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# "Surfing Alone": The Relationships Among Internet Communities, Public Opinion, Anomie, and Civic Participation

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## Abstract

Robert Putnam noted in his seminal essay "Bowling Alone" (1995) that the rich associational life that characterized Americans was being lost. He introduced the idea of "social capital", or the formal and informal relationships among individuals, as correlates of social trust and civic engagement in a society. Robert Putnam neglected to note a more critical threat to social capital and traditional associations than "bowling alone", however—the relatively new phenomenon of "surfing alone", whereby individuals link to each other through the Internet. While this has often been hailed as a means of creating communities across spatial boundaries, it limits the face-to-face contact that has been critical to the political power of traditional organizations. As such, it provides an illusion of community that is a weaker counter-force to a dominant class. Further, as an international phenomenon, it has the potential to affect the levels of social capital on a global basis.

This paper attempts to study the effects of "surfing alone" within the "internet community", using data from the Saguaro Seminar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. This project utilizes forty-one community-based samples from the study, for a total of 26,230 respondents in the United States. My paper concludes that the internet has a profound effect upon public opinion and civic associational life. To the extent that online contact replaces other forms of civic association, it promotes a public that is more isolated, less tolerant, and more susceptible to anomie than the traditional relationships.

**Key words:** Surfing alone; The relationships among internet communities; Public opinion; Anomie; Civic participation

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## INTRODUCTION

A constant threat to the republic lies in the isolated individual, severed from his past relationships, unhappy with his present circumstances, and pessimistic about the future. This person feels few ties to his community or to the body politic at large, and hence will not invest social capital, or the energy to create relationships with his fellows, in a society from which he feels alienated and a future he feels is uncertain. Many assumed the Internet would help alleviate this threat. By linking individuals to others through an alternative medium, the Net could provide a means by which social ties and civic involvement might be encouraged. However, unintended consequences have caused the Internet to have the opposite effect. The appearance of "cyber-communities" has instead degraded the traditional notion of community, and actually weakened civic participation.

Understanding this development requires that we examine the nature of the threat. As far back as 1820, Alexis de Tocqueville warned that *Democracy in America* had much to fear from persons who felt they had no place in a society, given the abolition of inherited titles of nobility:

> When an aristocracy carries on public affairs, its national pride naturally assumes this reserved, indifferent, haughty form, which is imitated by all classes of the nation… When on the contrary, social conditions vary but little, the slightest privileges are of some importance; as every man sees around him a million of people enjoying precisely similar or analogous advantages, his pride becomes craving and jealous, he clings to mere trifles, and doggedly defends them (de Tocqueville, 1956, p.253).

Democracy could easily degenerate into mob rule under these circumstances. More recently, Lipset

distinguished his *Political Man* from the alienated individual who was "highly conscious of his separation from others and from self" (Lipset, 1962, p.52). Further, Kornhauser noted in *The Politics of Mass Society* how isolated individuals were more prone to authoritarian appeals by demagogues because

> Acceptance of democracy requires a high level of sophistication and ego-security. The less sophisticated and stable a person, the more likely he is to favor a simplified view of politics, to fail to understand the rationale underlying tolerance of those with whom he disagrees, and to find difficulty in grasping or tolerating a gradualist image of political change (Kornhauser, 1959, p.155).

In the past few years, we have seen these issues arise again, this time in relation to trends among citizens in general, instead of just certain classes. Robert Putnam argued in his seminal essay "Bowling Alone" that the rich associational life previously enjoyed by Americans was being lost (Putnam, 1995, pp.65-78). Like many before him, he suggested that social capital correlated with social trust and civic engagement in a society. Absent these relationships, individuals lose a critical means of checking elite power through organization. Here, he echoes de Tocqueville (de Tocqueville, 1956, especially pp.198-202), who described the dangers of a society without voluntary organizations to give citizens a sense of place and status. Putnam updated this observation, using data from the 1991 World Values Study to show that the "close correlation between social trust and associational membership is true not only across time and individuals, but also across countries" (Putnam, 1995, p.72).

However, Putnam neglected in his essay a threat to social capital and traditional associations other than "bowling alone"—the relatively new phenomenon of "surfing alone", whereby individuals link to each other through the Internet. While he adds a discussion about the Internet to his book on the decline in American community, his main concern is that individuals will spend time on the Net that they could be spend on other, more community-oriented activities (Putnam, 2000, pp.169-180). He notes that while the Internet has often been hailed as a means of creating communities across spatial boundaries, it limits the face-to-face contact that has been critical to the civic activism of traditional organizations. As such, the Net could create a weaker community, which in turn would provide a weaker counter-force to a dominant class. Further, as a domestic or international phenomenon, it has the potential to affect the levels of social capital on a national or global basis. Still, Putnam conditionality his conclusions by stating that the Internet could also have positive effects: "the potential benefits of computer-mediated communication for civic engagement and social connectedness are impressive" (Putnam, 2000, p.174).

Finally, Sunstein adds another warning about the potential effects of the Internet. In *republic.com*, he argues that the Net can be used to customize the information we receive, reducing the "public" aspect of information exchange, and protecting individuals from opinions or subjects they might not otherwise seek. Sunstein notes that this sort of withdrawal by certain groups is not necessarily a bad thing for a pluralistic society; groups must often withdraw inside themselves in order to generate a coherent set of positions to present to the outside (Sunstein, 2001, p.66-67). That assumes, however, that these groups will eventually turn outwards and present their positions to be debated within the society at large. Sunstein's fear is that Internet groups would remain insular, and become a refuge against contact with others, effectively reinforcing whatever extreme positions the group's individuals might hold:

> If the public is balkanized and if different groups are designing their own preferred communications packages, the consequence will be not merely the same but still more balkanization, as group members move one another toward more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies…
>
> New technologies, emphatically including the Internet, make it easier for people to hear the opinions of like-minded but otherwise isolated others, and to isolate themselves from competing views. For this reason alone, they are a breeding ground for polarization, and potentially dangerous for democracy and social peace (Sunstein, 2001, p.66-67).

This danger is particularly acute with regard to the ability individuals have to customize their news consumption on the Internet.

This paper demonstrates the potential effects of "surfing alone" within the "Internet community" in four steps. First, it compares respondents' online "sense of community" with that of their neighborhood-, religious-, residence-, and work-based relationships. Second, it analyzes the demographics of the different types of communities. Third, it tests whether online associations lead to civic participation, as de Tocqueville and many of the pluralist theorists suggested about traditional relationships. It also measures whether identification with Internet communities correlates with measures of anomie, such as mistrust of particular ethnic and social groups in the population. Finally, it compares the online relationships with traditional forms of community relationships, such as residence-, work-, religious-, and neighborhood-based communities. The analysis shows that online communities are an inadequate substitute for traditional communities with regard to encouraging civic participation.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

Uslaner summarizes the general state of investigation into Internet communities in his essay "Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet." The author combines a survey of the literature with his own analysis to conclude

that merely the act of connecting to the Internet does not appear to lessen sociability or social trust. He acknowledges that surveys by Kraut et al. (1998) and Nie and Erbring (2000) claim a relationship exists between time spent online and misanthropic attitudes; however, he then contends that the more comprehensive Pew Center survey on the subject reaches the opposite conclusion (Uslaner, 2000, p.11)[1].

Other studies reflect similar disagreements regarding the effects of Internet usage on civic engagement. Recent literature suggests that differing results on these questions are a consequence of the way in which analysts operationalize Internet usage as a predictive factor. Bimber argues that "the great variety of communication and information-handling capacities [of the Internet]… can entail very different activities with divergent or even conflicting effects on human phenomenon" (Bimber, 2000, pp.299-303)[2] As a result, the Internet is not monolithic in its effects upon civic participation.

This theme is extended by Shah et al. in a study which attempts to classify users by functional groups. These include *researchers* (who use the Net for email and on-line investigations); *consumers* (who use the Net for financial and travel transactions); *expressives* (who use the Net to put forth opinions or carry on conversations on bulletin boards or in chat rooms); and *party animals* (who use the Net for entertainment or games) (Shah et al., 2001, pp.141-162). The analysts contend that *patterns of use* are better predictors of civic engagement than *hours of use* for Internet subscribers.

This argument is credible, as far as it goes. The problem with the classification of users into functional groups is threefold, however. As with any functional taxonomy, it is unclear whether these categories are exhaustive. Further, the classifications clearly overlap; individuals are likely to use the Net for a variety of these purposes, and if one evaluates by function, one cannot analyze the importance respondents attach to each. Finally, the analysis might not isolate the functions that elevate or decrease civic participation; indeed, the relationships the authors discover are rather weak.

Past studies do not include how respondents conceptualize their relationships to the Internet. Functional analyses do not necessarily address where one tends to derive their sense of community; nor do they study the differences between online communities and the more traditional forms. The following analysis follows this comparative format.

This study uses data from the Saguaro Seminar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. This project utilizes forty-one community-based samples from this data set, for a total of 26,230 respondents in the United States. Four questions guide the analysis:

a) What relationships exist among the different types of social ties individuals form? Can one define "communities" according to the group ties claimed by respondents?
b) Do "online communities" differ from the "traditional communities" based upon friendship, neighborhood, or city?
c) Are there demographic characteristics associated with different forms of community?
d) Are the different types of community related to measures of civic participation in different ways? Are they also related differently to destructive social forces such as distrust and anomie (a feeling of powerlessness and isolation in the society)?

## 2. SOCIAL TIES AND TRADITIONAL AND "ONLINE" COMMUNITIES

The first portion of this analysis utilizes questions regarding the sources of individuals' sense of community; respondents indicated their agreement with the following statements through "Yes", "It depends/No strong feelings", or "No" answers:

a) Old or new friends give you a sense of community.
b) People in your neighborhood give you a sense of community.
c) Living in [your city] gives you a sense of community.
d) Your place of worship gives you a sense of community.
e) The people you work with or go to school with give you a sense of community.
f) People who share your ethnic background give you a sense of community.
g) People you have met online give you a sense of community.

The responses were then correlated; the results, presented in Table 1, indicate that online relationships are different from the more traditional group ties. All of the traditional relationships were significantly inter-correlated below the .000 level; however, respondents who felt a sense of community with people they met online only correlated with those who claimed more traditional ties in three out of six instances: those who obtained a sense of community from their place of worship ($r$=.102, $p$=.000), those with whom they worked or went to school ($r$=.131, $p$=.000), and those who share the same ethnic background ($r$=.224, $p$=.000).

[1] See also Kraut, R. E.; Scherlis, W.; Patterson, M.; Kiesler, S.; and Mukhopadhyay, T. "Social Impact on the Internet: What Does it Mean?" *Communications of the ACM*, 41, 12, 1998; and Nie, Norman, H. and Erbring, Lutz. "Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report." Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, Stanford University.

[2] Factor loadings for the other types of community feeling were not significant, and were dropped from the factors.

**Table 1**
**Correlations Among Sources of Community**

| | Neighbors | City | Worship | Work | Ethnic | Online |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Friends | .273 | .167 | .176 | .197 | .138 | .052 |
| Neighbors | | .265 | .174 | .107 | .149 | .066 |
| City | | | .195 | .119 | .237 | .098 |
| Worship | | | | .184 | .278 | .102 |
| Work | | | | | .225 | .131 |
| Ethnic | | | | | | .224 |

A factor analysis reduces these responses to two sets of self-identified "communities", as shown in Table 2. The first factor, termed the *Traditional Community,* includes those who derive a sense of community from their friends and neighborhood. The second factor, termed the *Online Community*, includes those who derive a sense of community from people they have met online or from people who share their ethnicity[2].

**Table 2**
**Factor Analyses of Sources of Community**

| *Traditional* | Loading | *Online* | Loading |
|---|---|---|---|
| Friends | .691 | Ethnicity | .723 |
| Neighborhood | .738 | Online | .701 |

Two variables were computed to distinguish individuals in the Traditional and Online communities. The *Traditional Communitarians* were classified by adding responses on the variables citing community in friends or neighborhood; the resulting measure had a range of 2 to 6. The *Online Communitarians* were classified by adding responses on the variables citing community in one's ethnic group or online; the resulting measure also had a range of 2 to 6. The higher one's score on the variables, the more one associates with the respective sources of community.

## 3. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TWO COMMUNITIES

The two communities have different demographic characteristics, many of which are counter-intuitive. First, however, it is useful to describe the general demographics of Internet users. Here, there are few surprises. Access to the Internet at home, and the number of hours spent on the Internet in a typical week correlated positively with younger ages, higher levels of education, and higher incomes across a variety of measures[3]. Additionally, access to the Internet was most common among non-Hispanic whites, although race did not correlate significantly with hours spent on the Net[4]. These results correspond to the typical picture of Net users as younger, better educated, wealthier, and Caucasian.

The Traditional Communitarians are not characterized by any single demographic characteristic; indeed, despite Putnam's fears about the decline in social capital over time in America, membership in this group is not correlated with age ($r$=.083, $p$=.000). However, the Online Communitarians share a demographic profile almost the exact opposite of the "typical" Net users. Online Communitarians tend to have less education and lower incomes, and *they are more likely to be non-Hispanic blacks or Hispanic, and less likely to be non-Hispanic whites than the Traditional Communitarians*[5]. As such, these individuals are atypical of the groups who have Internet access and utilize it more often.

## 4. ATTITUDES TOWARDS CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND ANOMIE

The attitudes towards civic participation and anomie were grouped into five categories for this analysis. These include the following measures of *social trust, racial tolerance, civic participation, political participation,* and *anomie*[6].

*Social Trust*:

A. One can trust others vs. one has to be careful
B. Whether most people can be trusted
C. A general social trust index I
D. A general social trust index II
E. Trust your neighbors? (0 = Low).
F. Trust your co-workers? (0 = Low).
G. Trust co-religionists? (0 = Low).
H. Trust your local police? (0 = Low).

Racial Tolerance

A. Do you trust Asians?
B. Do you trust Blacks?
C. Do you trust Hispanics?
D. Do you trust Whites?

[3] Hours spent per week on the Internet and access to the Internet correlated with the following measures at a .000 significance level, respectively: year of birth (.200, .207), highest education completed (.151, .317), GED or equivalency (.127, .135), income over $30,000 per year (.132, .357), total household income (.142, .397), and three category education (.163, .319). All measures are Pearson product moment correlations.

[4] The Pearson product moment correlation for non-Hispanic whites (0=No, 1=Yes) was .021 for hours spent each week, and .125 for access to the Net at home.

[5] The higher the score on the Online Community scale, the lower the Pearson correlations with highest education completed (-.179), income over $30,000 a year (-.123), total household income (-.143), and three category education (-.187); the only exception was a non-relationship with GED or equivalent (-.017). Further, the higher an individual was on the Online Community scale, the less likely they were to be non-Hispanic whites (-.208), and the more likely they were to be non-Hispanic blacks (.147), or Hispanics (.136). All correlations are significant below the .000 level.

[6] Note that all measures were coded so that they represented increases in trust, tolerance, and civic and political participation; also, since anomie is a negative characteristic, positive associations show higher levels of anomie.

E. Composite Racial Trust Grouping I
F. Composite Racial Trust Grouping II
Civic Participation
A. Civic Participation Scale I
B. Civic Participation Scale II
Political Participation
A. Do you trust the national government?
B. Do you trust the local government?
C. 3-part electoral politics scale
D. 5-part electoral politics scale
E. Organizational activism scale
F. Voted in 1996 election
G. Signed a petition in the last six months
H. Interest in political affairs
Anomie
A. How happy are you?
B. People in the community do not care what happens to me.
C. Immigrants are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights.
D. A book that most people disapprove of should be kept out of the public library.

These measures were then correlated with four groups of individuals: those defined by the time spent online, those who had internet access, the Traditional Communitarians, and the Online Communitarians. The results, presented in Table 3, may be summarized in the following manner:

***Social Trust–*** The measures of social trust were not correlated significantly with the number of hours one spent using the Internet. They were, however, correlated with whether or not one had access to the Net in their homes in all but two cases. Further, membership in the Traditional Community correlated with higher levels of social trust in all eight cases. The opposite result is shown for members of the online community; membership in the Online Community correlated negatively with social trust in two cases, while the five other measures showed a weak negative correlation, and one showed a weak positive correlation.

***Racial Tolerance—*** Access to the Internet correlated positively with racial tolerance in five out of six categories. Membership in the Traditional Community correlated positively with racial tolerance in all categories. The hours spent using the Internet, and membership in the Online Community showed no relationship with racial tolerance.

***Civic Participation—***The hours one spent on the Internet, access to the Internet, and membership in the Traditional Community were all positively correlated with higher levels of civic participation. Membership in the Online Community was negatively correlated with civic participation.

***Political Participation—***The hours spent on the Internet correlated with higher levels of political participation in only one out of eight categories; by contrast, access to the Internet was correlated with higher levels of political participation in six categories. An important contrast lies in the relationship between the Traditional and Online communities. Membership in the former appeared to boost political participation; the higher one's score on this index, the *more* likely they were to participate in six cases. However, membership in the latter appeared to depress political participation; the higher one's score on this index, the *less* likely they were to participate in four cases (the other categories showed no effect).

***Anomie—***The hours spent using the Internet and membership in the Traditional Community correlated with reduced feelings of anomie in two out of four categories. Access to the internet correlated with reduced feelings of anomie in three of the four categories. However, membership in the Online Community had the opposite result; in two cases, feelings of anomie actually increased the higher one's score on the Online Community index.

**Table 3**
**Pearson Correlations Between Internet Use and Communities, and Measures of Trust, Tolerance, Participation, and Anomie**

| | Hours using internet | Access to internet | Traditional community | Online community |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social trust | | | | |
| A | .042 | .147 | .149 | -.123 |
| B | .051 | .135 | .121 | -.113 |
| C | .013 | .128 | .231 | -.085 |
| D | .021 | .139 | .295 | -.060 |
| E | .015 | 141 | .327 | -.074 |
| F | .040 | .143 | .160 | -.065 |
| G | .019 | .097 | .188 | .015 |
| H | -.006 | .055 | .219 | -.023 |
| Racial tolerance | | | | |
| A | .047 | .119 | .171 | -.015 |
| B | .039 | .109 | .185 | .003 |
| C | .044 | .110 | .178 | .007 |
| D | .002 | .052 | .185 | .031 |
| E | .043 | .105 | .184 | -.003 |
| F | .046 | .118 | .195 | -.010 |

To be continued

Continued

| | Hours using internet | Access to internet | Traditional community | Online community |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Civic Participation | | | | |
| A | .104 | .216 | .102 | -.116 |
| B | .102 | .218 | .107 | -.123 |
| Political Participation | | | | |
| A | -.002 | .022 | .133 | .046 |
| B | -.009 | .031 | .169 | .031 |
| C | .027 | .138 | .126 | -.100 |
| D | .042 | .162 | .136 | -.111 |
| E | .114 | .179 | .100 | -.035 |
| F | .024 | .129 | .115 | -.101 |
| G | .093 | .158 | .035 | -.105 |
| H | .056 | .129 | .100 | -.074 |
| Anomie | | | | |
| A | .020 | .120 | .161 | -.022 |
| B | .014 | .084 | -.200 | -.047 |
| C | -.103 | -.176 | -.055 | .133 |
| D | -.149 | -.205 | .010 | .177 |

*Note*. All relationships are significant below $p$=.000.

The results illustrate the differences between the Traditional and Online Communitarians. With regard to social trust, racial tolerance, civic participation, and political participation, one of three results occurred:

a) Membership in the Traditional Community boosted these measures while membership in the Online Community had no effect; or
b) Membership in the Online Community depressed these measures while membership in the Traditional Community had no effect; or
c) Membership in the Traditional Community boosted these measures while membership in the Online Community depressed these measures.

Similarly, Traditional Communitarians appeared to display lower levels of anomie, while Online Communitarians appeared to display higher levels of anomie.

These results support several hypotheses regarding civic and political participation. Putnam's assertions (1995, 2000) that traditional associations tend to boost these activities, and generate higher feelings of social trust, are supported by the profile of the Traditional Communitarians. These individuals, who draw their sense of community from their neighborhood and friends, would fit easily into Putnam's vision of those likely to engage in social organizations. However, they did not tend to be the older respondents, thereby not necessarily justifying Putnam's fear that social capital has declined in recent years according to this measure[7].

Yet, the fears that "surfing alone" depresses social trust, tolerance, and civic and political participation relative to the traditional community do appear somewhat justified. Further, Online Communitarians seem more susceptible to the feelings of anomie that are related to isolation from the public sphere. Indeed, "surfing alone" has two negative effects implied by these results. First, it appears to reduce the social capital that prompts engagement in civil society. Second, to the extent that it serves as a substitute for traditional forms of community based around friends and neighborhood, it eliminates the positive effects of the latter forms of social organization. Online communities are not merely poor reflections of traditional communities; they are different entities with deleterious effects upon social capital.

Finally, this project illustrates why past studies (Uslaner and Shah, etc.) have failed to address the relationship between the Internet and social capital. As the results indicate, access to the Internet is positively correlated with social trust, tolerance, and civic and political participation, and negatively correlated with feelings of anomie. These findings are almost certainly artifacts of the profile of those who have home access to the Internet—individuals who are wealthier and better educated tend to be of a higher socio-economic status, and thereby have higher levels of tolerance and participation[8].

Similarly, the hours spent using the Internet tended to have little relationship to the measures of social trust, tolerance, civic and political participation, and anomie[9]. These findings are consistent with those of Uslaner, who argued that time spent on the net did not increase or depress social capital. This project's results suggest that one's use of the Net was a better measure than just mere amount of time spent on it. However, a straight functional

[7] This result might be an artifact of the particular types of measures used, however. Also, a lack of correlation with age does not necessarily mean cohort effects are not present, since the relationship with age might not be linear.

[8] In order to test this hypothesis, the relationships between all the measures and access to the internet were examined, with a control for education. The relationships only remained after the control in five cases: objection to removing a book from the library ($r$=-.1216); civic participation ($r$=.1106); social trust ($r$=.1115); civic participation in three categories ($r$=.1177); and trusting one's neighbors ($r$=.1066). All measures are significant below the .000 level.

[9] Although where there is a relationship, hours spent on the Net appear to have a positive association with attitudes related to social capital.

classification of usage is insufficient to explore issues of social capital. Rather, one needs to explore further how the net user perceives that usage—one cannot decide *a priori* how various activities function for the respondent. When one discusses social capital, one must always return to the notion of community, regardless of the context in which one explores it.

## CONCLUSION AND RAMIFICATION

The Internet clearly poses a potential threat to social capital in post-modern societies. While its potential for grassroots organization on a global level can be encouraging, its ability to create "cyber-communities" that substitute for traditional community ties appears to fail with regard to civic participation. The Net, which can theoretically be a liberating tool that puts individuals in contact with more diverse populations and opinions, is being used by a specific group of individuals to isolate themselves from civic engagement.

One cannot resist speculation about this group—most notably concerning their motivations and why the Internet appears to serve and reinforce their attitudes and behavior. One surprising result in this study is the racial composition of the Online Community, blacks and Hispanics tend to have higher scores than whites on this scale. Since so much publicity has been given to the image (or perhaps the stereotype) of the angry, displaced white male, it is necessary to note that other racial groups are proportionately more likely to seek an ethnic community online, and that gender does not correlate with this activity. However, one must be cautious not to abandon this image entirely. Black and Hispanic respondents are more likely to appear in this group in proportion to their percentages in the sample population. However, of the 8,478 respondents who answered the two questions on the Online Community scale, 12.6 percent (1,066) fell into the top category; of these, 61.4 percent were white, 21.5 percent were black, and 9.8 percent were Hispanic. Due in part to their large presence in the sample, white respondents still dominate the Online Communitarians. Further research must necessarily involve more complex regression modeling to describe this group's demographic and motivational characteristics in more detail.

Further, it is small comfort that the isolation and decline in social capital that accompany online communities are becoming more pluralistic. Given that different racial groups are unlikely to join with each other if they seek links to their own ethnic group online, these findings only suggest that the balkanization of American society, and its resulting decrease in civic participation, is more widespread than suspected earlier. In addition, the nature of the Internet makes it likely that those who seek an online community with their own ethnic group will find sites that cater to their tastes, including many that depend upon negative, or even hateful, depictions of individuals who do not share their background.

All of these observations suggest that studies of the Internet and social capital require us to return our attention to the sources of community, and the question of why an Internet community, in and of itself, cannot substitute for the traditional forms. A primary reason is that a community is an entity to which individuals have an emotional attachment, and from which they derive a sense of a common past and a common future. Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that communities will encourage civic engagement, or the investment of social capital, in the future. Individuals only make investments if they can envision some future goal, either for themselves or their children.

But cyberspace exists only in the moment. It substitutes immediate gratification for a sense of past or future, and neither demands nor encourages commitments or investments of social capital. One may argue, of course, that even traditional communities have no real "past" or "future." They might be considered merely "imagined communities[10]" represented by a piece of land that symbolizes a common heritage. But one can return to the land and thereby "revisit" the community. Revisiting a website is a poor substitute for a link to a particular physical place one would fight for and perhaps die defending. Absent such a sense of common past and fate, individuals in a society lose the bonds which make them invest social capital in their community or nation. As Connerton notes

> Concerning social memory in particular, we may note that images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory. To the extent that their memories of a society's past diverge, to that extent its members can share neither experiences nor assumptions (Connerton, 1989, p.3).

An "Internet underclass", comprising persons who are less educated and less well off than those who generally access the Net, and whose isolation is reinforced by the singular activity of "surfing alone" might therefore prove susceptible to hateful, authoritarian appeals:

> Isolation… and a lack of sophistication are conducive to withdrawal, or even apathy, and to strong mobilization of hostility. The same underlying factors that predispose individuals to support extremist movements under certain conditions may result in total withdrawal from political activity and concern under other conditions. In "normal" periods, apathy is most frequent among such individuals, but they can be activated by a crisis, especially if it is accompanied by strong millennial appeals (Lipset, 1962, p.116).

Further, since the Internet is a global phenomenon, these results have global implications. The United States is not alone in producing web sites that have negative or hateful

[10] See, for example, Anderson, Benedict. (1995). *Imagined Communities*. In J. Hutchinson, & A. D. Smith. (Eds.). Nationalism New York: Oxford University Press.

messages about different ethnic groups, and it would be naïve to assume that this study's findings only apply to citizens of that country. The decline in social capital, the increase in anomie, and the withdrawal from politics associated with "surfing alone" need not necessarily result in individuals being more susceptible to authoritarian appeals. But even the "mere isolation" of a significant proportion of citizens from their society is something post-industrial polyarchies, which already struggle with issues of legitimacy and social cohesion, can ill afford to ignore.

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