

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS COMMUNITY

BY KEITH HAMPTON

Dominique Browning and Eric Klinenberg extol the virtues of living alone. In so doing, Klinenberg correctly points out that living alone is only common in cultures where prosperity makes this arrangement economically feasible. However, this has not slowed arguments that social media is increasingly a part of these same prosperous societies, and that this new tool is responsible for a growing trend of social isolation and loss of intimacy.

Neither living alone nor using social media is socially isolating. In 2011, I was lead author of an article in *Information, Communication & Society* that found, based on a representative survey of 2,500 Americans, that regardless of whether the participants were married or single, those who used social media had more close confidants.

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A recent follow-up study, “Social Networking Sites and Our Lives” (Pew Research Center), found that the average user of a social networking site had more close ties than and was half as likely to be socially isolated as the average American. Additionally, my co-authors and I, in another article published in *New Media & Society*, found not only that social media users knew people from a greater variety of backgrounds, but also that much of this diversity was a result of people using these technologies who simultaneously spent an impressive amount of time socializing outside of the house.

A number of studies, including my own and those of Matthew Brashears (a sociologist at Cornell), have found that Americans have fewer intimate relationships today than 20 years ago. However, a loss of close friends does not mean a loss of support. Because of cellphones and social media, those we depend on are more accessible today than at any point since we lived in small, village-like settlements.

Social media has made every relationship persistent and pervasive. We no longer lose social ties over our lives; we have Facebook friends forever. The constant feed of status updates and digital photos from our online social circles is the modern front porch. This is why, in “Social Networking Sites and Our Lives,” there was a clear trend for those who used these technologies to receive more social support than other people.

The data backs it up. There is little evidence that social media is responsible for a trend of isolation, or a loss of intimacy and social support.

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