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Article

From Global Village to Identity Tribes: Context Collapse and the Darkest Timeline

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Abstract

In this article we trace the development of two narratives describing social media that informed much of internet scholarship. One draws from McLuhan's axiom positing that communication networks would bring forth a 'global village,' a deliberate contradiction in terms to foreground the seamless integration of villages into a global community. Social media would shrink the world and reshape it into a village by moving information instantaneously from any location at any time. By leveraging network technology, it would further increase the density of connections within and across social communities, thereby integrating geographic and cultural areas into a village stretching across the globe. The second narrative comprises a set of metaphors equally inspired by geography but emphasizing instead identity and tribalism as opposed to integration and cooperation. Both narratives are spatially inspired and foreground real-world consequences, either by supporting cooperation or by ripping apart the fabric of society. They nonetheless offer opposing accounts of communication networks: the first is centered on communication and collaboration, and the second highlights polarization and division. The article traces the theoretical and technological developments driving these competing narratives and argues that a digitally enabled global society may in fact reinforce intergroup boundaries and outgroup stereotyping typical of geographically situated communities.

Keywords

context collapse; disinformation; geography; global village; internet studies; polarization

Issue

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1. Introduction

For all the undoubted emphasis in literary criticism and communication theory associated with the Toronto School of Communication, it also offered a spatial research program with lasting impact on internet studies. This stream of research was distinctly developed in the works of Eric Havelock and Harold Innis, the latter of whom offered an intensely geographic exploration of communication networks (Barnes, 1993; Innis, 2007). It also transpired in the late work of Marshall McLuhan that came to be associated with the school, particularly the axiomata about the media. McLuhan's first axiom was neither spatial nor political and stated that mass media were extensions of man, as technol-

ogy enhanced the physical and nervous systems of individuals and increased their information processing capacity (Carey, 1967). The second axiom, a footnote to Innis' observations on the psychic and social consequences of communication, asserted that the medium was itself the message because the meaning of a message was ultimately affected by the symbiotic relationship between the medium and the content being communicated (McLuhan, 1962).

But it was the third axiom, a deeply geographic metaphor, that resonated with those envisaging global networks: communication networks would bring forth a 'global village,' purposely coined as a contradiction in terms foregrounding the seamless integration of villages into a global community. Electronic media would shrink

the world and reshape it into a single village by moving information instantaneously from any location on the planet at the same time. Network and telecommunication technologies would increase the density of connections within and across social groups, thereby integrating geographic and cultural areas into a village that stretched across the globe (McLuhan, 1964). In short, global network infrastructure would change the balance between communication and spatial distance and put into effect McLuhan's vision of a global village.

Another narrative, largely opposed to the notion of a global village, emerged in the late 2010s and influenced much of the recent internet scholarship. It was built on reports of extensive filter bubbles, echo-chamber communication, and the widespread balkanization of internet communities (Flaxman et al., 2016; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Pariser, 2012; Tucker et al., 2018). The prevalence of this narrative was arguably triggered by the deployment of data-driven micro-targeting in political campaigning epitomized by the Cambridge Analytica data scandal and the ensuing data lockdown enforced by social media platforms. Since then, digital trace data has been increasingly linked to disinformation, misinformation, and influence operations across Western industrialized democracies and countries in the Global South, where state and non-state actors seek to strategically diffuse content that heightens partisanship and erodes the general trust in democratic institutions (Walker et al., 2019).

These metaphors refer to two milestones in how internet scholarship theorizes social media and networking technology: first it was perceived and conceptualized as a force for integration, only to be subsequently defined as force for polarization. In the following we unpack the theoretical tensions between spatially inspired narratives that either foreground cooperation or division against the backdrop of large-scale influence operations and a landscape of disinformation. We conclude with an assessment that while networking technology may well produce a globally interconnected society, it nevertheless continues to support intergroup boundaries and outgroup stereotyping typical of geographically situated communities (Hampton & Wellman, 2020).

2. From Global Village to Identity Tribes

2.1. Global Village

The suggestion of a global village exudes the formulaic optimism of the 1960s but managed to leave a lasting imprint on the discussion about the internet in the 1990s. In the years leading up to the dotcom bubble, digital communication was thought to bring the world together, both geographically and politically. During the late 1990s, particularly in the second half of the decade that led to the dotcom bubble, technology pundits and observers forecast that the impact of distance would be progressively diminished by communications technol-

ogy (Cairncross, 1997). This narrative gained currency in the emerging field of internet studies even if studies continued to report that geographic proximity remained a critical factor in building relationships and that the negative impacts of distance on cooperation were only partially mitigated by network technology (Kiesler & Cummings, 2002).

In other words, the term global village epitomized the shrinking of the world into one village through the use of social and digital media. Since its prescient formulation by McLuhan (1964), the metaphor was popularized to explain the internet, where physical distance is even less of a constrain on the communication activity of users. boyd (2008) argued that the global village metaphor continues to describe effectively how digital communication empowers personal relationships across vast geographic and cultural differences. In this alternative rendering of the global village, digital communication tools were used primarily to maintain relationships with people in close physical and social proximity instead of initiating relations with strangers. Friendster, a seminal social networking site predating Facebook, simply provided a tool for scaling up social networks rooted in proximate social relations and representing this dynamic to the community.

But the scaling of geographically-situated social networks to online platforms is not a perfect mirror, if it is a mirror at all, of social relationships established in one's immediate surroundings. boyd (2008) noted that the social graph of Friendster users with numerous common ties offered a good indication of severed relationships. Whenever user *A* and user *B* shared many friends in common, but were not friends themselves, there was a good indication that this was due to a severed personal connection, not a social opportunity. This is in sharp contrast with the dynamics of social relations observed offline, where exes cannot be simply deleted from one's life while also maintaining the social network that supported their previous relationship. In other words, the Friendster network was not merely mirroring offline social networks, but creating a disparate version with parallel albeit adjoining rules of engagement (boyd, 2008).

This persistent McLuhanian account of online social networks informed much of early internet research where social platforms were framed as a window to social contexts and local communities. It also provided the theoretical framework to a large body of scholarship praising the democratization of public discourse brought by open platforms and networked publics (Howard & Hussain, 2013). During this period, the open infrastructure of networked publics was explored in scholarship detailing how online social networks supported gatewatching (Bruns, 2005) and practices in citizen journalism that are central to a diverse media ecosystem (Hermida, 2010), with citizens auditing the gatekeeping power of mainstream media and holding elite interests to account (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). By most assessments, social network sites were genuine chal-

lengers to the monopoly enjoyed by the mass media (Castells, 2012).

This body of scholarship extolled the potential of social media for democratization and deliberation, inadvertently reinforcing a narrative where the affordances of social media platforms would necessarily champion communication and collaboration (Loader & Mercea, 2011). McLuhan's technological optimism, maintained with solipsistic certitude, heralded the ensuing globalization of markets, politics, telecommunications, and popular culture (Ferguson, 1991). The diffusion of information was no longer constrained by the high costs of production or limited bandwidth, the very tangible and perennial limitations associated with print and broadcast media (Bastos et al., 2013). These affordances, however, would eventually be leveraged by propagandists to coordinate and organize disinformation campaigns through social platforms with no interest in cooperation, integration, or collaboration (Benkler et al., 2018).

2.2. *Identity Tribes*

The metaphor of a globally integrated village is directly at odds and particularly ill-suited to account for the set of problems that appeared in the past decade, namely the upsurge in hyperpartisanship (Marietta & Barker, 2019), a political context marked by the spread of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012), and the declining trust in government and institutions, including news organizations (Amazeen, 2020; Zuckerman, 2017). A theoretical framework dedicated to foregrounding cooperation was also poorly positioned to account for influence operations that weaponized social media platforms, a development whose prominent examples including the 2016 US elections, the UK EU membership referendum, and the 2017 general elections in France (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Ferrara, 2017; Shao et al., 2018).

These developments challenged the very notion of networked publics and Castells' (2012) depiction of the internet as universal commons. The open infrastructure of the internet, particularly the World Wide Web, was a fitting arrangement built on the back of personal computers. But in the ensuing decades, scalability requirements led to a shift toward cloud computing that marked a milestone in the cost reduction of data transfer, followed by the upscaling of internet companies' ability to provide services to anyone anywhere in the planet. With cloud services providing economies of scale between five to ten over small-scale deployments (Hamilton, 2009), and mobile platforms slowly replacing desktop-based applications of personal computers, open standards gave way to cloud-based, centralized communication systems epitomized by social media platforms.

In the intervening period, social technologies gradually pivoted from a business model centered on software and services to the leasing and trading of user data. These changes overwhelmed the openness of networked publics, with the debate underpinning networks in the

late 1990s being replaced by a focus on the affordances of mobile apps and social platforms, whose userbase differed in substantial ways from the living communities of users that would come together around common interests. The emphasis on open communication eventually shifted to concerns about information warfare, an epochal transition that reflected material transformations in the social infrastructure of increasingly centralized communication networks.

Also noticeable in the transition from networked publics to social platforms was the steady commercialization of previously public, open, and often collaborative spaces, largely reduced to private property (Galloway, 2017). In the span of a decade, social platforms built their social infrastructure on the back of networked publics and the community organization that shaped internet services in the early 1990s. The ensuing infrastructural transformation of the networked publics continues to drive anxieties about social platforms in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica data scandal, including issues of digital privacy, data access, surveillance, microtargeting, and the growing influence of algorithms in society (Gillespie, 2010, 2014; O'Neil, 2016; Pariser, 2012).

This represents a considerable departure from the landscape shaped by online communities in the mid-90s and early 2000s where members would share their experiences. The meteoric rise of social platforms, particularly the behemoth Facebook, came with the promise of a wider audience that successfully pulled members away (and apart) from online communities that evolved from forums and e-zines in Bulletin Board System. The promise of a wider audience came at the cost of a dwindling sense of alterity and community. The ensuing algorithmization of communities introduced and championed by social platforms completed the transition by instantaneously rendering networked publics into a profitable source of users' interactions (Lingel, 2017; O'Neil, 2016).

Perhaps unintentionally, the transference of community governance from users to algorithms (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020) removed a key basis for mutual trust and opened the way for large-scale disinformation campaigns that conspicuously plagued election cycles, ethnic relations, and civic mobilization from 2016 onwards (Apuzzo & Santariano, 2019). By Facebook's own account (Weedon et al., 2017), its advertising algorithms were harnessed to segment users into belief communities that could be microtargeted with materials that amplified their intimate political preferences. This repurposing of intimate knowledge and networked interaction for revenue-making remained the corollary of commercial social media enterprises, including the individuals and academics involved in the infamous political consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica (Rosenberg, 2018).

The tendency of social media users showing a preference for a subset of content that is at odds with the coverage of newspapers was already apparent before social media became a primary channel for news consumption (Bastos, 2015). Benkler et al. (2018) argued that

it was Facebook algorithm—more than Facebook communities or specific malicious actors distributing problematic content—that rewarded clickbait websites and tabloid-like sources of information, which often include hyper-partisan content. The algorithmization of social media communities was particularly damaging because it reinforced patterns of interaction and the sharing of content in tightly clustered communities that supported and likely reinforced the relative insularity of users. For Benkler et al. (2018), concerns over the Facebook News Feed algorithm in particular, and over algorithmic shaping of reading and viewing in general, are not only legitimate but likely underplayed in the aftermath of rampant disinformation campaigns that leveraged social platforms' algorithms.

This account of social platforms is a considerable departure from the heydays of the internet as a force of liberation. Propaganda efforts led by the Internet Research Agency, a 'troll factory' reportedly linked to the Russian government (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Bertrand, 2017; Farkas & Bastos, 2018), weaponized social platforms to meddle in national elections in Western democracies. Since then, the record of demonstrable falsehoods shared on social platforms with real-world consequences has increased steadily. Facebook grew more proactive in Myanmar after the United Nations and Western organizations accused it of having played a role in spreading the hatred and disinformation that contributed to acts of ethnic cleansing (Miles, 2018). Narratives of the internet as a community, global or otherwise, were rapidly superseded by accounts of the internet as a tribe, with the meanings associated with community—i.e., identification, communication, and collaboration—being likewise replaced by terms addressing the hostility between tribes: polarization, weaponization, and nationalism.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, insisted on the path of greater connectivity and ignored the reverse course in his call to the Facebook community, melancholically titled 'Building Global Community,' with a suitable reference to tribes, cities, and nations. The missive read much like a reality check for a company that assumed greater interconnection between users would necessarily bring about greater understanding among people in real-world communities. The letter exudes a Silicon Valley feel-good vibe about progress and humanity coming together, not just as cities or nations, but as a global community (Zuckerberg, 2021). It also underestimates the extent to which social life is marked by contradictions, swiftly and demonstrably amplified as online and offline social networks, local and global communities, collapse into a common contextual ground.

3. Context Collapse and the Darkest Timeline

3.1. Context Collapse in the Global Village

Social media platforms have struggled to cope with the distinctively different social norms that orient online and

offline worlds. The conflict was perhaps to be expected: The affordances of online platforms pale in comparison to the overwhelming stream of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic information that supports face-to-face interaction. The implicit norms and conventions of face-to-face communication are often absent in online interaction, particularly turn-taking and the expectation that conversation will not be recorded or filmed without one's consent. Interaction on social platforms, on the other hand, is recorded by default and it is not always clear who owns the data generated. Digital trace data resulting from online interaction may also be stored beyond the life of participants. This caveat of online interaction is augmented by the business model of social platforms supported by advertisement, which requires online activity to be linked to the real-world identity of users, with Facebook being notable in ensuring all users are personally identifiable as real human beings, or perhaps more tangibly as real-world consumers.

Facebook is not alone in struggling to manage the collision between online and offline identities. Google has a track record of underestimating how entrenched relationships with kith and kin may differ in substantive ways from online transactions. The short-lived microblogging tool Google Buzz shared users' online activity with people they were trying to avoid. Google engineers assumed email frequency was a reliable proxy for meaningful relationships, which of course does not take into account pranksters, stalkers, debt collection agencies, crooks, and scam artists. Similarly, Google's Glass project failed to note that recording conversations between individuals requires one's consent. Much like Facebook's Real Names Policy, Google Plus—another short-lived microblogging and messaging tool owned by Google—sought to force users to link their Google activity to their real name, so that user's activity would be irrevocably linked to their real-world identity, a condition at odds with the regular forgetfulness of face-to-face interaction. Even Sidewalk—Google's project of a robot-maintained, data driven city of the future in Toronto—was eventually scrapped. Sensors would track residents' movement to optimize traffic flow and clean the streets, while also extending Google's omnipresent surveillance from the online world to the physical one.

The struggle to cope with online and offline norms is often accompanied by overwhelming good intentions that set these problems in motion. In the early 2000s, when Facebook was setting its agenda to reshape the internet around personal relationships, and then the entire world, few would argue against the mission of making the world more open and connected. A more open and intensively connected world was a logical consequence of the technolibertarianism epitomized by the *Declaration of Independence for Cyberspace* (Barlow, 1996) and the broader political aspirations of the Silicon Valley technorati (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). This political project collapsed in the second half of 2016, when Facebook's News Feed algorithm was exploited in various

influence operations in the run-up to national elections, turning a platform originally designed for connecting people into a remarkable driver of political division (Bastos & Farkas, 2019).

3.2. *The Darkest Timeline*

By the end of the decade, the narrative surrounding social platforms had turned to metaphors foregrounding polarization and division in a landscape marked by tribalism and information warfare (Benkler, et al., 2018). This narrative required the adoption of specialized vocabulary associated with influence operations to describe a set of practices designed to exploit deep-seated tensions in liberal democracies (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). The effectiveness of mal-, mis-, and disinformation campaigns depended in part on the ability to take advantage of the biases intrinsic to social media platforms (Comor, 2001; Innis, 2008), particularly the attention economy and the social media supply chain based on viral content (Jenkins et al., 2012). This model also maximized user engagement by tapping into primal emotions, such as anger or fear, that scramble users' perceptions of reality while being oblivious to the real-world repercussions of algorithmic filtering (Ananny & Crawford, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). In the closed environment of algorithms agnostic to hatred and vitriol, reality-distorting misinformation could flourish by reliably tapping into users' darkest impulses and polarized politics.

The substitution of real-world community leaders that emerged with the first wave of online communities with algorithms automating the management of social interaction online removed the underlying nexus negotiating the expression of identities online and offline. As social platforms began to scale up operations to cater for an increasingly larger user base, the flux of information within was for the first time managed by algorithms dedicated to maximizing engagement, which often translated to maximizing conflict. The rapid deployment of this algorithmic network infrastructure led to remarkable disconnect between social groups and undermined the fragilely woven fabric of society. The rise of network propaganda embedded to social platform affordances, along with the 2016 election cycle that placed Trump in the White House and brought a near-impossible Brexit to the UK, led the technorati to embrace dystopian narratives that described current events with term such as 'Darkest Timeline,' a reference to the theory that there may exist multiple universes outside of our own and that we live in the worst possible universe of them all.

The Darkest Timeline anecdote foregrounds a split in consensus reality perceived as cognitive dissonance in the cultural and political landscape. This perception is accompanied by a substantive uptake in conspiracy-theorizing (Uscinski, 2018), chief of these being the QAnon meta narrative. This knits together contemporary politics and racist tropes, positioning 'the people'

against globalist elites it refers to as 'The Cabal,' a force that traffics in pedophilia, blood sacrifice, Satanism, and other attention-getting transgressions. Similarly, anti-vaccination conspiracy-theorizing has rapidly evolved into a cult where members feel an obligation to share the truth with their neighbors and significant others. The economics of social capital underpinning real-world communities drives much of the activity in these loosely knit communitarian narratives, which embrace the participatory nature of the contemporary internet, where storytelling is built upon decentralized fan fiction spiraling within closed universes of mutually reinforcing interpretations (Zuckerman, 2019).

Despite its limited overlap with consensus reality, conspiracy-theorizing such as QAnon narratives successfully found footholds in the offline world. 'Q' t-shirts appeared recurrently in Trump reelection rallies during 2019 and 2020, and culminated in the violent storming of the US Congress on January 2021, when supporters featured Q paraphernalia, carried signs, and celebrated the theory. QAnon surfaced in political campaigns, criminal cases, merchandising, and college classes. The book *QAnon: An Invitation to a Great Awakening*, written by QAnon followers and supporters, peaked at #2 on Amazon's list of bestselling books in early 2019. QAnon supporters were often regular citizens who found in Q's messages a source of partisan energy that confirmed their suspicions about powerful institutions. Many were senior or elderly users who came across the theory through partisan Facebook groups or Twitter threads (McIntire & Roose, 2020). The ease of information sharing supported by social platforms not only allowed content to become untethered from offline communities. It also allowed content untethered from reality to penetrate real communities at scale and speed.

3.3. *Outgroups in the Global Village*

Barry Wellman has made a fundamental contribution to understanding how technology has changed the spatial constraints in social networks. Curiously based in the same university where Marshall McLuhan developed his seminal theories, much of Wellman's work is an empirically supported debate with McLuhan's insightful probes, with the concept of 'Global Village' resonating with Wellman's construct of 'Community Liberated,' and several of Wellman's studies consisting of attempts to see what the global village looks like around the world (Wellman, 1999). Much of this work addressed the perennial tension between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. Of particular interest is the study authored by Wellman and Potter (1999) where three types of communities are identified based on the extent to which they relied on face-to-face and phone contacts: lost, saved, and liberated. Individuals who lived near each other continued to have more frequent contact, but social technologies altered the notion of proximity in fundamental ways.

Our own attempt to understand this relationship was initially focused on investigating the relationship between the geographic location of protestors attending demonstrations in the 2013 protests in Brazil and the geographic location of users that tweeted the protests (Bastos et al., 2014). Spatiotemporal analysis showed only limited overlap between online and offline protest activity, with users' location differing considerably from the geography of the protest they participated online. The geography of street protests was indeed significantly distant from the geography of users tweeting the protests, with hashtagged tweets being particularly poor at predicting the actual location of users. While the events analyzed in this study took place in 2013, they foreshadowed the disconnect between online and offline protest activity that would drive many influence operations and the information warfare in the ensuing years (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Walker, et al., 2019).

This study forced us to challenge the narrative about digital communities suggested by the concept of 'global village,' the powerful McLuhanian metaphor describing how new communication technologies empower and bring together geographically disparate individuals across vast territories and cultural differences (McLuhan, 1962). If anything, our results suggested a different emphasis: Instead of bridging disparate geographies, social media consolidated extant socioeconomic and political divisions in the country, with users in geographically distant locations directing their attention toward the metropolitan centers of the public opinion.

In a follow-up study that similarly leveraged temporal and spatial data about the Brexit debate (Bastos et al., 2018), we explored the geographic dependencies of echo-chamber communication on Twitter within the Leave and Remain referendum campaigns. After identifying the location of users and estimating their partisan affiliation, we examined if polarized online echo chambers mapped onto geographically situated social networks. Echo-chamber communication was indeed rampant during the Brexit debate, but whereas most interactions were within a 200km radius, echo-chamber communication was predominantly restricted to neighboring areas within a 50km radius, with significant differences across the partisan divide: 168km on average for pro-Leave echo chambers, compared with 208km for pro-Remain. Perhaps more puzzling, the trend was reversed for non-echo-chamber communication, which covered shorter distances on the Remain side.

One possible explanation for the conflicting evidence on echo chambers is that politically homogeneous communication may reflect group formations inherited from offline social relations. As such, the boundaries of one's network can be simultaneously permeated by echo chambers stemming from offline relationships while being exposed to competing opinions on polarizing topics that circulate on social media. At any rate, the prevalence of ideologically homogeneous communication contradicted the euphoric literature praising the

democratization of public discourse brought by networking technology and social media platforms (Howard & Hussain, 2013). But it also challenged the prevailing narrative on echo chambers arguing that social media interactions lead users to engage with political content that resonates with them (Sunstein, 2009). The ideological and geographic patterning observed in the Brexit debate offers evidence for communication spanning the entire country, while also supporting ideologically homogeneous echo-chamber communication within geographically enclosed areas.

These studies lend partial support to the real-world consequences posited by both narratives, either by supporting cooperation or by ripping apart the social fabric of society. We found strong evidence for cooperation across geography and within ideological clusters, but we also found high levels of insularity between ideological clusters. These studies suggest forms of social organization that depart radically from the 'open society' postulated by Karl Popper's rendering of liberal democracy (Popper, 2020). Within this line of inquiry, network communication may indeed support the creation of a global society or village, but this globally connected society might reproduce outgroup negativity and derogation, with intergroup behavior reflecting geographically homogeneous communities that can suddenly outspread their spatial constraints.

4. Conclusion

Internet scholarship in the late 1990s and early noughties oscillated between narratives of integration and division, with McLuhan's seminal metaphor of a global village being superseded by a horizon of tribalism and information warfare. These narratives were inspired by geography and emphasized either integration and cooperation or identity and tribalism; either communication and collaboration or polarization and division. Common to both narratives is the foregrounding of real-world consequences, whether by supporting cooperation or by ripping apart the social fabric of society. As mutually exclusive narratives, they project inconsistent and disjointed physical places resulting from the weaving of network technology into the fine textures of the physical world, epitomized by social platforms and the vast centralized architectures underpinning cloud services.

Concerns about the viability of the internet up to recently have been largely restricted to infrastructure scaling, robustness, and resilience. With internet traffic growing at a fast and steady pace from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, the technology sector focused on issues of load and strain on the infrastructure. These developments shaped the debate around the benefits and potential hazards of centralized approaches to content delivery compared with a distributed architectural model. Scalability requirements eventually led to the shift toward cloud computing that marked a milestone

in cost reduction for data transfer, followed by the rapid scaling of internet companies' ability to provide services to anyone anywhere in the planet. The post-PC of the late 2000s and 2010s evolved to include wearable and ubiquitous devices favoring portability and seamless connection to cloud-based services.

It is an open question whether social groups can scale up as seamlessly as our communication infrastructure. Our cognitive threshold, indeed our capacity to empathize, remains evolutionarily linked to a relatively small pool of individuals ranging from a few dozen to a couple hundred individuals (de Sola Pool & Kochen, 1978). While we can communicate globally at virtually no cost, our social lives remain mapped to very real, limited, and tangible material surroundings. In sharp contrast to cloud computing infrastructure, our cognitive architecture is not designed to scale, but to root social experiences in a relatively small and stable number of meaningful social ties (Dunbar, 2016). The disconnect between scalable technical infrastructure and the limits of our social networks, but also the social technology underpinning our social fabric, has produced asymmetric social divides including polarization and the breakdown of communities. In other words, as online communities scale both in size and geographic breadth, critical breakdowns in the limits of social integration, cohesion, and consensus reality may follow.

As one's local experiences are intertwined with global communities or villages, the tenuous arrangements piecing together heterogeneous social groups may give way to social tensions, which are the source of much cruelty, oppression, but also of comfort and kindness. The permanent impetus toward greater connectivity evangelized by social platforms and encapsulated in the metaphor of a global village leaves little room for this inherent contradiction in social life. Narratives foregrounding division and polarization, on the other hand, overlook the substantial contributions of network communications to citizen journalism, civic education, and media activism that hold governments and power to account. On balance, network communication does seem to advance a global society or village, with the caveat that this globally connected society continues to reinforce intergroup boundaries and outgroup stereotyping typical of geographically situated communities.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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