

Social media and the re-structuring of communities: Changing perceptions.

By Anurag Arya (2021)

Abstract: Social media has changed how the sense of 'community' is perceived. Communities are closely tied to how people identify with them. This paper will argue that social media has changed how this identification is made, bridging old divisions, and leading to the formation of new types of inclusive and diverse communities that eschew traditional social markers. These new communities may serve various purposes, from political to simply an integration and negotiation of new kinds of identity. Diversity will be considered in a broad social context; for the purposes of this paper, the primary focus will be on nationalities, with miscellaneous examples considered for analysis.

Introduction

Social media has altered the traditional conceptions of communities and has made them diverse and inclusive. Communities refer to an imagined group in a particular place formed around common characteristics. In fact, traditional sociological research on communities primarily considered geography as a defining common factor for people (Taylor, 2008).

The geographical emphasis inadvertently led to a rise in the importance given to markers like nationality.

With the advent of the Internet and social media, we have seen humans replicate that sense of community virtually, with formation

of new kinds of groups which are no longer necessarily based on traditional characteristics like defined by geography, but on miscellaneous shared interests, or a belief in similar ideas. While it is true that many groups on social media and the internet are formed based on identarian interests and some form of tribalism is seen, based on different types of identity markers like race or gender, a divergence from traditional group behavior and norms is an overwhelming trend. We will primarily focus on this divergence in the following paragraphs.

Contact and shared interest

In the traditional sense, communities were tied to physical space and in turn, constant physical contact. This often led to a limited perception of what community could be, e.g., defined by race or nationality. Arguably, social mobility was a huge factor in how communities evolve or define themselves. Hampton (2016) argues how previous advancements in communication technology afforded convenience of moving places and changing shared space but didn't have a mechanism for sustained contact and awareness among people. This can lead us to conclude that it created a palpable fear among people to travel and experience a different sense of self; They feared losing their traditional social support systems and identity markers. This inconvenience is a major factor in understanding why progressive ideas about identity and community took time to develop. Technological advancements had made global communication and travel more convenient, but it was only in the digital era, there was an increased incentive to evolve the sense of community.

Digital technologies, have an advantage of what Hampton (2016) calls “persistent contact” and “pervasive awareness” which allow people to create sustained ties across long distances. This can be seen in how people keep in touch on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, share their lives, and maintain an awareness of each other’s lives, no matter where they are. Features like instant messaging on these platforms ensures persistent contact and mechanisms for sharing through posts, stories, comments, etc. ensure persistent awareness.

This level of constant contact and awareness was vital in creating space for new identities, as mobile people acquired new interests and shared them with their existing groups. People across nations, miles away, can ‘follow’ or ‘like’ a similar brand, or cultural product, and engage with it in their own unique ways. They may even find commonality based on political ideas unique to their countries but sharing similar goals and connect based on that. They are no longer limited by factors like the demographics of their region when it comes to ethnicity or their geographical reality; ideas take precedence.

Re-structuring of community

It is often argued that with the advent of social media in the digital age, there has been a “loss” of traditional community, and ties among people are weaker. It is a form of moral panic that has existed in previous eras as well; only this time, social media is blamed for this loss. It is a form of nostalgic thinking that seems to romanticize the past but ignore the very pervasive issues and problems that people have always faced. In this context, an example that is usually

considered is of closely-knit, intimate communities in small towns or rural areas, where bonds between people were supposedly 'stronger.' This line of thinking ignores the drawbacks of such intimate communities; society fell short on "contemporary notions of social justice, equality, and freedom" (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). Close-knit communities often also meant the perpetuation of similar prejudices against 'outsiders' or 'the other.' It could also lead to 'groupthink' and an aversion to innovative ideas. Traditional community, more often than not, referred to people segregating themselves on the basis of factors like race or religion. Segregation prevents inter-community exchange, dialogue and communication and can lead to social stagnancy.

Thus, instead of 'Loss of traditional community', it would be more accurate to say that community is being re-structured, mostly for the better. "Social media is fostering networked, supportive, persistent, and pervasive community relationships." (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). Social media has made it possible for people to form connections outside of their immediate social groups and find new ways to communicate across cultures and languages. The Internet ensures access to the same content regardless of where it is being accessed. The same posts reach different audiences regardless of their demography or social identity. This provides an opportunity for deeper engagement and conversation instead of one-sided messaging. As ideas are thus freely exchanged, it enables people to give up old assumptions about identity and form communities based on this free exchange.

This can be further understood through the concept of the "networked public" (Boyd, 2010). If communities are an imagined group in a specific physical space, networked publics are a virtual

space for people to get together and connect to socialize, for cultural events, or to engage in political discussion. This virtual space is a huge factor in shaping the nature of community today. As previously mentioned, communities used to be restricted by geography and physical space which created demographic barriers based on social identity. The virtual space is free of these traditional restrictions and can allow the same functions of a community, while allowing different people of traditional identity groups to come together under new banners, ideas, or purposes.

To understand the erosion of the importance placed on traditional social markers, namely ethnicity and nationality, and the evolution of identity, we will consider examples of Indian and Kurdish identity.

Changing national geography: A tale of two 'diasporas'

The 'Indian diaspora' refers to a diverse group of Indians who have migrated to different parts of the world, usually English-speaking countries, and usually have settled down. Their descendants also count as part of the diaspora. Before social media and the digital era, migrants to the United States had a much more difficult time adapting and adjusting their identities, as maintaining connections with their home country was more difficult. Social media has made that easier. This convenience is also coupled with the Western media exposure and cultural exports.

One of the most popular American shows in India in 2011 was the sitcom "How I met your mother", widely consumed on various screens (Sahoo & De Kruijf, 2016). Social media enabled discussion of the show plot, sharing of memes, and cultural comparisons among fans all over the world. The ending was even compared to a popular

Bollywood movie. This enabled Indians at home and abroad be part of American culture, through real-time engagement with their cultural product. This is true of other types of cultural products as well, like movies or books. It can thus be argued that this form of engagement created an environment of inclusivity for Indian people, regardless of their nationality or race.

Thus, Indians in India with the intention to migrate already have decent cultural exposure of the English-speaking countries that they eventually migrate to, while maintaining contact with their native culture. This enables them to be involved in a widened community space, identifying with cultural products and shared ideas, rather than simply social markers.

Marginalized communities of India have also benefited from community formation through social media. 'Dalits' is an umbrella term used for groups of oppressed 'lower castes' in India. These usually referred to groups of people involved in menial labor and were discriminated against. Dalits can now voice their concerns on social media and raise their concerns internationally, while previously they had little to no options and avenues to raise awareness and band together over the issues they faced. They worked in small towns and villages where often members of the 'higher castes' suppressed their free speech. On social media, there being no barriers to expression, Dalits across the country, and even outside of it (ones that are part of the diaspora) can raise awareness of their plight and voice their concerns.

Social groups, especially politically contested ones like the Kurds, that don't have a full-fledged national identity yet have also found

unique ways to engage socially and come together as communities. Mired in political conflict, Kurds have, over decades, almost exclusively existed as a diaspora. Those close to the homeland have concerns about diaspora Kurds, who have assimilated into European societies and become less attached to local tradition (Mahmod, 2019). A new networked space, distinct from the conflicted region of 'Kurdistan' (potential homeland for Kurds) have enabled second-generation Kurds to move away from nationalism as a sole marker of their Kurdish identity. Younger generations of Kurds define their identity by extracting influence from international popular culture and political thinking.

Lack of restrictions on online expression on social media means that they can express ideas completely different from traditional Kurdish ones, rooted in Western thought and discuss taboo subjects like sexual freedom and progressive attitudes towards gender. These new ideas, negotiated with their traditional identity, is enabled by online forums, where sometimes anonymity is a boon and people may discuss new ideas without fear of repercussions. Ethnically mixed Kurds born in other nations no longer identify with 'displacement', but rather, a new form of integrated identity, owing to free online expression, and an ability to connect with like minded members of the diaspora worldwide.

Both if these above examples lead us to conclude that social media and online cultures enable national and/or ethnic identities to become more integrated, diverse and change who is included or excluded in a particular community. Being 'Indian', or even 'Kurdish', may mean many things, and may include a variety of people with diverse perspectives, owing to unrestricted online engagement.

Local activism goes global

Social media also has an impact on local political movements and changes the perception of 'community' in unique ways. Protesters during the Egyptian revolution in 2011 made extensive use of social media and connected with sympathetic voices from across the world. They made various tweets and videos and voiced the problems and violence faced by them on the internet. Even though the movement was about Egyptian issues, people across the world commented, liked, and shared the concerns, by identifying with their own experiences with authority (Bridgman, 2014). This created a new form of online community, as 'online activists' ranged from Egyptians to people from as far as Spain and Philippines. These 'transnational' audiences participated in collective activism and built a new kind of community around resisting authority and dictatorship. Through social media, identity crossed national and ethnic boundaries and created a new kind of virtual space of like-minded people. It brought the movement global attention and enabled people from around the world to connect and form their own virtual community.

The very nature of online communities favors the construction of a specific type of identity, one based on individual worldview and interests, which in turn change the framework and nature of identification with communities (Arfini, Parandera, Gazaniga, Maggioni & Tacchino, 2020). These new communities, then, favor a diverse set of people, because traditional social markers no longer apply in a virtual networked space. Online communities, then, expand upon already existing parts of a person's offline identity, which include their offline social network and cultural practices. This expansion leads to formation of inclusive communities based on shared interests and ideas, regardless of social markers.

Conclusion:

We have examined and understood the nature of new kinds of communities as distinct from traditional ones, bound by space and social markers. As examples of unconventional community, examples of the Indian and Kurdish diaspora were considered. A new type of transnational, 'virtual community' can also be seen in online protest movements like the example considered of the Egyptian revolution. It can thus be inferred that social media creates a new kind of space for community formation, and this space in turn leads to communities that may include people of diverse nationalities or races, as they are no longer constrained by physical space or local social factors.

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