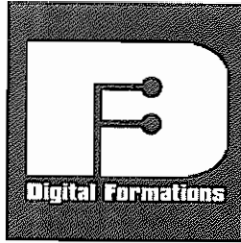


Technically Together



Steve Jones
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Michele A. Willson

Technically Together

Rethinking Community
within Techno-Society



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Introduction

On each side of the political spectrum today we see a fear of social disintegration and a call for a revival of community. (Giddens, 1994a: 124)

In an age where people have more opportunity to be interconnected across space and time through technologically aided communication than during any other period in history, the (post)modern individual in contemporary Western society is paradoxically feeling increasingly isolated. New ways to understand and experience meaningful togetherness are being sought.¹ Nostalgia underpins some of this impetus. Re-presented memories of 1950s-style communities where moral, social, and public order flourished are contrasted with the depiction of present social forms as chaotic, morally impoverished, and narcissistic. However, there is also, theoretically at least, the desire to formulate more enriching ways of experiencing ourselves *in relation*, which escape the dangers of earlier, restrictive forms of community. The current (both theoretical and practical) interest in community can thus be seen as a search for a more inclusive, enriching way of life and as a reaction to the impersonal, alienating, and individuating effects of (post)modernity.

Community is one of those amorphous concepts that is easily and loosely employed while rarely defined or explained clearly.² It is commonly used to refer to a grouping of people with various attributes while also inferring that it is or contains something that is emotionally enriching and valuable. Despite the plethora of different understandings, it seems to me that the essence or fundamental component of any conception of community (recognizing the problems with many of these loaded terms) is an understanding of community as ways of being-together. Community has had a bad reputation; it has been understood as being repressive and conformist. However, it has also been associated with a valued sense of connection and belonging.

The dilemma faced by contemporary community theorists is how to formulate an ethically appropriate theory of community that avoids the excluding and conforming practices of the past, yet is able to recognize the ontologically important aspects of being-together. This dilemma entails balancing concerns for the freedom or autonomy of the individual and concern for social integration; or what I refer to rather awkwardly in this book as the differentiating/integrative dilemma.

Within Western techno-society, innovations in communication technologies create possibilities for new forms of sociality. Technologically mediated social practices have received a lot of attention, among scholars and public alike, in terms of the communal possibilities and constraints they afford. For example, virtual communities—or communities experienced through technological mediation over the Internet—are presented by some commentators as a form of postmodern community and as the answer to the search for a less exclusive or repressive experience of community. Writers such as Howard Rheingold and Mark Poster suggest that technological communities could provide the solution to the differentiating/integrative dilemma that community theorists are seeking. Likewise, writers such as Manuel Castells or Barry Wellman point to the advantages of mediated sociality for the “networked individual.” While technological practices certainly offer social opportunities, I am uneasy about turning to the proclaimed liberatory and interconnective potential of these new relational forms for a vision of future ways of being-together. I am also uneasy about uncritically valorizing the so-called networked society. In view of society’s reliance on technology to solve its problems, some skepticism toward and further examination of the claims surrounding technologically mediated social forms is required. For it seems plausible that this hunger for community evident in (post)modernity is in fact partly driven by the experience and implications of being an individual within a technologically organized and aided society.³

Broad recognition of the importance of considering interrelational or intersubjective activity *is* taking place.⁴ The postmodern emphasis on the micro has too often meant that the focus has been placed solely on the individual, subject, or self. Relations with others (though concern over these relations is often the proclaimed rationale behind many postmodern approaches) have been either neglected or posited as a source or site of oppression. More recent work on community and networked relations could be seen as an attempt to redress this imbalance. Yet there is also recognition among community theorists of most orientations that a return to a traditional style of community is neither possible nor desirable. Hence the subtitle of this book: *Rethinking*

Community within Techno-Society. In this context, techno-society is being used as a shorthand term to refer to (predominantly Western) societies where the dominant modes of interaction and integration are increasingly technologically mediated. The title, *Technically Together*, is therefore part description and part question. It refers to the increasing ways in which being-together is technologically mediated, and it also questions the form, degree, and experience of this type of togetherness.

This book attempts a number of things. Its central premise is that the increasingly dominant practices of technological mediation and extension of social relations mean that we need to rethink our understandings and practices of community. Using communications technologies extends the capacity to connect with people through space and time, therefore enabling the continuation and extension of relations of community. Interpersonal interconnectivity is consequently heightened for both the individual and the community. Yet changing experiences of time, space, and the body, as a result of technological possibilities, impact on our ways of being-together altering individual subjectivity and intersubjective relations. These changing social relations require conceptualizing and discussing according to their positioning within and across various forms of community.

However, I also want to explore a number of contemporary writings on community to determine their understanding(s) of community and if and how they address technologically mediated social practices. The second half of the book is devoted to this task.

Throughout, questions are asked about the social and ethical ramifications of mediated social practices and the ways in which we understand these. Before progressing with these investigations, however, some background information and definitional concerns need to be addressed. For example, what is meant by *virtual communities*? If I argue that technologically extended social relations have ramifications for subjectivity and thus for community forms, then how is subjectivity to be understood? What do I mean when I refer to ontological categories, and to the ways in which different experiences of time, space, and embodiment are important to our ways of being-together? These issues are outlined briefly below.

Virtual Communities

At the very moment that there is talk about the loss of “real” community, many theorists, researchers, and practitioners—groups who don’t typically

“speak” to one another—all appear to share a common interest in the community enabled by the Internet. (Renninger & Shumar, 2002: 1)

In 1993 Howard Rheingold published a now-famous book entitled *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. In it, he wrote of the liberating and inclusive potential of (virtual) communities realized through computer-networked interaction.⁵ When linked to telecommunications networks, computer systems allow people to communicate with one another locally, nationally, and globally. Within these various networking systems, both community interaction and access to information can take place.

Virtual community is a term commonly used to describe communities that exist within bulletin boards, conference groups, MUDs, MOOs, and other interactive communication systems.⁶ Increasingly, newer phenomena like MMOGs (massively multiple online games) and weblogs also fall within this category. Interaction is (still) predominantly textual, conducted through a keyboard. This is changing over time with the increasing sophistication of virtual reality technologies, the continual enhancement of graphic and video technologies, and the widening applications of digital technologies. However, while visual information remains largely limited to text-based description, and audible or other sensorial information is excluded from the interaction, the player or community member is able to depict her/himself in whatever shape, form, or gender s/he desires. The participants in any of these virtual communities interact, discuss problems, and offer support to those who are suffering personal crises and yet usually cannot *see* or *touch* the individuals with whom they interact; there is no physical person-to-person contact.

In 1993 Rheingold generally saw the future potential of these virtual communities optimistically, as a way in which democracy could be enhanced through increased citizen participation in the decision-making processes of government.⁷ He likened interaction via the computer monitor to the re-creating of a public space where vigorous social discourse can take place. Within this public space, all who have access to the technological resources can participate. Rheingold argued that the interactions that take place through computers are *equalizing* (Rheingold, 1993: 62–63) in the sense that social and professional positions are invisible and do not enable the possessors of these privileges in the real world any such privileges or rights within the virtual community itself. Such communities, he argued, enable people to interact unencumbered by the prejudices they may experience in face-to-face encounters due to their embodied identities. Issues of race, age, gender, or disability are left behind, enabling freer, more equitable

communities to develop. And while his later writings are more critically aware of the less utopian possibilities of virtual community engagement, his belief in these claims seems to still hold.⁸

Rheingold’s portrayal of technological communities (and more recently of “smart mobs”) creates the impression of new, possibly postmodern, modes of human interaction and of social forms. Mark Poster would seem to agree. Indeed, in 1995 Poster argued that we were entering what may end up being a new age: “the second media age” as he referred to it. This new age, he suggested, may have fundamental implications for a participant’s subjectivity and her/his experiences of identity. The emergence of this new age is attributed to the possibilities enabled by new interactive communication technologies. Poster, along with many other Internet writers, argues that new interactive media enables a level of identity fluidity previously unknown. He writes that the new technologies are able to enhance social communication and community among those multiple fragmented identities that are symptomatic of the postmodern age. Such enhancement is seen as being transformative in the sense of opening up possibilities for new forms of community within techno-society.

This perception raises many questions. Are technological communities the vision of the future or simply a fantasy driven by the desire for a more enriching, interactive lifestyle? Does the *technological community* or the *network society* provide the answer for a more enriching social form that avoids the negative consequences of earlier forms of community? Or are these writings simply the hi-tech equivalent of the efforts of other community theorists concerned to strengthen or retrieve community forms? This book explores these questions—arguing that both technological and nontechnological community theorists are attempting to negotiate a balance between the accommodation of difference and togetherness. It also argues that both *types* of community theory fail to adequately consider the implications of the use of technology for understandings and experiences of community.

Community and Technology

As noted above, there is still much theoretical work to be done on the interplay of technology and community. This brings us to the core of this book and the problem with contemporary debates on community. Theorists, I argue, often ignore the issue of technologically mediated social practices (the first position), or else present technology simply as providing the means to achieve, supplement, or undermine desirable community forms (the second position).

The first position (nontechnological) fails to consider that the uses of technology to mediate social practices may warrant considered attention. This failure has more than immediate consequences. The current use of technology—particularly of communication/information technology—leads to the accentuation of a focus on the individual and to her/his compartmentalization. Indeed, as has already been suggested, some of this resurgence in interest into community forms could stem from the individuation that has resulted in part from the application of such technologies. A better understanding of community forms—and the coexistence and interrelationship of these different forms—within techno-society is thus crucial. Similarly, the implications of extending social relations across time and space through the use of technology require analysis.

The second position (technological) is primarily interested in the phenomenal possibilities that communication technology enables. This interest differs depending on how theorists understand the socio-technological relationship and how they understand technology itself. The positions can generally be characterized as follows: technology is seen variously as (1) a tool enabling the supplementation or destruction of existing communities; (2) providing the possibilities for new social forms; or (3) destroying/undermining the possibilities for community. These positions often fail to sufficiently consider the intersubjective implications of abstract social relations enacted through the technology. They do not adequately take into account the implications of changes in the ways in which ontological categories such as embodiment, time and space, and knowledge are experienced and practiced, and how these impact on both the forms and structures of community and on individual subjectivity.

Within Internet and new media studies, considerable attention is being placed on technologically mediated social forms and practices. There is also a growing pool of empirical data on these mediated forms to be drawn on. However, it seems to me that there is still much to be done in situating this work within a broader theoretical understanding of communities and ethical social relations and that there is valuable work being undertaken outside of these studies that could provide critical insight.

Subjectivity

Any discussion of technology and community requires consideration of issues of subjectivity. What is meant by the term *subjectivity* varies

according to the theorist and theoretical school to which he or she belongs. For example, the structuralists (e.g., Levi-Strauss) emphasize the role of institutional and formal language structures in the shaping of subjectivity. The phenomenologists (e.g., Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) attribute the formation of a situated subjectivity to historical influences, experiences, and resultant social values and norms impacting on an embedded subject. And the poststructuralists (e.g., Foucault, Derrida) assert the importance of textual, spatial, visual, and discursive orderings.

All of these understandings of subjectivity are based on particular presuppositions about the subject and subject formation. The structuralists see the subject as a construct created through the structures and application of language. Language represents objects and ideas to us, thus portraying a specific understanding of the world and of ourselves. The phenomenologists understand the subject as socially and historically embedded; shaped by the phenomenal experiences encountered through life. The poststructuralists, on the other hand, broadly see the subject (“the self” would be a more appropriate term here) as decentered and multiple, implicated in and influenced through the application of knowledge, language, and images. The postmodern subject is represented as multiple and fluid, differing in subjectivity according to the influences and expectations enacted on the self. However, these are broad and by no means exhaustive outlines, and many theorists would exist in the margins and overlaps of several of these approaches.

Subjectivity, in the way in which I will use the term, refers to the ontological and phenomenal consequences of being an active social being within a particular body, a being who interacts and is interacted with, and who is positioned temporally and spatially. Therefore, a person’s subjectivity is shaped by the historical, structural, and cultural/social settings into which s/he is born and lives: her/his embodied particularity; the identity that is attributed by these settings (indeed, some would say multiple identities attributed by a multilayered modern setting); and her/his intersubjective relations. This understanding emphasizes the agency, the sociality, the historicity and the particularity of the subject. It also highlights the socially embedded/constituted nature of the subject and her/his resultant subjectivity. This means that when considering the subjects of a community it is not possible to examine these subjects in isolation from the social environment in which they are positioned.

A Question of Form and Content

As stated, subjectivity and intersubjective relations are shaped through the interplay of societal, cultural, historical, and structural pressures. It is, in a way, an issue of form and content. The content can be the same, but if the form in which that content is manifested differs, the ways in which the content is experienced also differ. *Content*, in the way in which I will use it here, refers to the embedded particularities of social life. *Form* refers to the ways in which these particularities are structured, organized, and framed.⁹

Nikolas Rose (1996) writes that

[t]he self' is not that which is shaped by history, it is a particular historical plane of projection of specific projects and programmes that seek to govern humans through inciting them to reflect upon their conduct in a certain manner and act upon themselves through certain techniques.

The human being, from this perspective, is less an entity, even an entity with a history, than the site of a multiplicity of practices or labours. ... The human being is that kind of creature whose ontology is historical; its history requires an investigation of the heterogeneous and localized intellectual and practical techniques that have comprised the 'instruments', as it were, through which being constitutes itself. (300)

I would concur that the human being, as outlined by Rose, is certainly influenced by the disciplines and techniques enacted on him/her. However, to depict the human being simply as a canvas on which work is undertaken is to remove all potential resistance, agency, and ontological importance from that being. Phenomenal considerations are of importance, but it is necessary to also acknowledge the effects that changes to deeper ontological categories have on subjectivity and social relations.

Therefore, the interplay of both form and content should be considered in studies such as those undertaken in this book. Any rigid delineation between phenomenal and ontological considerations is unhelpful—phenomenal influences are incorporated within and impact on considerations of ontology. This is where Paul James's understanding and use of the concept of ontology proves helpful. In *Nation Formation*, James (1996) explains the incorporation or recognition of phenomenal influences on ontological understandings:

The concept [ontology] is used in the sense of the modes of being-in-the-world, the forms of culturally grounded conditions, historically constituted in the structures (recurrent practices) of human inter-relations. Thus the concept does not fall back upon a sense of the 'human essence' except in so far as the changing nature of being human is always taken to be historically

constituted. The concept is not confined to the sphere of selfhood except insofar as the self is always defined in interrelation with the 'other.' (xii)

This understanding is compatible with my understanding of subjectivity and the recognition of its historically situated and intersubjective nature and is used throughout the book.

Ontological Categories

This brings me to an explanation as to why ontological categories are significant when considering issues of intersubjectivity, technology, and community. I employ the term *ontological categories* to explain various ways of being. Changes in the ways these categories are lived and framed (content and form) result in different subjective and intersubjective relations. Technology is increasingly used to mediate relations within and across social relations, and this mediation is influential in the framing of different community forms. I am therefore interested in exploring the ramifications of altering the ways in which some ontological categories are experienced and understood.

The ontological categories that are particularly significant for this argument are knowledge, time and space, and embodiment. These categories are not distinct and unrelated—all feed into and affect each other—yet it is strategically helpful to treat them as distinct. I will discuss each in turn, in order to contextualize my central argument about the implications of technologically extended social relations for forms of community. The first category to be discussed is *knowledge* or, perhaps more usefully, *modes of social explanation*.

Modes of Social Explanation (Knowledge)

The phrase modes of social explanation is used to refer to the particular knowledge or explanatory schemas that explain the world, its various parts and its interconnections (e.g., cultural understandings, myths, intellectual practices). Knowledge schemas provide frameworks for interpreting and operating within the world in all societies. These frameworks also attribute meanings and interpretations to the other ontological categories mentioned. They explain how the particularities of bodies are to be understood and related to, and how the experiences of time and space are to be conceptualized. For example, Aboriginal people (prior to the European colonization of Australia) did not understand time as a linear chronological process; instead, time was understood within their lived explanatory framework as continuous,

and geographically, physically, and socially embedded (Myers, 1986: 52).

Every historical period utilizes particular knowledge and organizational schemas to explain how the world is to be viewed and how social life and production is to be organized and sustained. These schemas, whether mythological, religious, technological, or scientific (or indeed a combination of these), help to shape an understanding of the world and its associated life practices. Organizational practices are also influential.¹⁰ The description of late modern, Western capitalist system, for example, holds various conceptually descriptive representations of specific societal organizations and knowledge frameworks. *Late modern* or alternatively *postmodern* both describe particular organizational methods, explanatory schemas, and practices. Likewise, the term *Western* posits a particular orientation that is attributed in part because of geographical location but primarily because of the particular knowledge and organizational frameworks that traditionally derive from and are enacted in these regions. It is not necessary to outline these descriptions in detail; that has been undertaken in sufficient depth by many others elsewhere. It is enough for our discussion to point to the existence and coexistence of such schemas.

Foucault's writings argue that social institutions or disciplines—which produce, as he calls them, discourses—reflect but also work to shape social understandings and social practices. Institutional discourses create categories that prescribe understandings of normal behavior, outline that which is seen to be deviant or abnormal, and detail the procedures and practices for dealing with these various categories. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines the unreflexive normalization processes that occur through the instigation and operation of these discourses, and their adoption by the subject into her/his behavioral framework. This normalization process is maximized through the application of strategies of power (particular ways of organizing people and places in time and space).

However, the above discussion is not meant to suggest that all knowledge schemas that have existed within particular historical periods are complementary or singularly focused in the same direction (e.g., promotion of individualism). The popularity or predominance of particular knowledge schemas can be identified at particular times. These trends mirror to some degree, and also in some degree lead to, the types of social relations and forms of community that are enacted. But such tendencies can also result in a dialectic. The dialectic created by the predominance of notions of individuality and autonomy results

in an awareness of a lack of communality. This is where current interests in theorizing community could be situated.

Modes of Social Organization (Within Time and Space)

By referring to time and space as ontological categories, I am describing the ways in which understanding and experiencing time and space have implications for our ontological understandings of ourselves and of others.¹¹ All societies have their own particular time and space practices. In contemporary Western techno-society, social relations and communicative and informational practices are extended across increasingly larger areas of time and space. This has resulted in different understandings and experiences of time and space. The nation-state has been more easily conceptualized as a community as the development and utilization of transport technologies, of cartography, and of the print and electronic media have enabled the mental cognition of that space as an identifiable entity. The development of the capitalist system of production has necessitated the understanding of time as divisible, measurable, and linear.¹²

Part of Foucault's strategies of power process involves the positioning of people within a particular time and space so as to produce particular behavioral practice(s). Foucault's detailed examination of disciplinary surveillance practices instituted within areas of social life is instructive. In particular, his discussion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon demonstrates how the management and ordering of time and space in a particular fashion can lead to the production of certain economies of behavior and of particular subjects. While this particular strand of Foucault's work has come under attack because of his representation of docile bodies, this does not render the concern with, or examination of, the ordering of time and space irrelevant.¹³ What is useful is the realization that the ways in which time and space are ordered, understood, and experienced have ramifications for the community, the persons within that community, and also the intersubjective relations among such persons.

Modes of Presence (Embodiment)

Embodiment refers to the fact that we live in bodies and relate through bodies. The fact of having bodies means that each of us is imbued with individual particularities as a consequence of our specific bodies. These particularities are such things as the color of our skin, our sex, our height, and so forth. However, the experience of being in a body and relating according to that body is also affected by the types of knowledge frameworks that are in place—these describe how that body and its

relations are to be understood and thus experienced. And it is affected by how that body-in-interaction is placed within time and space. Gail Weiss (1999) prefers to describe this understanding as intercorporeality, drawing attention to the fact that we are socially embedded and that intersubjective relations are necessarily important. She writes,

[t]o describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies. (Weiss, 1999: 5)

Some feminists and postmodernists argue that embodied identity is ascribed a particular place by the society's norms and values and that as such, ascriptions of gender, for example, are social constructs. These social ascriptions too have intermittently undergone change over time and across different societies. However, as noted above, there is also an added emphasis that embodiment carries with it specific experiences that are biologically determined and thus have particular influences on the subject (content). As Anne Balsamo (1996) explains in *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, there must be consideration for both the social construction of the body—that is, the way the society understands and constructs the body—and the physical experience of the body with all of its possibilities and limitations (23–24). Living within a body therefore carries with it its own particular biological constraints and considerations, as well as being imprinted with the socially constructed designation of where and how a particular body is situated within a culture. According to such designations, your body colors your perceptions of the rest of the world. You are born, you will age, and you will also die. Your body also has to be fed, washed, rested, and so forth. Yet how these processes are undertaken and understood also is mediated through social discourses and norms.

These ontological categories are discussed in more detail throughout the book. They provide a means, or conceptual language, through which to explore and to explain some of the implications of the increasing technological mediation of social practices. Technically mediated relations have consequences for our understandings and experiences of community and for our relations with the Other. These understandings need to be framed in an ethically appropriate manner.

Ethical Concerns

Any discussion of community and community relations inescapably

This brings to the forefront concerns over the ethical appropriateness of any theoretical construction. Concern for the Other must either be able to be accommodated or alternatively be justified in the current theoretical climate. When discussing community—particularly in light of its sometimes problematic historical manifestations¹⁴—such ethical issues are a central concern.

To achieve a politically and ethically appropriate theory, Stephen White (1991: 20) discusses two ethics that he believes need to be incorporated and given equal emphasis: a responsibility to act and a responsibility to Otherness. Any community theory needs to incorporate elements of both these responsibilities to be politically effective and ethically appropriate.

The theorists who are to be considered in the following pages vary in the emphasis they place on such considerations, which has implications for the political efficacy and ethical appropriateness of their theories. What is common to all these theorists is a concern about the isolation or individuation that predominates in contemporary Western society and the perceived need for a strengthening or recognition of connection with others. All grapple to varying degrees with the integrative/differentiating dilemma. However, their adherence to or concern with matters of practice are more problematic. The intersection of the phenomenal and the ontological is graphically demonstrated with the introduction of technological processes to mediate community forms.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into two parts, consisting of three chapters each. The first part starts the process of constructing a theoretical framework for discussing community, technology, and social relations. Chapter One examines some general understandings of community. It notes the struggle that community theorists face when attempting to conceptualize a notion of community that is accommodating of individual difference while creating/recognizing integrative communal forms. The chapter also posits that any consideration of community necessitates an examination of community's subjective and structural elements. It derives three analytical categories by which to delineate structural forms: traditional, modern, and postmodern, according to the ways in which community mediates its social relations across time and space. Technology is introduced as being centrally involved in both the possibilities for and the predominance of extended community forms (including postmodern communities). The chapter also

considers the ways in which the subjective categories of community—bonding, commonality, reciprocity and recognition, and identity—are negotiated.

Chapter Two explores the possibilities and processes enacted by the use of information and communications technologies in more detail. It examines issues of interactivity within the various types and uses of communication technologies. Interactivity is central when considering the types of intersubjective relations that are practiced through the use of technology, and for the subjective outcomes of such practices. Through the discussion, it becomes clear that the claims made by many proponents of such technologies as the Internet as to their liberatory and communitarian potential are less than straightforward. The chapter considers briefly the implications for social forms as a result of the utilization and appropriation of technology to mediate and extend sociality and integrative practices. It takes virtual communities as one example of extended social forms and explores in more detail some of the implications of extended or disembodied sociality. It then extends the phenomenal considerations discussed so far a little further to consider the types of processes—abstraction, extension and compression, and instrumental rationalization—enacted through the employment of these technologies and some of the ontological considerations that result.

Chapter Three advances the argument that the intersubjective relations between, and the subjectivities of, community members are important in understanding community forms. It argues that as these relations are realized within/across the specific ontological categories of embodiment, knowledge, and time and space, their structuring has ramifications for the types of intersubjective relations that are practiced and experienced. Several types of intersubjective relations are identified and are used to describe the types of relation held/practiced with the Other. Technology is introduced as a way in which the extension of community forms and the mediation of social forms have been enabled, resulting in various intersubjective outcomes and possibilities.

Part Two of the book carries forward some of the concepts and analytic distinctions discussed in the previous section and uses these as a way to examine the works of three contemporary community theorists.

Therefore, Chapter Four undertakes a critical analysis of the work of Charles Taylor. Taylor is commonly grouped with other writers such as Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, and Alisdair MacIntyre (although this list is far from exhaustive) into the loose description of communitarian. Taylor's negotiation of the integrative/differentiating dilemma is explored through his notion of authenticity (differentiating)

and of communicative relations (integrating). His understanding of intersubjectivity is examined, as are his discussions of the implications of technology. Consideration of his approach to the subjective considerations discussed in Chapter One is undertaken, as is his approach, if any, to structural questions.

Chapter Five discusses the work of French theorist Jean-Luc Nancy. In particular, it examines Nancy's most commonly cited work on community, *The Inoperative Community*, which explores an understanding of community that takes place in the space *between* singular beings—or more correctly, at the site or *limit* where singular beings meet. Nancy negotiates the integrative/differentiating dilemma through an approach that highlights the incomplete sharing of this *between*, and of the importance of literature (integrative), and the existence and activities of singular beings (differentiating).¹⁵ Nancy's notion of subjectivity is also explored, and an attempt is made to draw out the implications of his (limited) statements about technology. From here his theoretical formulations are extended to see if they can accommodate my concerns vis-à-vis technology and community.

Chapter Six turns to a theorist who is interested in the possibilities for community enabled by technological potentialities. Mark Poster negotiates the integrative/differentiating dilemma through his understanding of the communicative and interactive possibilities of new technologies (integrative) and what he sees to be the new and multiple identity possibilities enabled by such interaction (differentiating). His notion of subjectivity is explored, as are his suppositions about the subjective implication of the use of communicative technologies.

Chapter Seven draws together the various threads of the book and explains if and how these community theorists can contribute to a further understanding of the interplay of community and technology. However, this chapter is also interested in highlighting some ethical concerns that become apparent as the book progresses. Relations with the Other are often seen as one of the most problematic outcomes of community formulation and of community practice. Contemporary community theoretical reformulations attempt to address this problematic through abstract processes—either theoretically or technologically. Finally, the conclusion raises some concerns as to the consequences of such abstract processes.

Our use of technology impacts on our experiences and understandings of time, space, and the body. It heightens our ability to connect with others in a manner increasingly unconstrained by temporal or spatial constraints. Yet it also accentuates the individual, who is *lifted out* of the social environment within which s/he is immersed. The increasing dominance of technologically extended social relations has

implications for our understandings and experiences of community and community relations. The following pages begin an exploration of the nature and consequences of such implications and review the ability of some contemporary writers on community to adequately explain or accommodate these socio-technological relations. To begin such an undertaking, a conceptual framework needs to be constructed. It is to this task that the book now turns.

Notes

¹ The idea of community is experiencing a resurgence in interest among both theorists and the society at large. America has seen the growth of a Communitarian Network, which claims the community has suffered through the privileging of individual rights and concerns. There has been an increase in the rhetoric of community employed by politicians such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (see Willson, 1995). The Third Way is premised on the importance of community (Scanlon, 2000). And numerous texts point to the demise of community and a rise in individualist behavior (for example, Putnam's *Bowling Alone* or Bauman's *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*).

² Or at the very least, there are so many different understandings that the usefulness of the concept itself has been questioned. For example, see Bell and Newby (1979) for an overview of the many different sociological definitions of community.

³ This is not to take a technological determinist approach, inasmuch as I am not saying that technology alone produces specific, unavoidable practices or outlooks. Rather, I am arguing that the uses to which the technology is applied by the society/culture; the modes of thought that are accentuated by technological applications; and the practices that are enabled or increased through the technological capabilities available all have ramifications for the experience of subjectivity.

⁴ This has been a recurrent theme through much of the work undertaken by feminist theorists. For example, see the works of Carol Gilligan or Iris Marion Young. This is also, though in a different form, seen in the work of Amitai Etzioni, who argues that the health of the community has suffered through the privileging of the individual in political and social life.

⁵ Since its publication, there have been a number of updates to this book. Such updates reflect the changing practices and demographics of virtual communities, as well as Rheingold's awareness of and engagement with more recent critical literature on the topic.

⁶ While virtual communities—in the sense of communities without propinquity—existed prior to the Internet and networked computers, the increasingly popular adoption of both the term and the practice of online gathering make them an important social form to be considered. The acronyms MUDs and MOOS have been adopted into virtual speak to refer to various virtual community forms, such as Multi-User Domains, etc.

⁷ He is certainly not alone in this vision. The notion of electronic town hall democracy is a common prediction (particularly among early writers) arising as a consequence of the technological possibilities of the Internet. See Rob Kitchin (1998) for some examples. While these claims have by no means disappeared, they are accompanied by more recent critical and less utopian assessments of the Internet's democratic potential.

⁸ Such arguments are extensive throughout writings about the Internet and cyberspace. For just a few examples, see the works of Howard Rheingold, Sherry Turkle, or the edited collections by Steven Jones. However, increasingly critical analyses of virtual communities and online subjectivity are also being published that question the degree of inclusivity and/or the openness of such interactive forms (see, for example, some of the work undertaken by Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman on race).

⁹ I recognize that these are by no means straightforward or uncomplicated distinctions, and that it could be legitimately argued that content and form are simply positioned within a continuum of social forms. Nevertheless, I continue to employ them as useful analytical divisions.

¹⁰ This is an example of how the different ontological categories are not distinct and separate. Organizational practices involve the combination of being based on particular knowledge frameworks and they also result in bodies and practices being positioned within time and space in particular ways.

¹¹ See David Harvey (1990) for a detailed exploration of the changing ways in which time and space (for example, through the introduction and utilization of cartography) have been explored throughout modernity and postmodernity.

¹² See Harvey (1990) and Anderson (1991) or the edited collection by Friedland and Boden (1994b) for their discussions on the ways in which changes in the ways of experiencing, organizing, and representing time and space have altered conceptual understandings of such categories.

¹³ This is also despite Foucault's own modification of his position with relation to the subject and disciplinary practices in his later works.

¹⁴ Nazi Germany is one example held up to demonstrate the dangers of community.

¹⁵ While this statement is a somewhat inaccurate and clumsy reduction of Nancy's sophisticated analysis, the sentiment is largely accurate.