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Part I.

The Social Dimension of Information Technology

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Chapter I

Virtual Communities and Social Capital¹

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Robert Putnam (1993) has developed a theory of social capital to explain the effect of decreasing community participation and civic engagement on declining institutional performance. Subsequently, there has been much speculation as to whether emerging virtual communities can counteract this trend. We apply the findings of computer-mediated communication and virtual communities to the networks, norms, and trust of social capital and also examine the possible effects of virtual communities on the privatization of leisure time. We conclude that social capital and civic engagement will increase when virtual communities develop around physically based communities and when these virtual communities foster additional communities of interest. Through a preliminary analysis, we identified potential communities of interest including education, exchange of general community information, and opportunities for government and political participation. We conclude with a discussion of current trends and research needs.

The lack of citizen participation in the community has recently come under scrutiny. Although this trend may have started at least a century ago (Wellman and Gulia 1999), it is only lately that the implications of this decline in community participation have been more fully explored. Besides negatively affecting a person's affiliation with his or her own neighborhood, this lack of community has also been cited as a major reason for the decline in civic involvement which helps communities operate (Putnam, 1993). Putnam has developed a theory of social capital that attempts to explain the relationship between citizen engagement in the community and the performance of the government and other social institutions. Although Putnam's theory is by no means unchallenged (Greeley, 1996), it has

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