This contrasts sharply with media ecology, as introduced by Neil Postman and maintained in the work of McLuhan and others who engage the ecological metaphor to study media as environments rather than as situated in urban communities. She argues that our contemporary, global, networked media environment has necessitated a shift in analytical approaches, from studying environments and media in isolation, to studying interconnected, globalized, media practices. Wahl-Jorgensen maintains that as scholars increasingly recognize that communication still takes place in geographically bounded communities (even as these localities are part of global networks), the Chicago School's understanding of community will have renewed relevance to studies of contemporary digital media environments.

In his contribution to this special issue, Lew Friedland argues that the focus within the study of communication on global and individual networks has suppressed the Chicago tradition of understanding how the city's social ecology influences personal, institutional, and civic life. To argue that the field of communication needs to revitalize the ecological tradition if it is to fully account for the networked transformation of social life, he critically examines the work of four major communication and sociology theorists: Manuel Castells, Barry Wellman, Claude Fischer, and Robert Sampson. The contemporary emphasis that communication scholars place on communication networks that transcend place contrasts sharply with the focus of contemporary urban sociologists who recognize that place introduces opportunities and constraints that fundamentally shape opportunities for health and mobility. Despite our increasingly networked and digital world, American lives are still rooted in communities of place.

To understand civic action, the challenge faced by sociologists and communication scholars alike lies in integrating an analysis of the space of flows and networked individualism with the role of local institutions and the settings for action that remain embedded at the ecological level.

Jeffrey Lane's ethnographic inquiry into "the digital street" provides a rich and provocative update to the classic street ethnography (e.g., Anderson, 1999). Lane argues that street ethnography holds great promise for understanding both urban life and urban youth's contemporary practices related to digital media use. In fact, the two are inseparable. Lane examines teenagers' relationships in Harlem as they develop through online and offline interactions. He traces their use of mobile technologies and social networking platforms as they negotiate local threats and opportunities, how they present themselves to each other, and how they attempt to establish and maintain their self-presentation in a variety of social contexts. This contribution bridges urban and digital approaches to ethnography and demonstrates how interactions on the street cannot be studied apart from interactions that are carried out online.

Vikki Katz and Carmen Gonzalez examine how community-level features affect family decisions about adopting broadband Internet and Internet-capable devices, and how parents' perceptions of local risks and opportunities influence how they integrate these technologies into family life. Their analyses draw on in-depth interviews with more than 300 parents of Mexican heritage and their school-age children living in three U.S. communities. Participants qualified for programs designed to encourage low-income families to adopt new technologies. Digital inequality is now widely recognized as being tied to other, broader forms of social disparity that disproportionately affect low-income and immigrant families. As such, Katz and Gonzalez's inquiry is clearly tied to Chicago School scholars' concern for the social integration of immigrants into American life. They find that the assumptions of local decision-makers about low-income families shaped the implementation of digital equity initiatives. Furthermore, they note that mismatches between these assumptions and families' realities prevent such programs from reaching their full potential to support children's educational success and families' meaningful connections to local resources, institutions, and other residents. They offer localized solutions for these conditions that will be useful for practitioners and policymakers.

Yong-Chan Kim and Eui-Kyung Shin add an international perspective with a focus on how both individual- and community-level factors shape the localized uses of digital communication technologies by residents of Seoul, Korea. Guided by the theory of planned behavior and communication infrastructure theory, Kim and Shin engage survey data to assess the factors that most influence Seoul residents' prior experiences or their current intentions to use a range of localized digital platforms and services to connect with information, stories, and people within their local districts (known as *ku*). The authors consider these factors within a broader set of city government initiatives intended to revitalize neighborhood life. Their effort to understand localized technology use in a global city, where Internet penetration is unusually high and social capital is unusually low, reflects Chicago School interests in how communication technologies influence residents' local behaviors and attachments.

Keith Hampton concludes our special issue by presenting a new theory of how two affordances of digital communication technologies—persistent contact and pervasive awareness—may fundamentally transform the nature of community. Hampton argues that a mobility narrative has been used to describe changes to the structure of community since at least the rise of urban industrialization. Despite important economic and social changes resulting from what Daniel Bell described as a postindustrial society, Manuel Castells' network society, and what Barry Wellman termed networked individualism, scholars have continued to describe the structure of the contemporary community as one in which people are increasingly mobile in relation to their social ties and place. In contrast to images of late-modernity, as proposed by scholars such as Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, which depict mobility as being maximized to the point where people are nearly free from constraints of time, space, and social bonds, the affordances of communication technologies for the persistent-pervasive community may reverse this trend. As a counterforce to mobility, the persistence of relationships and the contexts where they are maintained may become less transitory than at any time in modern history. The ambient, lean nature of social media provides for a pervasive awareness that increases closeness and a watchfulness that were typified in preindustrial communities. Hampton argues that the persistent-pervasive community represents a period of meta-modernity that combines aspects of preindustrial and urban-industrial community structures. He provides examples of how this hybrid community structure may affect access to social capital, collective action, political participation, and how lives are linked across generations.

The study of communication has its origins in the study of community and the city. The continued uncoupling of these traditions jeopardizes our common interest in understanding technological change, social integration, and how communication processes influence everyday life. We hope that this volume will serve as a starting point for a new generation of scholars working at the intersection of communication and urban and community perspectives.

By recombining the best of communication and sociological approaches, we can address questions about community and technological change that are increasingly important to policymakers and scholars across the social sciences. We cannot understand the opportunities and risks that individuals, families, and social groups experience as a result of increasing population diversity and social inequality, unless we explore the communities and places in which they are embedded and the media they use to communicate. We cannot understand how communication technologies connect people with diverse resources without understanding the ecological constraints inherent to the places where they interact. The role of media in the everyday lives of today's youth (or anyone, for that matter), should be contextualized among the many ways people interact online, in-person, and in-place. As new technologies become ever more integral to how individuals and collectives manage everyday interactions in an increasingly interconnected planet, let the role of communication in city and community once again guide our efforts to understand people and place.

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