

Social Capital and the News Media

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Many writers have long emphasized the importance of civic society and voluntary associations as vital to the lifeblood of democracy. Interest in this perennial topic has been revived by Putnam's theory of social capital claiming that rich and dense associational networks facilitate the underlying conditions of interpersonal trust, tolerance and cooperation, providing the social foundations for a vibrant democracy.

Groups and new social movements have traditionally been regarded as agencies for expressing and aggregating interests. But what is most striking about modern theories of civic society is the claim that typical face-to-face deliberative activities and horizontal collaboration within voluntary associations far removed from the political sphere, such as sports clubs, agricultural cooperatives, or philanthropic groups, promote interpersonal trust, fostering the capacity to work together in future, creating the bonds of social life that are the basis for civil society and democracy. Organized groups not only achieve certain instrumental goals, it is claimed, in the process of doing so they also create the conditions for further collaboration, or social capital. For Putnam, social capital is defined as "*connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.*"¹ Most importantly, this is therefore understood as both a *structural* phenomenon (social networks) and a *cultural* phenomenon (social norms).

But what is the relationship between social capital and the news media? In particular, in *Bowling Alone*, Putnam presents the most extensive battery of evidence that civic society in general, and social capital in particular, has suffered substantial erosion in the postwar years in America. Putnam considers multiple causes that may have contributed towards this development, such as the pressures of time and money. But it is changes in technology and the media, particularly the rise of television entertainment as America's main source of leisure activity, that Putnam fingers as the major culprit responsible for the erosion of social connectedness and civic disengagement in the United States, with the effects most profound among the younger generation². In America during the 1950s, he argues, leisure gradually moved from the collective experience characteristic of the movie theatre, urban street summer stoop, local diner, and town hall meeting to become privatized by the flickering light of the television tube. The privatization of leisure has led, he suggests, to a more deep-seated retreat from public life. Putnam is suitable cautious in extending these claims to suggest that similar trends are evident in other similar post-

industrial societies, but by implication if these have experienced similar secular changes in technology and the media, there should be some evidence of a parallel fall in social capital.

Following Putnam's claims, studies have examined the relationship at individual level between use of the news media and a number of indicators of civic engagement such as levels of social trust, political participation, and confidence in government. But no matter how rigorous the methodology, how rich the survey data, or how sophisticated the methodology, it may be that these attempts suffer from a common flaw in seeking evidence for a societal level phenomena through individual-level survey data. Sociologists like Edwards and Foley, following Coleman's conceptualization, stress that social capital is essentially contextually-specific; it exists in the social relations and social norms that exist within groups that facilitate cooperative action, but it is not necessarily transferable to other contexts³. For example, Coleman suggests that much of the work of the diamond trade in New York is based on relations of reciprocity and mutual trust among a close-bound community of merchants, but these norms do not persist beyond this context, so that traders are not necessarily more trusting of members of the general public outside the market. People living in high-trust close-knit communities, such as farmers and fishermen in northern Norway, the Amish in Pennsylvania, or monastic communities in Greece, are not necessarily equally trusting of their fellow-man (for good reason) if visiting the Bronx, Bogotá, or Bangkok. If contextual, it makes no sense to measure social capital at the individual-level outside of the specific community. You and I can display high and low trust simultaneously, depending upon our location. Edwards and Foley conclude that research needs to examine diffuse aggregate or societal-level patterns of cooperation, tolerance and civility in divergent contexts, suggesting that careful cross-national research attentive to differences in political and economic contexts is most appropriate to test the claims of the role of social capital and civic society in democracy⁴.

So is there a relationship (either positive or negative) between use of the news media in different societies and levels of social capital? To explore this issue we can draw on evidence from the World Values Study (WVS) conducted in 1995-7, aggregated at societal-level. The survey allows comparison of social capital in 47 nations, including a wide range of developing and industrialized societies, older and newer democracies, semi-democracies and non-democratic political systems, and cultural regions of the world. The WVS allows us to compare measures of belonging to voluntary organizations and civic association, and also provides a direct measure of personal trust that lies at the heart of social capital theory, and multiple standard indicators of political participation and civic engagement.

Any measure testing Putnam's thesis needs to incorporate his definition of social capital and therefore take account of both structural and cultural dimensions of social capital simultaneously, that is, the strength of social networks (measured in terms of belonging to a wide

range of associational groups and social movements), and the cultural norms (measured by feelings of social trust). The 1995 WVS item measured associational membership as follows: *“Now I am going to read off a list of voluntary organizations; for each one, could you tell me whether you are an active member, an inactive member, or not a member of that type of organization?”* The list included nine broad categories, including church or religious organizations, sports or recreational organizations, political parties, art, music or educational organizations, labor unions, professional associations, charitable organizations, environmental organizations, and any other voluntary organization. The range covers traditional interest groups and mainstream civic associations, as well as including some new social movements. Various items were constructed from this variable for testing. This study adopts a measure (VOL-ANY) developed as an overall summary gauge of belonging to *any* of the categories of voluntary organizations (measured as a 0/1 dummy variable). This measure assumes that what matters for civic society and social capital is belonging to at least one associational category, such as a church-based, sports or union group, and that it does not much matter which one or how actively people are involved. Social trust was gauged in the 1995 WVS by the standard question: *“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”* Social capital was measured by the combination of social trust and associational membership.

Table 1 sets out the simple correlations between access to newspapers, television and the percentage of the population online in these societies and levels of social trust, associational membership, and the summary social capital index. The results show three patterns. First, societies characterized by high social capital by this measure are also ones that have widespread access to all the mass media, with strong and significant correlations across all indicators. The relationship is strongest for social capital and use of newspapers, but there is also a *positive* relationship between social capital and access to television, not a negative one. Countries where the modern forms of electronic communications are most easily available are also ones rich in social capital. But secondly, what is driving the relationship is social trust not associational networks. In other words, countries with strong face-to-face bonds of interpersonal trust are also ones with the most widespread access to television (see Figure 1). In contrast, levels of associational membership, and the informal social networks that arise from civic society, turn out to be unrelated to use of the mass media. This suggests that we need to look much more closely at the supposed trade-off between public and private leisure patterns as some nations that commonly have widespread access to electronic media are also rich in ‘joining’ associational activities. Lastly, what remains unclear is the causal direction in these relationships. The correlations also show a strong relationship between levels of socioeconomic or human development, levels of democratization and levels of social trust. It could therefore be that culture (social trust) is driving access to socioeconomic development and therefore also the spread of the

mass media, or alternatively that richer societies are more likely to have widespread mass communications *and* social trust. Much further analysis is required with more sophisticated multivariate models that attempt to sort out the interrelationship among these factors, and this preliminary work only remains an initial look at some of the data. In particular, access to television can be very different to patterns of use, and indeed content. But the claims that it is the pervasive spread of television and privatized leisure in postindustrial societies that is driving any long-term erosion in social capital in general, and social trust in particular, does not seem to be supported by this cross-national evidence.

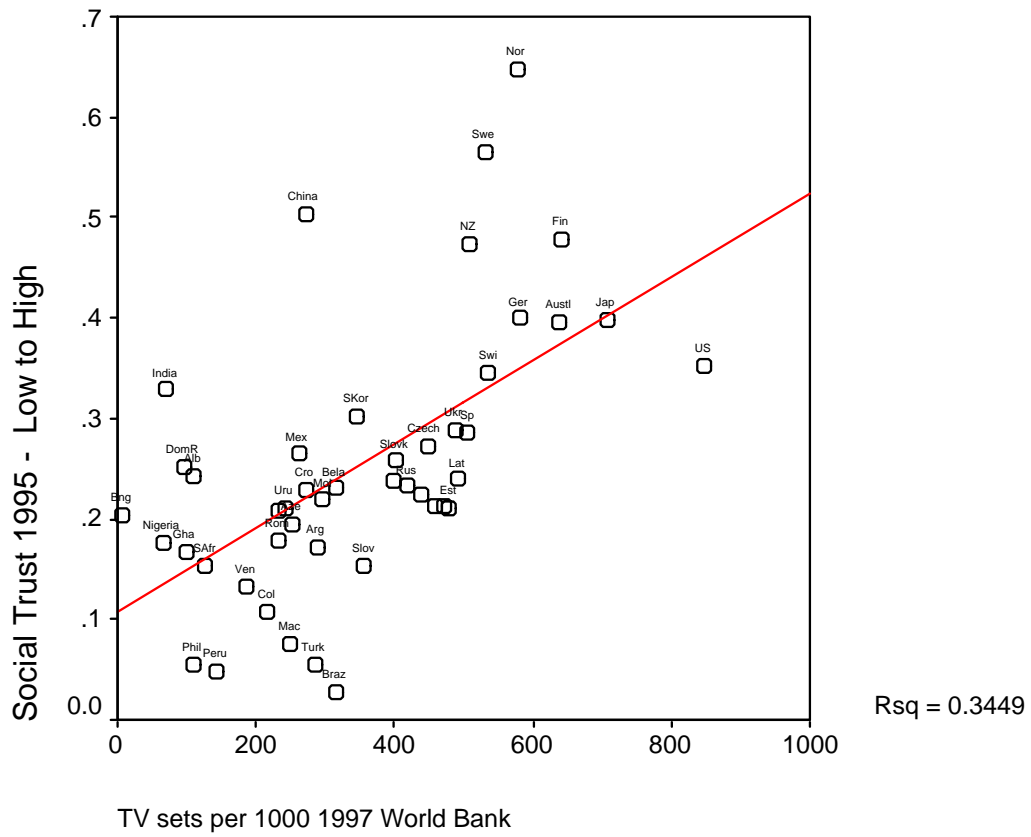


Figure 1: Social Trust and Access to TV

Source: World Values Study, mid-1990s, World Bank 1997

Table 1: Correlations between use of the media and social capital

	Social Trust	Sig.	Associational Membership	Sig.	Social Capital Index	Sig.
Per capita newspaper circulation	.744**		.152		.707**	
% Of households with TVs sets	.587**		.025		.577**	
Percentage of pop. online 2000	.698**		.491**		.786**	
Human Development Index 1998	.475**		.102		.499**	
Level of democratization 1995	.368**		.237		.432**	

Note: The figures represent simple Pearson correlations without any controls measuring aggregate use of the media and indicators of social trust, associational membership and the Social Capital Index in 47 nations in the mid-1990s. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

See text for detailed explanations of these variables. (i) Social trust: *“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted (1) or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people? (0)”* The proportion responding ‘can be trusted’ in each society. (ii) Associational Membership: The proportion of the adult population who said that they belonged to at least one of nine categories of voluntary associations eg a trade union, political party, sports club or environmental group. Social Capital: Social Trust*Associational Membership. Source: World Values Study, mid-1990s

Level of democratization: Freedom House measure of political rights and civil liberties, 1995. Source: www.freedomhouse.com.

Human Development Index: UNDP. 2001. *Human Development Report 2001* NY: UNDP/Oxford University Press;

Radio and TV sets: World Bank Development Indicators, World Bank CD-rom 2000;

Newspapers per 1000: UNESCO. 1999. *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook* NY: UNESCO;

% Online: www.NUA.com.

¹ Robert D. Putnam. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. NY: Simon and Schuster. P.19. Putnam also offers a related definition: "By 'social capital' I mean features of social life - networks, norms and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives." Robert D. Putnam. 1996. 'Who Killed Civic Life.' *The American Prospect*. P.56.

² Robert Putnam. 2000. Op Cit. p.246. Also Robert Putnam. 1995. 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America.' *P.S: Political Science and Politics* XXVIII (4): 664-83; Pippa Norris. 1996 'Did Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam' *PS: Political Science and Politics*. XXIX (3) September: 474-480.

³ Bob Edwards and Michael W. Foley. 1998. 'Civil society and social capital beyond Putnam.' *American Behavioral Scientist*. 42(1): 124-139.

⁴ See also Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris. 2000. 'Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture or Performance?' In *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* Eds. Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Kenneth Newton. 2001. 'Trust, Social Capital, Civic Society, and Democracy.' *International Political Science Review* 22(2): 201-214.