Weaving family connections on and offline: The turn to networked individualism

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Abstract

Networked individualism examines the societal shift from group-based interaction in a single, local, and often solidary family and community to multiple, sparsely-knit networks. Networked individuals have partial membership in multiple networks and rely less on permanent memberships in settled groups. They meet their social and emotional needs by tapping into these sparsely knit, often diverse networks rather than relying on tight connections with a relatively small number of family and friends. The shift to networked individualism helps us to understand connectivity across the lifespan, including the role of family connections in the lives of the older adults in East York we report on here. To maintain and enhance contact with family and friends, North American older adults (aged 65+) are flocking to information and communication technologies (ICTs), facilitated by its widespread availability, improved ease of use, portable access, and the need to connect with family, friends, and information that are no longer locally available. Our research uses interviews with 41 older adults to understand how these residents of the East York section of Toronto, Canada utilize ICTs. We discuss how the use of ICTs enhances these older adults' ability to be at the center of their personal communities, navigate the networks for routine contact as well as the provision of social support, and shape the kind of life experience they wish to have and enjoy. They use ICTs more to maintain existing ties than to forge new ones. Most integrate email into their communication repertoire with family, with some also using Facebook social media and Skype video chats. Contradicting fears that ICTs are inadequate for meaningful contact with kin, these older adults consider ICTs to provide real, and not just token, support. They particularly appreciate how ICTs enhance their ability to connect with younger generations as well as with their own generation. As family networks have spread out geographically, ICTs help relationships to persist over distance. ICTs also lessen communication barriers due to physical limitations and facilitate perceived social connectedness for older adults living alone. Yet, while ICTs aid in keeping in touch, older adults still prefer spending quality time in person with their network members.

Keywords: ICTs, older adults, seniors, networked individualism, social media, digital media, digital divide.