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Local community on Facebook – interplay between online and offline activities in the neighborhood of urban poor

"I am not going to this place, I don´t know how to go there, and I don´t even have a computer, of course, but I have heard that there is a lot of people in there, my daughter is there, too. I find it a good thing, though - very good - that there is a place where young people can talk to each other."

Extended abstract

In my paper, I ask what is the role of a local Facebook group in a neighborhood of concentrated poverty, and what is the impact of the social media site to local relationships. My question tackles one of the great debates of our time: whether the Internet enables to expand relationships both socially and geographically, or alienates people from their richer, more authentic relations (Boase et. al 2006). In my study of social relations in a poor urban neighborhood, the question is whether the online community weakens the local community, or, contrarily, improves possibilities for community participation. In my paper I try to describe the interplay between online and offline activities in the neighborhood, and show how the Internet is not just a means of long-distance communication but also enhances neighboring and civic involvement.

The paper is part of my dissertation research that I conduct in a project called "New urban poverty and the renovation of prefabricated high-rise buildings in Finland". My research is an ethnographic study on concentrated urban poverty in a welfare country where both concentrating poverty and ethnic heterogeneity are new phenomena. For a long time the Finnish population has been both ethnically homogeneous and economically relatively equal. Also, the urban structure in the country has been exceptionally homogeneous, resulting from a

persistent policy of mixed neighborhoods following which both rental and owner occupied housing have often been built in each housing area. However, as a consequence of the decline of the welfare society and the increasing income gap among the population, the spatial differences have begun to develop.

In my study, I examine the basis of social order in a neighborhood of new urban poverty. The field site of my ethnographic study is an example of a neighborhood in which living in a spatially separate and socially distanced neighborhood makes for a marginal existence, generates exclusionary solidarity, and restrains social mobility. Therefore, social networks are outstandingly local. A strong sense of community characteristic to the neighborhood is based on the working-class background of the inhabitants.

In the paper, I focus on the local Facebook group "Steep hill", which was established by a group of residents in 2011. I analyse the role of the Facebook group in the neighborhood and ask what are the effects of cyberspace on social relations, and how is the virtual community in the online world connected to the offline world. I examine what Wellmann (2001) has called "the social affordances" of technology: the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure. I focus on the affordances of Facebook on the neighborhood level and, in addition, try to acknowledge also the flip sides, its possible negative affordances.

I focus on the role of the virtual community on Facebook, its relationship with the physical offline world and impact on local social life. The first part of the paper describes the field site of my study "Steep hill". After that I briefly consider the role of online ethnography in my study and finally, the rest of the paper focuses on the online community and five different aspects of the Facebook group that I have found meaningful in my preliminary analysis: Facebook group as a local pub, sense of community, informal social control, collective action, and exclusionary effects of gossiping.

In the final part of my paper I conclude that the local Facebook group of "Steep hill" is a virtual settlement providing a new kind of neighborhood setting which attracts particular segments of the neighborhood population, and where people can meet and maintain relationships (Van Eijk 2010) and experience the feeling of belonging. Although communication on Facebook happens without physical face-to-face contact, it is in many ways similar to a local pub or a café where in-person meetings or only a passive observation provide sociability, sense of belonging, a feeling of community, and support in the form of exchangeable goods or services. The virtual community on Facebook mainly consists of different people than those who are active and

visible in the physical space. This, however, does not mean that there would be a juxtaposition of the established "community activists" (Small 2004) acting in the physical space and virtual community, but instead, these two worlds complement each other and in many ways merge and hybridize. Residents who prefer communicating online do not want to or – for the reason or another – are not able to participate in the physical space, which does not mean that they would have withdrawn themselves from the neighborhood or would just sit alone at home not having "real" social networks. Many of them know a lot of neighbors, but are home-based people, who via the Facebook group can take more interest in their immediate surroundings, and who use the Internet to contact neighbors without physical intrusion. This can lead to a rise in "neighboring" (Wellman 2001) among those who otherwise would socialize among themselves. In "Steep hill", the amount of "community activists" has increased because of the Facebook group as a new neighborhood setting has made community participation more suitable for those for whom community meetings or residents´ associations do not suit. And finally, for those who do not want to socialize at all, the Facebook group offers a convenient environment to be part of the community passively and hear *en passant* what is happening in the neighborhood.

Hence, the virtual community is not an imaginary one because it is actually built on the shared sense of community (see Gruzd et al 2011), and hence increases contact with neighbors and supports weak ties, social control and development of political action potential. The local Facebook group enables and intensifies certain local phenomena, because communicating online is fast and easy, and the number of neighbors that can be reached online is remarkable. This means that, on the one hand, the Facebook group enables rapid collective action, but on the other hand, rumours easily run riot and are difficult to control. However, these have always been the advances and downsides of a public space where people congregate to discuss the neighborhood matters.