

Book review: "Networked: The New Social Operating System, by Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman MIT Press. 2012"

Jen Schradie

▶ **To cite this version:**

Jen Schradie. Book review: "Networked: The New Social Operating System, by Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman MIT Press. 2012". Social Forces, 2014, 94 (3), pp.e89-e89. 10.1093/sf/sou075 . hal-03823028

HAL Id: hal-03823028

https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03823028

Submitted on 20 Oct 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Book Review

Networked: The New Social Operating System

By Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman
MIT Press. 2012. 358 pages. $29.95 hardcover, $17.95 paperback.

Reviewer: Jen Schradie, *UC Berkeley*

Sociologists have been researching digital technology and society over the past two decades, yet our discipline has yet to fully grasp its theoretical significance. Therefore, Rainie and Wellman's book, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, is a welcome addition to a broader dialogue on the role of the Internet and mobile technologies in social life. Their central argument is that digital technology is both situated in and shapes a new "networked individualism."

Rather than households, workplaces, or civic or religious groups organizing society today, the authors contend that the individual is the "primary unit of connectivity." This networked individual interacts with a loosely connected, diverse, and broad community of weak ties. According to Rainie and Wellman, we are in an "era of free agents and the spirit of personal agency."

With a combination of descriptive statistics, personal anecdotes, and existing scholarship, the authors describe networked individualism in everyday life. For instance, with "networked relationships," Rainie and Wellman explain how "personal networks have expanded, become more complex, and speeded up" (146). With "networked families," traditional and predefined roles have dissolved, so family members no longer act as a monolithic household. Families need to spend more time and effort to communicate with one another in this networked era of less face time, yet gadgets enable them to connect more and "bridge barriers of time and space" (170). The authors also explain how the nature of work has shifted in sync with the digital era and globalization, so now employees do less "atom work" and more "bit work" that is more creative, flexible, and autonomous. In what the authors describe as less hierarchical and less bureaucratic workplaces, networked individualism can thrive. According to RW, employees are able to work anywhere with mobile technology, bridging the public and private spheres.

The authors stress, though, that networked individualism is "not isolating or isolated," nor is it "the World According to Me—it is not a world of autonomous and increasingly isolated individualists. Rather it is the World According to the *Connected* Me" (19). Throughout the book, the authors weave a thread

© The Author 2014. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.

Social Forces 94(3) e89
doi: 10.1093/sf/sou075
Advance Access publication on 16 July 2014

of challenges to Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2001) thesis, as well as Turkle's *Alone Together* (2012) argument, for failing to provide systematic evidence that the current era, and technology in particular, has unraveled the social fabric of society. Rainie and Wellman suggest the opposite: people use the Internet to "support, supplement and enhance face-to-face interaction" (166), and the very nature of social media is, well, social.

Rather than taking a technological deterministic approach, in which the Internet has been the only cause of this shift to networked individualism, the authors instead outline how society has changed because of a "Triple Revolution." Rainie and Wellman argue that the past century witnessed a trend toward networked individualism well before the advent of the Internet or Mobile Revolution, in what they call a Social Network Revolution. This transformation, they outline, occurred because of and as a result of the "widespread connectivity" of transportation, globalization, and media, as well as "weaker group boundaries" and "increased personal autonomy" at home and work. Rainie and Wellman suggest that people still identified themselves as part of groups until the Internet enabled them to see "themselves as actors in social networks."

This personalized and individualized network revolution, the authors contend, was accelerated and expanded by Internet and mobile technologies. The authors explain how the Internet, in particular, has shaped networked content production and networked information. As individuals become digital creators, they can express themselves, collaborate, and connect with dispersed ties. The resulting information, then, is remixed and reproduced, yet consumed based on personal choice. In this section of the book, Rainie and Wellman lay out more detailed downsides and unintended consequences of networked information: TMI (too much information), privacy, and surveillance. At the same time, the authors suggest that the Internet has become normalized into people's information practices, blurring distinctions between online and offline spaces.

The third revolution is mobile, which RW describe as a dramatic shift from place-to-place to person-to-person communication so that people can connect with their network(s) at will. They point out that, just like Simmel's (1976) description of how the Industrial Revolution created the concept of strict timetables for the first time from trains to factories, so has the mobile revolution shifted us away from this rigid sense of time to one that is more flowing once again. At the same time, "distance is not dead, it is just being renegotiated" (108).

In the process of making their networked individualism argument, the authors weave significant junctures and leaders in information and communication technology history, as well as provide a useful overview of digital trends, which make this book ideal for undergraduate sociology courses on the meaning and history of technology and society.

The arguments in *Networked* also open the door for further investigation.

First, Rainie and Wellman use one of the most comprehensive American survey data sets, the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. However, to better defend their networked individualism argument, more in-depth analysis would be useful, such as regression analyses or more qualitative research, to understand and contextualize any mechanisms of networked

individualism. For instance, the authors make a number of associations between social-media use and political or social activities, but reverse causation could be at play.

In addition, Rainie and Wellman argue that the social-network revolution predates the Internet, yet more precision as to the timing of the mechanisms of these transitions is necessary, as the authors offer both preindustrial village life as well as 20th-century postindustrial living as a comparison to a networked operating system.

This new theory of social relations also raises the question of where *Networked* fits into broader sociological theories. The authors chose not to use the term "society" throughout most of the book, as they wrote, "families and working arrangements are better understood these days as networks…yet 'society' is such a convenient shorthand that we all continue to use the term. The trick is not to take [society]—or other manifestations of groupiness—too seriously, but to use the network perspective to delve into the actual clusters, cleavages and connections in societies" (41). In other words, Rainie and Wellman suggest not only that we need to conduct more network analyses, but also that networks are, indeed, a theory of society above and beyond social structures. This networked individualism logic focuses our attention on the individual, and in the process obscures the role of the economy, state, politics, and any other structural forces, including society. *Networked*, therefore, is a concept that needs deeper debate and analysis. For instance, how might the co-current rise of neoliberalism and digital technology shape RW's individualism argument? In turn, the authors contend that a network divide, rather than a digital divide, defines the current era. They also suggest that, rather than being bound by race, ethnicity, or gender categories, networked individuals have had an increasing amount of personal freedom. However, in light of the extensive literature on the persistence of digital inequalities, this new network framing distracts from pervasive social stratification.

Still, *Networked* is a significant book for sociology, as it pushes the boundaries of sociological theory and raises foundational questions for future research.

References

Putnam, Robert D. 2001. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Simmel, Georg.1976. *The Metropolis and Mental Life The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press.

Turkle, Sherry. 2012. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.