

Conference, „Digital Communities – Social proximity from a spatial distance“, 18th and 19th July 2024, Kiel University

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Ferdinand Tönnies was one of the most prominent figures in the early days of sociology and his 1887 book „*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*“ remains one of its central classics. His two concepts, community and society, have developed into some of the most influential and productive sociological concepts and have become an integral part of the field's terminology. The conference *Digital Communities – Social Proximity from a Spatial Distance*² revisited Tönnies' idea of community and brought it into current debates about the digital age. Although the concept of digital community is widely used in practical contexts (e.g., building and managing digital communities), it is less prominent in the academic field. The aim of this conference was to address this gap through conceptual, empirical and methodological work. Thereby, the work of Tönnies provides a helpful starting point and foundational source of inspiration for new directions of thought.

In a short introductory speech, Robert Seyfert of Kiel University, the main organizer of the conference, presented the idea of the conference. The conference aimed to address the asymmetrical use of Tönnies' productive pair of terms in sociological history: community and society in the context of digital transformation. Until now, sociological studies focused largely on the conceptualization and analysis of digital society (Baecker 2018; Nassehi 2019). However, the concept of the digital community is treated marginally in sociological discourse. To achieve this goal, the conference was organized into four panels with three main foci:

First, an analysis of digital communities as a new *form of social coexistence* – working with and beyond Tönnies. Here, the concept of a genuinely *digital* community is to be linked to the characteristics of *the* digital. Digital or virtual communities are characterized by new forms of social relationships, relationships without physical co-presence, but by social presence in the digital space. Second, digital communities might be shaped by new and different forms of *affective and cultural belonging*. Without spaces of physical co-presence, it remains an open question how participation and belonging might be shaped to constitute these communities. In addition, digital infrastructures develop new classifications and forms of social order that differ from analogous spaces. These changing interactions, interconnections and communications produce novel forms of affective identification. Third, digital communities need to be discussed in terms of *digital commons and community capitalism*. Commons are central to the emancipatory potential of digital communities. The concept aims at self-

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2 The conference was organized by the Institute of Social Sciences, Kiel University, Section of Sociological Theory in cooperation with the Ferdinand-Tönnies Society (FTG) and the German Sociological Association (DGS) and was supported by the initiative „Frauen aufs Podium“.

organized forms of social life, thus providing opportunities to explore the scalability of digital communities. As a bottom-up process, digital commons underline the structures of digital communities, and thus go beyond the limits of the traditional community concept. These communities can also be analyzed in their instrumentalization through, for instance, present forms of community capitalism.

In sum, the conference intended to discuss the potentials and limits of the concept of digital communities using Ferdinand Tönnies' work, but also going beyond it. In doing so, it brought together research on digital communities in many different fields: communication and (social) media studies, sociology of work and culture, philosophy.

Dieter Haselbach's presentation on *The concept of community: Ferdinand Tönnies' approach* aimed at providing a historical overview of the contextual background of Tönnies' legacy: 'Bringing you into a time where the term digital was not used at all, maybe by mathematicians'. The initial scientific situation of emerging sociology in the 19th century was dominated by natural sciences and a historical situation of European exploration and colonization of foreign societies. Tönnies' interest in the study of community as a form of social life stems from a renaissance of romanticism, which was crucial in his conceptualization of communal life. Inspired by the contract theory of Thomas Hobbes and its state of nature concept, Tönnies claimed that a social contract can only come about when preceded by relations of trust, thus community. Therefore, the concept of community by Tönnies refers to trust relationships between individuals. At this point, Haselbach emphasized that for Tönnies every current society is a mixture of community and society; forms of trust and contract. Community refers to traditional relations, often to be found in villages and small town life. It is associated with familial relationships and friendships that might also include forms of violence. Society, in contrast, refers to relationships between individuals that have the ability to agree on contracts under their own will. In a synthesizing table, Haselbach did suggest four fields of analysis for the discussion of digital communities: connecting people (a), order (b), sanction (c), and individual behavior (d). In his following conceptualization, he understood digital groups as: connected through the internet, ordered by informal laws with rather informal forms of sanctions, including, for instance, shitstorm or direct social exclusion.

The lively discussion that followed brought out the potential of the conference for the first time by throwing various questions on the digital into the metaphorical space. Topics of digital individuality (authenticity), the question of the subject in the digital, the role of technology (tools, algorithms and their governance) and the juxtaposition of physical and digital space were discussed in the context of Ferdinand Tönnies' work. One could have a first impression that introducing Tönnies' concepts in the study of the digital might be worth the effort.

The first panel focused on actual re-conceptualizations of Ferdinand Tönnies' concepts of community. Edoardo Lorenzo Cumitini, a doctoral student from the University of Hamburg, presented *Beyond the proximity metaphor: Redescribing Tönnies' dual logic of the communal and the social for the study of digital communities*. In his discussion, he focused on the distinction between *Wesenwille* and *Kürwille* as two different logics of human volition. *Wesenwille*, is describing the more spontaneous and affective will whereas *Kürwille* refers rather to the field of calculative, rational and artifact-based will in Tönnies' thought. Community is based on *Wesenwille* which emphasizes the spatially proximate, intimate or particularistic. This is in slight conflict to an understanding of digital communities which are often seen as partially disembodied through digital media. To speak of digital communities, it might be helpful to abandon the proximity metaphor and its spatial connotation. Moving from a spatial

to a temporal point of view, one might focus rather on the forms of time investments people pursue in digital spaces as a new measure of the strength of a social bond.

The hidden side of digital media was presented by Jakob Wiesinger, a doctoral student at the University of Bamberg. In contrast to the focus on the temporal dimension, his key questions evolved rather around delineations of public and private sphere(s). Here, he asked about the use of digital groups (such as, e. g., WhatsApp, Telegram Channels, etc.) as a form of social communication outside the public sphere. Such an approach emphasizes the role of civic culture, a social context that might be stabilized through everyday communication. Interestingly, his notion of community referred to an understanding of community as closeness and value-based relationships, very much in line with Tönnies. However, group members may have different expectations about the durability of the use of digital media for social communication. Digital media might constitute a countertendency to the often-discussed decline of communities, as they allow longer durability and easier forms of participation. This point was further discussed in regard to the new quality of speed and synchronicity enabled through digital media.

The second panel was intended to look beyond the work of Ferdinand Tönnies as the notion of community can be used in different ways. Andreas Hepp from the Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research Bremen (ZeMKI) presented a thought-provoking input on *Why communities cannot be digital – and yet digital media and their infrastructures are fundamentally changing processes of communitization*. He appealed to remain precise in conceptualizing (digital) communities. Therefore, he asked whether it is possible to speak of a digital community if it always requires a physical human and non-machine presence? Hepp's research leads him to the slightly provocative answer that it is not possible to speak of digital community building, because society is always based on human subjects and not on algorithms in digital space. The digital cannot create meaning and therefore community. Nevertheless, society is determined by developments of 'deep mediatization'. The foundations of society are therefore constitutively interwoven with digital media and their infrastructure. According to Hepp, communities differ in the way they use different digital spaces. The concept of deep mediatization creates new figurations and rearranges or produces new social references. This argument was further developed with regards to empirical studies on communitization and cross-generational changes as well as a research proposal that aims to look at the role of so-called pioneer communities and their imaginations of the future. These communities of digitalization create imaginations of future living environments and thus influence technological developments. The figurative work of future digital living environments shapes the imagination of new communities in the digital space.

Insa Pruiskien from the Research Center on Inequality and Social Policy Bremen (SO-CIUM) presented empirical findings on the development of communities that 'go digital'. She asked *What are local conditions for the production of digital communities? Protestant American congregations and politicized communities on Twitter*. Thereby, she explored the altered conception and perception of space in the digital realm and was particularly interested in understanding the affective dimensions within digital spaces of solidarity, trust, and belonging. Digital communities were conceptualized as a space of performance where members can showcase, reinvent, and present themselves. In an extensive social network and social media analysis, her study looks at religious digital communities in the USA. The analysis reveals the emergence of new cultural codes and the construction of indetermined and flexible digital identities. Such self-definition of actors in the digital space leads to a fluid construction

of the self. In her research, Pruiskén repeatedly encountered the high significance of platform algorithms as a constitutive factor in shaping digital communities. This also became the focus of the following discussion. Platforms act as digital spaces where an algorithmic logic creates unique and new interconnections between actors. These connections seem to be entirely digital, developing a dynamic of their own.

The third panel addressed the affective and emotional dimension of digital communities. Katrin Döveling, a researcher from the University of Applied Sciences Darmstadt, opened with her presentation on *Emotion Spirals in Digital Affect Cultures. Proximity at a distance. Empirical evidence and interdisciplinary challenges*. In her research, she explores the motivation for community building, in particular the feeling of belonging. Döveling understands emotions as a driver of social change. In this sense, the feeling of belonging needs a perception of alignment, which is highly influenced by the emotions in play. Her theoretical framework is underpinned by her empirical research on digital activism on social media. Here, it can be observed that emotional processes of alignment occur via visuals such as hashtags or emojis. The dynamic process triggers feelings of belonging. It results in manifested emotive schemes, so-called digital feeling rules, which specify emotional patterns while using certain hashtags, visuals and emojis. Döveling describes this process as digital affect cultures where digital connectivity is closely linked to emotional and affective processes. The ensuing discussion focused on the question of how emotions and emotional alignment can be measured. The importance of belonging to social movements was discussed. This also addressed the affective and emotional dimension of identification. Hate and anger can lead to affiliation and alignment, to negative identification, particularly evident on digital platforms.

Sandra Robinson from Carleton University, Canada, closed the third panel with *Strange intimacies – platforms, populism and digital communities*. Her work on intimacies focuses on the embodiment of emotions in digital communities. Her analysis on right-wing populist discourses in the US shows an emotional interplay of connecting and contesting, whereby an emotional decoupling takes place. The ‘politics of disconnection’ finds space (space in a spatial and social sense) in digital platforms. These are spaces of identification through shared rejections of specific values in the form of hate and anger. Examples include affective counter-positioning on gender and climate issues. This tied in with the previous discussion about the possibility of negative identification in digital communities. ‘Platform intimacies’ are realized through the platform’s own semiotic structures. Realities immanent to the platform are created and affectively bound to certain collective imaginaries. Robinson concluded that this is more a matter of attachment to digital platforms than a drive towards community building. The affects bind, but they bind not to a community. It should be noted that negative identification through intimate platform affects is a productive dimension of community-building, in which optimism promotes a sense of belonging.

Panel four, *From Digital Commons to Community Capitalism* started with the presentation *The meaning of neighborhood communities: Urban and digital Spaces of Common?* by Diana Betzler from the University of Fribourg. She presented a research project in the making, asking: How does civil engagement in neighborhoods come about and what role do digital platforms play here? Her research into digital platforms is planned on three levels: individual, neighborhood building and social role. Betzler conceptualized neighborhoods as characterized by geographical and architectural boundaries. Current developments in urbanization and digitization challenge this understanding. Digital neighborhoods delineate from the geographically limited places of residency and develop into a hybrid space that mixes virtual in-

teraction and offline encounters. In this context, new forms of social relations emerge through the digital space. This might lead to new actor constellations because such a digital ‘Dorfplatz’ offers a broader availability for all, at least in the theoretical expectation. Such a local digital space also constitutes ties to commercial players, such as, for instance, supermarkets. In addition, the design of these digital infrastructures is not necessarily created in a participative way.

Silke van Dyk’s presentation on *Community Capitalism. On the exploitation of digital communities* deepened these topics. How do digital communities fit into contemporary trends of capitalist formation? For van Dyk from the University of Jena, digital communities constitute a new resource for the capitalist accumulation of unpaid work. Historically, unpaid work was restricted to care work and is now leading to the restructuring of other traditional delineations. For her, this development is driven by the crisis of social reproduction (for instance, underfunded public infrastructures, demographic change, and the feminization of work), the technological change through digitization (for example, new relevance of digital data and digital platforms) and the more general crisis of neoliberal hegemony (such as, politics of austerity, and the rise of right-wing movements). In consequence, this leads to new forms of outsourcing value-creation into the civil society. The role of post-wage work becomes increasingly important. Post-wage work refers to different forms of immaterial labor that is normally not conceptualized as work and in fact blurs the conventional distinction between consumption and production. Van Dyk’s perspective emphasizes the dark side of digital communities: the instrumentalization of positive community feelings. She refers to Derrida’s critique of communities that are entangled with notions of homogeneity and natural belonging. Communities are made calculable by statistical and governmental technologies and become objects of their exploitation.

In the final presentation on *A note on neo-tribes: Escaping capitalism, the institutional, the organizational and the corporate – or not really?* Vivien Holdosi focused on questions of social recognition and mimesis. She introduced the concept of neo-tribalism that looks into the different social perceptions among individuals within societies. Against the classic definition of subcultures (e.g., Punks, Rave, Hippies, etc.) which have a very strict understanding of what defines these subcultures, neo-tribalism emphasizes more fluid possibilities of participation. The affiliation to a neo-tribe can be a temporal escape and partial commitment. In consequence, contributions into neo-tribal groups are much more fragmented and define the character of participants to a lesser degree. These forms of neo-tribalism do not necessarily develop a strong distinction to forms of consumption. Whereas neo-tribalism might be understood as a reaction of people who miss community, it is still closely entangled with ideals of ‘free choice of anything’ – although the choice might not necessarily be fully free.

All in all, the conference offered a productive space of discussion. This was particularly due to the multi-disciplinarity of both presenters and participants. Of course, there was no final consensus on what constitutes and characterizes digital communities. Nevertheless, some interesting aspects can be pointed out.

Against the spatial dimension that is much more present in the traditional concept of community, digital communities emphasize the temporal dimension. If the space of belonging becomes less significant and if participation from different spaces is easier, the time one invests into the participation becomes more important. Time of participation becomes a possible source of social distinction. In this vein, digital communities might also develop different forms of permanence and durability, especially due to the low entry barriers which

foster social expectations. This might particularly be so in digital communities of everyday life such as family-WhatsApp groups or the like. In such context, and this is similar to non-digital communities, there is no easy exit due to the strong social expectations and possible sanctions.

Digital communities often mirror already existing analogue groups (examples discussed have been family, religious groups or neighborhoods), but algorithmic classifications lead to new forms of community building. Timelines, feeds or chat groups can be algorithmically formed in ways that evade the perception of participants – even where they are heavily curated. Social order and social sanctions are then algorithmically intermediated rather than result of human interaction. The choices, individuals can make, are structured in different ways, as algorithms do not address the subject itself, but rather the context-conditions and infrastructures. In its most extreme case, digital communities might be communities without a shared sense of belonging. From this perspective, the discussion on community and the digital highlights the development of new forms of affective identification.

Literature

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