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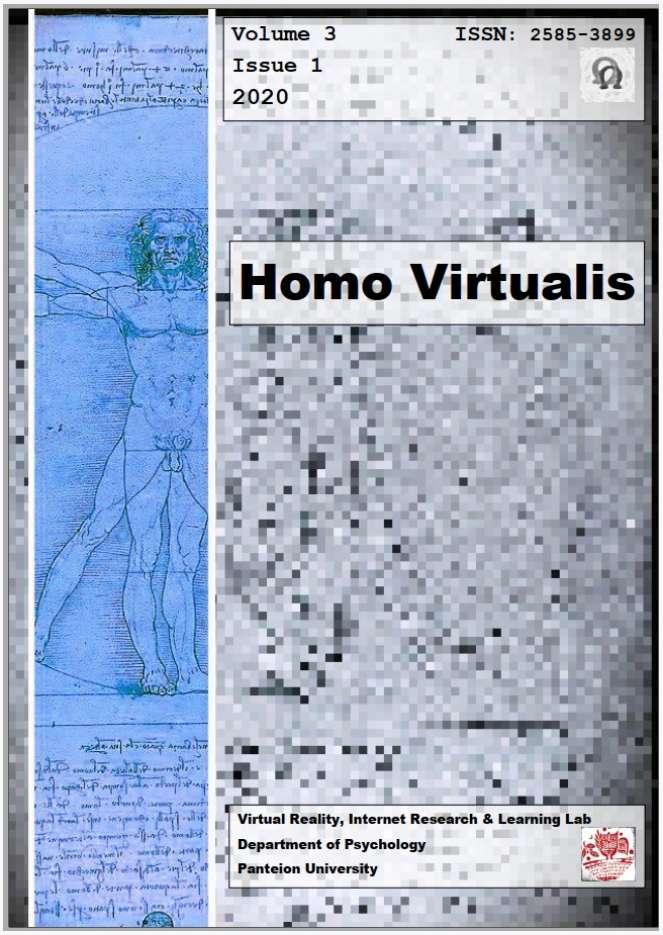


# Hybrid neighborhoods: From sandlots to social media

*Dimitris Karras, Maria Koletsi, Georgios Vagias*

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# Hybrid neighborhoods: From sandlots to social media

**Dimitris Karras**[1], **Maria Koletsi**[2] **& Georgios Ch. Vagias**[3]

**Abstract:** The rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) along with the mass urbanization phenomenon have led to dramatic changes in the ways people create social bonds, form and understand communities and act collectively towards common goals. One important change is that locality and distance is no longer perceived as a key prerequisite for the development of social bonds. Local communities, traditionally based on social grouping by physical proximity, have been seriously affected by technological media (social media and applications). Socio-psychological research shows that the major impact of technology-based communication is the transformation of social bonds between members of local communities and the social capital they accumulate. Within this framework, the research project "GEITONIA" has a dual scope. On a theoretical level, to shed more light on the different ways and degrees local communities use social media and applications in everyday life. On an empirical level, to examine if and in what ways a local social medium mobile application, developed for neighborhoods, can help the understanding of the sense of community and re-strengthen the social cohesion among its members. The article is an attempt to provide a quick glance on the key concepts and theoretical background on which the research project is based.

**Keywords:** *hybrid neighborhoods, local social media, virtual communities, social bonding*

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## The debate on physical distance

**D**espite current massive changes, research (Pattison & Robins, 2002; Goldenberg & Levy, 2009) indicates that we still perceive the value of physical proximity and emphasize on the fundamental and timeless contribution to develop and maintain local communities. This theoretical debate can be reflected and simplified in the contrast of two research titles. Cairncross (1997) supported the role of physical proximity as an influential factor, in her research titled "The death of distance"**.** On the other hand, Goldenberg and Levy (2009) argued for the exact opposite in their research "Distance is not dead".

Social research, mainly in the US and Europe, has turned its scope to fields as the role of physical proximity in human relations, the development and outspread of local social media and the perspective of shaping new forms of neighborhoods in an era where social relations are more and more determined by technological evolution. In the same direction, a critical research challenge, is if the development and expansion of local social media can support the strengthening of social bonds, among the members of local communities.

## From sandlots to social media

People and communities shape relationships by sharing public spaces for common activities and social interaction as well as by developing ties of bonding and belonging. A *sandlot* ("alana" in Greek language) is an open unstructured area, usually used for social gathering and social activities, like sport events, among the youngster members of a neighborhood or a community (Bowers & Green, 2013).

A *community* is defined as social groups formation, the members of which share common characteristics: values, beliefs, goals. Social bonding and belonging are empirical factors that affect communitarian life. In some cases, the connecting factor of community members is a shared physical space, in other cases the connecting factor is the quality of social relations or the interactivity of both (Gusfield, 1975; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Riger & Lavrakas, 1981). Thus, from the traditional communities that required the physical contact of people, humanity has been developed, through transformation of traditional types of social organization, into new ones – online or virtual communities, intermediated by information and communication technologies (Rheingold, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As an indication of the above, Wikipedia is a typical example which, at the current time, has created a geographically dispersed and multicultural community sharing information and knowledge and involving more than 30 million people (Brailas, Koskinas, Dafermos, & Alexias, 2015; Wikipedia Community, 2019).

This transition, from local to global, couldn't have left unaffected the local communities that are formed within or between neighborhoods. Putnam (2000), in his study "Bowling Alone" on American community makes a thorough attempt to measure the effects of this transformation, in terms of social capital, in the period

between 1950 and the end of the 20th century. Apart from physical capital, social capital, according to Putnam, evolves in different dimensions through formal or informal social networking, interactivity and engagement, in an era where internet was still on its infancy. Social networks, social norms and social trust facilitate coordination and cooperation for a common benefit. Measuring social capital is related to the levels of trust, the perceived reciprocity and the extent of participation in civil society organizations. On the other hand, theoretical considerations (Kazienko & Musial, 2006), observe that social capital in the era of online social networks, expands to a more dynamic and evolving concept, as communities and social groups invest in interpersonal relations or share information and knowledge in cyberspace. To this direction, a sandlot in an Athenian neighborhood could be evolved into a virtual group within a social medium like Facebook. To what degree and under which socio-psychological conditions and content, the members of a sharing proximal space will continue to interact or expand their local social circle, both online and offline, is an interesting question to be examined.

## Neighborhood definition complexity

At this point, it would be useful to discuss the definition of neighborhood as it plays a vital role on social capital theories and community development research. What do we really define as "neighborhood"? The answer is that it is very difficult to give a clear, precise, stable and common definition, despite the thorough research conducted over many years by social scientists. Neighborhood, as a micro-social ecosystem, combines physical and social capital within clear or invisible geographical boundaries. Organization of space and time, cultural and social dynamics play a key role to the evolution of different neighborhood environments and their transformation and identification through years.

Aber and Nieto (as cited in Nicotera, 2003, p.58) report that "despite nearly a hundred years of scholarly interest in neighborhoods, the question of what precisely constitutes a neighborhood remains unresolved and largely unexamined". Nicotera (2007) acknowledges that neighborhood is perceived and operationalized by residents through many different ways as they experience their common environment and place. Therefore, a more interdisciplinary approach in social research is necessary in order to understand the different and multiple neighborhood dynamics. Galster (2001) argues that "[u]rban social scientists have treated 'neighborhood' in much the same way as courts of law have treated pornography: as a term that is hard to define precisely, but everyone knows it when they see it". According to Galster (2001; 2019), the neighborhood presence depends, apart from other spatially based attributes, on social interactivity and bonding (sentiments). Therefore, it functions not as geographical reference but as externality space. Talen (2018), points out the ambiguity on neighborhood definition suggesting closer focus on neighborhood size for better understanding.

## Neighborhoods and communities on the virtual space

In the literature review, neighborhood is associated with community existence and local linkages of bonding and belonging. In the physical world the concepts of neighborhood and community are characterized by geographic locality. A community can be identified and studied within the geographical territory of neighborhood, even though community's existence does not, necessary requires the organizational form of neighborhood and vice versa (Glynn, 1986). Community, is a fundamental social organization with historical presence and evolution. Individuals and social groups organize their life in communitarian ways, incited by the need to address problems, explore solutions and achieve common goals, based on similarities. These similarities can be found on cultural trends and attributes as national identity, language, religion, tradition, socio-economic status and other. Anderson (2006) concluded that community understanding and participation, with a special emphasis on communities with national orientation, is a product of socio-cognitive processes. The study on nationalism, (Anderson, 2006), proposes a distinction between the physical location and the imaginary formation of community. The sense of bonding and belonging is not obligatory depended on the degree of knowledge community's members have about each other. Within a community's organizational ecosystem, feelings of bonding and belonging are also a virtual experience for its members (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). Community is able to exist online and independently from its local territory, as a real imaginary status having a shared content upon communal life, values and beliefs. Community's virtuality becomes better understood by the emergence of online communities. But still, community, as a primordial nucleus of social organization, is under study. Especially because it has as a bilateral dynamic the formation of physically and virtually connections, in the era of information and communication technologies (Govers & Go, 2009; Gray, 2000; Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011; Ray, 2017).

Scholars (Volker, Flap, & Lindenberg, 2006) observe that "The condition for the degree of community that is realized among interacting people are the opportunity for doing things together, the ease with which this can happen, and the motivation to do things together", (2006, p. 100). Local resources management, direct or indirect participation, expression of pluralization and synergetic actions, produce a sense of well-being able to enhance symbiosis in a short and long-term period. Related to the neighborhood (Volker et al., 2006) "Community is local to the degree to which the realization of well-being goals takes place in the neighborhood" (2006, p. 101).

Even though there are several definitions about neighborhood (Guo & Bhat, 2007; Melvin, 1985), the term can be perceived as a local social structure of contextual validity. Within neighborhoods, community bonding and belonging produce interdependences creating, progressively, a secure organizational environment, locally oriented, for the communal survival and progress. A neighborhood can evolve in rural, suburban or urban areas. Their structure differentiates with regard to the

formal and informal local organization of life (Guo & Bhat, 2007), carried out by residents and local entities, the presence of infrastructures, open spaces for sociability through communal projects and the investment of time for their fulfillment. Gorski (as cited by Weston, 2018) explains that "The neighbourhood is not simply the sum of the microchoices of the residents, but is a real macrostructure that emerges from the practices, products, and positions which constitute it (Gorski, 2013)" (Weston, 2018, p. 38). Moreover, Melvin (1985) identifies the importance for the study of the historical dimensions of neighborhood and Sharp & Warner (2018) observe that the perception of social cohesion, by neighborhood's residents, can affect residential mobility.

Having as a reference point the above research, "GEITONIA" project (**G**rowing and **E**nabling **I**nformation **T**echnologies for **O**nline **N**eighborhoods: **I**mplications and **A**pplications) tries to address some important questions related to community, neighborhood, virtual space and presence: a) the relationship between community and neighborhood in an era of information and communication technologies, b) community strength or weakness through the use of a local social medium, and c) the degree of engagement for residents in a local social medium co-created by them. Crow and Allen (1994) give a characteristic answer suggesting that a neighborhood can be perceived without the existence of a community and that a community can be also be perceived outside the geographical boundaries of a neighborhood. Such hyperlocal social networks are virtual communities, communities operating on cyberspace (internet, mobile environments) and, in some cases, are both present in offline and online place(s).

Over the last years, a number of local social networking applications have been developed in many countries around the world, most of them with commercial character. A local social networking application has the same features as a social medium but it is focused on users living in the same area. Among others, *Nextdoor* stands out (Masden et al, 2014), having more than 200.000 recorded neighborhoods online and is growing as a leading application in the market.

In Greece, the need for local communities to be expressed on the virtual level is satisfied mainly through Facebook groups and fora and there seems to be no thought for a complete media to serve that purpose.

To this direction the contribution of the current ongoing study is to broaden the scientific knowledge of the concept and value of the neighborhood in Greece, to identify the role that online social networks can play in the development of local communities and to develop a networking tool that will work towards the direction of the emergence of "hybrid" neighborhoods. The term "hybrid neighborhood" could be used here to define the community that is developed and maintained both in the physical space of a neighborhood and in a virtual level, through the usage of online tools, as local social media, online fora etc.

## GEITONIA local social medium

The research project "GEITONIA" focuses mainly on the following problematic: whether the new information and communication technologies developed according to the needs, expectations, values and demands of local community members and specialized in the social and geographical space of neighborhood, can reinforce the social interaction and cooperation between residents.

Alongside, and on a much more practical level, a central aim of research project "GEITONIA" is the design and development of such a local social medium application (supported in a mobile phone environment) which will be freely available for pilot usage by the residents of a defined area in Attica Prefecture, for a defined period of time. The uniqueness of this application, besides its noncommercial character, is that all the specifications are taking into account the needs and preferences of residents. These preferences are reported and recorded through questionnaires and interviews with them and analyzed offering fruitful grassroots information for the conceptualization and operationalization of neighborhood in an era of technological evolution. Representations of neighborhood in terms of time, space, social relations and collective needs and expectations, create a unique mosaic of informational guidelines for the organization of a neighborhood social medium. To this direction, the application would give its users the ability to create their online neighborhoods, the opportunity to meet their neighbors (if they haven't yet), to communicate about all issues that matter in their local community, to share information and organize common actions.

This virtual ecosystem, designed for neighborhoods, should be able to provide an inclusive terrain with different levels of privacy, and technological robustness. In order to become also an inclusive platform, it must ensure equal freedom of expression, information exchange and knowledge sharing, support of social interactivity for community problem identification and, if applicable, suggestions on problem solving.

Furthermore, the most important aspect, of the application development, is to provide community's members with an online mapping system (see also neighborhood detection algorithm model, Zhang, Noulas, Scellato, & Mascolo, 2013). This field is mandatory in order for the individuals to have the opportunity to select, by themselves, the "boundaries" of their neighborhood. The online representation of neighborhoods will give useful insights on the similar or different ways individuals and social groups understand and experience the neighborhood effect in the physical environment.

## Discussion

Current and previous research in the field underlines the importance for a more holistic scientific approach to be conducted concerning the physical and virtual

neighborhood environment, the cultural factors and the social capital accumulated with the mediation of available technological resources. The development of communities and neighborhoods differ in the USA and Europe. The organization of life, use of technology, local sub-cultural dynamics and urban design, may produce internal differentiations, beyond the already known. These factors, could have a multiple interrelation with nationality, religion, socio-demographic data, levels of digital divide and the detailed use of information and communication technologies in everyday life (Lynham & Neary, 2018; Ruggeri, Harvey, & Bosselmann, 2018).

To this direction neighborhood life, supported and organized by technological networking, is interesting to be examined for the reconsideration and redefinition in terms of content and context. More specifically is interested to be examined for the alternative ways people choose to interact with their neighbors, engage to social practices and emotionally invest in local social relationships. For this reason, the development of a local social medium, such as "GEITONIA", having as a starting point a geographical territory and expanding to cyberspace, invites residents to participate in a community of practice and cooperate on the most primary level of social symbiosis, the neighborhood level.

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