

## COMMUNITY IN CALIFORNIA

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Every community, or social group, must adapt to the urban environment. In order to survive, each community develops strategies to construct and maintain mutual support systems and safe places. When the community is dispersed throughout an urban area the need for effective channels of communication emerges as an especially critical problem.<sup>1</sup>

Participant observation at a switchboard in San Francisco confirmed that community switchboards succeed in helping groups deal with the centrifugal forces of urban life. Switchboards for feminists, homosexual men, single parents, and hippies link the scattered members of their communities and direct them to shared spaces.

### *Communities and Territory*

In our sprawling cities and mobile society, communities no longer find it necessary to establish a common residential territory. Although traditional ethnic groups with distinct neighborhoods, such as Chinatowns, survive, in the emerging urban social pattern members of a community live in scattered places throughout the city. University professors, artists, and members of radical political groups may share a common outlook but not a common residential area. These dispersed individuals form a community when they develop a feeling of identification with the group, express similar interests and goals, and participate in mutual cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

The loosening pattern of a community's residential territory requires two separate definitions of community. The first and older definition relates a group to a specific

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residential territory, and the second definition emphasizes the common outlook of the group. This dualism in the concept of community is explored by Palm.<sup>3</sup> The second type of dispersed community Melvin Webber has dubbed "community without propinquity."<sup>4</sup> A dispersed community no longer is defined by one piece of home turf but by a flow of communication among its members. The territory shared by a scattered community may consist of a collection of preferred places for social, commercial, and service activities, such as meeting halls, clinics, bars, workshops, specialty shops, and offices. Rallies, newspapers, posters, and switchboards sustain the ties between members and inform them of community spaces.

### *Strategies for Adapting*

Geographers such as Rengert have shown how individuals adapt to a stressful environment.<sup>5</sup> Lee draws on environmental psychology to explore how individuals respond to stress in the physical environment.<sup>6</sup> Buttner points out that such investigations of individual behavior generally ignore the sociological dimension of human life.<sup>7</sup> Although individuals do cope with their physical, economic, and social surroundings alone, their strategies are often mediated by their social groups or community. The community works together to provide human services and to establish safe spaces. Even though individual personality traits may influence the choice of response, the choice usually is affected by values and practices of the group. The individualistic view of humans as single organisms responding to their environment neglects the rich dimension of social interaction.

What strategies do communities adopt to cope with the urban environment? In the traditional ethnic neighborhood community needs are met by a system of face-to-face communication with the local territory. As ethnic communities grow and expand to other parts of the city, newspapers supplement personal contact. Robert Park described how immigrants used the community press to adapt to urban life in America:

One reason why the immigrant peoples read more in America than they do at home is because there is more going on they need to know. There is more novelty and more news. News is a kind of urgent information that men use in making adjustments to a new environment, in changing old habits and in forming new opinions.<sup>8</sup>

When the community is scattered throughout a metropolitan area new communication strategies are required. The vast quantity of information exchanged and the large number of potential social contacts make the city complex. Each social group must sift through these opportunities and select the information and contacts most useful to its own survival. Goldmark describes cities as "information-processing systems."<sup>9</sup> Deutsch suggests that the efficiency of cities be measured by the range of communications contacts they offer, but he also believes that communication overload is a disease of contemporary cities.<sup>10</sup>

Within this web of urban communication the telephone has become the most commonly used device for personal contact.<sup>11</sup> The telephone system is best suited to private conversation between two people. The network defies the friction of distance within the city, because it can instantly connect any two points. Almost everyone has access to a telephone; more than 90 percent of American homes have at least one. When widely separated members of a community seek information the telephone is the most convenient tool.

#### *Development of Switchboards*

Community switchboards emerged in the past few years as an effective means to link dispersed communities. Switchboards evolved from telephone information services called "hot lines." The first hot lines provided specialized information on drugs, sex, or venereal disease. They filled a gap in public services unnoticed by formal institutions. Hot lines have been especially popular with teenagers because this group generally does not have the resources to use public services without the assistance of an

adult. Hot lines fill their needs because the caller can seek information without revealing his or her identity, paying a fee, traveling to an office, or making an appointment.

Hot lines share several basic characteristics: First, they provide information not readily available from public agencies or friends. Second, callers need not reveal their identity. Third, hot lines require little money to operate, and the service is free to users. Finally, the service is as close as the telephone and requires no trips, appointments, or waiting.

Telephone counseling services grew out of the early information hot lines. These switchboards organized to handle suicide prevention, drug problems, child abuse, rape, and abortion counseling. They offer a combination of psychological, legal, and medical services. Again, the vital ingredients in the formula are reliable information, anonymity, low cost, and immediacy.

But these telephone services still do not constitute a true community switchboard. They provide information and counseling to isolated individuals who guard their anonymity. If the switchboard staff is effective in providing complete information, referrals, and advice, the clients may never call again. These services also limit themselves to a specific category of assistance. The hot lines that arose in the 1960's still field questions but do not link communities.

In San Francisco the first community switchboard was labeled the Haight-Ashbury Switchboard. It began to answer a wide range of requests within the "hippie" community of the late 1960's. Although many members of the community lived within the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, few established permanent residences. Households were fluid; some people lived in vans; others floated in and out of San Francisco. Street people with no fixed address became more and more common. Due to the mobility of community members, the Haight-Ashbury Switchboard became a central community service. The Switchboard staff continues to answer requests for housing, jobs, health care,

and legal aid. They advise callers on how to cope with the welfare system, where to join a yoga group, or when concerts are scheduled. Camaraderie took the place of anonymity in the formula for success.

At about the same time the Haight-Ashbury Switchboard became well established two switchboards for homosexual men organized--one in San Francisco and one in the East Bay. The switchboard as a strategy for adapting to the urban environment suited this group because other means of community communication have been limited. Radio advertisements, posters, or city newspaper coverage of events, businesses, or services in the "gay" community have not been acceptable to other social groups. The switchboard is also appropriate because many homosexual men prefer to maintain partial privacy about their identity. The confidentiality of a community switchboard is ideal. Switchboards for homosexual men have been organized in most major American cities, so that gay men who are new in town routinely call the switchboard to find out about bars, baths, housing, and community activities. It is their point of access into the community. Although gays are accepted more openly in San Francisco every year, and gay newspapers, posters, advertisements and radio spots abound, the switchboards still are firmly established as a community service.

One offshoot of the community switchboard is the FM radio station switchboard. When FM stations first blossomed as free-wheeling alternative media, their call-in services coordinated everything from car pools to Thanksgiving dinners for the listeners. More recently, as the stations have become more commercial, their audiences have broadened and they have lost much of their intimate contact with the community.

#### *The Case of the Women's Switchboard*

The feminist community has perhaps the largest potential membership and is the most scattered community in the Bay Area. The San Francisco Women's Switchboard provides cohesion for this

group. A year of participant observation as a staff volunteer and as a caller yielded an inside view of how a switchboard functions. The operation of this switchboard typifies most. It functionally resembles the Haight-Ashbury Switchboard, the two switchboards for gay men, and a nearby women's switchboard in Berkeley. The Women's Switchboard began in 1972. During its first months of operation several women borrowed space in a garrett, installed a telephone, and began a card file of information. Today the Women's Switchboard has two telephones in a small office in the San Francisco Women's Center. The calls are answered by a staff of about forty volunteers. The Women's Switchboard is advertised widely and is available to all women. Callers vary in age, income, and ethnicity. During peak periods staff members may answer as many as ten calls per hour. Up to two thousand calls a month have appeared in the log.

The card files of information lie at the heart of the operation. The main file contains more than 300 listings in categories spanning abortion, adoption, advertising, alcoholism, writers, yoga, youth, and the Y.W.C.A. An analysis of 3,000 calls shows that requests for help in housing and medical care are the most common (Table 1).<sup>12</sup> This fact confirms the belief that the switchboard is a strategy for providing basic community needs. Calls for information on entertainment make up only 3.7 percent of the total.

The ingredients for an effective community switchboard differ slightly from those for a hot line. Low cost and immediacy are crucial for both, but a wide range of community information must be provided. The most striking difference is that community camaraderie replaces the anonymous exchange of information.

### *Measuring Effectiveness*

For social scientists measuring the effectiveness of community switchboards several measures are possible.<sup>13</sup> Some evaluate calls and others examine the information resources.

TABLE 1. Analysis of Calls to the  
San Francisco Women's Switchboard

Information Sought	Percent
Housing	22.5
Medical Care	15.3
Crafts and Skills	11.7
Mental Health	9.6
Special Interest Groups	7.9
Legal Aid	6.1
Rides	4.9
Mothers and Children	4.2
Entertainment	3.7
Other	14.1
Total	100.0 = 3,000

Source: Marcia Settel, *Newsletter*, San Francisco Women's Center, August 1975.

The simplest measure is tabulating the number of people who use the switchboard during a given time period. For the Women's Switchboard the mean number of callers per operating hour is seven. This number has more meaning if it can be compared to the total number of people in the community. However, in dispersed communities population estimates are usually difficult if not impossible to estimate.

A second, more meaningful measure totals the number of people actually helped by a switchboard. This number is usually far less than the number of calls. Sometimes needed information is not available; often a caller is referred to another source. Information about classes, doctors, or apartments may be inaccurate, out-of-date, or inappropriate. At the Women's Switchboard the number of people helped compared with the total number of calls is between 50 and 75 percent.

A third measure emphasizes the number of repeat callers. The repeat callers probably are satisfied with the service and are maintaining ties with the community. Repeat callers make up nearly 50 percent of the calls that are answered at the Women's Switchboard.

Other measures of effectiveness apply to the files of information kept at the switchboard. The most straightforward measure is the total number of listings. At the Women's Switchboard they total over 4,000. Inexperienced staff members may not be able to make full use of all the files, but others may add their personal store of information to supplement the listings. At least twenty items a day are updated.

### *Conclusion*

Community switchboards are a successful strategy for helping social groups adapt to the urban environment. They fulfill two basic functions that allow the communities to maintain their cohesiveness. The first is to supply a network of social contacts for mutual support. The second is to direct callers to shared community spaces throughout the city. These spaces range from coffee houses to free clinics. Like the community members themselves, the community spaces are dispersed and shift frequently. Constant communication is required to notify community members of changes. When communities scatter throughout the city and face-to-face communication diminishes, switchboards can be an effective alternative.

### *NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Parts of this paper were presented at the 1976 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

<sup>2</sup>George A. Theodorson and Achilles G. Theodorson, *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969), pp. 9-11.

<sup>3</sup>Risa Palm, "Factorial Ecology and the Community of Outlook," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 63 (1973), pp. 341-46.

<sup>4</sup>Melvin Webber, "Order in Diversity: Community Without Propinquity," in *Cities and Space*, ed. by Lowden Wingo, Jr. (Baltimore: Resources for the Future, 1963).

<sup>5</sup>George F. Rengert, "Coping with Urban Stress: The Case of School Dropouts in Philadelphia," *Proceedings of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 6 (1974), pp. 120-24.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas H. K. Lee, "The Role of Attitude in Response to Environmental Stress," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 22 (1966), pp. 83-90.

<sup>7</sup>Anne Buttimer, "Social Space and the Planning of Residential Areas," *Environment and Behavior*, Vol. 4 (1972), pp. 285-86.

<sup>8</sup>Morris Janowitz, *The Community Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>Goldmark, Peter C. "Communication and the Community," *Scientific American*, Vol. 227 (1972), p. 145.

<sup>10</sup>Karl W. Deutsch, "On Social Communication and the Metropolis," in *Internal Structure of the City*, ed. by Larry S. Bourne (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>11</sup>Hiroshi Inose, "Communication Networks," *Scientific American*, Vol. 227 (1972), pp. 117-28.

<sup>12</sup>Marcia Settel, "A Day at S. F. Women's Switchboard," *Newsletter*, San Francisco Women's Centers (August 1975), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Robert E. Shelley, "The Development of an Information System of Organizational Resources in San Francisco," Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1972, pp. 9-11.