

Chapter 87

Cyber Behavior and Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews historical development of research on cyber behavior and social capital, based on the definition by Robert D. Putnam, by focusing on the relationship between Information Communication and Technology use with social networks, civic engagement, as well as social trust. Firstly, the intellectual history of studies on cyber behavior and social capital is reviewed. Secondly, important past studies on the relationship between ICT use and social capital are focused from four perspectives: social networks, civic engagement, local community, and mobile phone use. Finally, future research directions are discussed from the perspective of comparative culture and rapidly evolving high-functionality smart phones.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Robert D. Putnam's much-celebrated books (Putnam, 1993, 2000), social capital—defined as social trust and norms of reciprocity and the social networks that foster them—has become one of the key concepts underpinning many analyses of contemporary democracies.

Putnam argues that by forming tightly knit horizontal social networks and engaging in various economic and social exchanges, people develop norms of reciprocity to help others as they themselves have been helped. Based on these norms, people in the same network act honestly and in good faith. As a result, they develop greater social trust in others. High social trust and reciprocity norms in these social networks reduce suspicion of betrayal and lower barriers to connecting with others. These elements of social capital act reciprocally to produce a “virtuous circle” that underpins

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democratic society by facilitating cooperative collective action and making it easier to resolve social dilemmas.

Putnam first realized the importance of social capital during his research on Italian regional politics. The North–South divide in the efficiency and functionality of various democratic systems in Italy is well known; in fact, regional reforms that took place in the 1970s were successful in the North but ended in failure in many parts of the South. Through research involving multiple facets of historical analysis, social surveys, and interviews of politicians and community leaders, Putnam examined this gap in the performance of democratic institutions and concluded that what supports the vitality of democratic societies at the most fundamental level is not economic prosperity but horizontal networks between tightly knit people, social trust, and reciprocity norms (Putnam, 1993).

Putnam next shifted his focus to American society and presented a vast amount of data indicating a decline in social capital since the 1950s, as demonstrated by transitions in political participation, membership in various groups and organizations, informal socializing outside of work, and participation in volunteer activities. To symbolize how bowling leagues and other social-network-producing organizations have become a thing of the past, the cover of Putnam's book shows a person bowling alone.

Putnam draws on a wealth of data to reveal how social capital is in decline in American society, and discusses the causes of this decline. He points to generational change, increased time pressures on dual-income households, and longer commutes due to urban sprawl, among others, but names television watching as the worst culprit. Putnam explains that since the spread of television in the 1960s, people have spent less time on public organizations, informal socializing, and other forms of social participation outside of the home. This stands in contrast to the generally positive relationship between social participation

and newspaper reading, which, like television, is a form of mass media (Norris, 1996; Putnam, 2000).

Putnam's assertion that television watching undermines social capital, however, has been attacked as a "video malaise hypothesis." There is no consistent evidence that more hours spent watching television leads to fewer hours of social participation. Controlling for sex, age, education, and other basic social attributes, Norris (1996) reported that television-viewing time had a negative effect on participation in informal activities that were meant to resolve community issues. At the same time, however, Norris found that the frequency of watching programs about public issues positively affected participation in informal activities in the community, and she concluded that it was an oversimplification to claim that television suppresses social participation. Likewise, empirical studies have not offered consistent evidence in support of Putnam's claim that watching entertainment programs inhibits social participation. Clearly, the relationship between television and social capital is not as simple as Putnam might assume. Academic discussion now should focus not so much on the amount but on the content of the media to which we are exposed.

Does Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) use have a positive effect on social capital? Internet and other ICT use are similar to mass media use in the sense that people browse websites to gain information. It may follow, as Putnam would fear, that time spent surfing the Internet reduces communication with others, and that this in turn leads to less social capital. However, ICT may also be used as an interpersonal communication tool. Because it allows people to communicate with others without leaving home, ICT has the potential to complement existing means of communication, and thereby enrich social capital. As with television, the historical debate surrounding ICT use began with negative attention, which was then countered with claims about its positive aspects. In the next section, we will review how ICT use has spread since the

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