There are questions about whether the community has been lost now due to modernizations driving trends away from kinship. Many may believe they live in supportive communities but they are the exceptions and that the masses around them are lonely and isolated. More often now, people are involvement in local neighborhood activities. However, community has never been lost, it has just changed throughout the years. There should be no presumption that it is confined to a local area or aggregated in bound groups. Wellman attempts to introduce the paradigm of a social network to replace the traditional community definition.

As the globalization process has made the world flat, access to places in different regions and nations have become more common. As Wellman has shown, networks have changed from the typical ‘social support’ system to a system of resources. Community ties are now narrow, specialized relationships, not broadly supportive ones. Before, one would ask a community for help with a variety of topics but now, since the number of networks has grown per person, they have also become more specialized networks. People are maneuvering in sparsely knit, loosely bounded, frequently changing networks because of the growing complexity of networking. Inside each network, there are personal ties that allow someone to remain in the network. However, a person no longer remains connected with the network as a whole. I can personally see that in my own life, just with my network of friends. Although I have friends in my different networks (Church, ECE, etc), most of my connections are with individuals; I have little affinity to the rest of the community as a whole.

An interesting aspect of community is how the composition changes depending on cultural background. Westerners look to community for emotional and personal support rather than domestic and economic ones. However, other countries may rely on certain members of the community for home-building capabilities or connections into certain strategic institutions. In less materially comfortable parts of the world, Wellman asserts that communities are used beyond just sociability and supportiveness. Even with micro-financing taking off in many third-world countries, the people giving the loans are often a part of the local community, with personal stake, rather than acting as a third party company. The community extends itself into the economic, political, and social realm of survival. Noting the differences, it is only logical for social visualization to concentrate on the activity beyond just being supportive or social.

The history behind how communities have evolved is an interesting part of how social behavior has also changed. Before, I may have asserted that our generation today is more isolated and individualistic than community oriented. However, I suppose we do have communities, but the
The definition has evolved. By gaining complexity, we’ve lost generality. It should be interesting to see if the pendulum ever swings back the other way.

The Strength of Weak Ties by Mark. S. Granovetter

The strength of a tie is determined by the amount of time, emotional intensity, the intimacy, and reciprocal services between two people. Granovetter attempts to assert that information can traverse greater social distance when passed through weak ties rather than strong. He uses a case study done by Kerckhoff, Back, and Miller, involving a Southern textile plant, to support the statement. The earliest to be stricken by the mysterious “insect” were social isolates. The first adopters were marginal, however there became an increasingly likelihood that a person that was socially integrated will be affected as well because of the increase of weak ties. Once they are, the information is propagated rapidly. Granovetter argues that because of this, individuals with many weak ties are the best people to diffuse a “difficult innovation” since most of the ties will be local bridges into different networks.

At first, I regarded the assertion with skepticism. Intuitively, weak ties are regarded as less powerful than strong ties just because of the weaker ability and opportunity to influence the other person. By having that background, I assumed that you would want to use people with stronger ties to pass along information. However, when stronger ties are involved, it is very likely that the people that one has stronger ties with also have strong ties with one another. Therefore, the network is more closed and limited to a clique. It is true that in the network, information may spread rapidly, but the amount of people reached is limited. The point is to penetrate into different networks and the way to do that is by using weaker ties. More weak ties that exist into a network can give a higher probability of penetrating and spreading information into the network.

Applications for this are integrated into the individual and community context. Granovetter used an illustration from the job market to prove a point that weak ties are an important resource for possible mobility opportunities. Long paths were not involved with how respondents got contact information they transmitted and they rarely ever saw the person in nonwork context. Rather, change meetings and mutual friends operated to reactivate ties. On the community level, when there is a call for collaboration between different groups, weak ties are crucial to reach many groups. However, Granovetter can only speculate on this as no hard data was given as evidence.

It’s interesting to see the strength in something traditionally thought of as weak. Also, while reading this, it became no wonder that “networking” and developing contacts rather than deep relationships has become a focus. Since this paper focused a lot on the strengths, there are some drawbacks as well. However, reading this definitely made me want to be more of the person with many weak ties.
Social network analysis has had different phases in development and Freeman highlights the 5 that he believes are important. The phases are defined below:

1. 1930s graphic images were produced by hand
2. 1950s use of standard computational procedures to produce images
3. 1970s computers used to produce machine drawn images automatically
4. 1980s personal computers develop images that could be displayed on monitors and in color.
5. 1990s availability of browsers and the World Wide Web opened up new possibilities for graphic display

For each phase, Freeman illustrated his descriptions of them with examples. It was especially interesting to see visual progression of how visualization of social networks has changed. That in itself is some kind of visual account of a timeline. The standard directed graph depiction of a social network has been engrained in my mind that it was difficult to imagine any other representation. However, this completely challenges the notions I had before of visualizing a network.

The visualizations varied in aspects of color, line strength, node size, symmetry and positioning, and even the representation of the nodes. Included was also a physical apparatus, an actual 3-D model of a social network data. The Target Sociogram focused a lot more on the center and tries to classify the different actors into one of the concentric circles. This sociogram was also constructed as a physical visualization, similar to a target board. It seemed like in the past, much more physical visualization was built and nowadays, it’s hardly something intuitive to do.

As time progressed and computer generated graphics became more of a standard, the visualizations added more standards. Also, visualizations entered the 3rd dimension, adding depth and new levels. Also, animation and movement have been added as another dimension. Also, with the development of programs, graphical data is now not a fixed image. Often, we can zoom in and out and also travel between data points of a model.

It seems that visualizations have also grown in popularity. Freeman predicts that there will be motivation to develop a single program that can integrate storage, retrieval, and visualization of social network data into a single program. There already has been some movement online regarding this. While I was researching resources for Processing, an open source programming language, I came across Open Visualization (OV). You basically store data on the website and select a type of visualization you want and OV will output the graphical image. Also sites like Many Eyes can do the same with inputted data. It seems we may well be on our way to achieving Freeman’s vision.