The Internet and Social Capital*

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A century and a half ago the French journalist Alexis de Tocqueville travelled throughout the United States and marvelled at the generosity of the American people. "When an American asks for the co-operation of his fellow citizens, it is seldom refused; and I have often seen it afforded spontaneously, and with great goodwill," Tocqueville argued [8]. He attributed this generosity to the Americans' tendency to look beyond their own immediate concerns: "The principle of self-interest rightly understood produces no great acts of self-sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial....If the principle of interest rightly understood were to sway the whole moral world, extraordinary virtues would doubtless be more rare" ([8], 122-123). This idea of self-interest rightly understood we now call trust in other people.

According to Tocqueville and many who have followed in his footsteps, people develop trust in each other when they join together for common purposes in civic associations. Indeed, Putnam referred to a "virtuous circle" of trust, group membership, and informal social ties that has become known as "social capital" [5]. Social capital helps make society and its government run more smoothly.

Yet, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this circle somehow broke. Americans began to withdraw from participation in all sorts of civic groups–from the traditional service organizations such as the Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, and the League of Women Voters as well as bowling leagues and card-playing clubs. We socialized less with friends and neighbors and we voted less often. The inevitable result was that we became less trusting of one another [6]. In 1960, 58 percent of Americans believed that "most people can be trusted" (as opposed to saying that "you can't be too careful in dealing with people"). By the 1990s barely more than a third of Americans trusted each other, according to national surveys such as the General Social Survey and the American National Election Study. Americans have lost their sense of community. We

don't mix with each other as much as we used to and we don't trust each other. We have become more balkanized, our public life has become more contentious, and our national institutions (especially the Congress), struggle to compromise on even the most basic public policy questions.

The villain in the decline of social capital, Putnam argues, is technology–initially television and now the Internet [6]. Watching a lot of television keeps us inside our homes and away from the civic organizations and social connections that generate trust. Heavy TV viewing also leads us to believe that the real world is as "mean" and violent as the programs we see on television–so it makes us less likely to trust strangers. Television produces misanthropes–who see the world as a dark and threatening place and whose "Friends" are fictional characters whom you will never be asked to help out.

That's the old technology. Today there are even more mistrusters and civic engagement has dropped further. The new culprit seems to be the Internet. Even more so than television, the Internet may be a lonely place. We hear stories of people who become addicted to the Net, who spend their hours in front of a computer screen and ignore their families and dissociate themselves from friends. Television programs may make you think that the world is mean. The Internet will show you just how nasty folks can be. When you enter an Internet chat room, you can hide your identity, "flame" other people, and "troll" first time visitors to a web site. The Net can be a dangerous place, where "charities" solicit funds for nonexistent causes, scoundrels feign love for lonely hearts, and unscrupulous hackers uncover your credit card numbers. Heavy Internet users *become* more depressed, lead more stressful lives, and have fewer friends–even though they may start out as well off psychologically as the rest of us [4].

Yet, this is just one face of the Internet. Others see the Net as the great opportunity to

rebuild our lost sense of community and trust. People come together on the Net through e-mail lists, affinity groups, support groups, and chat rooms. The Internet connects people from all over the world–and may be, as Hauben and Hauben argue "a grand intellectual and social commune in the spirit of the collective nature present at the origins of human society" ([1], 5). The Internet is the great leveller of class and race barriers–which have proven to be strong barriers to effective participation in American society [11, 12]. As computer literacy and Internet access grow, Americans should reconnect with each other–thus forming the base for a new era of trust.

I offer a third perspective: The Internet neither destroys nor creates social capital. There are both altruists and scoundrels on the Net, just as there are in everyday life. Indeed, the Internet, like television, mirrors everyday life. What people do online is pretty much what they do offline: They shop, they get sports news and weather, they plan their vacations, and, most of all, they contact people they already know through e-mail. The Net is not a threat. But it is not Nirvana either.

The major reason why the Internet is not the "new new thing" of trust and civic engage-ment is that much of the current discussion of the "virtuous circle" of trust, civic engagement, and socializing is misplaced. Trust in other people is trust in strangers, people who are different from yourself. Trust is essential for a civil and a cooperative society, but it does *not* depend upon your life experiences–whether you visit friends and relatives, join civic organizations, watch television or surf the Internet. Instead, trust reflects an optimistic world view and a belief that others share your fundamental values. You learn trust from your parents. You are not likely to become more trusting in people who are different from yourself by interacting in clubs or in coffee klatches with people like yourself [10].

Trust is not irrelevant to the Internet. Far from it. Going online does not make people

either more or less trusting, But trust shapes how people interact with each other. Trusting

people are less likely to fear getting involved with strangers. In everyday life, trusters are less

likely to lock their doors at night and to use guns to protect themselves. They are more likely to

volunteer and give to charity. On the Net trusting people should see others as nice folks who

won't exploit them–so they should be less worried about violations of their privacy and will be

more likely to buy goods on the net. There is little reason to believe that people who trust others

will be more or less likely to use the Internet otherwise.

What about the other aspects of social capital, civic engagement and sociability?

Perhaps people who use the Internet a lot are hermits, but more likely they are sociable. From e-

mail (the most widely used part of the Internet) to chat rooms to support groups, going online

involves communicating with others. The Internet is not likely to create the kinds of communi-

ties that could generate trust. Trust develops between people of divergent backgrounds, whereas

the net excels in bringing together people who already have something in common–be it family

ties, friendship, working in the same office, political views [2], or needing the same kind of

medical information and/or psychological support. One of the most heralded forms of online

communities–the medical support groups–brings together people who may know nothing about

each other *except that they share the same malady*. And since many of these conditions are

temporary–such as sports injuries [7]–these online communities may well be populated primarily

by transients. Nevertheless, simply going online for information and support is hardly the

hallmark of a troglodyte.

What the Data Tell Us

What is the connection between trust, socialibity, and Internet usage? I analyzed data

from a 1998 survey of technology use by the Pew Center for The People and The Press. The

survey asked 2,000 Americans a variety of questions about going online as well as questions about people's social networks, and their trust in others and in government. (Alas, there are no questions on group membership, which is a key element of social capital.) I estimated almost 20 models using a statistical technique called ordered probit analysis.[1]   These models allow me to determine which factors best predict different forms of Internet use. Each model contains many factors that might lead to more Internet usage,[2] but I focus on trust and measures of sociability (how wide is your social support network, how often you visit family members, and how frequently you call friends). Unlike the Kraut et al. survey of people who were given computers so that they would go online [4], the Pew Center survey is a representative national sample of the population with a much larger number of respondents (2000 compared to 169). Examining only those people who go online may lead to erroneous conclusions, especially since most people don't spend a lot of time on the Internet.

The Internet usage variables fall into four categories: general use of the net, how often people go online, making social connections online, and worries about privacy and security on the net. I summarize the results of the statistical models in Table 1. And they are telling: The Internet is neither the tool of the devil nor the new Jerusalem–which heralds the renaissance of a national sense of community and trust in one another. For most types of general use of the Internet–using e-mail, getting information on health, business, sports, and stocks, expressing your views online, and buying goods online–trust either doesn't matter at all or not much. Surprisingly, e-mail users are more likely to trust others and people who buy goods online are ever so slightly more likely to trust others.   Beyond that, general use of the Internet is connected neither to trust nor to sociability. All sorts of people go online to seek information–the trusting and the misanthrope, the sociable and the recluse.

There is little reason to expect that simply going online either taps or drains sociability (or trust). Kraut et al. argue that people who spend a lot of time online are the misanthropes [4]. But the Pew Center survey offers little support for this view. People who use their computers a lot, who spent a lot of time online yesterday (both in real time and how often they connected), and who *say that they spend too much time on the net*, are no less trusting than people who don't go online at all. Neither the Internet nor television remakes people's personalities [9]. And the picture of heavy surfers as loners is also wrong: *The heaviest users of the Internet have **wider** social circles and support networks.* The Internet, then, does not herald a new spirit of community. Rather, it is an additional outlet for people who already are connected to other people, as others have also found [3].

The new innovation of the Internet–chat rooms–offers some hope that people of different backgrounds might get together and learn to trust one another. But here, of all places, we see some evidence of misanthropy. People who visit chat rooms or who make new friends online are no more or less sociable than anyone else. They don't have bigger or smaller support networks and are no more likely to visit relatives or call friends. Yet, they are *less **trusting*** than others. Perhaps people who make friends online, often anonymously, feel uncomfortable with meeting "real" strangers. And many, maybe most, chat rooms are marked by a dominant worldview or ideology–and dissidents often find out rather rudely that they are not welcome ([2], [12], 101-102]). People who frequent chat rooms seem to trust only people like themselves and fear people with different views.

People who mistrust others fear the Internet much as they accept all sorts of other consipracy theories that we see on the "X Files." They worry about their privacy generally and in particular about the security of their medical records and downloading viruses. Trusters see

the Internet as more benign. Trusting people believe that they can control the world and have faith that science will solve our problems [10]. They see the Internet as an additional tool that gives them leverage over their world ([12], 173).

The Internet, then, is not a resevoir of social capital. As in everyday life, there are places where trust matters and there are even more places where it doesn't. Trust matters most when people fear the unknown and worry that this new technology can come back to haunt them. And there is little evidence that the Internet will create new communities to make up for the decline in civic engagement that has occurred over the past four decades in the United States. Yet, there is even less evidence that the Internet is pushing people away from traditional social ties or making them less trusting.

Internet use neither consumes nor produces trust. Neither the number of listservs you belong, how often you go online, whether you are willing to give your views on political or social issues online, or whether you enter chat rooms makes you more more trusting. And *the more people use e-mail, the **less** trusting they seem to become.* Surfing the net will not turn a misanthrope into a truster.[3]

The Pew Center survey does not allow a good test of the effects of Internet use on trust because it does not include most of the factors that I have elsewhere found to be the most important reasons people trust others (a general sense of optimism and control). The 1996 American National Election Survey does permit a rough test of the effect of Internet use on trust. The test is not ideal, because the survey asked only whether people had Internet access, not whether they went online or what sites they visited). And net usage was substantially less in 1996 than in the past. But it is the best test available–and it shows just what I would expect: Internet access leads to neither more nor less trust, once we take other factors (such as general

optimism, age, and education, among other variables) into account.

Circling the Wagons?

This completes the circle. It is neither vicious nor virtuous. The Internet is neither a dark and threatening place nor is it "a grand intellectual and social commune." Yes, the Internet is filled with pornography, but it didn't invent them and nobody is forcing folks to visit these sites (or others that sell Viagra to dogs or let children gamble). And yes, there are more opportunities on the Web to give to charities, to find volunteering opportunities, and to join support groups. But that isn't the whole Internet either. The World Wide Web is very much like the World. It makes things better in some ways and worse in others. But it is not transforming. If you want to make a revolution, you have to go offline.

The message of these findings is the Internet is not a threat to our society or its moral fiber. Regulating the net won't solve our social problems or save our children from evil influences. Children develop trust in others by learning from–and emulating-their parents, and not from what they (don't) see on television or on the Web. And how much you trust others as a child largely determines how much you trust others as an adult. Yes, the world *may* seem a more dangerous place on television or on the Web. And the Internet makes such mean sites more readily available than the everyday world (or even television). But this does not mean that the net (or any other form of media) poses a real threat to most families. By itself, it is neither a threat to civil society and sociability or its panacea.

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Table 1

What Shapes Internet Use?

Findings from Survey of the General Public

From the Pew Center for The People and The Press 1998

Types of Internet Use   **Effects of Trust and Sociability**

Types of Internet Use	Effects of Trust and Sociability
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. People who use e-mail are more likely to trust others and people who buy goods online are slightly more trusting. 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. And they have strong social bonds. They have good social support networks and are more likely to have visited family.

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. They are *less* likely to trust other people.**

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.

NOTES

1. The technique is analogous to multiple regression when the dependent variables (what I wish to explain) are categorical rather than continuous.

2. I use other variables to ensure that the relationships between Internet usage, on the one hand, and trust and sociability, on the other hand, are not spurious. The other variables are: age, gender, being a student, family income, owning your own home, being self-employed, being single, having no religion, how much time you watch television each day, how often you read a newspaper, whether you trust the federal government, and whether you believe that the Internet helps keep people in touch with one another.

3. Other independent variables in the analysis are: age, whether you own your own home, family income, ecuation, whether you say that you are a "born again" or Evangelical

Christian, whether you are employed, how often you call friends, and how often you visit your family. Only education is statistically significant in the model. Ideally, I should estimate a simulataneous equation model to test for the possible reciprocal effects of trust and Internet usage. However, these results are so weak that such modeling would not yield different conclusions.