

Ohio Networks: Roots in Community, Culture and Communication

Adam C. Earnheardt

Digital and mechanical networks are defined by their systems of interconnected wires, whereas other networks are defined by their systems of connected computers and devices (e.g., the World Wide Web). In the communication discipline, however, we are deeply invested in the intricacies of more complex human networks as they are defined by groups of people, communities, organizations and work groups, whether exclusively or inclusively linked, to achieve goals. As humans, we are *born* into our first networks (e.g., families). Society forces us into networks (e.g., primary school education), we are indoctrinated by other networks (e.g., religion, politics), and select or are selected by other short-duration, long-duration, and lifelong networks (e.g., friends, clubs, workplace).

In 21st century communication scholarship, researchers have identified the importance of new media networks for their social and cultural contributions (Edwards, Edwards, Wahl, & Myers, 2016; Wood & Smith, 2004), primarily in terms of information gathering, analyzing and sharing as well as initiating, cultivating, and maintaining relationships. However, traditional social and behavioral scientists know that networks are far more expansive and elegant than modern day “social” media would lead one to believe. While the study of networks has become less reliant on physical geography, it is still important to note that Ohio is the nexus of many influential, elaborate, and sprawling networks. As a discipline, communication researchers have only begun to understand the power of digital media access on traditional and emerging social networks. Inspection of the vast Ohio-oriented

Adam C. Earnheardt (Ph.D., Kent State University) is associate professor and chair of the Department of Communication at Youngstown State University. He previously served as executive director and conference coordinator of the Ohio Communication Association.

networks reveals there is much work to do, as evidenced by insufficient scholarship related to these systems.

As an association, the Ohio Communication Association (OCA) is poised to advocate for more research into these networks. This advocacy is only possible because of OCA's strength and endurance as a network of scholars. For decades, OCA has facilitated networking opportunities for scholars interested in communication research, and for professionals teaching and working in communication-related fields. For nearly a century, the State's premier network of communication scholars and educators, the OCA (formerly known as the Ohio Speech Communication Association) has brought together scholars to discuss original research and advancements in the communication discipline at the annual conference (typically in early Fall). Evidence of the strength of the OCA can be found in its longevity in that it is one of the oldest, state-based scholarly associations for the communication discipline. Furthermore, Ohio is one of some 20 states to maintain an active network for communication scholars. Couple this endurance with the contribution of OCA's long-time publication the *Ohio Communication Journal*, and it is easy to appreciate the importance of this network and its many contributions to the discipline.

Some of the discipline's most prolific scholars have at one time or another called Ohio home, which is understandable considering that the state has more than 140 four-year and two-year, private and public, community colleges, universities and regional campuses. Although some of these scholars have left the state, they have extended Ohio's network of communication scholars. They promote exploration of important networks through the prisms of group and organizational communication, and by expanding applications of traditional behavioral and social scientific theories. To be sure, our disciplinary network has borrowed from many established networks in sociology and psychology. Our scholars have applied rules theory, social exchange theory, structuration theory, symbolic convergence theory, systems theory and other sociology- and psychology-based theories to understand the functions of, membership in, and implications for groups and networks. Of course, this theory list is

not meant to be exhaustive, but it does showcase the various avenues of examining Ohio's networks.

Thus, this article is meant to serve as not only a celebration of the networking opportunities afforded to OCA members, but also a call for Ohio's communication scholars to consider exploring some well-known, but rarely examined networks through the prisms of community, culture, and communication.

Community Networks

Community networks are often defined by geography and industry. Most of Ohio's 11.6 million residents live in the major metropolitan areas of Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus, the state capital (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Smaller metro regions include Akron-Canton, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown-Warren. Ohio ranks as the 7th most populated state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The majority of Ohioans identify as Caucasian (83 percent), followed by African American (13 percent), and Hispanic/Latino (4 percent). However, examining the geodemographic data provides only a narrow glimpse of the diverse social networks of Ohio. Cultural and religious groups, workforce and educational institutions, and entertainment and sports connections provide a richer perspective of Ohio's social networks (Earnhardt, 2011a).

The history of Ohio's community-based networks predates immigration and the Westward Expansion. For example, Native American culture is abundant throughout Ohio. Features of Native American communities are found throughout the state and at numerous Indian burial groups, noted by the earth wall enclosures, geometric patterns, and mounds of various shapes and sizes (Woodward & McDonald, 2002). The grounds attract diverse networks of visitors including Native Americans, historians, and anthropologists. For example, the Hopewell Culture National Historical Park is home to some of the oldest burial grounds. The term *hopewell* is used to describe, in part, the network of spiritual beliefs among Native American groups. Beyond Hopewell, there is evidence of ancient burial mound building in Columbus, near the Scioto and Olentangy Rivers, and throughout more rural areas of middle Ohio.

Many social networks have developed around the major cities and regions of the state, based primarily on the leading industries of those areas. Workforce networks centered on the production of rubber were created in Akron, for jet engine production in Cincinnati, for automobile assembly and parts in Cleveland, and for steel in Youngstown. Although Ohio was once a leader in steel and manufacturing, these jobs have declined due to shifts in economic policy and trade regulations (Buss, 1983). Because of this downturn in manufacturing, Northeast Ohio is considered to be part of the *Rust Belt*, the informal term used to describe the line of closed, rusting mills that stretch from Cleveland to Youngstown and beyond. These harsh economic conditions fractured working-class networks, displaced networks of families and friends, and led to the creation of new community networks for the poor and disadvantaged.

Another notable community network that has been in decline for the last half century is farming and agriculture. Somewhat related to the deterioration of manufacturing networks, areas of western and central Ohio are considered part of the *Corn Belt*, a term used to describe the prairie region states and the networks of grain farmers that populate those areas. Declines in these agribusiness and manufacturing networks led to moderate increases in educational networks, primarily in higher education for the unemployed and working-class retraining (Earnhardt, 2011a).

Cultural Networks

Cultural networks are defined by systems of values and beliefs, but also by the arts and other creative endeavors. These networks of expression may focus on the arts, humanities, and other intellectual achievements including dance, literature, music, painting, philosophy, and theater (e.g., live theater, film). Members of cultural networks meet together and with other cultures to refine understandings or appreciations for cultural differences and similarities. Communication scholars, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists have long been interested in the functions of intracultural, intercultural, and

cross-cultural communication for purposes ranging from simple decision-making techniques and outcomes to complex coexistence (Sieck, 2010). Ohio serves as a center for many of these important cultural networks, suitable for investigation. From large-scale cultural events to museums to sporting networks, Ohio provides access to some of the most important and relevant cultural networks in the world.

For example, Ohio is home to many music and cultural festivals that attract networks of fans, enthusiasts, and activists. Not to be confused with a community network, the music festival ComFest, short for Community Festival, is considered one of the largest music and art festivals in the nation. It is first and foremost a cultural event, networking groups of individuals who may never otherwise communicate for the purposes of understanding and celebrating different cultures. “We recognize that there are primary attitudes which divide and oppress people. These attitudes are usually shown by prejudice against people on the basis of age, class, ability, income, race, sex and sexual preference/orientation. *We seek to eliminate these attitudes,*” (ComFest, 2016). Aside from numerous art vendors and musicians, social and political organizations attract like-minded networks to discuss issues and celebrate diversity. One example of this is ComFest’s annual Gay Pride Parade that connects members of the GLBT community. Other notable music and art festivals in Ohio include the annual Bunberry Music Festival (Cincinnati), Columbus Art Festival, Jamboree in the Hills (Morristown), MasterWorks Festival (Cedarville), Nelsonville Music Festival (Nelsonville), and Rock on the Range (Columbus).

Another interesting cultural network centers on the celebration of twins. Each year in Twinsburg, Ohio, over 1,800 sets of twins and other multiples come together from around the world for Twins Day (Earnhardt, 2011a). Started in 1976, the festival celebrates local and extended networks of twins, including identical and fraternal twins of all ages and their families. The festival is considered one of the largest gatherings of multiples in the world. From a social scientific perspective generally, and human communication scholarship interest specifically, Twins Day serves as an important event for gathering data for various communication studies as well as biological, anthropological,

psychology and sociological research (Davis, 2014). Other notable Ohio-based cultural events important for network analyses include the Dublin Irish Festival. Networks of foodies, a term used to describe food enthusiasts, descend on Ohio each summer for the Banana Split Festival (Wilmington), Barnesville Pumpkin Festival, and Sweet Corn Festival (Millersport).

Areas of southern Ohio are known for their membership in the *Bible Belt*, a term used to describe a section of the U.S. in which networks of evangelical Christians, primarily of Protestant faith, dominate cultural, political, and economical structures. Although this region is mostly comprised of southern states, church membership and attendance across southern Ohio is considered strong. Additionally, beyond Ohio's Bible Belt region, the Christian music fan network celebrates at large festivals including Alive (Mineral City) and theFEST (Wickliffe).

Other music fans observe the creation of Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an important milestone in the recognition of their network. Opened in 1995, more than 600,000 fans signed a petition in favor of building the Hall in Cleveland over several other locations, including Los Angeles and New York City. Many music fans and critics recognize former Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed's creation of the term rock and roll in their rationale for locating the Hall on the Lake Erie shores in Ohio. Freed is also credited with coordinating the first rock concert in Cleveland (Fisher, 2009). Fans of the inductees network with each other during visits to the Hall for museum tours, concerts and other events, and through online social networks such as Facebook, which often attract the museum and musical artist enthusiasts (George-Warren, 2011).

Ohio sports draw worldwide networks of fans (Tyus & Earnhardt, 2011). Professional sports franchises in Ohio's three major cities (Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus), amateur, and intercollegiate athletics enjoy expansive fan bases. The Cleveland Cavaliers have broadened their fan network beyond Northeast Ohio through acquisition of players from other countries including Australia, Brazil, Lithuania, and Russia. The online forum RealCavsFans.com boasts over 7,000 members who post

messages and questions about players, trades, rumors, game strategies, and statistics.

Other professional teams, including the Cincinnati Bengals and Cleveland Browns (National Football League; NFL), Cincinnati Reds and Cleveland Indians (Major League Baseball; MLB), Columbus Blue Jackets (National Hockey League), and Columbus Crew (Major League Soccer) garner similar fan networks, particularly in baseball, hockey and soccer due to their ability to sign players from other countries and, by proxy, attract a broader fan network (Earnhardt, 2011b). On the collegiate level, large networks of students and alumni-rooted fans follow the sports teams of their alma maters. Ohio State University football represents the largest of these fan bases, evidenced by the throngs of tailgaters that come together before home games and by the size of the Ohio Stadium, also known as the Horseshoe, that holds over 100,000 spectators (Earnhardt, 2011a).

The Pro Football Hall of Fame, located in Canton, brings together legions of fans to celebrate the accomplishments of the league's more prominent teams, players, coaches, owners, and officials (Earnhardt, 2011c). New members are enshrined in front of fans in early August each year, and the ceremony is typically followed by the Hall of Fame Game, an exhibition game that serves as the unofficial start to the new NFL season.

A Call for Communication Scholar Networks

This article calls on Ohio's communication scholars to do more to understand the complexity of our state-rooted networks. Although there is much to do to fully understand and appreciate the functions of Ohio's networks, OCA scholars are best positioned to conduct these studies because of our vast network of association members, current and past. Thanks, in part, to the Internet and social media, OCA's members are no longer bound by physical geography, allowing for scholars beyond our state to connect with other scholars to examine the influence of Ohio's networks on the world.

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