

Network Connections: A Comparison of Physical and Online Groups Through Sixties Countercultural Ideas

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Most people are familiar in one way or another with the concept of community and the modes of communication that connect its members. The success of a community or group of people ultimately depends on the communication between them, and whether the modes of communication used facilitate intimacy and group membership among community members. Advances in technology, such as the automobile, the telephone, and more recently, the internet, have greatly furthered the possibilities of communities and the interactions of members. Such advances have caused many scholars to question what constitutes a community and whether or not such new communication methods as the internet are contributing to the apparent destruction of “community.” My research deals with the communication between people who share similar ideas regarding spirituality, love, respect for nature and other “hippie” values through the 1960’s counterculture and through the internet today. By studying the communities that made up the counterculture of the nineteen sixties and the articulations of the ideas of this group of people on the internet today, it becomes apparent that even the most seemingly traditional ideas of community, involving face-to-face contact, can be expressed and attained through the use of technology.

Through my research, I will link the communication network of countercultural communities of the sixties with the network of internet sites today which promote similar ideas of the sixties counterculture, specifically those sites affiliated with the Rainbow Family. This approach to understanding community as a series of networks of individuals rather than tied to a specific location is one utilized by many scholars, but this

particular study of the sixties counterculture as a blueprint for the networks of the internet today is unique. This approach can offer a perspective on how the beliefs of a counterculture, which flourished across the nation and beyond and then suddenly, it seemed, ceased to be, can still be maintained through use of the internet today. Likening such physically based communities that existed in the sixties, whether they be communes or temporary gatherings, to online communities that promote similar ideas adds greater emphasis to the humanness of such communication. The use of the internet to promote gatherings outside of Cyberspace, as is the case with Rainbow Family affiliated websites, can be seen as a means of connecting likeminded, spiritually-aware people through technology, but also can be seen as sustaining the same bonds outside the internet as well. Many people are skeptical, however, that technological advances such as the internet contribute to the loss of community, an idea that is not exclusive to even the twentieth century.

Working alongside other scholars involved in the study of community and the internet today, this research discusses what appears to be the current perception held by many people regarding the apparent disappearance of “community” as a result of people’s growing use of technology, including the internet. According to many scholars, this perception of community as becoming defunct due to advances in technology is not a new one; rather it can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and beyond.

Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist during the nineteenth century, made a distinction between the kind of community that existed before industrialization, which he referred to as *gemeinschaft* and the contractually organized societies associated with the coming of the industrial revolution, which he deemed *gesellschaft* (Wellman, 4). Tönnies

saw these new types of communities as lacking cohesion and taking the place of the family-oriented, traditional forms of community (Wellman, 4). This is a theme that remains strong today, according to K. Ann Renninger and Wesley Shumar. “Modernity results in a loss of traditional community values and structures and replaces them with impersonal relationships and fragmented cultural values...” (Renninger & Shumar, 2).

It is crucial to understand that such fears of the destruction of community have existed for a long time, for it can help to quell current perceptions of the internet as compromising such traditional ideas of community. Many contemporary scholars reject the notion that communities were ever in fact completely isolated and unaffected by outside influences, and that there exists an imagined consensus that such was the model of communities before technology came along. Pundits of virtual community, according to Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, confuse the pastoralist myth of community for what actually was reality for many communities, and this did not include a community being completely isolated from outside influences. Wellman and Gulia also recognize that even before the internet, community ties were already geographically dispersed and connected by telecommunications such as the phone and fax machine (Wellman, 355). Such scholars stress the reformulation of what actually constitutes a community, so as to be able to accommodate for the study of both communities which are geographically limited as well as those which lack such bounds, including those communities which grow out of the internet today. Recognizing that community is not disappearing, but rather being reformulated through advances in technology, especially regarding the dispersal of hippie ideas, can pacify those pundits of technology’s apparent role in community.

It is important to realize that communities can exist outside of geographical bounds. This phenomenon did not just recently begin with the advent of the internet, rather, communities have existed in the form of networks of people exchanging ideas and information for much longer than many traditional critics of community would recognize. Due to changes in technology, the idea of community becomes blurred and must be reformulated. Many scholars have argued over what exactly constitutes a community, whether it is necessarily geographically bounded, or can exist outside of such constraints. Many contemporary scholars are dispelling older concepts of community that are defined by geographical boundaries in order to analyze those communities that grow, and in fact flourish outside these limitations. The Social Network Theory is very often utilized to study such groups and their interactions.

The Social Network approach to analyzing communities is based on the exchange of resources between individuals which in turn creates connectivity between members of a network. It is defined by the amount and types of resources exchanged, whether or not the exchange is voluntary and frequent, and the direction of the flow of information being exchanged (Renninger & Shumar, 4). Dorothy Noyes discusses this approach in her essay "Group" and describes those dense networks of people, characterized by single-stranded relationships as what we usually associate with the typical community, such as a working-class neighborhood, for example. The benefit of using such an approach is that scholars are better able to analyze this kind of typical community, as well as emerging communities without geographical constraints.

The Social Network Theory helps break away the preconceived notion of a community as a bounded, tight knit group of people whose interaction is involuntary and

not based around shared interests. With this new approach to studying communities, scholars are able to distinguish between what can and cannot constitute a community more clearly. With this theory, one is able to dispel the once unarguable notion that a neighborhood is automatically considered a community, based on how much exchange is actually taking place, whether the exchange is voluntary, and so on. In these new terms “community” refers to networks of relationships between individuals (Wellman, 15). The Social Network approach analyzes the relationships individuals form among each other and the cohesiveness of these ties allows scholars to not only conduct research on new communities, such as those in Cyberspace, but also those former communities that once appeared to be more traditional

According to Noyes, using the Social Network Theory allows scholars to view a community as consisting of complex networks of contacts and influences. Noyes shows how this theory can apply to groups of people as it relates to the exchanging of ideas between networks of members in apparently bounded communities. According to Noyes, community is not independent of the network and networks exist solely in the way that ties between members are recreated and revitalized through music, dance, religion and other performances of the group. An important actor in this recreation of ties is the peripheral member. Noyes emphasizes the importance of peripheral network members in connecting the networks of a community to the larger society. Such peripheral members, once there exist enough of them, have the power to influence central members to adopt their (the peripheral member’s) ideas and innovations (Noyes, 458). Thus, the weak ties of the peripheral members actually have the potential to be very powerful in the spreading of culture and ideas.

According to Wellman and Leighton, in Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities, such weak, ramifying ties, like those utilized by the peripheral member, exist for obtaining access to new resources, whereas the strong solitary ties are more for conserving existing resources (Wellman, 10). For the peripheral member, these weak ties are utilized in searching for information on the internet at any random moment, but for those searching for a connection with central member, or group of members, it is necessary to develop stronger ties. The process of socializing between the peripheral members and the central members of an online community is very similar to the weak ties of network members that connected hippies to the greater counterculture in the sixties. Today, the networks that are a more current articulation of the notion of community, i.e. internet communities, can now easily be compared to seemingly geographically bounded groups to form a larger community, specifically, in the case of the hippies of the sixties. These are the groups who are trying to relive the communities which they physically lived in during the time period of the counterculture.

The hippie counterculture of the sixties is often perceived as one made up of dropouts and acid heads who were often unsure of exactly what they were rebelling against. While this was true to some extent in many geographical communities, including the community of Haight-Ashbury, this is not the definition utilized while researching this topic. Here, I am concentrating on the sets of beliefs that were able to transcend the rough-and-tumble end of the sixties and resurface again on the internet decades later. For these purposes, what will define this group of hippies is the ideas, beliefs, and communication methods utilized, rather than stereotypical actions of members of these communities (such as drug use.)

The Haight-Ashbury community which developed in the San Francisco Bay area was a lively scene since the beat era in the fifties (Hoskyns, 23). But unlike the beats, the new members of this community in the sixties seemed to possess a different attitude. Charles Perry, author of The Haight-Ashbury describes this as “an expansive, theatrical attitude of being cool enough to have fun” (Perry, 6). A momentous event of the whole hippie era occurred in this area in 1977, the Human-Be in, a “gathering of the tribes” (Hoskyns, 129) that sought to unite the myriad of hippies that existed across the country. This festival, which evoked the feeling of a family reunion in many people (Hoskyns, 131) was one of the more uniting features of the community, which slowly began to collapse with the introduction of harder drugs on the scene in the late sixties. Although LSD was an extremely influential part of the community, the members of the Haight-Ashbury community still shared the same ideas about peace, love, and respect for nature as many others in the counterculture who were not so connected by the use of LSD.

The hippies, members of the countercultural movement of the sixties, were able to identify themselves with others in the movement outside of their own personal communities through the dispersal of information, stories, and sharing of values that allowed the greater subculture to flourish. Alicia Bay Laurel, a member of the Haight-Ashbury community in 1966, continues to stress the ideas and values that she and her fellow countercultural members possessed, and still possess today, via the internet. The hippies, according to Laurel, were those who wished to live in a gift-giving culture that valued spiritual awareness and depth and sought to live in harmony with nature. In her description of the hippie lifestyle she experienced, Laurel also emphasizes the importance of fluidity in life, and how this idea and many others of the counterculture were in

complete opposition with the middle class culture in which most of the hippies were raised. Laurel and many other members of the sixties counterculture were well aware of how they uprooted many former notions about the nature of community and replaced it with a more amorphous idea of society.

Many of the communities which surfaced during this time, including various temporary communities such as Be-Ins and festivals like Woodstock, and the Haight-Ashbury community, were free of the restraints of a traditional community. They were free to the extent that, while individually each was geographically bounded; their formation was intentional rather than a product of simply generational ties to a region. These communities which constituted the pieces of a greater countercultural puzzle simultaneously thrived individually, influenced each other constantly, and overall the entire counterculture at large. The bonds that were made between members of the counterculture were no longer vertical, as Laurel puts it. She refers to the friendships she established during this time as “a horizontal extended family, as opposed to the ancient tribal extended family, which was multi-generational, and therefore, vertical” (www.thefarm.org/museum/intimacy.html). This new development of community as no longer being tied down by geographical and generational bounds actually was a reaction to the changes in society in the post-war era of the fifties.

Countercultural communities such as Haight-Ashbury in the sixties were intentionally established as a reaction to the homogenization of middle class communities in the fifties. The new postindustrial idea of community that emerged after the Second World War had a direct effect on the new idea of community in the sixties. The mass society that materialized during the fifties, according to sociologist David Reisman,

created what he dubbed the “lonely crowd,” lost in the midst of the homogenization and organization of the time (Jamison & Eyerman, 34). This feeling led to the alienation and rebellion which now offers a foresight into the countercultural movement of the sixties. Despite the fact that countercultures such as the hippie movement were actually in opposition to the ideals of the middle class, their formation of amorphous communities that went beyond traditional bounds actually follow a similar trajectory as those of the new middle class in the fifties. According to Jamison and Eyerman, communities were no longer necessarily generational and bounded to one spot. However, the middle-class communities that were developing were so homogenized, that the sixties communities reacted as a rebellious counter to the mass society that reproduced the same individuals. This resulted in a countercultural movement that flourished beyond traditionally bounded communities.

The alienation felt by the masses during this time also led to rebellion that manifested itself in the sixties with such movements that challenged middle class ideas. The community around Haight-Ashbury certainly did just this, and although this community is known specifically for its infamous Summer of Love (Hoskyns, 149), it also provides a plethora of connections with the networks of individuals of this time and how they relate to advancements in technology, and eventually the internet.

Even among the so called “acid-heads” of Haight-Ashbury, there existed this hope in technology as being able to connect an entire population of likeminded individuals. Charles Perry, reflects on people’s interest in technology at the time. He refers to Marshall McLuhan’s book Understanding Media as helping to popularize the notion of a Global Village which would be created through electronic communications. McLuhan

believed that technology was merely “a series of extensions of various human physical capacities” (Perry, 262). This personification of technology completely jettisoned such Tönnian ideas of *gesellschaft*, or those communities associated with the industrial revolution. By attributing these human qualities to the use of technology, one can see technology as a tool for unification rather alienation. This acceptance and, in fact, support of technology and its capacity to link a group of people is extremely important during this time, for it was these people that could understand the potential of the internet when the time came for its creation.

Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen* connects McLuhan’s ideas as it relates specifically to computer communication. Turkle notes that the use of computers to sustain or create ties with other people is a result of human beings’ need to “retribalize” (as McLuhan said) as our rootedness to a place dissipates (Turkle, 187). The roots of the internet itself can be linked to the San Francisco area of Haight-Ashbury in the creation of the WELL.

The networking of individuals in the sixties actually can be presented as an analogous model to the internet today. John and Jo Lee Loveland Link, whom I interviewed for this project and who are currently working on a book about the sixties counterculture, assert that the same social dynamic of using networks to communicate with other hippies in the sixties is present on the internet today. They stress that the counterculture was a “community-of-communities” that thrived in the gatherings of its members.

The Loveland-Link’s attest that there was a common vision among the hippies, and that vision was sustained through music, art, writing, dances, festivals, and in the

case of politically active hippies (which they were), through demonstrations as well. These performances helped to continually restore and revitalize community ties, just as Dorothy Noyes described in her explanation of group interaction. Performances of such hippie rituals and ideas, such as communal living, are still being promoted today, except now they include an added virtual element.

Because of this, groups which meet on the internet today, especially those proponents of similar countercultural ideas and lifestyles of the sixties, understand the possibilities of the internet in connecting a mass of people. This is effectively an exact comparison to what the counterculture of the sixties did through networks in its heyday. Howard Rheingold, in The Virtual Community began to recognize the appeal of the internet in one of its earliest forms, the WELL in 1986 (Rheingold, 4). At this point, he was beginning to see this new form of communication as a place to find solace and a place to meet interesting, likeminded people in the San Francisco Bay area (Rheingold, 29). The WELL, or the “Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link,” had its roots in this area and was born from the Whole Earth Catalog, a catalog developed to provide people leading alternative lifestyles in the sixties counterculture, with tools and ideas to maintain such a lifestyle (Rheingold, 26). The Whole Earth Catalog helped link networks of people together, just as its successor the WELL did in the 1980s. The internet continues to do the same thing today. This method of communication that managed to connect all these people together in their desire to live a countercultural lifestyle helped shape the shared identity felt by community members.

According to Carl Farrington and Evelyn Pine, who worked on the Community Memory Project in 1984, community is defined as “a group of people linked by a

communication structure supporting discussion and collective action” (Arge and Douglas, 220). Communication is obviously an integral part of a community in the spreading of ideas among members. This was no exception in the sixties counterculture. The ideas of this group were dispersed through communication methods such as word of mouth, publications such as the Whole Earth Catalog, and writings of traveling authors. Ordinary members of the counterculture could spread messages through traveling as well, through hitchhiking or road trips.

Many former hippies have recognized the potential of the internet to bring people together. Many proponents of hippie values are using the internet to actually revert to face-to-face communities that thrived in the sixties, while just simply using a quicker means to get everyone together to share in common practices and beliefs. The Rainbow Family is an appropriate example of this use promotion of face-to-face interactions through means not usually used for physical contact.

Rainbow family is a “non-organization” that gathers once a year in a National Park in the U.S. to pray for peace on earth. An accurate definition of this is difficult to come by because it does not have an actual leader, but one of it’s “non-members” describes it as such: “...it is a fundamental human expression, the tendency of people to gather together in a natural place and express themselves in ways that come naturally to them, to live and let live, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us” (www.welcomehome.org).

The Rainbow Family was born with the invitation of all people to the first gathering in 1972:

We, who are brothers & sisters, children of God, families of life on earth,
friends of nature & of all people, children of humankind calling ourselves

Rainbow Family Tribe, humbly invite: All races, peoples, tribes, communes, men, women, children, individuals – out of love. All nations & national leaders – out of respect, All religions & religious leaders – out of faith, All politicians – out of charity to join with us in gathering together for the purpose of expressing our sincere desire that there shall be peace on earth, harmony among all people.

<http://welcomehome.org/rainbow/info/carla-what-is.html>

This gathering of people transcends spatial constraints in that people from all over the country, and even the world, are coming together for a common goal. However, there still remains the physical feature of community in that the gathering takes place in an actual physical location. What is so interesting about this group and its change through time is its ability to utilize technology to facilitate these gatherings, as well as the relationships formed between members outside of the gatherings via their internet communication.

Virtual communities, according to research conducted by Fion S L Lee et al., can be defined as “a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven contents, resulting in a relationship being built up” (Lee et al., 4). This definition compiles many scholars’ work on the subject and stresses that a relationship is built from interactions of members online. While the Rainbow Family gathers outside of Cyberspace once a year, the bonds of its members are often maintained online during the time they are not together. According to a survey conducted by Lee et al regarding the communication tools used in websites, the discussion board is the most popular outlet for group communication (Lee et al., 8).

The Rainbow Family’s discussion board, found under Google Groups at *alt.gathering.rainbow* exists to discuss the annual Rainbow gathering. But it is also

highly active and contains up to thousands of posts each month from June 1992 to May 2005. Thus, even though the purpose of this board is to discuss the annual meeting, people involved in this gathering are obviously using the discussion board to maintain bonds with each other outside of this get-together. The highly active nature of the board shows that members are extremely involved, even though they are not engaging in face-to-face communication. The Rainbow Family affiliated websites provide information about the gathering as well, but serve more as a source of information about communal living and leading an alternative lifestyle.

Welcomehome.org and Welcomehere.org are two of many internet sites affiliated with the Rainbow Family. They are created and maintained by “focalizers” who are not representatives of the Rainbow Family, but rather help to inform people of the annual gathering and the history of the group, or rather, “non-group”. The websites also promote living in communes, or “intentional communities” and provide information about these communities in virtually every state. Because of this physical contact, the online discussions can flourish, but this online communication ultimately allows the traditional idea of community to flourish within this counterculture that still exists today.

Communication in the sixties, while lacking in the quite sophisticated networks employed by users of the internet in the late twentieth century, still followed a similar trajectory in its user’s conveyance of ideas. This type of movement can certainly be seen among people in the hippie era. The importance of travel via hitchhiking, road trips, or by any other means of transportation cannot be overstressed in the communication of ideas during this time. The establishment of networks among individuals during this time allowed for the connection to the greater countercultural movement. The communication

among individual community members enabled events such as Be-Ins and eventually the momentous event of Woodstock to offer temporary communities in which individuals of the same movement could fully come together and revitalize their ties. In this way, the social networks of the hippie movement were quite similar to structure of the internet today, except that this technology allows for instant communication with seemingly no boundaries.

Because the hippie networks of the sixties share such similarities with the internet today, it is no wonder that groups which continue to push communal living and respect for the Earth (such as the Rainbow Family) are using the internet to get the message out. The methods utilized by casual net-surfers involve weak and ramifying ties to a community, as Wellman put it, and exist to obtain new information and resources. I utilized such ties to the Rainbow Family in researching them on the internet. I was a peripheral member, with little influence though, because I failed to leave my mark on the group. In order to become a central member, one must engage in their discussion board, attend the annual gathering, and so on. This dynamic of maintaining relationships and communities via virtual friendships in the duration between Rainbow gatherings, is very similar to the whole shared identity and so called “horizontal friendships” maintained by those hippies in the sixties that went beyond geographical constraints.

By studying the interactions of members of the counterculture of the 1960s and discovering that such interactions were not contained in one specific location, one can see that this model of communication is very similar to the internet. This prospect may offer comfort to those still holding on to such Tönnian fears that modernity destroys community.

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