Suburban social relationships in the material and virtual worlds

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This is an exploratory study of the ways in which virtual communications are changing the ways in which suburban residents of different generations interact with each other – both their own age group and those younger and older. It was hypothesized that younger people rely more on electronic communication while older people (like the author…who is 72 years old!) use the phone to talk rather than text and seek more face-to-face contact for communication. There is, of course, a voluminous and growing literature on especially children’s use of web based and mobile communication technologies, and somewhat less on the their use by older generations, but few have made intergenerational comparisons (e.g. Boyd, 2014; Correa et al, 2009; Buckingham and Villett, 2013; Ehrenreich et al. 2013; Lenhart et al. 2010; Muscanell and Guadogno, 2011; O’Keefe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Sundar et al, 2011; Turkle 2011; Yardi and Bruckman 2011). Fifteen years ago Hampton and Wellman’s intensive study of a “wired” suburb of Toronto (“Netville”) found that the provision of high speed internet encouraged interaction between neighbors. The ubiquity of mobile telephony today may be further reinforcing local communication.

The setting for this study were two New York suburban small towns each about 20 miles from Manhattan. Highland Park (population 14,000 in 2010), Southwest of Manhattan in New Jersey, began as a suburb of New Brunswick, home of Rutgers University and today many of its residents are affiliated with the University. Croton-on-Hudson (population 8,000 in 2010) is North of the city and began as a leftist/anarchist community in the early Twentieth Century and today has a well educated population some of whom commute to Manhattan. Only 26% of Highland Park’s households include children under 18 years old, while the equivalent figure in Croton-on-Hudson is 39%. Highland Park, where many university students reside, includes 44% of non-family households. Median household income is higher in Croton-on-Hudson ($121, 544 in 2010) than Highland Park ($78, 356) and while Highland Park has 10% of its population in poverty, it also has nearly 40% with graduate or professional degrees. The choice of study sites was simply that I live in Highland Park and my daughter (age 43) lives in Croton-on-Hudson with her three children (ages 5, 9 and 12). I thus had access to “subjects” of various ages with whom I conducted informal interviews. Since I had neither the resources nor the approval of the Institutional Review Board for a formal survey, the findings are merely exploratory.

As expected, respondents of all ages reported communicating with friends both face to face, via oral telephone, and online through social media and texting, but my (older) generation relies more on the former two modes than the latter. Fewer than half of the respondents in the older age group owned a “smart” phone and few of those used it for texting. In contrast, children as young as 8 or 9 used their phones to text rather than talk (often to keep costs down). The average age for children to get a first cell phone is just over 11 years in the U.S. Most (middle class) children have played online games, some involving online interaction with friends, by the time they are ten years old – Minecraft was popular with my informants, but even five year olds play Webkinz which involves “communicating” online with toy animals etc. Most school children see their friends and interact with them at school and at after-school activities, but most also reported texting their friends especially outside school hours and keeping in touch with parents en route home from school (sometimes to get permission for diversions). Some use Skype and Facetime to connect with friends and family. Despite the dangers to vulnerable teenagers of online predators, this is also the first generation of children to have virtual “face-to-face” interaction with grandparents…who sometimes reside on another continent. Obviously, this contact is reciprocal and appreciated by the grandparents.

The parental generation has many uses of electronic communication both with their own friends and with children and elders. Both towns have Facebook groups for parents of school children – Croton’s has 300 members while Highland Park’s has 600. The groups discuss school affairs (especially teachers) and use it for exchanging or selling goods and services. While the older generation is less “connected” electronically, most respondents appreciated the ease with which communication can be made with peers and others.

One of the most encouraging consequences of mobile communication has been to enlarge the “home range” of children. Valentine (1997) and others documented the restrictions placed on children’s mobility by parental (and others) fears of venturing into the unknown. Holloway and Punlott Wilson (2014) have recently showed that in England, organized extracurricular activities is reversing this trend for middle class children, and the same appears to be the case in those New York suburbs I studied where many children participate in local sports in public parks. But as importantly perhaps, the ability for mutual contact via mobile phone has given parents greater confidence to allow their children to roam alone or with friends even out of parental sight.

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