Note: This is a pre-publication final draft. For the published version, please see: Rafalow, Matthew H. (2019). "Technically Together: Reconstructing Community in a Networked World." Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews (48)2: 159-161.

Technically Together: Reconstructing Community in a Networked World, by **Taylor Dotson**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017. 328 pp. \$34.00. ISBN: 9780262036382.

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Social scientists know that technologies, new or old, do not inherently constitute community. A town hall is, after all, just a building; its walls take on meaning when people breathe social life through its doors, establish a shared purpose, and form relationships with one another. But so far scholars have not well evaluated existing theories of how digital technologies do, or do not, aid in the development of community. What's missing is a reconciliation of contemporary manifestations of social interaction with classic sociological theories of community.

Taylor Dotson tackles this challenge head-on, bolstered by a staunch critique of Barry Wellman's theory of networked individualism, or the idea that digital technologies have transformed community life to sets of relationships are less local, more global, and centered on interests rather than local necessity. "Try getting a Facebook status update to help move a couch or stay for dinner," Dotson huffs, in an early hook. *Technically Together* assembles a wealth of "technology" cases – not just digital devices or internet environs, but woodstoves, bars, cooperative business, and zoning structures – and applies a framework for evaluating whether each abets, or depresses, core tenets of community. Dotson denaturalizes assumptions of not only what counts as technologies (any structure, really) but also injects a perspective as to which are technologies of community.

Dotson's narrative hinges on an evaluative framework he proposes early on, arguing that social belonging is central to community and various structures that shape community's potential can help or hurt its development. He labels structures as "thick" or "thin," respectively, and uses this distinction as a means to thoughtfully unpack existing assumptions of networked individualism. Technologies that promote systematic integration of social ties, like the ability to see friends at work and church and also while volunteering: thick. Technologies that drive social networks with greater anonymity, mobility, and individualism: thin. Thick is better for community, thin is not.

Theoretical scalpel in hand, Dotson applies this framework to a massive list of structures that shape community. He first tackles suburban sprawl and urbanity, arguing that features like gated communities and shopping malls are thin/barriers to community, whereas shared public spaces, like sidewalks amenable to block parties, or building collectives, or local means for conflict resolution are thick/enablers of community. Online forums and virtual communities are thin, whereas communal bars, religious centers, or even quality seating around transit stations are thick. The internet is not a great enabler of community, he argues, because web forums, chat rooms, and social network sites almost never systematically integrate social ties and facilitate political or economic communities.

Technically Together cleverly intermingles an evaluative focus on classic structures discussed by community scholars (like residential zoning, community policing and religious centers) with trendy digital tools (cell phones, chat rooms) as a means to refocus our gaze to the

broader community ecology. But Dotson eventually devotes fuller focus in later chapters to a critique of digital technologies, translating elements of Sherry Turkle's psychological claims that digital technologies drive social isolation and fear of intimacy to broader community effects. Telephones, personal electronic, mobile digital devices, and conversations while watching TV or online video are all thin sets of tools or practices that pose barriers to community. They don't help teach and promote skills of civil conversation, he argues. Even air conditioners take away from community by encouraging people to retreat to the insides of their homes.

What to do? Dotson makes recommendations that span a wide gamut, including an answer to air conditioners: encourage more "public cooling technologies," like front porches, that promote collective sociality. More rights over the collective governance of recreation spaces and zoning. Public transit options that don't have middle-man monetization models. Using mesh networks, or a peer-to-peer internet service, to give communities more control over their internet. Collective discouragement of digital retreats, and perhaps even a forced turn-off of cell phones or internet on certain days of the week.

Dotson's analytic approach – labeling technologies as thick or thin, enabling of community or disabling – provides means to challenge techno-utopic notions that the digital landscape shapes community in ways that are both inherently innovative and inevitable. There's a magic to *Technically Together* in that it reads as though Robert Putnam and Steve Jobs are having a debate that sociologists could only dream of witnessing. But the line Dotson draws between thick and thin technologies of community may be too bright. He ultimately characterizes "the internet" (a worldwide network used by over 4 billion people) as a thin structure. This is, to say the least, an eyebrow-raise among media scholars who are producing literature with nuance Dotson would appreciate: digitally-mediated environments exhibit a variety of thick and thin community structures just like the other non-digital environments that appear in this book. His evaluative constructs strike a familiar tone to that of Marshall McLuhan's writing on "hot" and "cool" media, a well-known (and hotly debated) fixture in media studies that has been criticized for being overly reductive. Some of the policy recommendations made in the book would also benefit from this nuance. For example, while mesh networks would detach from restraints of internet service providers, how do we know they would inherently be helpful to community? Would not structures develop within social settings across these networks that could help or hurt community in particular ways? At the risk of empiricism, I am not convinced that *Technically Together* would read the same if Dotson had spent time in some of the digital contexts he evaluates, interviewing participants in chat rooms or systematically observing the ebb and flow of various online forums.

I am also skeptical that thick and thin technologies could not potentially be mutually constitutive of community. In passing, Dotson remarks that there may be certain instances where fleeing online could be a helpful resource to some individuals, like LGBT youth in a repressive local community. Perhaps, in this case, anonymous online environments can help marginalized youth safely discover other viewpoints and develop the courage to thoughtfully challenge their local networks. This is a missed opportunity to reflect on how thick and thin structures could actually help promote community – a level of nuance that *Technically Together* could benefit from so as to avoid naturalizing a viewpoint on digital technology and community practice that Dotson set out to demystify at the start. This matters especially because there are more and more convincing empirical examples of digitally-mediated communications that translate to meaningful interactions. If social media use greatly increased the odds of attending Egypt's Tahrir Square protests to unite against an oppressive political regime (2002), should we be so

quick as to claim that a Facebook update could not lead to either help moving a couch or a dinner guest?

This book assembles a needed framework to begin unpacking how technologies, digital or otherwise, can shape community. Media and communications scholars may find it lacking in reference to contemporary studies on the topic. But sociologists who are not regularly embedded in digital environments will find *Technically Together* to be a helpful primer in that it provides a language to consider how community is, or is not supported, by structures that exist in the twenty-first century.

References

Tufekci, Zeynep, and Christopher Wilson. 2012. "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square." *Journal of Communication* 62: 363-379.