



A Nod is as Good as a Wink

The Social Impact of The U

We're interested in people and in the ways they get along with each other. And to that extent you could say that we're interested in communities. We aren't though particularly interested in asset transfer, citizens' councils, allotment cooperatives or mutual pub ownership. These are all fine things and good luck to those who take them on, but we're really interested in a less high-energy vision of community engagement. We call it a nod and a wink, and we think it's just as important, in fact we think it's even more important than running the local branch of the Neighbourhood Watch.

In a footnote to *The Strength of Weak Ties* Mark Granovetter makes a disparaging reference to "...ties without substantial significance, such as a "nodding" relationship between people living on the same street, or the "tie" to the vendor from whom one customarily buys a morning newspaper". These "negligible" ties are only significant to Granovetter in the unlikely event of a disaster, at which point they could be "usefully distinguished" from having no tie at all. That grudging final concession hidden in a footnote nevertheless reveals something significant about communal relations: recognition matters. It forges the first bond between people without making intensive demands on them, demands of personal disclosure, shared values and the monitoring and sanction of agreed behavioural norms.

These ties can be contrasted with the strong ties of high-density networks. In the words of Manuel Delanda, high-density networks have the capacity to store information about "transgressions of local norms", this in turn implies that "the network itself has the capacity to store local reputations and via ostracism and other penalties, the capacity to deter potential cheaters"¹. High-density networks have this capacity because the friends of my friends know the friends of your friends and they in turn know everybody else's friends in a given community. This ensures that information travels fast and thoroughly and sanction does too.

Granovetter's "absent" ties, the nodding and winking, don't carry this level of communal solidarity. They are undemanding ties in times of plenty but they reveal an unexpected power in times of adversity. We believe they are particularly valuable ties for dispersed, changing communities of busy people with long commutes and full timetables. They are sufficiently flexible to allow for long work hours, for mobile populations, for economic change, and sufficiently tough to be the basis for solidarity under duress, as we saw during August 2011 in the post-riot clean up.

The erosion of these kinds of social ties may largely have gone unnoticed because they have been too readily seen as insignificant. Policy-makers have concentrated on the upper end of the community engagement spectrum, on volunteering, participatory budgeting and involvement in decision-making. Ours is a more far-reaching mission, to champion the nod, the wink and the over-the-shop-counter exchange of news that form the first crucial experience of reciprocal communal interaction for the majority of people in the UK today. We know this matters and we know how to measure how much.



We shouldn't mourn the loss of community

The everyday experience of community for the vast majority of people living in the UK today is of a predominantly "low-density" kind. This means that comparatively few of us have experienced the fixed, stable, high solidarity lifestyle of tightly knit communities. This does not mean that we do not have strong ties in our lives, simply that these strong ties are not communal ties but the private ties of family and friendship. In community terms the friends of my friends do not know the friends of your friends who in turn do not know everybody else.

There has recently been a tendency to think of this as a loss. We look back to some halcyon, perhaps largely fictitious, world of idyllic village life in which neighbours were known and could be relied upon for physical protection as well as emotional support and we wish that we could recreate it, or something very like it.

Our contention is that this yearning is misplaced. We must recognise that tightly knit communities are simply not the kinds of communities in which we live. To quote Eric Eisenberg, closing the communal borders "can work for a short period of time for isolated individuals in relatively closed systems, but that is not our present situation"ⁱⁱⁱ. The constraints that tightly knit communities impose on their members through the enforcement of local norms can only forge consistent bonds when they are not put under external pressure. The transgression of norms not shared by new arrivals all too easily leads to high levels of tension.

In research conducted for its civility report *Charm Offensive*^{iv}, the Young Foundation repeatedly found that local people closed ranks against incomers who were perceived as different. Residents of social housing were more likely to be viewed as a problem by owner-occupiers in Cambourne, bad behaviour was associated with migrant populations in Wiltshire and teenagers were described as "rowdy", "rude" and "intimidating" in market towns where they were in a marked minority. A dominant cultural norm which appeared to be flouted by a small minority led to a breakdown in relations which all too quickly became stark and difficult to resolve.

By contrast the highly multicultural borough of Newham showed a range of civil behaviours that demonstrated openness and flexibility between individuals and groups. In Queen's market business owners had adapted to the times and frequently spoke fluent Urdu. Similarly in a recent episode of Jamie Oliver's *Great Britain* on Channel 4, Oliver visited a Leicester market stall run by Julie and Lee Bennett, a stall loaded with Asian produce about which they were impeccably well informed. The Bennetts spoke about the importance of their varied produce and their own knowledge of that produce for the success of their business. For the couple both were part of a sound business plan for a Leicester stall.

These last two examples both come from multicultural urban spaces, but this is coincidental. Our argument is not exclusively urban, nor do its premises depend on the particular pressures of cultural difference. The tensions of differing norms are inevitable in any community which is contending with change, and the UK is facing a number of changes that put pressure on community relations. This change may be generational, the aging population of Dorset for example, or economic, the difficulties of creating new forms of entrepreneurial employment in rural Northumberland, to take another.

Each one of these changes requires a flexible, adaptive approach to developing community structures that accommodates change, indeed that welcomes it, rather than attempting the impossible task of establishing communal conformity in the face of change.



As these examples show, it is not only possible but imperative that we cease to embrace the nostalgia of a bygone age of shared norms and values, and look instead towards the reality of our lives and enhance the potential strengths that lie in loose connections, varied relations and a welcoming notion of hospitality rather than tight-knit community.

The power of low-density networks

The greatest value of a tightly knit community to its members is that it establishes the psychic certainty of a known and fixed identity. This banishes a good deal of the insecurity that can make life uncomfortable and painful, by the same token however “what we gain in certainty we lose in possibility in equal and predictable amounts”. Tightly knit communities may be comfortable, predictable and safe, but they are not adaptive. They can only with difficulty accommodate new information and new ways of being, relating and working.

By contrast, the greatest value of low-density networks, with their infinitely more varied and numerous links, is their capacity for providing their members with new information about fleeting opportunities. Low-density communities are highly adaptive. They welcome new information, new ways of being, relating and working with minimal disruption to their members. They are by their very nature flexible and innovative.

To put this another way, tightly knit communities recycle information and police their borders whereas low-density networks continuously draw new information into the system and allow their borders to take care of themselves. The first border is impermeable, the second porous. The first establishes an authoritative order in which social roles are relatively fixed, the second lacks the solidarity to establish normed behaviours and consequently encourages new roles to be performed by its members.

Why does this matter? Well, new information, in our hyper-connected world, has both enormous cultural value and an equally important economic value. Knowledge is what economists call a solidarity good. It doesn't depreciate with sharing, in fact it grows in value the more it is shared, and sharing is at the heart of the internet age. Knowing about opportunities and knowing about them fast really matters. Being able to share your knowledge is key to being accepted as a viable member of a wider cultural and economic world. In this world, except in exceptional cases like that of the Amish community who choose to live entirely outside ordinary society, energy expended on policing the border is energy wasted. The community is better off without it.

In a recent talk for the Mashable Media Summit, Faris Yakob, Chief Innovation Officer of MDC Partners expands on exactly how the cultural and monetary value of information is generated by fast and wide distribution. In Yakob's words “there is a correlation between the amount of time it takes to distribute something and the amount of time it takes to have an effect”. The faster information is distributed, the faster it will have effects in the world.

Individuals and groups that are inefficient at distributing information are at a marked disadvantage. They are left out of the loop. Some of this insight can be found in the social capital talk that began with Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, but *Bowling Alone* emphasises slow rather than fast networks, strong rather than weak ties, and the importance of robust relations of trust in information sharing. In essence, Putnam is talking not about solidarity goods, but about goods that find their value in scarcity. By holding on to opportunities and only sharing them with a select group of norm-observing and trusted interlocutors, information sharing is restricted. An immediate division is created between those who have knowledge, networks and valuable contacts and those who do not. The issues for social justice are immediately apparent.



How then to bypass the need for this kind of deep trust in establishing viable networks for information sharing within communities? Well, rather than the solidarity of strong ties, we can think instead of the trust inherent in hospitality. Where the solidarity of tightly knit communities creates social capital through recognition of similarity, hospitality generates social capital by extending “kindness to persons whom we know nothing about, and whose personal commitments are irrelevant to our welcoming attitude”^{vi}.

By stimulating hospitable low-density networks in our communities, we can encourage the valuable sharing of information and the openness and flexibility that are both essential in supporting us to adapt to the changing nature of our neighbourhoods, whether these changes be economic, environmental or demographic in kind.

In short what we need in community relations are:

- Good channels for new information to enter
- Effective means for information to percolate

And

- Open, hospitable relations with our neighbours rather than the solidarity of tightly-knit community

Where are we now

In over sixty-five interviews with a broad sweep of respondents from a variety of communities, we found that most people were more than happy to live in a low-density community. We asked respondents to look at the scale below and place themselves, their community, and an “ideal” community somewhere along the line, making it clear that the examples in the boxes were illustrative only:



We found that most people felt comfortable smiling at neighbours, perhaps knowing their names and doing them the occasional favour such as accepting a parcel or feeding a cat, but in general preferred to avoid more extensive interaction.

They felt that their own communities were, in general and with one or two notable exceptions, to the left of the scale, often to the far left, but they were not unduly worried about it. When asked to think about an “ideal” community, respondents showed a telling level of confusion. On the one hand they had a sense that there was a general cultural understanding of community as “ideally” closely integrated, on the other, this was not what they wanted for themselves. One



respondent noted that “I never think I want to feel part of that”; this comment was representative of the majority.

Asked about good citizenship, respondents spoke of “keeping myself to myself”, “not interfering” and “obviously not to bother any one, not to cause harm to anyone and...that’s it”. Intervention of all kinds was in general deplored. By contrast respondents frequently noted the importance of independent shops. This was not a statement in favour of small businesses and against supermarket chains; rather it was a vote in favour of weak ties. In the words of one respondent: “... using local businesses, actually knowing the staff... if you go into sole proprietor local businesses they’ll know you and get to know your name. [...] You don’t need to know about people, have keys to their house or anything, just being acquaintances, having acquaintances is important.”

This notion of low-level involvement, of having acquaintances in a local neighbourhood, is key to the approach that we are developing with The U.

Who we are now

From our review of the existing literature and our own research, we estimate that in any one community there will be no more than 5%^{vi} of people who can be described as the “civic core”^{viii}. These are the people who will play an active role in local decision-making, campaigning, volunteering and organising.

Recent initiatives have focused on expanding this civic core. Civic Limits, a report published by ResPublica in July 2011 suggested that the government should aim to double the civic core within the next ten years. The report admits the daunting nature of the task, noting the disparity between those who say they would like to be more involved and those who in practice will actually take a more active role. This finding is matched by our own research. Our interviews showed that the majority of respondents were far less involved than the civic core in community activities, with a further minority preferring an entirely anonymous relationship with their neighbours and neighbourhood.

Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, it was the least active respondents who were the most content with their civic behaviour, generally self-defining as good citizens. By contrast the few highly active respondents we spoke to were far more likely to feel that they could, and indeed should, become more involved. This no doubt fuels the ResPublica finding that “...too much involvement activity misses the mark, appealing to a limited group of people, often already heavily engaged.”

In thinking about the kinds of people who play particular roles in their communities, we have found it useful to quantify and qualify different groups. We make distinctions between:

1. **The Active:** these are that small number of active members of the civic core who already have high levels of involvement in local activities and are keen to take on more.
2. **The Receptive:** these are the majority, people who, when asked, agree that involvement and good community relations are a good thing, but who are reluctant to participate in practice.
3. **The Inert:** these are the few who prefer to keep themselves to themselves, who have no interest in playing any kind of role at a community level, and who are made uncomfortable by any attempt to push them towards involvement.



It should be noted that we do not think of these categories as essential types. One person may make their way through each one of these groups in a lifetime as their stage of life, employment, family and interests make increasing or decreasing demands upon them. What we do want to do, however, is to create pathways for The Receptive majority to be able to act on their positive feelings of community without asking them to make radical changes to their lifestyle.

Where we want to be

The vast majority of UK communities are very low-density networks. This is what citizens are used to and this is what makes them feel comfortable. At the same time we know that interaction is valuable. It is valuable as an information channel that spreads opportunity more equally within society and as a means of establishing those civil behaviours that make interaction in public places run smoothly. There is evidence too that a regular low level of communal interaction contributes to individual wellbeing^{ix}. We can, then, do better than anonymity. We can also do better than an old-fashioned understanding of tightly knit community which does not fit with our contemporary way of life and which creates groups of insiders and outsiders that are inevitably in tension with one another.

In our vision of happy and active communities, low-density networks can be made to work more efficiently. They can be a driver of mutual coordination without making demands that citizens are unwilling to meet. They can be a means of rethinking our existing notions of participation, of meeting the challenge identified in the ResPublica report of finding “forms and techniques of participation [that are] relevant to people’s needs, expectations and lifestyles”.

These new approaches can be the means of generating greater openness, a wider and more generous dispersal of information, and a new culture of hospitality in which “personal commitments are irrelevant to our welcoming attitude”^x. These active low-density networks can accommodate change in a wide variety of forms by promoting understanding, designating places and creating channels for a swift welcome of newcomers. By disseminating skills in managing change, difference, misunderstanding and reaching out to others, The U will be at the heart of this movement towards a new and more cooperative, softer and more accessible form of community engagement.

We intend to measure the effectiveness of our work by tracking the sharing of new information through incoming and outgoing channels and by generating new means of creating hospitable relations between people in a neighbourhood. We will be looking for new means of distribution and new participants in each network. We will also be tracking the ways in which new participants enter the network and how hospitable relations can expand networks and create more value. In short we will be taking a creative, innovative new approach to community building that goes with the grain of civic habits but creates new and measurable value for individuals and groups.

i 1973, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, Mark.S. Granovetter

ii 2006, *A New Philosophy of Society*, Manuel DeLanda

iii 2007, *Strategic Ambiguities: Essays on Communication, Organization and Identity*, Eric Eisenberg

iv 2011, *Charm Offensive: Cultivating Civility in 21st Century Britain*, The Young Foundation

v 2007, Eisenberg

vi Ibid.

vii 2010, *Taking the Temperature of Local Communities*, The Young Foundation – the report classed communities with 5% of citizens involved in decision-making as highly active

viii ResPublica’s *Civic Limits* report suggests that 30% of adults account for 90% of all volunteer hours and 70% of civic participation. This national figure will of course be unevenly distributed through communities, not least since this group is “more likely to be well-educated and middle-class than the population as a whole.” p.3

ix 2010, *Taking the Temperature of Local Communities*, The Young Foundation

x 2007, Eisenberg