



Information technology and social cohesion: A tale of two villages



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ABSTRACT

The study is about social cohesion in rural communities and how this interacts with Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Social cohesion is considered in terms of both system integration and social integration. System integration includes business and cultural organisations, civil society and communal spaces on and offline, which can provide bridging mechanisms to bring together disparate social groups. Social integration refers to more informal mechanisms of inclusion, including social networks, a sense of belonging, commitment to the common good. The paper considers these elements of social cohesion in relation to the intertwining of on and offline relationships by examining two contrasting rural communities in Northern Scotland. The paper concludes that ICT can play very different roles in social cohesion for different social and cultural groups as well as for different kinds of locational communities, but that ICT is becoming an integral part of rural social relations.

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1. Introduction

The countryside is being transformed by the possibilities offered by Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to enable people to live and work remotely but also to interact with their local communities in new ways. ICT enables local communities to be created through online and offline interactions which have implications for the kinds of social cohesion evolving in particular places. The paper considers how these local social relations are played out in new forms through digital interactions.

Social theorists have long pointed to the disappearance of traditional communities in the countryside and elsewhere through the *disembedding* of social relationships (Giddens, 1991) in favour of communities of choice and personal communities which are less likely to be locational (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). This disembedding of social relationships and traditional communities in time and space is further enabled through digital communications that can create new communities of interest and affect which are not localised at all (Rainie and Wellman, 2012) and are available 24/7 at the click of a mouse or poke of a touch pad (Turkle, 2013). Hence, communities without propinquity take on new dimensions through ICT (Calhoun, 1998). However, people still live in local communities in which social relationships are meaningful and

important and it is the *re-embedding* of these social relationships within a locality which are the focus of this study. Digital communications also play an increasingly important part in this process as the community can be represented and “imagined” online in different ways. However, within communities various social layers interact with digital technology in different ways leading to different forms of social cohesion and different relationships to the community of place. Digital communications are usually seen as an integral part of the development of urban areas (see for example the recent digital cities catapult; <https://futurecities.catapult.org.uk/>). Yet rural communities are interesting ones in this respect because their relative isolation and dispersion make ICT perhaps even more important (Townsend et al., 2013). People might seek to make a living in the countryside, by setting up businesses or by commuting or remote working (Bosworth and Willett, 2011), but it is often quality of life that they are seeking, which can include quality of community life as they perceive it (Champion, 1989). They join people for whom the countryside is a source of more traditional forms of livelihood (such as farming or fishing) creating a series of socio-economic and cultural layers (Halfacree, 2008; OECD, 2008). The constant churn between in-coming and outgoing populations in the last decades as young people move away to find work or education and older people move in to retire (Stockdale et al., 2013) may make it difficult to easily distinguish between “incomers” and “locals” (Jedrej and Nuttall, 1996), although these distinctions might nevertheless hold a cultural or social salience. The tradition of community studies mainly focused

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on social relationships in more settled communities that were geographically bounded (Crow, 2002). However, new social relationships created by mobile residents and information communications suggest that many dimensions of community life, including social cohesion, need to be reconsidered. Nowadays, rural communities are ones of choice rather than necessity. But what sort of communities are they?

The purpose of this paper is to look at how people create a sense of community and social cohesion in a local setting. It considers the role of ICT in enabling them to do so and how new kinds of community are thus created. ICT means that people do not need to leave their networks behind them when they move but there might nevertheless be *re-embedding* of social relationships at a local level. In doing so, people create their own sense of “elective belonging” (Savage, 2010) in their attachments to the places they have chosen to live and the social imagining of those places (Anderson, 1983). The richness of local social relationships, which we term social cohesion, are important for the “quality of life” (Phillips, 2006) to which social cohesion contributes (Abbott and Wallace, 2012).

2. Theory: local communities and social cohesion

Although social cohesion has a long history in social sciences, it has been more recently adapted to provide a framework for social policies at national and European levels (Ellison, 2012; Jones, 2013; Larsen, 2013) and is usually analysed at a national level, often in terms of quantitative indicators (Berger Schmitt, 2002). Deriving from Durkheimian sociology, social cohesion refers to the social bonds and social norms that hold society together (Durkheim, 1964) and has been recently operationalised through indicators to measure social networks, a sense of identity and the commitment to the common good (Dragolov et al., 2013). So far, few people have tried to look at contemporary forms of social cohesion either qualitatively or at a local level and none have done so by considering ICT.

David Lockwood provides a framework for understanding social cohesion in terms of social and system integration:

“Whereas the problem of social integration focuses attention upon the orderly or conflictful relationships between *actors*, the problem of system integration focuses on the orderly or conflictful relationships between the *parts* of a social system.” (Lockwood, 1992: 400)

In other words, system integration can be seen to relate to the community as a whole and the relationships of the different parts within it, whilst social integration refers to the way in which individuals are linked to the community through social inclusion (Abbott et al., 2016).

But how can it be operationalised empirically at a local level? Here we consider system integration as the relationship between different structural elements of the local social system - how cleavages of social classes, age, divisions between what are perceived as “incomers” and “locals” are bridged. We consider social integration as the way in which individuals are connected to the local community through social networks, social capital, a sense of belonging and working for the common good.

Beginning with system integration, social cleavages can be particularly acute in small communities where people live in close proximity, but are themselves dynamically changing. They can also be lived out in virtual communities as different social groups use ICT and interact with their communities in different ways. Cleavages according to income as well as culture might be found but also according to age as the divide emerges between those who use a variety of communications media and those who use only limited

media or none at all (although the latter group are rapidly disappearing) (Dutton and Blank, 2012). Here we can identify offline sites of interaction in the form of meeting places such as village greens, squares and streets for casual interaction, commercially provided community hubs such as pubs, shops and cafes or collectively organised spaces such as meeting halls, notice boards and museums. The density and nature of civil society organisations such as youth clubs, local history associations and religious organisations can be greatly augmented through online communications on which they increasingly depend (Huysman and Wulf, 2004; Wallace, 2013). Online meeting spaces encouraging system integration can also be websites which provide collective resources and information. However, many of these sites are provided officially through local authorities and it is not clear how much community activities really form part of this virtual space or how much local residents are able to engage with it. Locally produced radio and TV stations, as well as paper or online newsletters, help to bridge this divide between official communications and citizen participation. In rural areas, the local Community or Parish Council can help to make these collective spaces into ones that engage residents but their degree of activity and representativeness of local interests is variable.

Turning now to social integration, this refers to the way in which people are connected into the community at an individual or group level and can be explored both online and offline. An important element of this is social networks binding people to a community and thereby generating social capital (social capital being seen as the added social value produced by networking). This includes “bridging social capital” that can link to others outside personal networks (Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000) and “bonding social capital” that can help to reinforce more affective social relationships. Both forms of social capital are important for generating social cohesion. Social capital can potentially be augmented by ICT communications, including the weak ties that enable people to “get things done” (Granovetter, 1974) as well as the strong ties reinforced by social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and texting. The synthesis of bridging and bonding social capital assisted can be even more strongly reinforced in rural areas on account of the overlapping of multiple social ties (Townsend et al., 2015a,b).

A second element of social integration is the feeling of belonging to the community (Dragolov et al., 2013). This sense of belonging, identified at a national level as a powerful emotional commitment to a territory and its related community (Guibernau, 2013), could also be found at the local level in some communities that generate local loyalties and elective affinities. It is often the case that people form emotional attachments to the landscape (Ingold, 2000), but social solidarities are cemented by a sense of loyalty and commitment to the group, which some contexts foster more than others (Crow, 2002). This sense of identification can be explored through subjective perceptions of individuals but also through the multiple ways in which the locality is evoked in online communications.

A third element of social integration as a factor in social cohesion is a commitment to the community and the “common good” for which people might be prepared to invest time, capital or other resources (Dragolov et al., 2013). Commitment to the community as a common good is based on altruistic notions of the worthiness of local causes and putting collective interests above individual ones - although these activities can also be vehicles for furthering individual self-interest as Lin demonstrates (Crow, 2002; Dragolov et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2001). For Putnam it is this collective good that is fostered through social capital to foster “civic mindedness” which is also the basis for prosperity and democracy (Putnam, 2000). In his studies, it is this civic mindedness which distinguishes the prosperous North of Italy from the “backward” South (Putnam et al., 1993). Social capital is therefore generated through

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