

E-Associations: Can Technology Reverse Declining Civic Engagement?

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Meetup.com's innovative technology makes it easy for individuals to find others who share interests and helps them pick a time and venue. It thus raises interesting questions about how the Internet may shape the nation's "social capital" (the social networks and the benefits that flow from these social ties).

The Internet offers great peril and promise for America's already declining levels of community engagement. On the liability side, Web surfers shop and chat relatively anonymously from their computers instead of building greater social trust through face-to-face interactions and chance encounters with people unlike themselves. Web-based media may impair our "social peripheral vision" and connections by increasingly targeting homogeneous audiences with ever-narrower interests. Easy exit from virtual communities discourages "netizens" from working through conflicts or investing in long-term relationships and reputations.

Alternately, the Internet could enhance social capital by creating new media for civic engagement. Just as barn-raising and quilting bees gave way to bowling teams and Kiwanis clubs, contemporary e-mail and list-serves can help people maintain both a wider circle of friends and geographically distant networks. In principle, the net offers a more

efficient way of mobilizing large numbers of people quickly. By allowing workers to telecommute, the Internet may strengthen face-to-face ties to family and community. Social participation may also be easier online for elderly shut-ins, those with physical disabilities, or people seeking to discuss confidential medical conditions.

Whether the Internet becomes an asset or a liability in creating social capital will turn largely, as Robert Putnam suggests, on whether the Internet becomes a "nifty phone" (enabling us to connect with a wider range of individuals) or a "nifty television" (that leaves us passively sitting behind yet another ghostly screen).

Some technologies, by weaving together virtual and real strands of interaction, may produce stronger social capital than either would independently in much the same way that alloy metals like steel are stronger than their constituent parts (iron, nickel, etc.). Meetup is one such alloy example of technological social capital.

Meetup.com

With these possibilities in mind, we conducted a study of Meetup.com, which uses technology to help otherwise-unconnected users learn of each other and communicate between meetings, but uses good-old-fashioned face-to-face meetings around common interests to build the social ties.

Here's how Meetup works. Over one million people have registered and entered their zipcodes along with topics that interest them (e.g., Harry Potter, dachshunds, practicing Spanish, home schooling, or animal rights). The software identifies when there is a local quorum on any given topic, generates a monthly meeting time—a "meetup"—and polls users about the best venue. Users, not Meetup, generate the list of potential topics, though the company prohibits topics that are pornographic, hate-based, or advocate illegal activities.

Meetups hold promise for building social capital. Since the company was launched in 2002, meetups have rapidly increased in number. Meetups initially came to fame as the organizational backbone in the early days of Howard Dean's presidential campaign in 2004. But politics now account for only 15 percent of current meetups and the more general promise of Meetup is in reaching beyond traditional social circles. Unlike most forms of social capital where existing social ties morph into a new effort, Meetup offers the potential to bring together complete strangers and engage the truly civically disengaged.



Meetup.com's home page

Confounding Stereotypes

Over the summer of 2004 our research team observed roughly 38 meetups in eight cities. We collected 337 survey responses from meetings that fell into four broad types: hobby/social groups (such as poodle owners and knitters), public purpose/activist groups (including political advocacy and human rights groups), skill-building groups (such as language practice and investor clubs), and “religious” associations (very loosely defined).

The findings challenged four preconceptions we held:

Not primarily for youth. We expected meetups to disproportionately involve 18-30 year olds. According to a Pew survey in 2004, 22 percent of Americans over 65 years of age use the Internet versus 77 percent of those 18-29. But 26 of the meetups we observed had participants who were older on average than the community around them, and only eight meetups were younger than the community.

Not attracting the civically disengaged. People who participated in meetups already exhibit above average civic engagement, at least partly since meetup participants tended to be far more educated than the surrounding community. Similarly, while meetups often contained a mix of races, on average they were 24 percent more “white” than the surrounding community.

Not attracting community newcomers. The proportion of newcomers to the community at meetups was also lower than the surrounding population. Nonetheless, compared to traditional community meetings, meetups may still do better at drawing in new blood.

Only sometimes bridging strangers. 85-90 percent of meetup attendees had some prior connections to fellow participants, partly because individuals frequently heard about the meetup through a list-serve or a mutual friend. Sixty percent of people coming to their first meetup knew no other participants, which was low compared to our expectations but likely high compared to other “old-world” group counterparts, like bowling leagues or the Rotary.

Weak and Strong Ties

It’s a tough environment in which to build social capital if the people attending rapidly turn over. While our study did not track meetups over long periods of time, we found only 25–40 percent of

participants returning in meetups monitored in consecutive months.

This member “stickiness” may increase as Meetup.com now requires a local champion and organizer for each group. Members will also be able to deepen their involvement through federations of local meetups. At the time of our study, however, we found that in well-established groups that had met 20 times or more, the typical attendee had been to only five prior meetings.

So given this high-turnover environment, it’s all the more surprising that, nonetheless, meetup participants show signs of building social capital with other individuals. Almost a third of meetup participants were developing social capital: making new personal friends with someone they first met at meetup or doing something with other meetup participants outside of meetup.

As with other examples of social capital, meetups already rich in social connections got richer. Those who already knew people at their first meeting gained more lasting social connections from meetups. And reinforcing the importance of social capital (which has already proven important in domains as diverse as public health, well-functioning government, or economic growth), attendees who developed new friends with others in the meetup were statistically more likely to return.

Our initial findings suggest that “convening technologies” such as Meetup may be effective tools for building social capital. If meetups, however, hope to achieve their goals of empowering the disengaged, they will have to broaden their appeal beyond the very well educated and already civically involved. ■

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Although information technologies can socially isolate individuals, they can also bring people who wouldn’t otherwise meet face-to-face.