

## **International Conference:**

### **DIGITAL COMMUNITIES: SOCIAL PROXIMITY FROM A SPATIAL DISTANCE**

#### **Call for Abstracts**

**Time:** 18.-19.07.2024 (conference days) / 31.03.24 (deadline for the submission of abstracts)

**Location:** Kiel University, Germany

#### **Organized by:**

- *Centre for Sociological Theory* (<https://www.st.uni-kiel.de/en>), Prof. Dr. Robert Seyfert
- in cooperation with the *Ferdinand Tönnies Society* and the *Section of Sociological Theory* at the German Sociological Association (DGS).

#### **Conference overview:**

In 1887, the Kiel sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies published *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, one of the central classics of sociology. Since then, community and society have become some of the most influential and productive sociological concepts. However, the treatment of the two terms within social science research is quite different. While the concept of society has established itself as a central analytical concept, the concept of community tends to be confronted with affirmative references and normative criticism from the outset. This privileging of the concept of society can also be found in sociological studies on digital transformation. Sociological research is dominated by studies on the digital society (Baecker 2018; Helbing 2014; Nassehi 2020). In contrast, studies on the digital community, especially in sociological diagnoses of contemporary life, are only marginal in nature or have so far only been scattered without a systematic theoretical context. The concept of the digital community is assumed rather than explicated, such as in the discussion about a supposed social polarisation through social media (Bruns 2019). Based on this realisation, the conference at Kiel University will explore the potential of the concept of community in the context of digital transformation. Three different levels of analysis will be distinguished: 1) digital community as new forms of social coexistence; 2) the role of digital commons as a concept for exploring the scalability of digital communities; and 3) the instrumentalisation of digital community, e.g. in currently discussed forms of community capitalism.

#### *1.) Digital communities: new forms of coexistence*

Sociological studies tend to view communities as evolutionary remnants and backward social formations. In sociological research, the idea of an evolutionary differentiation of modern societies tends to go hand in hand with a repression of the communal. Modern society here

refers to life in post-traditional societies (Giddens 1994), i.e., to the disintegration of communality and the decreasing importance of communities that require physical presence. In parallel and contrary to this discourse on modernity, however, the emergence of new forms of communities, post-traditional communities in modern societies, has been pointed out in recent decades (Hitzler et al. 2008; Maffesoli 2000). Modern societies do not simply abstract and formalise traditional forms of social relationships, but rather develop completely new forms, e.g., forms of community networks and associations based on socio-technical or mediated relationships (Hepp et al. 2022; Knorr Cetina 2007; Latour 2006). With regard to the emergence of the internet, for example, some scholars consider the facilitation of new online communities as a new field of social experimentation (F. Turner 2008). On the basis of this diagnosis – the return of the communal and the increasing importance of socio-technical and socio-technical and socio-digital relationships – the question for the conference discussion is whether the current discussion about an emerging digital society should be supplemented by an analysis of digital communities.

Indeed, since the end of the 1990s, fragmentary attempts to update the concept of community have emerged in the context of digital transformation, e.g., in the concept of virtual communities (Brint 2001). Virtual communities are understood as social aggregates that emerge from more or less repeated communication and give rise to social relationships in digital space (Rheingold 1993). In this context, the connection between virtuality and communality is an analytical challenge insofar as the concept of community inherently presupposes a bodily co-presence. In contrast, virtual communities are always also world communities mediated by digital technologies. In addition to the physical distance, another difference to the classic concept of community developed by Tönnies (Tönnies 2019) is the voluntary and fleeting nature of virtual communities. Due to the absence of physical interactions and the optional nature, these forms of community have been labelled thin communities (Delanty 2010; B. Turner 2001).

Digital communities then form the conceptual counter-term to the digital society of which they are a constitutive part (according to one of the theses to be examined at this conference). Just as for digital societies, it can be assumed that digital communities are characterised by fragmentation and heterogeneity (Hepp et al. 2022, p. 42f.). Community types can be distinguished, ranging from heterogeneous collaborations and individual self-presentation in social media to ethical connections in neo-communities (Reckwitz 2017). They also appear in various affective shades, e.g., as digital "positive cultures" (Reckwitz 2017), i.e., as what Tönnies described as social "relations of mutual affirmation" (Tönnies 2019, p. 124). However,

they also emerge as digital negative cultures that are characterised by a particular degree of controversy (shit storms, hate speech, etc.). These can also be described as "reactive communities" (Deleuze 1979, p. 30), whose structural consistency is primarily based on demarcations and reactions to statements made by other communities (Robinson 2022).

The conference aims to examine how the concept of digital community can be analysed systematically and with regard to affective and cultural belonging in the field of tension between physical co-presence and absence. Both the potentials and the dangers of digital communality will be discussed: from democratic and emancipatory forms of digital communality - algorithmic solidarity (Yu et al. 2022) - to racist and discriminatory neo-communities (Robinson 2022).

Community-based forms of coexistence within digital societies have also been discussed in recent years under the heading of digital commons.

## *2.) Digital commons and the scalability of digital communities*

Digital commons are one of the most central and prominent forms of digital communities. It is a form of communality typical of the digital space that cannot be analytically classified as either a state or market-based form of organisation. Its sociological relevance arises from the fact that it is a form of communality that has achieved societal relevance. Digital commons such as Wikipedia are examples that illustrate the fundamental scalability of communal forms of organisation in the digital space. In addition, more recent approaches in particular claim not to think of digital commons exclusively as isolated individual communities organised in micro-structures. Instead, the practice of commoning underlying the commons is conceived as a fundamental structuring paradigm of future societies and questions emerge that are in close dialogue with the described field of tension between community and society (Helfrich and Bollier 2020).

Although at first glance digital technologies appear to be a basis for enabling transpersonal relationships (relationships between specific individuals and a general other) and thus for scalable commons, two central problem areas arise here. Firstly, there is a certain category of commons that is particularly suitable for transpersonal mediation in the form of digital commons. These are unscarce digital goods in the form of knowledge commons whose reproduction costs tend towards zero and whose use is non-rivalrous: In other words, where use by one person does not diminish the benefit to someone else. If, on the other hand, we turn to the traditional commons described by Ostrom (Ostrom 2010), for example, it becomes clear that interpersonal, i.e., direct relationships between specific people are still of central

importance here, which again results in limitations in the transfer to digital communities. Commoning thus also initially appears to come up against the *limits of the community* (Plessner 2019). On the other hand, with regard to the attempt to generalise commoning into a communal principle of action, it can be said that this also leads to a one-sidedness. While some view communities as evolutionary remnants and intend to dissolve them in the direction of society, commonism relies entirely on horizontal collectives that are intended to produce a future commons community (conceived as a network) in emergent bottom-up processes (Sutterlütti and Meretz 2018).

The conference will explore these open questions and lines of conflict and, among other things, look at the extent to which the horizontality of collectives could be usefully complemented by a verticality of society and vice versa. What areas of tension and possibilities become visible when one leaves this binary perspective, which is quite powerful in sociology? What role do the potentials of digital mediation play as an element of such a dissolution of the dichotomy of society vs. community?

### 3.) *Community capitalism and the Instrumentalization of digital communities*

While some researchers would like to elevate commoning and thus also the principle of (radical) voluntarism to a social emancipation paradigm, other researchers warn against such an absolutisation of community. In response to current crises of legitimacy, "digital capitalism" (Staab 2021) has already successfully promoted the instrumentalisation of community, creating forms of double exploitation that target vulnerability and connectedness as a resource. This can be clearly seen in the area of care, where the new care policy model of the 'caring community' is now intended to close gaps in response to the thinning out of the state care sector. The strategic use of digital community by large 'community capitalism' corporations (Dyk and Haubner 2021), such as Meta, AirBnB or platforms like Yelp, can also be observed. It is an integral part of the business concept of so-called recommendation service providers that the users of the corresponding platform develop a sense of community and, as a result, leave more reviews and comments on the corresponding restaurants, bars, museums, etc. A hasty abandonment of the seemingly 'cold' anonymity of (state) social structures in favour of the self-organised 'warmth' of voluntary communities seems naive from such a perspective. For while the one offers protection for those beyond the community precisely because of its 'cool' indifference, the other runs the risk of underpinning already advanced processes of precarisation and thus also insecurity as a means of control. The tech euphoria of recent decades is now countered by a much more sceptical perspective, which critically discusses the formation of

economic monopolies, the privatisation of the internet and the influence of big tech companies (Muldoon 2022). Politically, this is expressed on the one hand in the increasing regulation of digital business models, infrastructures and platforms. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in addressing political mobilisation and new negotiation conflicts that locate the digital community in a genuinely democratic and self-determined setting (Tarnoff 2022). In this area of tension, however, it remains to be seen to what extent a concept of digital community can also offer political potential or whether we are observing new forms of its instrumentalisation.

### *Aims of the conference*

The conference aims to discuss the potentials and limitations of the concept of the digital community outlined above. In what ways can Ferdinand Tönnies' concept of community be updated in the direction of digital communities? The conference should also serve to systematically bring together the research on digital communities that has so far only existed in rudimentary and scattered form. The aim is (1.) to develop a conceptual toolkit along the three levels of analysis (new forms of living together, digital commons, community capitalism). Beyond these conceptual questions (which are orientated towards Tönnies theorizing), the discussion of concrete cases will also address the question of which (2.) methods can be used to investigate these new forms of digital sociality. This can be linked to various methodological discussions, which include both qualitative (e.g. digital ethnography) and quantitative methodological innovations (e.g. big data analysis). At the same time, these discussions should also take place with a contemporary analytical interest, namely based on the question of which concrete phenomena of digital communality have emerged through the digital transformation process. Which empirical research can be identified in this field, which is still lacking and which represent particularly promising fields and topics for future research projects?

The conference language is English. The aim is to publish the conference papers in English in a special issue or an anthology.

It is possible to apply for travel grants. For further information, please contact the organizers.

**Send abstracts of no more than two pages by 31.03.2024 to [kwanka@soziologie.uni-kiel.de](mailto:kwanka@soziologie.uni-kiel.de)**