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The Vanishing Table, or Community in a World that is No World

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the possibility of community under modern conditions of “worldlessness,” displacement, and disburdenment, conditions recently materialized in, and accelerated by, digital information and communication technologies. The paper engineers an encounter between two literatures: the body of philosophical writing that locates the phenomenon of worldlessness in the progress of modern technology generally; and the growing social science literature examining the character and dynamics of digitally-mediated community practices and forms. The paper begins with a theoretical exegesis of aspects of the work of three thinkers—Harold Innis, Hannah Arendt, and Albert Borgmann—who have made thoughtful contributions to our understand of the technological phenomenon gathered here as worldlessness. It then proceeds to reflect upon recent empirical accounts of digitally-mediated community, in light of the philosophical questions raised by these thinkers. The paper concludes by arguing that digital technology, as it is elaborated in the context of contemporary liberal capitalism, provides a material setting in which community is likely to thrive only in a particular, truncated form: as an infrastructure of convenience for instrumental communication between networked individuals.

“Community,” Albert Borgmann writes, “gathers around reality.” He is referring specifically to “the holy game of baseball,” and the reality of “a thoughtful and graceful ballpark” (1992:136). As a site of common celebration, the ballpark—and Borgmann is careful to distinguish ballparks from artificially-turfed, climate-controlled domes that are a technology for rendering the game into a commodity and spectators into customers—“inspires common pride and pleasure, a shared sense of season and place, a joint anticipation of drama.” One might say the same of a local hockey rink in the midst of a Canadian prairie winter. In both cases, the “rich reality” of the site acts to “sponsor a sense of community;” they are places where “reality and community conspire...” (135).

Borgmann's poetry tempts us immediately to ask whether unreal or virtual environments can sponsor community in the same way that common engagement with rich material reality can. This is the "virtual community" question: Can digital communication networks mediate the sort of relationships located by the ballpark and hockey rink? Do *virtual* reality and community also conspire? These are tempting questions but, as a point of departure, they are too limiting if our aim is to appreciate the impact of digital technology, in its various and comprehensive manifestations, on the character of human relationships. The utilities typically associated with "virtual community"—multiple-user domains, chat rooms, discussion lists—represent only a small portion of the application of digital technology to everyday life, and it is not clear that the most significant social questions about this technology concern, or are contained within, the online environment itself. Digital technologies also work upon life offline: the reality into which digital technologies intervene is not just virtual. And they intervene not only as instruments people use, but also as part of the material environment in which life unfolds. Borgmann's insight is that human social relations (not to mention individual human souls) always depend for much of their character on the material conditions in which they arise and subsist. As he puts it: "There is in every case a symmetry between human life and its setting" (Borgmann 1992:96). The question is, then, what setting does digital technology provide for human life?

As Borgmann points out, some realities—the artificial environment of the domed stadium—are impoverished rather than rich and, as such, lack the necessary resources for a fruitful conspiracy with community. I will argue that digital technology impoverishes rather than enriches our shared reality, at least so far as the concrete material foundations of community are concerned.¹ My contention is that this impoverishment is revealed in the relationship between digital technologies and our engagement with a common world of "things." Much of the debate over the social implications of digital technology is framed in terms of an encounter between location and communication. On the one hand, critics argue that digital technologies undermine the spatio-temporal location of human sociability, and that this dynamic threatens community relationships. On the other hand, proponents suggest that these technologies compensate for dislocation by mediating communication between displaced individuals and so contribute to, rather than detract from, the possibility of community in the contemporary setting. As I will concede below, there is considerable truth in both these propositions, and it pays to think them through. Nonetheless, the location-communication dialectic does not fully account for the setting that new information and communications technologies provide for community. Specifically, it fails to reckon with the crucial relationship between technologies and things, and between things and community. In what follows, I will argue that digital technology, as it is elaborated in the context of contemporary liberal capitalism, provides a material setting in which the concretion of a common world of things is systematically evaded, and so conspires more readily with commodity than with community.

A World that is no World

Human beings are radically limited by their situation in space and time, but our experience of this situation can vary considerably, especially when it is mediated and rendered artificial by technology. Naturally, we experience time as a recurrence of

organic cycles (i.e., bodily rhythms, alternating days and nights, seasons, lifetimes) at rates specific to particular locations, and space as the extent of our regular habitation (i.e., where we live) and the distance over which we can reasonably travel, communicate or see. Combined, these experiences of time and space as essentially limiting elicit a sense of “place” that localizes the organization and coordination of the common attention and activities of human communities. We are, by nature, local.

That being said, we are no longer natural; perhaps we have never been. As David Harvey (1989) has argued, the human experience of space and time cannot be effectively separated from the specific material and symbolic practices that structure and endow it with meaning in any given context. Consequently, a radically natural experience of time or space would be very difficult for a social being to achieve. Additionally, Harvey writes, “[t]he material practices from which our concepts of space and time flow are as varied as the range of individual and collective experiences” (211). The human apprehension of space and time is invariably social and varies, it would seem, across space and time.

Nevertheless, there are consistencies in the modern western experience of space and time, and the mediation of this experience by technology is perhaps chief among them. Technological mediation—the standardized measure of time by clocks, calendars and zones; the invention of the telescope; the proliferation of mapping; the development of transportation and communication technologies—artificially transgresses the natural limits of place, enabling the constitution and coordination of human attention and activity on scales and at speeds greater than that for which nature provides and fits us. The name Harvey gives to this dynamic is “time-space compression” which he defines as

processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves. I use the word “compression” because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inward upon us. (1989:240)

In Harvey’s view, intensification of the dynamic of time-space compression is the distinctive mark of postmodernity. Several others have also identified the construction of spatial and temporal experience as central to the trajectory of the modern west. Notable among these is Anthony Giddens, who identifies “time-space distanciation” as among the definitive marks of late modernity. In this dynamic, the localized experience of space and time characteristic of traditional societies is “disembedded” under the universalizing influence of symbolic tokens (e.g., national and international currencies) and technocratic systems (Giddens 1990). For Giddens, the generalization of this dynamic under the auspices of globalization holds out significant progressive potential.

If there is a consensus among those who reflect upon the social impact of digital media, it is that these technologies—despite whatever else they do—operate on our experience of space and time. In the digital age, social, political and economic attention and activity are increasingly concentrated upon, and mediated by, flows of data that race across vast distances in an instant. Under these conditions, the human experience of time and space as essentially localizing is annihilated. As Manuel Castells

(1996) puts it, when operated upon by network technology, “[l]ocalities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographic meaning ... inducing a space of flows that substitutes for the space of places. Time is erased in the new communication system.... The space of flows and timeless time are the material foundations of a new culture ... the culture of real virtuality” (375). In this configuration of human experience, places are less important than processes; time, traversed by speed, becomes timelessness; and as a material basis for individual lifestyles connected mobility is more valuable than enduring, stable location. Indeed, under these dynamic conditions, location is typically experienced as a material liability rather than a source of strength and meaning.

Digital networks are neither the first nor the only technology to participate in the dislocation of human attention and activity; that modern technologies of mass and personal transport have enabled transgression of the limits imposed by distance is obvious. However, communication media have also always been technologies that work on the material of space and time. This was the crucial insight of Harold Innis (1951). According to Innis, communication media can be biased towards either the integrity through time of that which they mediate (time-biased media) or its portability through space (space-biased media). Time-biased media such as stained glass windows and statuary emphasize location and continuity and are not configured for reach or speed; space-biased media such as mass printing on paper, money, electrical transmission and broadcasting emphasize the movement of large quantities of information across considerable distances at great speeds. In other words, time-biased media defer to the natural limits of space and time within which human beings are situated, while space-biased media operate to overcome these.

In Innis’s view, the bias of a medium of communication emerges from equal parts technological and social determination. Technically, a medium such as the printed page (or a computer file) has the capacity to store a great deal of information for a very long period of time as well as to enable its transport across great distances quite quickly. Which of these capacities ultimately defines the bias of the medium depends on which has a better rapport with the priorities of the society in which it is situated. The biases of communication media thus settle into a mutually reinforcing dynamic with the culture, politics and economy of their age, to establish what Innis called a “monopoly of knowledge” (1951:4). In his view, societies in which the monopoly of knowledge effects a balance between time and space bias—i.e., between concern for continuity and the extension of reach—are the most stable and hospitable. Modern western society, Innis lamented, has failed to achieve such a balance. Instead, the modern appetite for size and speed fairly overwhelms genuine attention to continuity or location, a condition both reflected in, and mediated by, an uninterrupted trajectory of space-biased communication technologies: the moveable-type printing press and paper; electric telegraphic transmission (which liberated communication from transportation); and electronic broadcasting.

As suggested above, digital communication technologies are probably best understood as a part of this trajectory of space-biased media rather than as a departure from it. Computerized networks introduce unprecedented levels of speed, automation and reach into human communication, which decreases the need to synchronize and localize activity in particular places. Despite (or perhaps because of) their formidable capacity for storage and retrieval, these technologies also devalue the preservation of

communicated information. The cultural priority of speed over continuity in communication is evident in the contrast between the frustration people demonstrate when their “downloads” of massive volumes of digital information are anything other than instantaneous, and the cavalier ease with which they unceremoniously “delete” these same volumes of information when they are no longer needed or desired. What, we might ask, could be more distant from our natural experience of space and time than the ability to receive in mere seconds, from a source across the globe, hundreds of “pages” rich in images and text that we feel quite comfortable to obliterate almost immediately should they not meet with our approval? That we expect instantaneous data flows rather than being astonished by them, and that we feel no hesitation in regularly destroying reams of digitally encoded information, are marks of both the vitality of space-bias in contemporary western society and of the rapport that has been established between this society and the particular capacities of this technology. The space-biases of digital networks emerge as the perfect technological complement to the 24-hour casino of global capitalism and culture, wherein everything is on, or on sale, all the time, everywhere, but nothing lasts. This is the acceleration of a dynamic identified by Innis more than 50 years ago, just as that other great communication technology that would save modern communities—television—was about to take hold: “It is possible that we have become paralyzed to the extent that an interest in duration is impossible or that only under the pressure of extreme urgency can we be induced to recognize the problem” (1951:88).

But what is the problem? Why does it matter that digital technologies accelerate a radical dislocation of our experience of space and time? On the basis of his sweeping history of western civilization, Innis concludes that the cultural conditions attending monopolies of knowledge biased toward temporal continuity differ substantially from those biased toward spatial expanse. Societies with time-biased monopolies of knowledge—typically ancient societies—tended towards modesty of scale; localized attention; decentralized, personified political authority; personalized exchange relations; religiosity; celebration, tradition and custom as practical, living embodiments of collective memory; non-specialization; and community. Societies with space-biased monopolies of knowledge—most modern western societies—tend towards grossness of scale; dislocated, cosmopolitan attention; centralized, rational-bureaucratic political authority; impersonal, commercial exchange relations based on the abstract forms of money and commodity; secularism; spectacle and consumption; specialization; and individual freedom and autonomy. Innis’s “Plea for Time” should not be understood as some romantic nostalgia for naive communalism (1951:61-91). His view was that healthy societies are those that manage a balance between time-bias and space-bias, and that imbalance in one direction or the other—either the universal, homogenous republic of choice or the close, inward parochialism of the Hutterite colony—is fatal to human flourishing. Cosmopolitanism needs to be balanced by local traditions in order to prevent it from becoming deracinated homogeneity; and rootedness needs to be balanced by openness to diversity lest it descend into idiocy and bigotry. Either extreme is untenable in the long run.

That being said, as Innis once wrote: “Each civilization has its own methods of suicide” (1951:141). If modernity is on the precipice it is because of the overwhelming space-bias of its dominant culture, abetted by communication technologies that comport with and mediate this imbalance. One need not accept these apocalyptic stakes to

ask whether digital technologies are unfolding in such a way that they will right, or increase, this imbalance. As argued above, the infrastructural role these technologies play in political, economic and cultural globalization seems to suggest that their destiny lies in continuing the trajectory of imbalanced space-bias that has characterized the modern west. We must assess the prospects of community under the auspices of this technology in this light. If digital technologies are predominantly space-biased and if Innis is correct that communication media and practices that radically dislocate our experience of space and time are historically inimical to community, then we would do well to keep our expectations for community in the digital age relatively modest.²

Unless Innis is wrong and temporal/spatial orientations do not really matter to community. In 1916, John Dewey—in a statement to be echoed decades later by the likes of Jürgen Habermas (1999) and Benedict Anderson (1999)—asserted that

[p]ersons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others. A book or a letter may institute a more intimate association between human beings separated thousands of miles from each other than exists between dwellers under the same roof” (Dewey 1964:4-5).

Forty years ago Melvin Webber raised the possibility that modern urbanization, characteristically associated with decline in organic communal relationships, provided for “community without propinquity” (1963). Communities need not be geographically localized, he argued, nor do they require immediate, face-to-face encounters.³ Subsequently Barry Wellman (1979) and Claude Fischer (1982) argued that localized community as a basis for human association and sociability had long been literally *displaced* into multiple networks of interpersonal ties that are not organized spatially (see also Wellman, Carrington and Hall 1988). Communication, it would seem, can compensate for dislocation.

Few would deny that most people in modern western cities and suburbs (and perhaps even small towns) have little knowledge of, serious encounter with, or moral investment in the neighbours with whom they co-inhabit days and nights in buildings, blocks, or neighbourhoods. To equate community with neighbourhood, town or city under these conditions is effectively to say that community simply designates an arbitrary physical boundary that contains very few substantial human relationships. Those who study social networks suggest that aspatial personal networks comprised of ties of varying degrees of intimacy and activity provide the very communal resources and experiences that local neighbourhoods do not: support; sociability; information; and a sense of belonging (Wellman 1999). In this vein, Wellman and Keith Hampton point out that “most of the social support, and much of the information and resources that people require to function in their day-to-day lives comes from sources outside of the local setting,” and therefore, “[c]ommunity is best seen as a network—not as a local group” (Hampton and Wellman 2002). This is probably true, and it substantiates rather than contradicts the argument that most human social relationships in the modern era are dislocated in space and time, essentially placeless. Whether this is cause for relief or concern depends on what one thinks a sense of place lends to human life, and on what one presumes to be the consequences of radical displacement and dislocation.

In any case, it is clear that these individuated networks of spatially dislocated interaction and association have been enabled, from the outset, by a variety of transportation and communication technologies, including especially automobiles, airplanes and telephones. It is also clear that digital communication technologies are the perfect instrument of what Wellman (2001) has labeled “networked individualism”—sociability based on highly dynamic, spatially dislocated, nested networks of social ties constructed through individual choice and interests and maintained by communication.

Some recent influential studies of Internet users are worth noting in this context, the first conducted by a group led by Barry Wellman using data from a large survey of visitors to the National Geographic website (Wellman et al. 2001; Haase et al. 2002), a second by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Horrigan 2001), and a third by Keith Hampton based on his investigation (in which Wellman also participated) of a wired subdivision in suburban Toronto dubbed “Netville” (Hampton 2001; Hampton and Wellman 2001). As one might expect, each of these studies found evidence that Internet users in significant numbers employ the medium to contact friends, family, groups and organizations online. Digital communication media networks thus enable networked individuals to establish and maintain social ties with a variety of people, organizations and associations.

What about specifically local or community concerns? In their work on the National Geographic survey, Wellman and his colleagues initially concluded that “...the Internet is increasing interpersonal connectivity and organizational involvement. However this increased connectivity and involvement not only can expose people to more contact and more information, it can reduce commitment to community” (Wellman et al. 2001:450-51). Subsequently, these authors revised their conclusion somewhat, emphasizing the correlation between frequent Internet use and a strong sense of *online* community, and suggesting that increased online activity “neither turns people on nor turns them off from an *overall* sense of community” (Haase et al. 2002:318, emphasis added). Whatever the case, the issue is moot because location as a basis for human associational or community life has long since ceased to matter. As the authors explain: “The security and social control of all-encompassing communities have given way to the opportunity and vulnerability of networked individualism. People now go through the day, week, and month in a variety of narrowly defined relationships with changing sets of network members” (Wellman et al. 2001:451). In this sense, the Internet is playing precisely the role it ought to with respect to human sociability, enabling spatially and temporally dislocated associations and relationships.

The findings of the Pew study confirm this. While its author suggests that the results indicate, “many Americans are using the Internet to intensify their connection to their local community” (Horrigan 2001:2), a closer look reveals that “many” might not mean very much. The study estimates that 90 million Americans use the Internet to contact groups. Later in the report we find that only 26 percent of these—roughly 23 million people—report that the Internet has helped them connect to “nearby groups” and, of these, “only 6 percent say it has helped them ‘a lot’ in getting them in touch with locally based groups” (Horrigan 2001:17). The report concludes:

On balance, however, the vast majority of Internet users say the Internet is a useful tool for becoming involved in things going on *outside* their community. Two-thirds (67 percent) of Internet users say the Net helps them get involved in

things outside their community, compared to only 9 percent who say it helps them get involved in things close to home (Horrihan 2001:25).

Hampton and Wellman's Netville studies complicate the issue somewhat. Netville is the fictitious name these researchers have given to a subdivision of 109 homes outside Toronto in which households were equipped by a consortium of technology and communication companies with advanced computer and network technologies. Homeowners moving to Netville would have free access to these advanced technologies and services in exchange for their agreement to have their use-patterns monitored and studied by the consortium (which also included select academic researchers). For what have been described as "various organizational reasons internal to the Magenta Consortium," forty percent of Netville households were denied access to the network infrastructure despite initial assurances they would be fully wired—a glitch that served the happy purpose of providing researchers with a ready-made, non-wired control group against which they could compare the behaviour of the wired residents (Hampton and Wellman 2001:481). In many respects, Hampton and Wellman's findings were predictable, and consistent with those discussed above. Starting from the assumption that moving to a new neighbourhood strains the ability of people to maintain their existing social ties, Hampton and Wellman found that the use of Internet communications alleviated this strain, particularly in relation to maintenance of ties across considerable distances. While the use of these technologies had no effect on distinctly local ties (within 50km), in the case of both midrange (50-500km) and distant (more than 500km) ties, wired residents of Netville fared better in terms of contact and support than non-wired residents (Hampton and Wellman 2001:486-91). These findings are consistent with the claim that the primary utility of digital communication technology—or, more specifically, e-mail—in relation to community under contemporary conditions is its effectiveness in mediating aspatial, far-flung associational or social networks.

There is, however, another finding that has emerged from the Netville studies that merits attention here. Hampton and Wellman have found that Netville's wired residents 'neighbor' more extensively and more intensively than their non-wired counterparts. According to the study, "Wired Netville residents on average know the names of 25 neighbors as compared to 8 for the non-wired, they visit each other's homes 50 percent more often, and the neighbors they know are spread more widely throughout Netville" (Hampton and Wellman 2001:486). On this basis, Hampton suggests that new communication technologies "may hold as much promise of reconnecting us to communities of place as they do in liberating us from them," and that "the introduction of ICTs specifically designed to facilitate communication and information sharing in a residential setting could reverse the trend of neighbourhood non-involvement" (Hampton 2002:228, 231). The numbers regarding neighboring are certainly intriguing, and it does seem that digital communications contributed to localizing Netville, but Hampton does well to phrase his generalizations based on these findings in measured terms. It is not clear why a person who can recite twenty-five names she has seen repeatedly on a list of e-mail recipients should qualify as a better neighbour than one who can recall the names of eight people she has encountered in other ways; it is not surprising that contact taking place over a digital network yields relationships that are more spatially dispersed throughout the neighbourhood than those produced by conversation that takes place over a fence; and it is not clear that the difference between

3.2 visits with the neighbours per year and 4.8 visits per year is really that significant (Hampton 2001:117). In any case, we must keep in mind that while Netville is a real place, the conditions under which it has developed as a neighbourhood are highly artificial. It may be the case that relatively well-distributed access to a dedicated, localized communications network that provides access to neighbourhood content and contact can mediate a re-placement of community relations, especially amongst a relatively homogenous social group⁴—but it is not all clear that these characteristics pertain to the dominant characteristics of Internet design and use, or of society, beyond the cul-de-sacs of Netville.

Nevertheless, what does emerge quite clearly from these studies is confirmation that community in North America has been progressively displaced into dislocated, individualized social networks and that digital communication and other technologies have contributed to the viability of this condition. However, as Castells writes in reflecting on this very phenomenon, “the costs for society are still unclear” (2001:133). Whatever community will be for those who fully inhabit and partake of the digital age, it will be so under socio-technical conditions of radical dislocation and displacement, compensated for by communication, technologically-enabled to surmount these very conditions. Whether this compensation is full or partial, and whether it entails its own pathologies, is a separate question. Already in 1955, Martin Heidegger could observe: “All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail and drive man—all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world” (1966:48). Under these conditions—arguably accentuated by digital technology—if community is to exist at all, it will exist in a form appropriate to “the illusion of a world that is no world” (Heidegger 1966:48).

The Vanishing Table

Insofar as the argument that twins community with location is premised on the assumption that dislocation makes authentic communication impossible, it is untenable. Technology, as is its way, has made the seemingly impossible—routine dialogic communication despite dislocation—seem possible and, in so doing, breaks the location-community nexus, at least to the extent that regularized dialogic communication is understood as definitive of community. However, if we consider that community requires more than dialogic communication, there may be something else to say about its relationship with digital technology. This section will explore the possibility that meaningful engagement with a common world of things is just as important to community as is communication or dialogue, and that the implications of digital technology for the prospects of such an engagement are quite profound.

Concern with the distinctly modern phenomenon of technologically-mediated worldlessness has not been restricted to reflection upon space and time. For example, Hannah Arendt—the great theorist of worldlessness—was concerned not so much with dislocation in place and time as with modern estrangement of human beings from a common world comprised of concrete material things. In Arendt’s view, to dwell in the world was to be both related to, and separated from, others by concrete, enduring things that are the product of human work.⁵ In laboring, we attend to the biological,

animal needs of existence by producing items for consumption; in work—artful fabrication of objects for enduring use but not consumption—we build a common world that is the stage of our common interests, our “being among men (*inter homines esse*)” as Arendt puts it (1958:51). Referring to “the fabrication of human hands,” she writes: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it. The world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (Arendt 1951:52). A “common world of things” that exists between human beings and nature provides a stable basis for dwelling in common interest—i.e., for community—insofar as concrete things outlast individuals and their private needs, appetites and passions. According to Arendt: “a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence” (Arendt 1951:55). Human beings come and go but the world endures, at least in so far as the world is a world and not just, say, a cache of resources. As Arendt puts it:

It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them, their “objectivity” which makes them withstand, “stand against” and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users. From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact—in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. (1951:137)

This, then, is the distinction between “the labor of our bodies” and “the work of our hands:” the former gathers resources that disappear in consumption; the latter fabricates a common world of enduring things around which disappearing beings are gathered. Things are for use, not consumption: “Their proper use does not cause them to disappear and they give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man” (Arendt 1951:136). Absent concrete, enduring things “no common world and no public realm is possible” (Arendt 1951:55).

For Arendt, the modern human condition is marked by a crumbling of the common world of things:

What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (1951:52-3)

This worldlessness has a number of related causes, chief among them the elevation of the activities of labour (attention to biological appetite and necessity) over work (fabrication of objects) and action (Arendt’s category for political deliberation and practical deeds), and a corresponding colonization of modern public life by activities of com-

merce strictly for the purpose of private consumption, whether immediate or deferred as accumulation.⁶ Under this regime, work dissolves into mere labor, and the solidity and “intrinsic worth” of useful things dissolves into the “everchanging relativity” of commodity values established via the estimation of private, subjective tastes in public markets (Arendt 1951:164-5).⁷ So reconfigured, things lose their objective quality and cannot serve as a firm basis for a common world that outlasts us. The end of production ceases to be the crafty fabrication of a useful thing that will endure, and becomes instead the technological generation of valuable commodities that disappear through consumption to make way for more commodities. The table degenerates from something concrete to gather around, into an abstract value to be bought and sold by individuals. As a commodity exchanged, the table is passed from one labourer to another, from producer to consumer, but it does not remain between them as a thing that joins and separates them in common interest. Thus the material basis of community is compromised by the dissolution of the common world of things.

Technology plays no small role in this dynamic. The “problem of technology,” according to Arendt, “is not so much whether we are the masters or slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things” (Arendt 1951:151). Her answer to this question is decisive: “For a society of laborers, the world of machines has become a substitute for the real world, even though this pseudo world cannot fulfill the most important task of the human artifice, which is to offer mortals a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves” (Arendt 1951:152). If this is true, the implications for community are potentially profound.

These implications have been elaborated carefully by Albert Borgmann, who supplements Arendt’s attention to things with a concern for the practices that safeguard them, and with a more radical understanding of commodity. Borgmann distinguishes between things and “devices.” A thing “is inseparable from its context, namely, its world and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely, engagement” (Borgmann 1984:41). Devices, on the other hand, remove the world’s material from its context and make it available to us in the form of commodities that alleviate the burdens of living in the world. Devices conceal the actual operations that accomplish this procurement and, in so doing, “dissolve the coherent and engaging character of the pretechnological world of things. In a device, the relatedness of the world is replaced by a machinery, but the machinery is concealed, and the commodities, which are made available by a device, are enjoyed without the encumbrance of or the engagement with a context” (Borgmann 1984:47). To use Borgmann’s example, a central heating plant is a device that “procures mere warmth and disburdens us of all other elements” (1984:42). The heating plant conceals from consumers the manner in which heat is produced, and seems only to ask of them that they consume the warmth it makes available. By decontextualizing the production of warmth, the central heating plant disburdens us of the world without engaging us with it. The stove, on the other hand, is a thing that accomplishes more than just making warmth available. It also provides a focal point for engagement with its world, via a set of focal practices that coheres around the stove: attending to the seasons, chopping wood, filling the wood box, building and tending the fire, gathering around the hearth. Practices, in this sense, are what things are for (just as availing us of commodities is what devices are

for). Focal things are not produced for the sake of their production—they are not merely “stages on which nothing is ever enacted” (Borgmann 1984:222)—but rather to center focal practices. In return, “A practice keeps faith with focal things and saves them for an opening in our lives” (209).

Borgmann’s characterization of focal things and practices is rich:

[W]e might say this about focal things in general. They are concrete, tangible and deep, admitting of no functional equivalents; they have a tradition, structure, and rhythm of their own. They are unprocurable and finally beyond our control.

They engage us in the fullness of our capacities.... A focal practice, generally, is the resolute and regular dedication to a focal thing. It sponsors discipline and skill which are exercised in a unity of achievement and enjoyment, of mind, body and the world, of myself and others, and in a social union. (219)

In focal things and the practices that guard them, reality is experienced as commanding and eloquent, quite unlike the commanded, muted reality that is opened to technological procurement as commodity under the device paradigm. Borgmann’s list of focal things and practices includes the trout and fly-fishing, the wilderness and hiking, the horse and horsemanship, the instrument and musicianship, the meal and the culture of the table. There are potentially many others. However, in a technological world, devices and the commodities they make available typically displace focal things, and the disciplined burden of engaged, focal practice loses out to the ease of disburdened consumption. Technological devices make food readily available in the form of commodities that are convenient to consume (e.g., “fast” and prepared foods) but relieve us of the burdens (i.e., patience, skill, tradition, manners) of cultivating, gathering and preparing food, and of eating it together around the same table. The table vanishes as a focal thing when the practices that focus upon it disappear into the brilliant ease offered by technological devices and commodities. In this instance we are deprived, technologically, of a site of engagement with the commanding and eloquent reality of the world, and of communion with other people. A focal practice such as the culture of the table, on the other hand, “discloses the significance of things and the dignity of humans, it engenders a concern for the safety and well-being of things and persons” (220). Clearly, there is something at stake for community here. The question is whether digital technology is oriented primarily towards devices and commodities, or towards focal things and practices.

Borgmann’s later work refers to the “isolation of focal things and the diaspora of focal practices” under the auspices of postmodernity and its technologies (Borgmann 1992:222). Computerized information technology looms large here. As used by most people, the computer—like the central heating plant and its warmth—makes information and communication readily available as commodities but it conceals (behind “Windows,” ironically) the complex work of this accomplishment, and the context in which it emerges. We need only to consider the strangeness (i.e., the *alienation*) of being able to do something so fantastic as to exchange complex messages with thousands of people all over the globe instantly and simultaneously, or to access representations of the entire content of a library or art gallery from a wafer thin disk (or from a URL) on our desktops, *without the execution of any substantial skill, craft, or knowledge whatsoever*, to appreciate the manner in which this device tears things from their context, and estranges people from the commanding reality of the world. “Whatever is

touched by information technology,” Borgmann writes, “detaches itself from its foundation and retains a bond to its origin that is no more substantial than the Hope diamond’s tie to the mine where it was found” (Borgmann 1999:5). Information gathering and communication are mental activities, but their prosecution unfolds in the context of the concrete reality of the world, which includes time, toil, distance, and the presence and accommodation of others. The question is whether the mediation of these activities by digital networks is engaged with, or disengaged from, that reality: this will determine whether we are engaged in a focal practice, or disengaged, when we are gathering information and communicating with these devices. According to Borgmann, we can judge the focal significance of mental activity, “by the force and extent with which it gathers and illuminates the tangible world and our appropriation of it” (Borgmann 1984:217). The very appeal of network technology for most of its users is precisely that, despite the brilliance of its communication and information capacities, it still manages to leave darkened the tangible reality of just exactly how it appropriates the world.

Digital devices make extraordinary communication and information available to us as commodities, which is to say in a form that disburdens us of the challenges of the world and its reality. A commodity is, by definition, a convenience, something the purpose of which is to make life easier. The word “commodity” derives from the Latin root *commodus*, for that which has due measure, is suitable, convenient or accommodating. It is typical to think of commodities exclusively in the classical Marxian sense as objects exchanged for money. Indeed, it is basically this conception of the commodity that underlines Arendt’s diagnosis of the fate of things under the dominion of market relations, a diagnosis that speaks across decades to tell us a great deal about the escalating privatization and commercialization of the public sphere under the auspices of digital technology (Barney 2003). Still, the more radical notion of commodity as *that-which-is-commodious* can supplement our appreciation of digital media as technologies of worldlessness. In Borgmann’s formulation, commodity—“the commodious way in which devices make goods and services available” (Borgmann 1984:42)—is intrinsic to the modern technological dispensation. The “primary character” of technological commodities is “their commodious and consumable availability with the technological machinery as their basis and with disengagement and distraction as their recent consequences” (Borgmann 1984:259n5). From this perspective, the commodity is not so much, or not solely, an object of exchange but a quality that serves to disburden its possessor of the material difficulties of being in the world.

Whether the Internet becomes an exclusively commercial domain or not, digital technology certainly bears the marks of commodity in the sense of disburdenment, and its commodiousness extends beyond the ease with which it enables commercial exchange. Without digital devices, it would not be very easy to send identical messages from my desk in Ottawa to the desks of scores of political scientists scattered throughout Canada in the blink of an eye; or to receive a package of news reports from disparate sources, customized to my interests, on my computer every morning, (almost) no matter where I am in the world; or to gather, from my chair in the space of an hour, current documents from twenty governments around the world outlining their plans for the elaboration of digital infrastructure. Digital devices make all this easy. They are very convenient. That is what they are for. However, in the overwhelming convenience with which they make information and communication available to us, these devices de-

prive us of the more substantial engagements opened up to us when we confront the challenges of communication and information in the commanding reality of the world instead of devising ways around it.

We might consider here the different experiences of the student who comes to seminar and sits around the table with her fellows and hashes out the meaning of Heidegger's notion of "the fourfold," and the student who chooses to forego seminar and get "the information" by e-mailing the professor or finding something about it on the web. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that these two students end up with roughly the same information about "the fourfold." What is the meaningful distinction between these two experiences? Obviously, one is easier, more convenient than the other. Showing up on time, staying alert for three hours, speaking, listening, deliberating, thinking—it's all hard work. Sending a one line e-mail ("I was just wondering: what's the fourfold?") and *not* waiting for the reply (the asynchronous genius of e-mail relieves us of the discipline of waiting patiently), or plugging "Heidegger's fourfold" into a search engine, at the time and place of one's choosing, is much more convenient. The other, perhaps more significant, difference is that one experience entails a focal practice while the other does not. As a thing, the seminar table gathers a focal practice: a practice with a tradition of its own; a practice the risks of which excite and engage the full capacities of those who undertake it; a practice that demands and nurtures dedication, resolve, discipline, and skill; a practice that presences mind and body, self and others, and culminates in the celebration of a common achievement. Something, perhaps, like a community. In addition, in this practice, very little of what is involved in reaching the collective outcome is concealed: everything is on the table. This practice is what the seminar table, as a focal thing, is for.

The computer, in this example, is a device for avoiding the practice of the seminar by making the information available in a more convenient form. The computer can certainly deliver information about "the fourfold"—albeit information shorn of context and stripped of the markers of its achievement. It can also make the seminar table vanish and, with it, the practice that the table focuses. We might keep this in mind when we hear arguments that suggest the virtue of digital technology is that it makes it *easier* to be a member of a community, as in the following account of online community provided by Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia:

With more ease than in most real life situations, people can shop around for resources within the safety and comfort of their homes or offices. Travel and search time are reduced. It is *as if* most North Americans lived in the heart of densely-populated, heterogeneous, physically-safe, big cities rather than in peripheral, low-density, homogeneous suburbs. (1999:171-2)

The prospect here is that the device that makes community more convenient—by delivering it to shoppers as a commodity—may also be the device that drains community of the practices that give it substance and meaning.

This conflation of community and commodity brings us full circle in the discussion about things. For Arendt, when the work of our hands is given over to exchange wholly for the purposes of individual consumption, whether immediate or deferred as accumulation, when things lose their inherent worth as use-objects and are reduced to mere subjective values, we lose the shared world of stable, enduring things that relate

and separate us in common interest. This worldlessness long preceded the onset of the digital age, although, I would venture, computer technologies certainly extend and accelerate it. What is left for community under these conditions? According to Arendt: “Historically, we know of only one principle that was ever devised to keep a community of people together who had lost their interest in the common world and felt themselves no longer related and separated by it.” She refers here to Christian charity, “a bond between people strong enough to replace the world” (Arendt 1951:53). The virtue of charity abides, and it binds when it is offered and received, but it suffers in the context of a secular, bureaucratic, acquisitive society. So we are left to ask: what might now keep communities together despite the loss of interest in a common world of things that can relate and separate us?

The Internet, of course. Digital communication technologies, so complicit in the dissolution of the common world of things, are also well suited to make available community reduced to commodious communication between networked individuals. The commodity of digital communication need not be limited to the vulgarities customarily associated with electronic commerce—software downloads, pornography and customized Nike running shoes—but can be extended to include all manner of communicable, consumable, valued but expendable resources made conveniently available by this medium. As Wellman and Gulia argue, and as numerous other studies have confirmed: “companionship, emotional support, services and a sense of belonging are abundant in cyberspace” (1999:186). Contrary to what many critics of virtual community might imagine, these communal resources are easy, not hard, to find on the Internet, because the medium eliminates many of the concrete challenges that make community in the real world so very hard to practice. True, the practice of community is strengthened by rising to, rather than evading, such difficulties, and doing away with them effectively removes the things that support the practice by challenging it. Nevertheless, homilies about the virtue of hard work (and the voices of our mothers telling us that “nothing worth doing is easy”) are unlikely to persuade in the face of a good bargain, which is exactly what digital devices offer up when it comes to community.

Technologically-mediated communication may indeed mitigate the negative impact of dislocation on community, especially in contexts where community is reduced to its communicative, dialogic aspects. It is not so clear that communication can adequately compensate for the loss of a common world of things, particularly communication mediated by technological devices that are also complicit in that loss. Phrased differently, it is not clear that community can bear the loss of focal things and focal practices with the same resilience with which it has borne the trauma of dislocation. It is difficult to say for certain whether the binding and separating action of common things is ultimately indispensable to community. My suggestion here is simply that community is impoverished, not necessarily eliminated, by technologically-sponsored wordlessness, and that digital media participate in this sponsorship. It is certain that community is impossible without communication; it may also be the case that communication is meaningless without a world. To comprehend the relationship between digital technologies and community we must hold these two propositions together, as Arendt does when—describing communication as “the premise for the existence of man”—she writes: “Existence itself is, by its very nature, never isolated. It exists only in communication and in awareness of other’s existence.... Existence can develop only in

the shared life of human beings inhabiting a given world common to them all” (Arendt 1993:186).⁸

My argument is that digital technologies affect both communication and its material setting. Specifically, in their very action as devices of commodious communication, these technologies simultaneously undermine our inhabitation of a common world of things. Thus, they provide a setting in which community appears as communication, but communication without a world that gives it meaning. It is worth pointing out that after the table vanishes, those once gathered around and separated by it still share a location, and they can still communicate; what sort of an association they might then have depends on what, absent the table, they would say to each other, why saying it would matter, and what it would mean to them. These things are hard to predict. Still, as a contrast to the sort of association in which communication is easy but things are scarce, we might consider the community experienced by two neighbours who, on the heels of eight-hour shifts and forty-minute commutes, get their respective kids fed, bathed, kissed, and bedded, and then stand in the cold, joined and separated by fifty feet of ice they have just cleared and flooded for tomorrow’s shinny, in silent recognition of that which they hold, and which holds them, in common. It remains to be seen whether community as commodious communication, between individuals dislocated in a world that is no world, will produce such wonders.

Notes

Forthcoming in: Feenberg, Andrew and Darin Barney, eds. 2004. *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

1. It is customary at this point to offer a “definition” of community that will inform the discussion to follow. I will refrain from doing so, largely because I think this is a rare instance in which strict definition is counterproductive to thought. It has been my experience that when one begins with a clear definition of community, consideration of subsequent argument is sacrificed to irresolvable contestation of that definition, especially if it sets a high standard. In fact, the notion of “community” is so contested and variable that to choose one definition over another is essentially arbitrary, a rhetorical strategy enlisted to lend normative support to the author’s critique or endorsement of the operation of these technologies. In lieu of this, I would encourage the reader to engage with what follows in light of whatever understanding of community they regard as common and reasonable.

2. Directly or indirectly, Innis’s concerns about dislocation are at the base of much of the contemporary concern about the negative impact of digital communication technologies on community. See, for example, Frost (2003).

3. For commentary on Webber’s argument in light of contemporary conditions, see Calhoun (1998). Calhoun applauds Webber’s “appreciation of the growing choice, flexibility, and multiplicity of relational groupings” available in modern urban and organizational situations. However, he also points out that “The conception of community with which [Webber] worked was remarkably vague and weak. Community meant no more to Webber than clusters of personal relationships characterized by some common identity and perhaps a bit of emotional warmth” (374).

4. Hampton and Wellman report that Netville residents were “similar in terms of age, education, and family status ... largely lower middle class, English-speaking, and married.” Most residents had children living at home, and most were White (Hampton

and Wellman 2001:481). One would presume that residents of Canada's first wired suburb were also relatively technologically-literate.

5. For another, related discussion of things and their relation to dwelling, see Heidegger's (1971) "The Thing" and "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." According to Heidegger, things "gather" or "stay" "the fourfold" of "earth and sky, divinities and mortals" (1971:171).

6. This point requires elaboration. Arendt understood that an artisan requires a market in which to exchange things with others. "The point," writes Arendt, "is that *homo faber*, the builder of the world and the producer of things, can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs, because these products themselves are always produced in isolation." Thus, "His public realm is the exchange market, where he can show the products of his hand and receive the esteem which is due him." The problem occurs, however, when the *whole* of public life is given over to commerce, and when the entire purpose of commercial exchange is mere consumption. "Historically," according to Arendt, "the last public realm, the last meeting place which is at least connected with the activity of *homo faber*, is the exchange market on which his products are displayed ... its end came with the rise of labor and the labor society which replaced conspicuous production and its pride with 'conspicuous consumption' and its concomitant vanity" (1951:160-162).

7. In this sense, esteem is displaced from the worker, to whom it is due, and onto the product itself.

8. This comes in the context of Arendt's endorsement of Jasper's placement of communication at the heart of the philosophic (and existential) enterprise over Heidegger's solitary contemplation—the latter, in her view, resulting in worldlessness and withdrawal.

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