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Strong-Tie Social Connections Versus Weak-Tie Social Connections

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Political Implications

The Streisand effect matters politically to the extent that incumbent powers, governments, corporations, and famous individuals have less latitude to prevent public criticism through prior constraint, censorship, or lawsuits. It shows that previous instruments of controlling information are outmoded. Over the long term, it may prove more valuable to simply ignore criticism, given the problem of information overload. Similarly, some could flood the public with countervailing messages to cause confusion. Or, powers could seek changes to the law to allow for more secrecy around attempts at suppression, thereby solving the paradox of the Streisand effect.

William Lafi Youmans
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See Also: Berkman Center; Demand Progress; Morozov Principle; Social Media and Freedom of Information Act; United States; Wikipedia; WikiLeaks.

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Strong-Tie Social Connections Versus Weak-Tie Social Connections

Discussions regarding the strength of social ties relate to social capital theory. As Robert Putnam describes it, social capital theory suggests that social networks have value at the micro

(individual), meso (community), and macro (societal) levels. An individual's social network is comprised of multiple, multiplex social ties of varying strengths. Strong ties exist among individuals connected within densely knit, homogeneous networks such as those involving kin and close friends. Weak ties exist among individuals connected within sparse, heterogeneous networks such as those involving acquaintances.

Strong and weak ties, according to Mark Granovetter, are both important because they connect individuals to valuable resources (e.g., information or opportunities). The utility of strong and weak ties varies, however, as a function of the particular situational context in which it is utilized. The different utility of strong and weak has been widely debated as a result of the implications of tie strength for a wide variety of social and psychological outcomes, such as psychological well being, social capital and cohesion, job opportunities and social mobility, and political and civic engagement. This debate has been amplified by the emergence and influence of new technology, especially social media.

Strong Versus Weak Ties

As Granovetter posits, the strength of any tie is a function of the frequency and duration of interaction, level of emotional intensity and intimacy, and the reciprocal services found within the tie. On a continuum, strong ties involve more frequent interaction, emotional intensity and intimacy, and feelings of reciprocity. Strong ties are often homophilous in nature. That is, they form among individuals who share similar cultural, demographic, or attitudinal characteristics. According to Granovetter, the stronger the tie, the more homophilous the tie. This relationship results in a densely knit, exclusive social network where those connected via strong ties also share other friends—friendship circles tend to overlap.

Weak ties exist on the opposite end of the continuum. Weak ties involve less frequent interaction, lower levels of emotional intensity and intimacy, and lower feelings of reciprocity. Moreover weak ties are less homophilous than strong ties. That is, they form among individuals who share varied cultural, demographic, or attitudinal characteristics. Consequently, weak ties represent a relatively heterogeneous, sparsely knit social

network. This relationship results in a sparsely knit, inclusive social network where those connected via weak ties rarely share other friends—friendship circles tend to remain distinct.

The Strength of Strong Ties

Historical comparisons of strong and weak ties have typically concluded strong ties connect individuals to be more beneficial social and psychological resources than weak ties. Their “bonding” function has been especially heralded. That is, strong ties strengthen interpersonal relationships, resulting in increased feelings of reciprocity and trust. This cultivates feelings of social solidarity and overall social cohesion. From this perspective, strong ties reflect Ferdinand Tönnie’s conceptualization of *Gemeinschaft*—a geographically bound community characterized by a strong sense of togetherness and moral obligation. This generates greater motivation to provide assistance to strong ties during times of need. For example, it is often easier to convince family and friends to help one move across town than it is to convince an acquaintance to help.

Because of their distinct characteristics also strong ties can possess certain negative aspects. As Putnam suggests, strong ties can result in antisocial outcomes such as sectarianism, ethnocentrism, and corruption. They can also cultivate exclusive identities and a narrow sense of self. Granovetter also suggests that although strong ties breed local cohesion, they do so at the expense of the exchange of opportunities and information with diverse others. Their insular and exclusionary nature, therefore, contributes to social isolation and the overall fragmentation of society.

The Strength of Weak Ties

Weak ties can also be utilized to connect individuals to valuable resources. Granovetter is a strong advocate for the “strength of weak ties,” suggesting that they serve an important “bridging” function. That is, weak ties foster connections across cliques or subgroups, opening paths for the rapid and efficient exchange of opportunities and information across social distance. Granovetter suggests that certain weak ties represent “local bridges”—the most efficient links between social groups because they minimize the

amount of time, energy, and potential for message distortion. Weak ties connect heterogeneous individuals to valuable resources unavailable within the densely knit, exclusionary structure of one’s close ties. And while all weak ties are not necessarily bridges, strong ties, by definition, cannot serve a bridging function. Such interaction and sharing across heterogeneous weak ties can therefore be viewed as contributing to social integration and cohesion.

Historical and contemporary critiques of weak ties originate from the belief that they lack the feelings of reciprocity and trust characteristic of strong ties. From this perspective, weak ties mirror Tönnie’s conceptualization of *Gesellschaft*—a community comprised of fluid, contractual, and instrumental relationships based on individual self-interest—and cultivates individualism and feelings of social alienation.

The Changing Nature of Social Ties

Concerns about the balance of strong to weak ties within individuals’ social networks have existed since the Industrial Revolution. These concerns originated as a result of urbanization, improvements to transportation and communication networks and technology, and the emergence of consumer culture, among other factors. As Barry Wellman has documented, these changes have initiated a social shift from what he terms “neighborhood-based communities” to “person-to-person” communities. Geographically bound, densely knit communities of strong ties have not been replaced, but are rather supplemented by “far-flung, loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit and fragmentary” communities comprised of self-selected strong and weak ties. Individuals actively create communities of kin, neighbors, friends, coworkers, and various other acquaintances who share interests.

The emergence of “person-to-person” communities has been met with some trepidation. Critics fear that these communities of “limited liability” lack the same sense of reciprocity and trust present among strong ties. They fear consequences such as diminished face-to-face interaction, increased feelings of alienation, lower levels of social cohesion, and diminished life satisfaction. Yet, far from signaling a definitive shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, Wellman argues that new

forms of community coexist with and supplement pre-existing modes, much like strong and weak ties coexist and supplement one another.

Tie Strength and Social Media

Initial analyses of the effect of social media on tie strength echoed concerns previously raised. Critics bemoaned the geographically dispersed, anonymous, and voluntary nature of social ties predicated on shared interests. The integration of social media into daily life only amplified concerns regarding diminished opportunities for face-to-face interaction. The technological features of social media (e.g., enabling both synchronous and asynchronous interaction) also raised concerns regarding its ability to convey emotion and cultivate feelings of reciprocity and trust. Essentially, critiques concluded that ties created and maintained online via social media were less supportive and beneficial than those created and maintained offline.

Current thinking, however, presents a more balanced view. Studies of social media, specifically social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, conclude that SNSs support sociability and quality social ties in a similar fashion to face-to-face and geographically based social interactions. Such findings emerge from the fact that SNSs are more often used for tie maintenance, rather than creation. That is, individuals rely on SNSs to maintain existing offline ties, rather than creating connections with anonymous, online others. Often, online interaction fosters offline interaction, such as when friends coordinate face-to-face meetings via social media. SNS “friends” are therefore more likely to include family members, close friends, coworkers, and old high school friends than individuals who share some interest, but had not met offline prior to “friending” one another. Caroline Haythornthwaite has posited that many SNS-based ties may not actually exist without SNSs. These “latent ties”—ties that remain meaningful but suffer from a lack of frequent interaction—can actually be strengthened as a result of social media-based interaction. That is, interaction via social media holds the potential to improve tie strength by converting latent ties into weak ties and weak ties into strong(er) ties.

Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky’s debate regarding the role of social media and tie strength

in contemporary political activism reflects these divergent perspectives. Gladwell argues that social media are a weak-tie phenomenon capable of increasing participation in social causes by facilitating collaboration, coordination, and the expression of ideas. However, it does so by decreasing the level of financial or personal risk involved in participation. According to Gladwell, high-risk activism is a strong-tie phenomenon, and therefore is absent in social media activism.

Shirky argues that social media is integral in high-risk activism, irrespective of the strength of ties present within a network. As he argues, social media strategies connect committed social actors and create new strategies and bonds that facilitate social change. Specifically, social media increase access to information and the ability to respond to information on a massive and rapid scale, which helps actors coordinate and demand social change. Shirky acknowledges that superficial social media activism exists, but concludes based on anecdotal evidence from recent social movements that social media represents a vital tool capable of strengthening civil society and the public sphere in the long term.

Implications of Tie Strength

In the absence of empirical evidence, the Gladwell and Shirky debate remains unresolved, but illustrates that the composition of social networks and the integration of social media into their maintenance and functioning has numerous implications for political and civic life. As Putnam proposes, for a democracy to properly function social capital must be managed to maximize the positive consequences while minimizing the negative consequences. This logic holds, regardless of whether democratic discourse and functions occur offline or online.

Tie strength, for instance, influences the likelihood and nature of political discussion and civic deliberation. It is more likely to occur among close ties, but discourse may be limited to topics relevant and/or acceptable within the local community. Close ties may also exert undue social pressure to conform one’s thinking to the group norm, or to adopt more extreme views than under other circumstances. Weak ties play an opposite role in this process. Such discourse may occur less among weak ties, but more diverse perspectives

and inclusive worldviews can result instead in partisanship, polarization, and political bickering.

Active political discussion and civic deliberation contributes to social cohesion and the formulation of a local identity and political and civic participation. This may manifest itself as a commitment to a community, or through involvement in community organizations. The rise of “person-to-person” communities complicates this relationship, because increased connections to weak ties may shift one’s primary local identity and engagement from geographically bound communities to geographically dispersed communities.

Strong ties, especially those that are geographically proximal and benefit from frequent interaction, may be more easily mobilized to achieve collective goals than geographically dispersed weak ties. However, when social networks are comprised of too many strong ties, it becomes less effective at mobilizing individuals outside of the close ties to their cause. Hence, it becomes necessary to mobilize both strong and weak ties to achieve desired individual and communal ends within and across communities.

Conclusion

Current thinking concludes that tie strength is not indicative of more or less beneficial social ties. Both are capable of promoting political and civic participation because they help individuals gain relevant information, create meaningful interpersonal relationships, and coordinate to achieve individual and collective goals. But it is only through the combined resources made accessible via both strong and weak ties, complete with their ability to provide bonding and bridging social capital, that individuals, communities, and society at large gain the resources needed to fully and efficiently participate in a democratic society. Social media supplements, rather than detract from, this process.

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See Also: Evolution of Social Media; Facebook; Network Influentials; Social Capital; Social Networking Websites.

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StumbleUpon

StumbleUpon calls itself “a discovery engine that finds and recommends Web content to its users.” In fact, it is a Web search engine that allow users to discover and rate Web pages, Facebook posts, Twitter updates, photos, videos, and all other Web content that is personalized to their tastes and interests using peer-sourcing and social-networking principles. To monitor a users’ browsing, toolbar versions of the service are available for all major browsers and mobile operating systems. Founded in 2001, StumbleUpon had 1 million users by December 2002. In 2012, the Web service claimed 25 million registered users.

Technology and Derivatives

Web 2.0, the current phase of the World Wide Web and online applications, is characterized by interactive and dynamic content. Web 3.0 is assumed to comprise the following opportunities: a hybrid, semantic, and intelligent Web made possible by the convergence of several new technologies, which will make data and content more usable and accessible. When the World Wide Web changed from 1.0 to 2.0 to 3.0, the user changed, respectively, from a viewer, to a producer/prosumer,