Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, or Supplement Social Capital?

Social Networks, Participation, and Community Commitment

By Barry Wellman, Anabel Quan Haase, James Witte and Keith Hampton


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1. Debating the Internet’s Effects on Social Capital

How the Internet affects social capital is neither a trivial nor an obscure question. Robert Putnam (Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community, Simon & Schuster, 2000) has documented a long-term decline since the 1960s in American civic involvement. This decline includes the lessened ability of citizens to articulate and organize requests for good government, the movement away from community life, and increased psychological alienation.

Putnam’s evidence encompasses two forms of social capital, which we call

1. Network capital: Relations with friends, neighbors, relatives, and workmates that significantly provide companionship, emotional aid, goods and services, information, and a sense of belonging.

2. Participatory capital: Involvement in politics and voluntary organizations that affords opportunities for people to bond, create joint accomplishments, and aggregate and articulate their demands and desires, a concept enshrined in the American heritage by de Tocqueville.

We add a third item to this discussion and to our analysis:

3. Community commitment: Social capital consists of more than going through the motions of interpersonal interaction and organizational involvement. When people have a strong attitude toward community—have a motivated, responsible sense of belonging—they will mobilize their social capital more willingly and effectively.

What if Putnam is only measuring old forms of community and participation while new forms of communication and organization underneath his radar are connecting people? Some evidence suggests that the observed decline has not led to social isolation but to community becoming embedded in social networks rather than groups and a movement of community relationships from easily observed public spaces to less accessible private homes. If people are tucked away in their homes rather than conversing in cafes, then perhaps they are going online: chatting online one-to-one; exchanging e-mail in duets or small groups; or schmoozing, ranting, and organizing in discussion groups such as listservs or newsgroups.

The rapidly expanding Internet has been a big hope for community creation. Although the debate surrounding the influence of the Internet on social capital has been ongoing, no clear pattern has yet emerged. Until recently, much of the debate took place without much systematic data. Utopians have claimed that the Internet provides new and better ways of communication, whereas dystopians have argued that the Internet takes people away from their communities and families.
As the Internet has infiltrated North American life, analysts have had to move from seeing it as an external world to seeing how it becomes integrated into the complexity of everyday life. We contribute to the debate by asking if the Internet increases, decreases, or supplements social capital. We examine people’s Internet use in the broader context of their face-to-face and telephone communication. We analyze the relationship of their online activities to their interpersonal network capital, their organizational and political participation, and their commitment to community. The evidence for our discussion comes from a large-scale Web survey of visitors to the National Geographic Society Web site in the fall of 1998.

2. Does the Internet INCREASE Social Capital?

Early—and continuing—excitement about the Internet saw it as stimulating positive change in people’s lives by creating new forms of online interaction and enhancing offline relationships. The Internet would restore community by providing a meeting space for people with common interests and overcoming limitations of space and time. Online communities would promote open, democratic discourse, allow for multiple perspectives, and mobilize collective action. Although early accounts focused on the formation of online virtual communities, it has become clear that most relationships formed in cyberspace continue in physical space, leading to new forms of community characterized by a mixture of online and offline interactions. Moreover, online interactions fill communication gaps between face-to-face meetings. The Internet thus enhances the tendency for many ties to be nonlocal, connected by cars, planes, phones, and now computer networks.

Although a developing phenomenon worldwide, nonlocal community is probably most prevalent in North America, where people move frequently and sometimes far away; where family, friends, former neighbors, and workmates are separated by many miles; and where the many immigrants keep contact with friends and relatives in their homelands.

Those who see the Internet as playing an increasingly central role in everyday life would argue that it increases communication offline as well as online. In this view, the Internet not only affords opportunities to contact friends and kin at low cost, it also enhances face-to-face and telephone communication as network members (a) become more aware of each others’ needs and stimulate their relationships through more frequent contact; (b) exchange songs, pictures, and other files; and (c) make online arrangements to meet in person and by telephone. The Internet can also increase organizational involvement by facilitating the flow of information between face-to-face meetings and arranging these meetings themselves. The plethora of information available on the Web and the ease of using search engines and hyperlinks to find groups fitting one’s interests should enable newcomers to find, join, and get involved in kindred organizations. Thus, if the Internet increases social capital, then high Internet use should be accompanied by more offline interpersonal contact, organizational participation, and commitment to community.

3. Does the Internet DECREASE Social Capital?

The second view argues for an inverse relationship, that the Internet is fostering a decline in social capital. The interrelated bases for the argument are that The Internet may be diverting people from true community because online interactions are inherently inferior to face-to-face and even phone interactions. Online ties...
may be less able than offline ties to foster complex friendships, provide intangible resources such as emotional support, and provide tangible material aid. As Robert Putnam once told Barry Wellman (personal e-mail, January 10, 2000), “I think you’re a wild-eyed optimist to think that person-to-person networks are just as good as, if not better than old-fashioned door-to-door (or rather faces-to-faces) networks.”

The Internet may compete for time with other activities in an inelastic 24-hour day. There are discrepant findings about whether online time sinks do or do not pull people away from other interactions inside and outside the household. The Internet can draw people’s attention away from their immediate physical environment because when they are online they pay less attention to their physical and social surroundings. Some researchers see a parallel in the impact of the Internet with the way that television had a similar absorptive effect that reduced social interaction in the home as well as social and political involvement outside it. But broadcast television is not a clear analogue to the socially interactive Internet.

The Internet may be a stressor that depresses and alienates people from interaction. One longitudinal study of “newbies” to the Internet found that as Internet use increases, social contact offline decreases and depression and loneliness increase. Although the Internet enhanced weak online ties, it simultaneously decreased stronger offline ties.

4. Does the Internet SUPPLEMENT Social Capital?

Where the increase and decrease arguments privilege the Internet by seeing it as radically changing how people interact offline, the supplement argument gives this new technology less of a central role in shaping social trends. It presents the Internet as best understood in the context of a person’s overall life. It is integrated into rhythms of daily life, with life online viewed as an extension of offline activities. The Internet provides an additional means of communication to telephone and face-to-face contact, one that can be more convenient and affordable.

The supplement argument suggests that the Internet’s effects on society will be important but evolutionary, like the telephone has been, continuing and intensifying the interpersonal transformation from door-to-door to individualized place-to-place and person-to-person networks. Although face-to-face and telephone contact continue, they are complemented by the Internet’s ease in connecting geographically dispersed people and organizations bonded by shared interests.

The Internet may be more useful for maintaining existing ties than for creating new ones. Nor might the Internet lead to organizational and political participation if users have no interest in such matters. The introduction of sophisticated information and communication systems in the businessworld has not demonstrably created social capital. Thus, if the Internet supplements social capital, then Internet use should supplement offline interpersonal interaction, not affect organizational participation and increase commitment to community. The level of Internet involvement will not be associated with either more or less offline activity.

5. How the Internet May Affect Social Capital

Does the Internet affect social capital in terms of social network contact, organizational and political participation, and community commitment? Our results indicate that Internet use supplements network capital by extending existing levels of face-to-face and telephone contact. This is one of the few situations in the social sciences where a lack of association is meaningful. Heavy Internet users neither use e-mail as a substitute for face-to-face visits and telephone calls nor visit and phone more often. Most Internet contact is with people who live within an hour’s drive. People who live farther apart have less overall contact. Yet, these long-distance ties use the Internet for a higher proportion of their overall contact.

These results suggest that the effects of the Internet on social contact are supplementary, unlike the predictions of either the utopians or dystopians.

The Internet is especially used to maintain ties with friends. Friends usually interact as either two people or two couples, whereas kin and neighbors are likely to be in densely knit social networks. Our findings suggest that the Internet is particularly useful for keeping contact among friends who are socially and geographically dispersed. Yet distance still matters: Communication is lower with distant than nearby friends.

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our results show that Internet use is not a uniform activity. People engage in social and asocial activities when online. On one hand, the Internet is used as a tool for solitary activities that keep people from engaging with their kin and in their communities. On the other hand, not all online activities compete with offline interactions. People might read newspapers or search for information regardless of whether they do this online or offline. The time people save because they shop online may be spent in offline socializing with family and friends. Internet use increases participatory capital. The more people are on the Internet and the more they are involved in online organizational and political activity, the more they are involved in offline organizational and political activity. The limitations of our data do not allow us to make strong inferences about how Internet activity influences political participation. Although future research will have to specify the causal sequence, we suspect a positive feedback effect. Rather than distinct online and offline spheres, people are using whatever means are appropriate and available at the moment to participate in organizations and politics. People already participating offline will use the Internet to augment and extend their participation. People already participating online will get more involved in person with organizations and politics.

Taken together, our results suggest that the Internet is increasing interpersonal connectivity and organizational involvement.

When people use the Internet to communicate and coordinate with friends, relatives, and organizations, then it is a tool for building and maintaining social capital.

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When the Internet engages people primarily in asocial activities, then even more than television, its immersiveness can turn people away from community, organizational and political involvement, and domestic life. By contrast, when people use the Internet to communicate and coordinate with friends, relatives, and organizations—near and far—then it is a tool for building and maintaining social capital. Our research has shown that there are no single Internet effects. In this era of spatially dispersed community, the Internet fills needs for additional interperson contact that supplement in-person and telephone contact. At a time of declining organizational participation, the Internet provides tools for those already involved to increase their participation. Yet, at a time when networked individualism reduces group social cohesion, extensive involvement with the Internet apparently exposes participants to situations that weaken their sense of community online. This suggests that future examination of Internet use might identify what affects the quality as well as the quantity of online social interaction—for weak and strong ties.
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