

1. (New) media and Social Capital

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The new media – the increased convergence of technology, media, and entertainment – will likely need to play a critical role in our nation’s rebuilding of social capital for several reasons: 1) TV, entertainment and technology have absorbed most of our increased leisure time over the last generation¹; 2) given that media and new media are reshaping how we spend our time, it is hard to believe that they will not play a central role in any social capital solution; 3) since the most avid TV watchers have the least social capital, it is centrally important to think about ways TV could re-engage these Americans rather than merely preaching to the civically converted²; 4) entertainment seems to be a prime mining ground since Prof. Putnam’s research in *Making Democracy Work* showed the central role of fun and entertainment in building social capital (in Italy it was choral societies and soccer); and 5) the new media offers new opportunities because of its interactivity.

Bob Putnam notes in Bowling Alone that while technology will need to be part of the solution, there are significant obstacles to building trust over the Internet. First, the digital divide means that until access to computers and the Internet is universal, it can’t truly be a tool for building diverse ties in American communities. Second, we communicate huge amounts of information non-verbally, and it may be a long time until our virtual communication is as information-rich as our face-to-face communication. [Note: even high-definition television videoconferences convey far less information than face-to-face communication and hence are less efficient at building trust.] Third, the technology encourages cyberbalkanization: ever more specialized groups talking about a very specific problem. In some such groups individuals are flamed for off-point comments. One of the great virtues of more traditional group get-togethers (like the eponymous bowling leagues) is that no conversation was considered off-point. If groups police much more tightly the boundaries of what is permissible, our conversations will lose valuable peripheral vision about issues of community importance.³ Technology tends to promote greater communication with those like us who are geographically distant, rather than with our immediate neighbors (who may be less like us as far as shared interests). This greater mix of long-distance ties at the expense of nearby ties is a real

¹ See Robinson and Godbey, which shows that Americans on average have 6 hours more of free time now than they did in the mid-60s and more than 100% of this increase has been consumed by increases in per capita TV viewing. Comparisons of how we spend our money show, for example that expenditures on entertainment have risen 4x faster than inflation since the mid-60s, and expenditures on computers are expected to rise over 300 fold in constant 1992 dollars to \$666 billion by 2006. [Annetta Miller, “The Millennial Mind-Set.” *American Demographics*. January 1999.]

² Professor Putnam’s research for Bowling Alone showed that *the single most predictive variable* for Americans having low levels of social capital, controlling for all standard demographic variables, was the extent to which they indicated that “TV is my primary form of entertainment.”

³ Paul Resnick observes that online participants, assuming they are familiar enough with the technology, can always spawn a new online community to discuss this “off-topic” point together. But the fact remains, that if in internet groups this takes conscious initiative on the part of participants or if respondents self-censor from off-topic postings, this will put a damper on peripheral vision.

concern if we need to rally our neighbors to deal collectively with place-based problems: schools that aren't working, zoning issues, crime, or even local environmental issues. Finally, the issue is whether the Internet becomes more like a nifty phone or a nifty television: i.e., whether it is used more for enhanced person-to-person communication or more for enhanced entertainment. There are many incentives for industry to steer the Internet towards a nifty TV and if so, this could have far more negative impact on civic engagement than even the TV.

Saguaro participant Paul Resnick is somewhat optimistic about the potential role of technology on social capital as he describes in a piece "Where Locality Meets Virtuality" in a 2003 book produced by the U.K. think tank, Forum of the Future. He notes that as the cost of one form of entertainment decreased (namely TV), it both increased the consumption of TV relative to other forms of entertainment and increased the consumption of entertainment in total. Unfortunately, it also increased isolation since TV-watching tended to occur alone. Similarly, he posits that the Internet will decrease the cost of communication, with the net impact of greater communication, and potentially greater social capital. Resnick believes that the Internet will also spawn a rise of new institutions that depend on widespread use of the technology for communication.

Impact of changes on social capital

Left to its own, industry forces like *convergence* [the blending of the television and the computer and the Internet] and *narrowcasting* [broadcasts to ever narrower market segments] will likely have negative social capital effects. Although some evidence suggests that the Internet (at least in its pre-convergent days) is displacing some television watching⁴, it is still unclear how much of the Internet usage and surfing is and will prove to be social capital-building.⁵

Convergence technology facilitates individuals cocooning more and interacting with others less. By analogy, the CD enabled Bach aficionados to hear high fidelity Bach all the time, and Stravinsky lovers to listen to 100% Stravinsky. Symphony attendance suffered since some listeners didn't want to hear the Bach or Stravinsky they didn't care for. However, in going to the symphony, Americans were more likely to socialize with others, meet and reinforce friendships, and build more social capital. The trends (likely replicated by entertainment technologies) seem somewhat inexorable – give people what they want when they want it 100% of the time – but hardly social capital friendly.

Narrowcasting and niche entertainment may increase personal satisfaction with the entertainment provided, but at the cost of common cultural references.

⁴ See, among others, Norman Nie and Lutz Erbring study "Internet and Society" by the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society. (February 17, 2000)

⁵ There have been studies by Barry Wellman, Robert Kraut and Norman Nie that all come to differing conclusions about whether the Internet decreases or increases social interconnection. It may simply be too early to tell. There is a useful paper by Paul Resnick called "Beyond Bowling Together: Socio Technical Capital" positing a framework for how technology can promote social capital at: <http://www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/stk/ResnickSTK.pdf>

Possible ideas for change

We ought to be extremely wary of any predictions of the future, given that in the past pundits were so totally wrong about the ultimate uses and social impact of the television, the radio, or the telephone. So take what is written here with many many grains of salt.

To oversimplify, media could be part of the answer to civic re-engagement in four ways: 1) civic journalism/conversation starters; 2) awareness or idea placement; 3) new paradigms that increase social capital by participating in that form of entertainment; or 4) using the technology to reinforce or strengthen face-to-face social ties.

Civic Journalism: Conversation starters

There is a growing interest, partly stemming from Pew funding, in civic journalism: having journalists see their role as either helping to craft solutions, focus on issues which the public identifies as important, or foster deliberative public discussions. The effectiveness of these efforts appears somewhat unproven and inconsistent.

Television might also have a role here. Hedrick Smith, produced a 4-part series on PBS called “Seeking Solutions” which aired in September 1999 and discussed in various segments promising approaches to stopping teen violence, confronting hate crime, and building community. More information is available at: <http://www.pbs.org/seekingsolutions/>. As part of the broadcast, they convened a panel to discuss these issues in a town hall form, and took questions from the audience. (Other similar examples are High Impact Television and the TV Race initiative. [<http://www.pbs.org/pov/tvraceinitiative/what.html>])

Idea placement:

People in the media industry refer to “product placement” as the planting of commercial products in movies. This is supposedly doubly effective since the viewers’ cynical ad-discounting defenses are down when, for example, the movie heroine drinks a Coke.

A parallel idea, that I would label “idea placement”, is inserting themes or ideas into TV shows or movies. The Harvard Alcohol Project used this approach in introducing the phrase “Designated Driver”. The “Squash-It” campaign uses this approach to try to reduce teen violence. [See: Rosenzweig, “Can TV Improve Us?” and a Harvard Gazette article, “Winsten Named First Frank Stanton...”.] While this was initially a novel idea, it has become such a mainstream idea that Hollywood now routes all such requests through the Entertainment Industries Council.

One could for example, speculate whether it would have impact if the characters on “Ally McBeal” (and 50-100 other shows) all started talking about the bowling leagues they attended or the PTA meetings they went to.⁶ This strategy would not change the largely non-social TV-watching experience itself. However, by wrapping social capital activities in the warm mantle of TV characters the viewers admired, it might ameliorate the TV-effect by encouraging viewers to do more social capital building after watching the show.

⁶ Recently, it has come under some attack when it was revealed that the US Government was using their leverage to get anti-drug messages inserted into TV shows.

A second, more traditional form of awareness would be public service announcements (PSAs) on issues of civic engagement, in order to raise awareness of the importance of social capital. Every year the Ad Council takes on a couple issues and helps develop print and sometimes video PSAs for those issues. Some think this is less effective since the audience tends to screen out these advertisements.

New paradigms:

A third area, and one where we can't be very specific about examples, since we've yet to find promising examples, might be to brainstorm new ideas (commercial or non-profit) that are entertaining and involve people forming bonds of trust and reciprocity through that entertainment. Here are a couple trivial examples, that are most probably NOT the answer, but illustrate the kind of idea that we hope might emerge.

One example might be a business venture to build movie theaters with attached cafes and have theaters encourage movie patrons to sign up for movie discussing clubs. Once a month (like a book group) you'd be assigned an interesting movie and then would discuss it together afterward in their cafe. [Our hope would be that through the group meetings and consistent membership, people would form new friendships and bonds of trust and reciprocity.] The theater would have many such movie clubs on different nights of the week and focusing on different genres (mystery, foreign, adventure, comedy, etc.).

A more high-tech solution might be multi-player computer games that overlapped with real life meetings to build and reinforce networks of trust and reciprocity (perhaps where building such ties of social capital was an essential element of "winning the game").

Strengthening face-to-face social ties

While the technological solutions have not yet emerged, there are already examples of people trying to use the technology to facilitate social capital building. Paul Resnick rightly observes, that whether or not we have found the promised land with regard to technological applications to build social capital, we should acknowledge the significant experimentation in the last decade. Some of these inventions⁷ may well prove to be the essential building blocks of how society uses technology to knit us closer together.

⁷ These interventions might include ideas for how to use technology to facilitate face-to-face encounters (like meetup.com or NetDay that used technology to help match Californian volunteers with public schools that needed to be wired with internet connections). These interventions might also include large-scale impersonal social capital (like *recommender* services that recommend things of interest based on others who share your taste, *reputational* software that enables users to learn of your reputation for trustworthiness online, or *introducer* services that introduce you to others several "degrees of separation" away. For a discussion of these concepts, see: Paul Resnick, "Beyond Bowling Together: SocioTechnical Capital". www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/stk/ResnickSTK.pdf

So here is a list of some interesting developments in using technology to foster greater social capital.

1) Tools:

The technology could provide tools that make it easier to get together socially.

Examples of this can be found at sites like: egroups.com (that tries to make it far easier to form groups), evite.com (that makes it easier to send invitations for social events), <http://www.volunteermatch.org> which makes it much easier to find out about volunteering opportunities.

Another possible tool that could be helpful in building social capital is the *recommender* tool. In Amazon or on other web sites, technology helps recommend other books, music, etc. that might be of interest given the books or music that you like. (This uses a complicated algorithm called “nearest neighbors” to identify who else has similar taste on a lot of other items to you and then see what else they like.) In principle, one could use this technology together with geography sorting (limited only by the size of the databases) to recommend other people in Poughkeepsie or Seattle who also share your interest in books, or political causes, or hobbies and suggest you two e-mail each other or get together. [Yahoo is actually developing a version of this to promote matchmaking.]⁸ While this may not be likely to generate bridging social capital (unless the people interested in an underlying book, political cause or hobby are diverse themselves), it may be an effective way of localizing interest in an issue.

Meetup.com has created opportunities in almost 480 U.S. cities (at last count) for people who share an interest in a political candidate, or Britney Spears, or wiccans or anime or Harry Potter to meet monthly in a venue that the participants get to vote on. Meetup uses technology to facilitate localized meetups, but this technology is too new to know how sticky membership is in these groups is, how strong the social bonds formed are, and whether these have long-term use in political campaigns beyond the early phase (i.e., prior to the Iowa caucuses or NH primaries).

Having readily available local information may make it easier for citizens to get involved. A Michigan prototype (www.publius.org) localizes voting information for you if you live in Michigan (where you can vote, what your ballot will look like, etc).⁹ www.AvenueL.com tries to provide locally useful information for a community in Walnut Creek, CA.

Some U.S. sites attempt to construct a list of your neighbors on a block through reverse phone directory lookups (with inconsistent and imperfect results). [The reverse

⁸ “‘But Yahoo Said I’d Like You’ --- Taking a Page from Amazon, Dating Sites Suggest Partners; Viewing 200 ‘Spunky’ Women” by Jennifer Saranow (WSJ, 7/3/2003, p. D1).

⁹ Many sites use such technology to make information local – nytimes.com can localize the weather for you or Yahoo yellow pages can localize listings for you – but these sites are not focused on spurring greater civic engagement.

directories are sometimes incorrect because the online phone directories updated infrequently.] Such listings could be a helpful tool to facilitating a block party or a neighborhood association.

2) Localizing conversation and computing

In principle, you should be able to localize conversations or posting to a specific enough level that others would have interest (e.g., recommendations of restaurants or plumbers or crime problems, etc.). There are two approaches. You can either restrict conversations to a specific locality (like a neighborhood) or have conversations at a larger level that get sorted geographically from the distance to user (so that a user on Maple Street would see postings from those who lived closest to Maple St. first before the user saw postings of someone who lived further away).

Some things have been tried in this regard, and the level of the localization differs somewhat dramatically from example to example:

a) the creation of software for neighborhood directories using the technology like software, digital cameras, etc. Descriptions of early experiments with such directories can be found at: www.whothat.org;

b) <http://www.neighborhoodlink.com> (that helps neighborhoods communicate electronically);

c) MIT researcher's experiments to residents of poor neighborhoods (Newark, Roxbury) to get free computers if they share them with neighbors (Randal Pinkett, Alan Shaw);

d) *Community Strength Foundation* is buying up zip codes URLs that could be used for community partnership and to foster civic engagement. They have bought up at least 300 zip codes and you can see an example at www.08033.com;

e) The now-defunct www.upmyStreet.com was a U.K. site in which individuals discussed matters relating to their postal code (a level of geographic specification that is more precise than U.S. 5 digit zipcodes – approximately 12 households-- but not as precise as U.S. zip+4). However, merely localizing conversation does not make the conversation interesting, as www.nycbloggers.com makes clear;

f) Keith Hampton (MIT) e-neighborhoods project is a longitudinal study of how new communication technologies can be used to build local social capital. The technology lets communities themselves build e-mail lists, community bulletin boards, etc., and then monitors the impact of these tools on social interconnections. The project is also being tried in Amsterdam. The hope, after measuring the impact in these e-neighborhoods, is to make this software broadly available;

g) Craig's List: <http://www.craigslist.com/> A list that started in San Francisco but has migrated to many other cities in the U.S. where residents can find out about anything from jobs to apartments to community events, and has fostered a lot of social capital in the process;

h) Fast Company: Company of Friends

<http://www.fastcompany.com/friends/handbook/2.html>

Company of Friends attempts to localize readers of *Fast Company* (basically technology entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs) and help them get together in local cells where they can form friendships, think about collective action, discuss topics of interest, etc.;

i) Esther Dyson talked about how wi-fi (wireless computers) are coming to be used at conferences. "Instead of chatting aloud in a living room, the chatters are in the conference hall and online -- silent but active, so they don't disturb anyone. ... They can find the data to correct speakers as they 'blog' (short for 'Weblog'), posting real-time commentary about what's happening onstage." Although the article didn't describe this, one can imagine with the overlap of computing in the same hall, it's likely that this technology could be used to reinforce or build social networks. Article "Parallel Channels" at:

<http://www.edventure.com/conversation/article.cfm?Counter=8648145>; and

j) Howard Rheingold, in *Smart Mobs*, also talks about how the technology of instant messaging or other wireless communication can be used to quickly redirect large groups of people, like for political protests in the Philippines.

3) Setting up latent groups

Some posit that there will need to be software that makes it really easy to form latent groups (for example, among parents of kids in a specific 3rd grade class, or state park users) that one can activate when needed, so there is an easy way of communicating with other 3rd grade parents when an issue arises, you want to organize carpooling, etc.

4) Social-networking on the web

Various groups have arisen on the Internet that attempt to take advantage of the "small world" phenomenon – that we may be only *six degrees of separation* away from *anyone* else in the world, and far fewer links away from a very large number of people.

Some of these focus on expanding one's business network or network of business referrals.

<http://www.ryze.com/> or
<https://www.linkedin.com/>.

Others provide free software that one can use to map out one's networks.

<http://www.spokesoftware.com/> (for business referrals)

One provides networking to develop new social friends or dates (www.friendster.com).

The problem that most of these sites have is that people's social networks are implicitly preconditioned on their friends acting as a gatekeeper all the time. An example may be helpful. Ms. Jones (A) has a friend Ms. Gonzales (B). Mr. Smith (C) wants to find a date, get job leads, or let others know about a product he is selling, etc. and Ms. Jones (A) decides whether Ms. Gonzales (B) would be a good source for this inquiry, whether Ms.

Gonzales (B) would be interested in talking to Mr. Smith (C) about this, and whether Ms. Jones (A) has burdened Ms. Gonzales (B) too much (and thus should desist). If Ms. Gonzales (B) feels overwhelmed by people Ms. Jones (A) sends her way, Ms. Gonzales (B) may stop returning Ms. Jones' (A's) requests and the relationship is soured or ended.

Most of these sites have not yet figured out how to balance these two competing dimensions: 1) having individuals list a lot of contacts so that many people are only a small number of connections away from many others; and 2) letting participants keep their social networks close to their chest so they can be gatekeeper, or not be burdened by tons of requests to utilize their social networks.

We are still relatively early into the experimentation of how technology can best build more social capital, but this is meant to illuminate some of the ways in which this might take place.