The Internet and Civic Engagement
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1) This research brings together three topics that social scientists have been paying attention to recently: the internet, civic engagement, and trust. It follows my book in progress, The Moral Foundations of Trust (available at

http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/research.htm) and my article, "Social Capital, Television, and the 'Mean World': Trust, Optimism, and Civic Participation," Political Psychology, v. 19 (September, 1998), available at

http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner/working.htm. There is a substantial body of work, following the pathbreaking analysis of Robert Putnam, that civic participation in the United States has been declining since the 1930s. Americans join fewer groups, give less of their national income to charity, and socialize less with each other than they once did. And when we withdraw from civic society, we are less likely to develop the trust that is essential to building cooperative relationships with each other that permits us to reach compromises on key issues facing the country. Putnam, in his forthcoming book, Bowling Alone, argues that much of the decline in civic engagment can be traced to Americans' growing attachment to their television sets. Instead of getting out and about joining groups and socializing, we are spending more and more time at home glued to our television sets. We become isolated from other members of the society and thus will become less likely to trust people we don't know. This research agenda has become known as *social capital.*

2) The key question in this research is whether the internet is like television or whether it

opens up new opportunities for civic engagement. Does the internet isolate us from others or does it allow us to make new connections? Is the internet a welcoming place where people build links with others or is it a haven for misanthropes, who withdraw from society and stay glued to their computer screens?

3) There are at least two contrasting views of the role of the internet in society. One sees the internet as facilitating new links with other people. People come together through e-mail lists, affinity groups, web sites based upon mutual interests (including health and medical questions), and especially chat rooms. This new technology creates virtual communities where people can come together and interact with each other.

4) An alternative perspective sees the internet as a dark and threatening place. People can hide their true identity on the internet and the press periodically runs stories of romantic liaisons that turn sour and perhaps even violent on the internet. We hear stories of lonely people who spend hours upon hours on the net prowling sex sites and chat rooms in search of victims. Even when heavy users aren't dangerous, they are likely to be misanthropes who need to get a life beyond their computer screens. A Carnegie-Mellon study showed that heavy internet users are more likely to be depressed, lonely, and withdrawn compared to light users. Putnam has speculated that the internet works the way that television does–it separates people from each other rather than bringing them together.

5) First, a few ruminations on the supposed link between trust, civic engagement, and the media. I argue in The Moral Foundations of Trust that Putnam and others have over-stated the relationship between trust and civic engagement–and indeed have conflated it. Most types of civic engagement do NOT produce trust–since the most group member-

ships and informal socializing involve people like yourself–and thus there is no reason why you should develop trust in people like yourself from such activities. Indeed, if there is any connection between trust and civic engagement, it should go from trust TO civic participation. People with faith in strangers might be more likely to get involved in activities that involve folks who are different from themselves–not simple group membership or socializing, but rather more demanding activities such as volunteering time and giving to charity. So trust is a moral resource that connects people to each other. You learn it from your parents–and it is resistant to everyday experience–including viewing television and surfing the internet.

6)   Putnam's case against television rests on two foundations. The first is a direct cause of waning participation in civic affairs: Television viewing eats up time. If you are hooked in front of your television set, you can't be out and about partaking in civic life. The second part gets to civic participation through television's affect on personality. Television dramas bring us violence and bad guys. The news highlights crime, war, disease, and other plagues. A viewer might reasonably think that the real world is cruel as well. If you watch a lot of TV, you are likely to believe that the "television world" *is* the real world. And it is a "mean world," where people don't trust each other, would try to take advantage of each other, and are looking out primarily for themselves. People who watch a lot of television, Gerbner and his colleagues argue, rank low on social capital, or trust). Putnam argues that television leads people to become disengaged from their communities directly (through the time crunch) and indirectly (by making them less trusting).

7)   In my Political Psychology article I exonerated television as the cause of either decreasing trust or less civic engagement. When I estimated more elaborate statistical models

than Putnam, in which I consider other causes of trust (especially an optimistic world view) and test for reciprocal linkages between faith in others and civic engagement, the effects of television drop out. There is little evidence that people become less trusting or see the world as mean by watching television–regardless of what types of programs they view. And there is sparse evidence that television has become the substitute for other forms of civic activity. Yes, people who watch a lot of television *are* less trusting and *participate less in civic groups*. But there is no evidence that watching television *causes* either lower trust or less participation. Instead, television viewing may be part of a more general syndrome of misanthropy such as Chauncey Gardner in Jerzy Kozinski's <u>Being There</u>, rather than the cause.

8)   Similarly, one wonders if internet users are like heavy television viewers–disconnected from their communities, loners whose social connections may not be real people at all, but icons on their computer screens. Or, are people now using the internet, to reestablish connections that have been lost as fewer folks join civic organizations?

9)   To test this argument, we need surveys of the general population. The Carnegie-Mellon survey only covered a small number of computer users. A good comparison MUST look at people who go on-line and those who don't. To this end, I look at four surveys: two by the Pew Center for the People and the Press in 1998, one based upon the general population and the other of people who go on-line; a 1996 survey of trust and civic engagement in Metropolitan Philadelphia conducted by the Pew Center; and the 1996 American National Election Study (ANES), which have but limited questions about internet usage, but much better questions about civic engagement than either Pew survey.

10)   Overall the online sample is more likely to trust other people (by 46 percent compared to

38 percent). However, this likely reflects socioeconomic differences between the two samples (education, income).

11)   The statistical analyses from the Pew Center surveys (using probit or ordered probit analysis) are summarized below and they suggest that the internet, like television, is neither the cause nor the effect of trusting communities. Instead, internet users are distinguished by their attitudes toward technology (they are comfortable with it and thinks that it helps people keep in touch) and their demographics: They are young, students, male, not religious, and have higher incomes.

12)   The 1996 Philadelphia survey and the 1996 American National Election Survey (ANES) do contain good questions on people's involvement in their communities. However, each survey only asked one major question on the internet (in the Philadelphia survey, whether people use e-mail and in the ANES, whether people have access to the internet). For each survey, I followed the path I used in The Moral Foundations of Trust–estimating statistical models that allow for reciprocal causality (trust affects internet use and internet use shapes trust, e.g.). (The specific technique is three-stage least squares regression analysis.)

Overall summary of results from the four surveys:

Overall, these results suggest that internet access can help build a civic community. They encourage most forms of civic engagement–except for involvement with children's groups (which may reflect a time crunch). But in no case are the results for internet access very powerful–the key elements in building civic society reflect people's values. But internet access may help facilitate getting people involved in their communities–though the Pew Center survey of Philadelphia suggests other-wise. We need more information about what people do when they are online. And we need to know more about the psychological underpinnings of how internet usage ties into civic engagement–because these results suggest that the internet does *not* build trust in strangers. Indeed, people who spend a lot of time online or who visit chat rooms or make new friends online seem to be *less* trusting and have weaker social support networks than people who are not connected to the internet. The findings are not easily put together because of different questions on different surveys, but overall a picture seems to be emerging that suggests: The internet is *not* a revolutionary technology in shaping civic engagement. It neither brings together the undifferentiated masses nor repels them to withdraw unto themselves. As with television, the misanthropes stay at home and seek cyber-friends more than real friends. People who trust others and who have strong social support networks will find the internet a useful forum to help themselves get involved. The internet will not organize the disorganize, but neither is it a dark and dangerous place inhabited by loners. The internet is not the community of the future–because whatever communities it can build must exist in real life.

What Shapes Internet Use?

Findings from Surveys of the General Public and Online Users

From the Pew Center for The People and The Press 1998

Types of Internet Use **What Matters and What Doesn't Matter**

Types of Internet Use	What Matters and What Doesn't Matter
use e-mail get health information get business information get sports news get stock quotes give your views online buy goods online	**Interpersonal trust generally doesn't matter for most types of computer usage. For online sample, people who trust others are more likely to buy goods online. For general population, people who use e-mail are more likely to trust others.** People who say that the internet helps keep them in touch with others are more likely to go online in many different ways. And young people, males, students, higher income people, and people with no religion are more likely to go online. But overall, there is little evidence that simply going online creates or destroys communities. Most relationships with trust are weak and there are no significant relationships with any form of traditional social networks.

how much time use
   computer
how much time online
yesterday
how many times went
   online yesterday
believe you go on line too
   much
	People who go online a lot are NOT more likely to be misanthropes. If anything, they may be more trusting (online sample). And they have strong social bonds. They have good social support networks and are more likely to have visited family (general sample) or called friends (online sample) yesterday.
	Also they say that the internet helps keep them in touch and are more likely to be nonreligious, male, students, young, and with higher incomes.
	Going online is **NOT** a substitute for watching television. People who use their computers a lot (and go online a lot) are **MORE** likely to watch a lot of television. (They are also *less* likely to read newspapers daily.)

visit online chat rooms make new friends online	**People who visit chat rooms or who make new friends online are NOT the likely foundations of a new civil society. They are no more likely than others to have strong social support networks or to have visited family or called friends yesterday. In the general population, they are *less* likely to trust other people. And online users who visit chat rooms don't have strong support networks.** People who seek community on the internet have faith in technology as a way to keep in touch, but generally internet friendships seem to be alternatives to trusting communities, rather than pathways to it.

worry about online privacy worry about security of medical records worry might download virus	**People who worry about their privacy or security on the internet are far less trusting than people who aren't so worried. This reflects the general idea of trust as an optimistic world view, however, rather than anything specific to the internet.** **People who are insecure also are less likely to have strong support networks and to feel that new technologies keep us in touch with each other.**

Determinants of Civic Engagement
Key Results from the Pew Center for The People and The Press Survey
of Metropolitan Philadelphia 1996

Dependent Variable   **What Matters and What Doesn't Matter**

use e-mail	**e-mail users have stronger support networks than people who don't use e-mail. But they are no more likely to trust others, to mingle with other people when they engage in social activities, to talk to their neighbors, or to watch a lot of television. e-mail users are younger, have higher incomes and more education, and are more likely to be students.**
volunteer time	**volunteers are less likely to use e-mail than other people–and this result is very strong.**
mingle in social settings	**people who mingle in social situations are substantially more likely to communicate by e-mail, to have lived in their neighbor-hoods for a long time, and to have children.**
attend town meetings	**people who attend town meetings are less likely to use e-mail (but more likely to mingle in social settings, to have more education and to be upper income).**

Determinants of Civic Engagement
Key Results from the 1996 American National Election Study

Dependent Variable	**What Matters and What Doesn't Matter**
internet access	Modest impacts for trust in other people and for volunteering. But other forms of civic engagement have no impact on internet access–and people who are involved in their church are marginally *less* likely to have internet access. The young and people who favor more a more liberal approach to morality are more likely to have access to the internet, as are people who watch television news.
trust in people	Internet access has no impact on trust, though giving to charity strongly builds trust, while involvement in church leads to less faith in strangers. Faith in your own race leads to less trust, while positive evaluations of other racial groups is indicative of greater trust.
volunteering time	People with internet access are slightly more likely to volunteer than people without access–but the key factors shaping volunteering are attending religious services often, how frequently you talk to your neighbors, and your level of concern for others. The internet by itself is not very likely to build community, but it might facilitate volunteering among people who already are committed to helping others. (Many non-profit organizations list volunteering opportunities on their web sites.) Nevertheless, this result stands in sharp contrast to the result from the Pew Philadelphia survey–so the issue remains very much up in the air.
charitable donations	As with volunteering, there is a modest effect of internet access on giving to charity. But the main factors driving charitable giving are religious (involvement with church), connection to the community (through newspaper readership and talking to neighbors), and a willingness to reach out to people who are different from yourself (including trust in people and saying that your views might be different from others').
involvement with business groups	Internet access is strongly associated with invovlement in business groups (as is being self-employed).
involvement with cultural groups	Internet access is strongly associated with involvement in cultural associations (as are being Jewish, female, older, and liberal).
involvement with children's groups	People with internet access are somewhat *less* likely to be involved with children's groups (younger people and early baby boomers are the most likely to be involved, as are people with children aged 6 to 9).

involvement with church groups	People with internet access are more likely to be involved with church groups (even though people with internet access are slightly *less* likely to be involved in their churches). This impact is quite powerful, though it hardly rivals measures of religiosity (how often you pray, how often you read the Bible, rejecting political liberalism, being a Catholic, being older).