

Chapter 10

Social Capital and Third Places through the Internet: Lessons from a Disadvantaged Swedish Community

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ABSTRACT

Although Sweden is generally considered to be at the forefront of the ICT revolution and to have high levels of social capital – interpersonal trust and participation – there remain areas and populations which are relatively disadvantaged. In this chapter we examine a number of efforts which have attempted to make use of ICT to enhance social capital in a Stockholm suburb which has been stigmatised in the press and which contains relatively high proportions of immigrants, single parents and the unemployed, all groups which are relatively excluded. An initial effort, based on the installation of a local community network, largely failed. A second effort, based on a locally-run Internet Café was more successful, with the café operating as a Third Place, both online and offline, bridging many of the divisions characterising the community. Despite its success in encouraging participation, trust and community identity, the IT-Café could not be sustained following the end of project funding and a change in personnel. The factors accompanying the success and failure of the Swedish undertakings provide lessons for other efforts to use ICTs in attempts to enhance social inclusion and community.

INTRODUCTION

Social capital, defined in terms of the density and nature of social participation, the degree of trust and the sense of community identity, has become a pivotal concept in both social theory and social

policy (see for example Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Field, 2003; Halpern, 2005). An important facilitator of social capital in local communities has been the existence of ‘third places’, informal public meeting spaces, apart from work and home, which provide the setting

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for informal public life. According to Oldenburg (1989, p.16):

The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.

In a celebration of the “great good places at the heart of our communities”, Oldenburg (2001, p.2) writes about the contribution of third places to informal collective effort:

Essential to informal collective effort is the habit of association, and essential to informal association are places where people may gather freely and frequently and with relative ease.

Effective third places provide arenas for the creation of both bonding and bridging forms of social capital (Putnam, 2000), providing opportunities for people to bond with others similar to themselves, while at the same time facilitating the development of bridging relationships with others who are different. Bonding relationships, sometimes associated with kinship ties, give rise to strong feelings of identity and are often multi-stranded. Bridging relationships are more likely to be single-stranded; Granovetter (1973, 1982) refers to such ties as being “weak”, but as implying the existence of “thin impersonal trust with strangers”. Both forms of relationship are likely to be sparse in communities which combine diversity with disadvantage and their relative absence is associated with other indicators of low social capital such as a lack of trust and low community identity.

Developments in Western urban society, including developments in communications technologies, the segregation of workplace and home, changes in the nature and allocation of roles between the genders and the generations and the economics of leisure, have led to a perceived

decline in the number of physical locations which can serve as third places, especially in suburban areas. Public houses, coffee bars, community centres, corner shops and other sites which served as third places up to and including the middle decades of the twentieth century, find themselves under increasing pressure to meet commercial and other targets, which limit their potential to offer public places where people can drop in and meet with others on an informal basis.

The decline in the number of third places reduces the opportunity for social encounters outside home and work and leads to an impoverishment of social capital.

Without casual regular encounters it is very difficult for all the other steps in community building to take place: discussion, organisation, action. (Advomatic, 2008)

In this view third places are a casualty of the “balkanisation” of society. The impact is likely to be especially deleterious to social capital in communities marked by heterogeneity and scarce resources, reducing the chances of strangers meeting each other in non-threatening situations and threatening both bonding and bridging relationships.

THE INTERNET, THIRD PLACES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The question posed by the Internet and other forms of social computing, which emphasise interactivity rather than passivity, is whether they can provide a new virtual space for informal social participation which can fulfil the roles previously played by physical third places. Dystopians suggest that rather than socialising in public, families have withdrawn to the privacy of their homes, passively watching television or sitting in front of a computer screen at the expense of engaging in “real” relationships. Supporters of the role of social com-

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