Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, **Networked: The New Social Operating System**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, 358 pp., $29.95 (hardcover).

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At first glance, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman's **Networked—The New Social Operating System** follows a growing academic trend: that of the application of network theories to different levels of social experience, if not to society at large. The three revolutions to which the authors refer—the rise of social networking, the consolidation of the Internet, the always-on connectivity of mobile devices—contribute to shape a new social order, that is, an "operating system" combining technical possibilities and everyday practices.
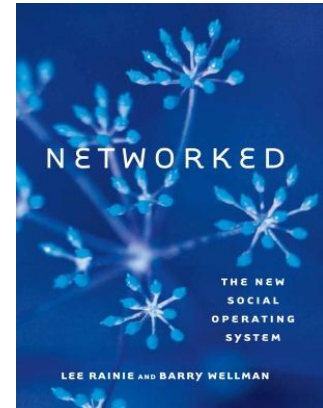
Rainie and Wellman provide an interesting overview of how sociability has been changing in the past decades due not only to the spread of the Web as such but also to the evolution of wireless connection and the establishment of innovative interaction patterns in digital environments. Instead of being viewed as a nonhistorical phenomenon, Lovink (2011) observes, the Web should be investigated in its actual development. In this sense, *Networked* gives us an interesting account of the multiplicity of factors converging to shape new social configurations.

Rather than focusing on methodology, this review examines Rainie and Wellman's theories and discusses some implications of "networked individualism," a central concept proposed by Wellman in the last years. The story of Peter and Trudy at the beginning of the book, which narrates how the two used their networking skills to mobilize acquaintances to deal with a medical emergency, is, in this sense, revelatory. Peter and Trudy's ability to "rebuild their world" is actually not surprising, considering their high networking competence and long experience within digital communities. However, to what extent is the successful experience of a few skilled users representative of the general proficiency of Internet users?

The problem is related to a widely discussed question—that of social capital. According to the authors, there is a clear statistical correlation: Heavy Internet users have a more extended social network than do light users, so it is possible to assume that the Web enhances people's sociability. This assumption, however, raises further questions: Are digital relationships influenced by preexisting social capital, or is it the Web that broadens users' networks? None of the results reported by Hampton, Sessions, Her, and Rainie in their 2009 survey should be "interpreted as explanations of cause and effect." Although their results show that the use of technology is strongly associated with "larger social networks," people adopting new technologies often come from the upper classes, and their social capital is generally high, even before accessing the Web.

Rainie and Wellman's assumption is here somehow ambiguous. On the one hand, they observe that only a small segment of Internet users have "virtual friends whom they have only met online" and recognize that preexisting social capital does play a role in shaping digital experiences. On the other hand, they suggest a virtuous relationship between Internet use and socialization: "Social networks are large and diversified thanks to the way people use technology," because digital devices "help people manage a larger" set of ties (p. 13). But what kind of people and which part of society are we talking about?

To investigate this issue, we can start with the authors' following statement:

On average . . . the size of people's discussion networks . . . is 12 percent larger among mobile phone users, 9 percent larger for individuals who share photos online, and 9 percent bigger for those who use instant messaging. (p. 119)

As we know, this correlation between the extension of offline and online networks reveals the grounded nature of Web consumption, which is far from being a disembedded experience; so much so that it is possible to talk about the end of the virtual. Rainie and Wellman suggest that there is nothing virtual in the way we use the Web: Immersive experiences are limited to online games and to a few other cases, such as Second Life, whose majority of users are, not surprisingly, inactive. The future of "networked individualism" will therefore be marked by the incorporation of virtual reality into everyday life, with the two becoming fully integrated into a kind of generalized augmented reality. This is what "social operating system" refers to—a sociotechnical pattern defining a new layer of reality, whose meaning is neither determined by individual interpretations nor is it the outcome of digital technologies.

Seen from a different perspective, however, the correlation between Internet use and the strengthening of social ties is not that revealing, because the use of social network services—here considered as an indicator of Internet consumption—is a socialization practice in itself. The Web is, however, used for many other purposes that have nothing to do with socialization: information, pornography, or, in the case of Facebook, to peek at someone's profile or update a page, without interaction. What about these common practices? Are they associated with enhanced social capital? From this perspective, the following assertion by the authors does not appear surprising: "People who email the great majority of their core ties at least weekly are also in phone contact with more core ties than non-emailers (p. 129)."

Practices such as e-mailing or sharing pictures are likely to be associated with a greater number of offline relationships and can therefore be taken more as an indicator of sociability than of Web usage. Internet use is indeed a multilayered experience combining different patterns of consumption and of mixing community-oriented and solipsistic behaviours. There is no evidence that the social uses of the Web are more frequent than are individual uses, such as watching videos, looking for gossip and pornography, and so forth.

I would suggest that to fully investigate the transformations driven by technological innovation, it may be useful to measure the relation between offline social experiences and individual uses of the Web. We are indeed witnessing the development of social and individual uses of the Web, which are sometimes

conflicting. What we need to do is make a neat distinction between the two, which is what Lull (1980) did with TV consumption when he distinguished between relational and structural uses. Unlike TV consumption, which is not just a solitary activity but is also embedded in everyday practices, Web surfing is not always a social experience; it can also involve a number of individual, even narcissistic, practices.

To better analyze this phenomenon, we can examine the Pew study on *Social Isolation and New Technology* (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009), whose results are at the basis of *Networked*. The survey, in short, reveals that social networking is strictly associated with "Internet use in general." If we look at the regression analysis, however, beside the general category ("Internet users"), we find four clusters of practices: (a) social networks, (b) "blogging," (c) "sharing digital photos," and (d) "instant messaging." In other words, the specific uses of the Web taken into account belong to the subcategory of social uses. Although this choice may be legitimate from a methodological point of view, the theoretical explanations have probably been affected by individual uses of the Net not being considered relevant.

So, is there a flaw in Rainie and Wellman's theory? To find it out, we need to better clarify the concept of "social capital." The correlation between the social uses of the Web and the extension of offline networks is not, as noted, so surprising. However, surveys showing a correlation between social capital and Internet consumption do not clarify whether this is the result of expert networking practices performed by skilled users or of a more generalized increase in social relations produced by the Web. "The more Internet contact, the more in-person contact," Rainie and Wellman write (p. 127), thus stating a kind of tautology: People using the Web for socialization purposes stay in touch with a larger number of friends.

Now, we should consider the most impressive data: "Heavy Internet users" show "the biggest increase in their number of friends," having "23 percent more active network members than non-users" (p. 128). These figures should be considered with some caution, because the meaning of the word "friend" has changed in the age of Facebook and must now be understood in a broader sense. But the figures are, as the authors note, indicative of a trend: The Web is not an obstacle to socialization and does not lead people to isolation, as some critical authors suggest.

Rainie and Wellman's analysis, however, raises two fundamental questions. The first concerns statistics: Is the increase in the number of friends a consequence of the Web, or is it a more obvious effect of a particular use of the Web, that is, social networking? The second question relates to the distribution of social ties among users: As already noted, heavy users show the largest connectivity, reflecting a major trend in the evolution of the Web, with the "rich getting richer" and a few hyper-connected nodes collecting the most part of the social ties. So, what is the Web doing, offering new opportunities for socialization or enhancing social distinctions?

A thorough examination of these results seems to suggest a different hypothesis. Skilled users, that is, early adopters of broadband connection (as in Horrigan and Rainie's 2002 study) or active users of social networks (as in the previously noted case of Peter and Trudy) are usually characterized by higher social capital. An active use of the Web, then, leads to a further enhancement of social capital: The more people become engaged in networking practices, the more they expand their social environment. Social

capital is therefore both the precondition for understanding networking practices and the outcome of such practices, creating a "rich-gets-richer" cascading effect. In consideration of this virtuous circle, are we witnessing the rise of a decentralized system, or is there rather a new hierarchy reflecting the broader trend toward concentration—or "power law"—that many surveys have been pointing out?

Generally speaking, the "networked individualism" theory relies on three assumptions that I would like now to address. The first, as previously noted, is that the social uses of the Web are the most relevant, whereas individual uses are marginal or not significant. The second assumption is that the social dimension of Web use is always a positive tendency regardless of some critical aspects related to the structural imbalance in the distribution of resources, the growing social divide, and ultimately power. The third assumption is that all individuals are likely to creatively perform networking practices and build their environment, whereas little attention is paid to the pressures exerted by social groups and their conformist effects. These three assumptions are far from being demonstrated; therefore, they appear—we could say—to be "ideological."

To better explain this point, consider this passage:

> Many of the most technologically connected workers have jobs built around creative effort rather standardized paper pushing. This thrusts more autonomy and authority onto individual workers. Flexible arrangements with bosses, peers and subordinates encourage independent thinking and perhaps even creativity. (pp. 15–16)

According to the authors, people today experience more creative and self-directed working conditions, and their workplace is open to wide "networks of collaboration"—an assumption, however, that millions of digital natives would probably question, being exposed as they have been to the disadvantageous working conditions of late capitalism. For Rainie and Wellman, on the contrary, the change brought about by the Web is to be mostly intended as a positive evolution: "the digitalization of the news thus offers the potential for richer coverage and therefore deeper understanding" (p. 226) at the point that the Americans finally became "more purposeful in their use of the Internet, more serious in their pursuits" (pp. 72–73). On "deeper understanding," "more serious" pursuits: To what degree are these assumptions accurate descriptions? The ideological character of this argumentation lies in the unquestioned idea that the evolution of our society is prompted by networks, and networks are made of individuals who, through this activity, improve both their living conditions and those of society at large. In such theory—and this is the point that I wish to emphasize—there is no room for conflict, and a social theory that does not take conflict into consideration can certainly be proposed, but it needs to be clearly supported by evidence, which does not seem to be the case here.

The networked operating system, Rainie and Wellman write, requires people to develop "skills for handling problems." People "can no longer passively let the village take care of them," so "they must actively network" and "forge alliances," and so forth (p. 9). The actors of social change, according to the authors, are the individuals and the networks connecting them: this idea is plausible but needs to be substantiated by fuller evidence. This might come as a surprising question in such a context, but are we sure that networks are the protagonists of contemporary history?

The networked nature of social behavior is a topic that goes beyond the scope of this review. What I want to highlight here is, however, the difference between "network" as a sociological pattern, as it emerges from quantitative analysis, and "network" as a real social force. The latter is a widely accepted idea, but relies on an assumption—the six degrees of separation—that is totally unreliable: Milgram's experiments were indeed affected by so many methodological flaws that it is difficult to understand their widespread success.

There is actually no evidence that we live in a small world and that networks act as a decisive player in our society. In his famous *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Simmel (1903/1976)—whom Wellman and Rainie consider as the founder of network theories—talks perhaps about "connected cities" (p. 43), but he actually refers to the effects of monetary economy, which has little to do with the individual's creativity.

As long as we focus on networks, we can certainly gain an understanding of everyday practices, but before viewing networks as the main organization principles of our societies, we should probably wait for more solid theories to be proposed that take power issues into due consideration. The shift toward network analysis can actually pose a very serious risk: that of forgetting the importance of the main social operating system of modern history—social class.

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