## Internet use and community ties

Keith Stamm (1985) established connections between newspaper use and community ties. It is time to explore a possible parallel connection with the Internet, including the establishment of communities that are not geography based.  (John Bare, Shawn McIntosh, Rachel Davis Mersey and Deb Procopio)

# Newspapers, Internet Use and Community Ties

John Bare
Jan. 14, 2008

> *The newspaper is a Bible which we read every morning and every afternoon, standing and sitting, riding and walking. It is a Bible which every man carries in his pocket, which lies on every table and counter, and which the mail, and thousands of missionaries, are continually dispersing. It is, in short, the only book which America has printed, and which America reads. So wide is its influence.*

- Henry David Thoreau, 1854

In the third quarter of the 20th century, during the time Phil Meyer made his living as a newspaper reporter, smart capitalists recognized a link between local newspaper consumption and community ties. What they saw was a virtuous cycle. With one reinforcing the other, newspaper owners made a nice living.

Scholars would publish findings supporting this theory: The more we engaged with daily newspapers, the stronger our ties to the place where we lived. And vice versa

The notion was convenient for both social engineers and newspaper publishers. We could aim interventions at either point in the model and, for the most part, end up in the same place.

Somewhere along the way, the two pieces of American life became less dependent on one another. It would be an exaggeration to say that the two became completely unhinged. Nevertheless, both the capitalists and the scholars have had to offer a final benediction over the simplified, elegant model of newspaper use and community ties.

There are lots of reasons for the shift. In general, over the last quarter of the 20th century so much of public life changed because we were given more choices on content, in amount and variety, and

opportunities to decide which content would ever reach us at all – and, for that matter, to produce, customize and edit content ourselves.

Phil's professional life tracks along this period nicely. He started his newspaper career in 1950, in Clay, Kansas. For the next 50 years, he made his living as a reporter, a media executive and a scholar. His community experience was just as varied, taking him from Topeka to Miami to Washington, D.C., to Chapel Hill, his home as the 21st century media experience unfolds.

The Internet demands attention in part because it's so disruptive. It easily attracts blame, praise and admiration. As compelling as the Internet is as a point of argument, dramatic changes were taking place before any glint of a dot-com era.

Let's back up a few steps, the way epidemiologists do, and take a look at what was happening from 1950 to 2000. It turns out the second half of the 20th century was a period of sweeping change, having nothing to do, per se, with the Internet.

The changes rolled across all five decades. If there was a flash point, it was from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s,when the culture tipped. The timing is shown by the criss-crossing lines on the above plot .
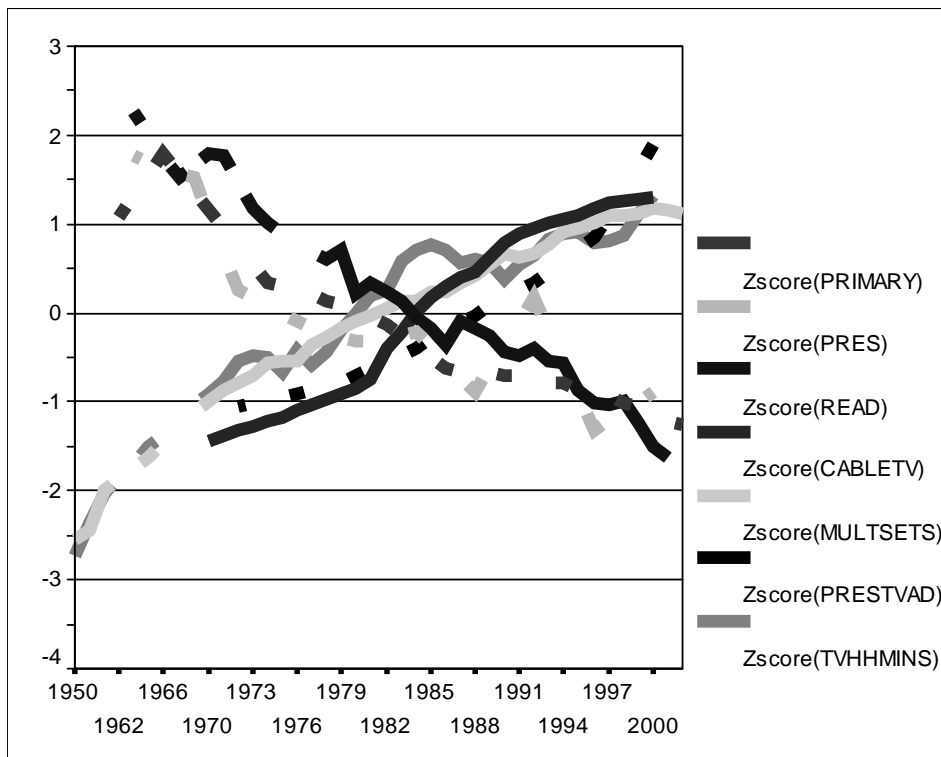


Voting in primaries, voting in presidential elections and newspaper reading all declined.

On the rise were four emerging forces: cable TV penetration; households adopting multiple TV sets; political advertising spent on TV; and TV viewing.

Before scholars could completely deconstruct the implications of this new TV culture, another earthquake arrived in the form of the Internet.

Ad rates are now set by auctions, a raw force in free-market capitalism, instead of being controlled by the local publisher. Consumers are winning, as it's easier than ever for buyers and sellers to connect with one another, directly.

It's the same way with information. Consumers of information and peddlers of information – buyers and sellers, of sorts – can connect directly with one another.

The easy assumption is that the birth of the Internet has changed the way we interact with our community. Or that the Internet itself has changed what we mean by community.

In fact, I would argue that the widespread adoption of the Internet has made evident a set of complex processes that have been roiling beneath our sight lines as long as individuals have been organizing themselves into communities, whether in Athens, Rome or Jamestown.

In fact, having nothing to do with the Internet's presence, public life has always been a complex, non-linear system. That very act – the process of "self-organizing" – is the mark of complex, nonlinear systems. And public life has always been in a constant stage of emergence, with stasis the exception. It turns out public life is more of a game of pick-up sticks than dominoes. When we move one stick, we can never exactly predict which other sticks will shift.

Capitalists have always wished that public life could be reduced to linear processes, like a game of dominoes, where costs were certain and profits steady. They imposed as much structure as they could get away with, putting consumers through a forced march to fulfill their desires. It was literally, in many cases, take it or leave it. Scholars put up with the pretense of linear models so we could get our regression models to run.

Having to confront the Internet spoils the illusion that we can construct a top-down social order that is predictable and linear. The Internet, in fact, is meeting individuals' thirst for opportunities to self-organize – which, of course, runs counter to old media companies' desires to organize, segment and slice and dice consumers into communities (called "markets") that maximize profits (and efficiency). It turns out that Buzz Merritt's concern that new media would turn us all into some version of "rutabaga man," with society fragmented by individuals insulated from anything outside their narrow view of the

world, may be less of a problem, after all. Or at least the negatives may be outweighed by the positives that come along with the power of self-organizing networks.

For 21st century newsmen, Steven Johnson's book, Emergence, is as important as Stamm's book, The Newspaper and Community Integration.

"Cities have lives of their own," Johnson writes, "with neighborhoods clustering into place without any Robert Moses figure dictating the plan from above."

It's sidewalks, Johnson says, that "are the primary conduit for the flow of information between city residents. … Sidewalks allow relatively high bandwidth communication between total strangers, and they mix large numbers of individuals in random configurations."

As compared to newspapers, not to mention gated communities, the Internet greatly increases opportunities for individuals to bump into one another in ways that affects the behavior of those who are part of the interaction. The Internet did not turn orderly communities into chaotic, non-linear messes. The Internet merely freed individuals to organize themselves more authentically. This includes how they self-organize to manage their news and information.

The self-organizing forces will extend – are already extending – to consumers' pursuit of, access to, distribution of and consumption of information, including news about everything from the Iraqi war to school lunches. The Internet has invigorated consumers and peddlers of information, who are gleefully creating exchange markets without having to pay any tolls to the old newspaper publishers.

While information is plentiful, as Phil has explained in his writing and teaching, attention and trust are now scarce. Newspapers, in whatever form they take, will live or die based on their ability to gain and hold consumers' trust and to process and deliver information to consumers in ways that garner their attention. Social engineers and dot-com capitalists are already working at this. Newspaper publishers are late to the game.

# The Internet: Harmful or helpful to community ties and civic engagement?

**Shawn McIntosh**
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Newspapers have always played a role in civic life, serving as a center for conversation-starting and authoritative information. Readership studies have repeatedly found that readers are loyal to a newspaper that "makes me smarter," informing them about issues in their community and nation that are important and actionable.

Call it the "water cooler function": Newspapers give intelligent individuals the information they need for conversation at the office water cooler, the community meeting, the church supper or the political chat among friends on the porch after supper. Those conversations lead to actions: joining an outcry against an unfair government policy, protesting the use of public funds for private gain or simply pulling a lever in a voting booth. Keith Stamm found newspaper readers more engaged in their community.

Newspapers, as a mass medium have had the ability to define what was important in civic life and which topics were deserving of water-cooler conversation. They have even had the ability to define the terms of those conversations.

With newspaper readership in decline, it would be easy to conclude that community ties and civic engagement will also decline, that the absence of a mass medium will mean fewer conversations, or less informed conversations.

The reality, though, is that the Internet is a very different medium – one that provides not only the information of a traditional newspaper but also interactivity, a new tool for starting conversations.  By offering interactivity, something printed newspapers could never really offer beyond the boundaries of letters to the editor, the Internet has become the new water cooler.

Consider a recent big news story: Barack Obama made a major speech on race issues. A day after the speech, The New York Times' had more than 2,200 comments on their coverage of the speech. Technorati showed that more than 200 bloggers were talking about the speech – beginning community conversations.  The Fort Worth Star-Telegram had a poll of reader reactions to the speech. And Mediacurves.com showed minute-by-minute reactions as a focus group of more than 700 viewers watched the speech.

Has any newspaper coverage of major address by an American president ever begun so many conversations? Did newspapers, the leaders of civic engagement, ever spawn the hundreds of thousands of words that are being written now about that speech? Could any newspaper give the range of opinions and reactions that the new medium of the Internet provides?

Obviously not.

So it should seem apparent that the Internet can only enhance community ties, whether the news story of the day is local or national, because of the amplified water cooler role the Internet offers.

The promise of interactivity  is surely positive. The Internet can start dozens or even hundreds and thousands of conversations.

However, another positive aspect of the technology of the Internet has a downside that could mitigate the effects of interactivity. The Internet allows endless personalization and choice. In effect, the personalization of the Internet may keep it from becoming the new mass medium – because the masses are not consuming the same content.  The same technology that can pick out your new favorite books at Amazon can narrow your choices of opinion for civic engagement. The Internet offers users the ability to shut out conversations they don't want to engage in and points of view they don't want to hear.

So will the Internet help or harm civic engagement? In many ways, it depends on how polarized the nation is, and how willing consumers are to hear opinions that differ from their own. Barack Obama says he believes the country wants to be more unified, to be having a shared conversation. Whether he is correct remains to be seen.

# Identity and Interdependence:

## A New Community Framework to Study Local News Use

**Rachel Davis Mersey**
**January 22, 2008**

A wealth of literature details the Internet's ability to foster new groups. These groups, brought together by shared interests or backgrounds, can defy geographical boundaries and have become known as online or virtual communities. However, the willingness to use the language of "community" in this digital context remains contested. The ongoing discussion has focused on pinpointing what characteristics actually define a community.

Sociologists favor a contextual lens, highlighting the external forces that define communities. This systems focus has a long history. Emphases have been on the taxonomy of social ties, technological processes, law making, and the connection between real and virtual communication.

In contrast, psychologists have honed in on people as key. The most widely recognized extension of this approach came in the development of psychological sense of community: "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." Sense of community has been proven to be present in a variety of different communities, those that are geographically bound, such as the neighborhood, a housing complex or the workplace, and those that are geographically unbound, such as blogs, e-mail groups or Web sites.

Despite this extension to the digital world, others cite evidence that digital groups are weak in comparison to communities built on strong face-to-face communication. In the framework of building social capital, Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein suggest "that trust relationships and resilient communities generally form though local personal contact." Specifically, Norman Nie and others have cited the socioemotional shortcomings of e-communication as the key difference between the digital and real worlds.

Still others have advocated for a wider perspective, one that recognizes the complementary roles of offline and online communities. Simply, Sally McMillan and Margaret Morrison cited "the line separating real and virtual communities is often fluid and permeable." There is a clear sense throughout this work that technology has resulted in a rise in individuals being a part of more than one community. It is this increase in individuals' community memberships that now requires the attention of mass communication researchers. What is the impact on community-driven journalism?

*Communities and journalism.* What we know is that local news outlets have long grounded their work in the geographic community and scholarship has followed suit. Keith Stamm gave us the most

definitive model—a cyclical representation of the community-newspaper relationship based on community links, which exist via place, process, or structure.

This perspective was born out of a 19th century conception of community in which communities were distinct entities. Today, communities exist across state boundaries, communities bleed into other communities, and communities may exist in new platforms. For example, a form of traditional journalism has emerged in the online avatar world Second Life.

*New sources of news.* What we know is that the expansion of the news business via blogs and user-generated content has inextricably changed journalism. This coupled with the blurring of community boundaries suggests that Stamm's model of the relationship between community ties and newspaper use is dated. It reasons that the model may work for some—those with traditional geographic community ties initially examined by Stamm—and not for the rest—those with an expanding number of community memberships. What is clear is that practitioners' traditional belief that everyone who lives in a community has a need for the local newspaper is a fallacy.

If local journalism is to survive as a unifying force that serves its community, it is evident that it must become a multi-platform and multi-dimensional product. It therefore becomes essential to expand our understanding of the connections between individuals and communities from Stamm's early work. As such, this short paper rests on previous scholarship and journalism practices, and suggests a new framework for mass communication researchers to study the relationship between communities and local journalism in light of the rise of digital media and the blurring of community boundaries. It prizes two constructs: identity and interdependence (figure below).
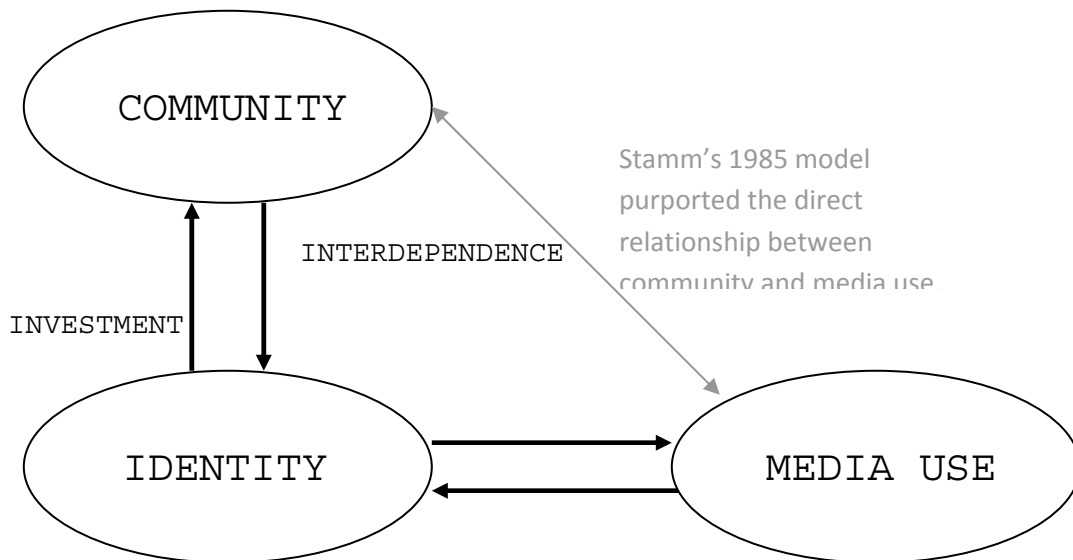
*Identity.* Social identity theory posits that people have both personal identities and social identities. It is reasonable, based on the literature, to suggest that general media choices may be a part of social identity construction and maintenance in two ways. First, individuals may choose media that reinforce their positive social identities. Second, those media choices help define individuals' social identities. An essential element throughout this research is that individuals define their social identities by being members of particular groups and also by not being members of other groups. For mass communication researchers, this means people are defined not only by what they read but also by what they do not read. Could it be that the local newspaper has become "what not to read?"

*Interdependence.* There is evidence to suggest that communities cannot exist without an interactional basis; shared interest is not enough. David McMillan and David Chavis called this "influence" and "integration and fulfillment of needs;" Barbara Ley, "architecture of commitment." The emphasis is on a back-and-forth flow between a community and its members: (1) individual commitment toward the community as a whole and members of the community individually and (2) the benefit of the community as a whole and the behaviors of the individuals to the member.

# The Internet and Democracy: A Prospect for Restoring Civic Health

**Deb Procopio**
**February 18, 2008**

Many political and social scientists are alarmed at the low quality of public opinion as well as the decline of civic health in the United States.  Robert Putnam has pointed to a decline in organizational participation and the television as catalysts for the decline. Delli Carpini and Keeter see the lack of information as the primary cause of a decline in civic health.  Others, such as Schudson, argue that civic health is not declining, and we have simply moved into a new model of citizenship where citizens do not need to be informed to be effective citizens.

I would argue that citizens do, in fact, need to be informed in order to make solid, rational decisions in the democratic process. Simply half-listening to the news and giving full attention only when an issue is alarming is ineffective. By the time an issue is alarming, there is most likely no time left to voice an opinion or vote, nor is there time to work through and investigate logical consequences to form a stable opinion (to reduce Yankelovich's "mushiness."  For this reason, it seems reasonable to continue to study the knowledge gap and underlying factors, and this study found remarkable results to support the hypothesis that the Internet may very well help to mitigate some of those underlying factors.

Knowledge gap theory seems to illustrate that the concepts of participation and knowledge are thoroughly intertwined. Evidence of knowledge gaps has been presented most recently by Cecilie Gaziano, and as Tichenor, Olien and Donohue wrote, it seems very possible that the gap in knowledge between those of higher and lower education is due, in part, to personal interaction. It seems logical that when people participate in any activities—social, political, religious, or other—they will undoubtedly interact with others, engage in discourse with others, encounter differing views and opinions, and perhaps articulate their own opinion. In addition, as Schudson pointed out, the religious, social and political worlds are intertwined now more than ever—meetup.com is a social site that was actually leveraged by Howard Dean to help him become the leading Democratic candidate at one point. He even goes so far to suggest that a woman is "doing" politics by merely walking into a room, thus assuming she has a right to be present – recall the lunch-counter sit-ins of the 1960s, when this "assumption" was not an assumption as all, but actually a radical political statement.

In touting the intertwinings of social and political participation, Schudson dismisses the importance of knowledge. However, as Delli Carpini and Keeter illustrated, knowledge is even more important to disadvantaged or minority groups who need solidarity that results from an understanding of opinions, issues and the connections between candidates and issues.

Many scholars, and particularly Yankelovich and Putnam, point to the media as a culprit for civic decline. Traditional mass media have been one-way "push" media, have failed to present consequences of issues, have failed to focus long enough on issues in order to sell a product, and by their very nature fail to present views of those groups without significant organizational means, i.e. public relations departments or spokespeople.

The nature of the Internet is extremely different. The Internet provides fewer barriers to entry, more opportunities for participation, organization, and interaction—both socially and politically. In addition, the Internet is now a combination of push and pull technologies. One may visit a portal such as Yahoo and may be given (pushed) a list of current news stories. However, if one wishes to gain a deeper understanding of the story, different viewpoint, or related issues, the opportunity is there. This key opportunity is not available with traditional media (aside from writing a letter to the editor.)

The results of this study demonstrate that people in lower SES groups who use the Internet may be more aware of social and political opportunities, and thus participate more in their community, whether socially, politically, or through charitable giving. In addition, the study suggests that the nature of the Internet as an interactive technology may allow users to feel more empowered, which could lead to increased desire to learn about community, social and political issues.  Although the methods used in this analysis do not allow causality to be asserted, further studies using path analysis could further test assertions of causality.