BOWLING ONLINE:

HOW THE INTERNET IS DRIVING THE REINVIGORATION OF AMERICAN SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT:

This paper begins where Robert Putnam (2000) left off in his seminal work Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. It aims to explore what role the Internet and social media tools like Facebook and Twitter may have played in overturning diminishing levels of social capital. After reviewing the current literature on Internet-driven social capital generation, the paper describes the results of the San Diego English Country Dancing (ECD) Study, an analysis of the influence of Facebook on an apolitical recreational group in a suburb of San Diego California. It concludes that Facebook compels people to engage with the site out of fear of being left 'out of the loop', that Facebook leads to stronger and more sustainable groups, and that Facebook crystallises weak ties, making them more accessible and creating a reservoir of social capital to be called upon in times of need.

Next, this paper examines the implications of online social media on civic engagement. It employs the American Tea Party Movement (TPM) as an example of successful Internet-driven grassroots political action and argues that it is the low costs and low risks of online participation that make it so successful. However, the ease of this low-commitment activism also makes it vulnerable to being simply disregarded as 'slacktivism'. Furthermore, by comparing the TPM with Iran's failed 'Twitter Revolution', this paper argues that social capital cannot simply be 'downloaded', and that certain conditions must be met before social networking sites have the power to dethrone dictators.

I conclude that the Internet has been the saving grace of American social capital, and that the weak ties of bridging and maintained social capital will ultimately benefit from social media tools like Facebook. While its applications for bonding capital are slightly less clear, the successful embedding of the Internet as a complementary form of communication at the very least contradicts claims made by some scholars that it detriments strong ties.

Chapter 1: Research Design

Introduction

This paper aims to understand how changes in the culture and usage of the Internet have affected social capital in the United States, a decade after the publication of Robert Putnam's (2000) seminal work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

In the years since the book's release, Professor Putnam has refrained from addressing how the rise of Internet technology since 2000 may have affected American social capital. While there is a general consensus among scholars that Facebook and other social networking sites have a beneficial effect on social capital (Bhalchandra, *et al*, 2010; Lampe, *et al*, 2007; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Valenzuela, *et al*, 2009), such literature tends to adopt a quantitative methodology, leaving scope for this paper to approach the effects of the Internet on social capital qualitatively and contextually.

Research Statement

In order to gauge the extent to which the Internet has affected American social capital levels since 2000, I have used primarily qualitative research methods. Because social capital is such a multi-faceted concept, a qualitative explanatory approach appears the most suitable. Furthermore, this paper aims to follow the largely qualitative methodology of Putnam's (2000) study as closely as possible. Nevertheless, *Bowling Alone* also relies on a substantial quantity of statistical secondary data and as such this paper does use some quantitative analysis. This study undertakes an embedded approach and, like Putnam (2000) in the later chapters of his book, attempts to inductively analyse American social capital in order to understand what it has become in the opening decade of the 21st century.

At its simplest level this study is an exploration of whether or not an independent variable (improving Internet technology in the last ten years) has increased or decreased the dependent variable (American social capital). Nonetheless, I do not anticipate the answer to the paper's question to be as simple as 'yes' or 'no'. Firstly, the concept of social capital is not directly quantifiable by nature; while its footprint can be detected within statistical data, it is difficult to precisely evaluate 'levels' of social capital. We must look instead for indicators that social capital is increasing or decreasing. Table 1 notes the indicators in political, regular informal and irregular informal activity that Putnam uses to suggest a decline in social capital. Restrictions on the length of this study mean that I only use primary research to analyse political and regular informal indicators of changes in social capital, and specifically only group membership and leadership.

Activities that Putnam Claims Indicate Social Capital		
POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AS INDICATORS	**REGULAR INFORMAL ACTIVITIES AS INDICATORS**	**IRREGULAR INFORMAL ACTIVITIES AS INDICATORS**
Serving as an officer of some club or organisation	Membership in a group	Eating dinner in a restaurant
Working for a political party	Attending group meetings	Visiting friends for dinner or evening
Serving on a committee for some local organisation	Acting as a leader for group	Having friends over for dinner or evening
Attending a public meeting on town or school affairs		Going to the movies
Attending a political rally or speech		Attending church social function
Making a speech		Attending a sports event
Writing to a congressman or senator		Going to nightclub, disco or bar
Signing a petition		Going to a live concert or theatre
Being a member of some "better government" group		Going to a social or country club
Holding or running for political office		
Writing a letter to the paper		
Writing a letter to the paper		

Table 1

A second issue to be wary of is that social capital is not a solidly conceptualised phenomenon. Scholars have battled over its meaning since the late 1970s (Dolfsma & Dannreuther, 2003). This paper employs Putnam's (2000) conceptualisation, defining it as the "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (2000: 19).

Changing definitions of social capital lead us to our final point on the dangers of oversimplifying our approach. We must aim to fully comprehend what the Internet has done for social capital, and not simply superimpose the framework of the 'real' world onto that of the 'virtual'. In a conversation after a lecture delivered at the University of Bristol in mid-2010, Professor Putnam told me that political scientists must search for and engage with an 'alloy', an approach that encompasses the effects of both real-life and virtual networks on social capital[1]. This is why undertaking a qualitative explanatory approach in my primary research is so crucial: the thick-description afforded to us by the interviews allows us to discern patterns and uncover the hidden applications of online social networking.

Methodology

This paper engages with a mixture of both primary and secondary data. The primary data, collected through semi-structured interviews, supplements the secondary data and provides a deeper understanding of the trends detected in pre-existing academic literature and data. The interviews were conducted as a part of the San Diego English Country Dancing Group (ECD) Study carried out in January 2011. After initially meeting with the group, they occurred online through email with a single pool of individuals. The 13 individuals interviewed were involved by formal membership with a non-political social group that meets regularly once a week throughout the year in the same location. All individuals were active Internet users and the group itself was embedded in the Internet. Because the interviews were conducted through email, each was structured around identical questions (see appendix), although

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[1] Professor Robert Putnam, personal conversation, 9 June 2010

interviewees were asked if they could be contacted again to comment on their previous questions, making the interviews semi-structured. Interviews were used to uncover how much influence the Internet had had on individual involvement with the group and specifically if it had hindered or helped group cohesion.

The interviews were conducted with individuals based in Poway, California, a suburb in San Diego County with a population of 50,000, selected because it provided a large number of potential social groups to choose from, and because of the convenience of proximity. The decision not to control for age or gender was a consequence of Putnam's claim that trends in declining social capital appear consistently in all demographics of the population (Putnam, 2000: 46). Thirty applicants were originally invited to submit their email addresses for the interview. Of these, eighteen responded. Three email addresses were non-functioning and two did not respond, providing the study with 13 participants (see Table 2). While this sample was not large, it was beneficial because it allowed in-depth analysis during the interview and follow-up after the data was initially processed.

	Participants
Invited to interview	30
Accepted interview request	18
Non-functioning email or failure to respond	5
Total number of participants	13
Response rate (%)	43

Table 2

Interviews were an appropriate method for gathering supplementary data for this paper. Not only do they allow a thorough understanding of all factors that may be affecting the dependent variable, but also by approaching the interview data holistically, subsequent theme analysis can uncover possible themes or codes that emerge (Vromen, 2010). Interviews are not entirely reliable, however. Nunkoosing (2005) describes how the interviewer often imposes herself on the interview, influencing the responses of the subject. In this paper, this problem is remedied somewhat by the fact that the interviews took place via email. Interviewees were not pressured into response by the expectant presence of the interviewer, nor was the body language or tone of the interviewer able to interfere with the process.

Of course, conducting the interviews in such a manner does generate other problems, foremost being the time allowed for the interviewee to consider their response, which may be practiced, artificial and concealing if interviewees have time to think them over (Hine, 2005: 37-38). However, the time delay afforded by an Internet interview may also grant the individual more time for deliberation and therefore

richer and more informative responses. In other words a loss in organic spontaneity equals a gain in coherence and self-reflection.

Markham (2004) adds that while the Internet interviewer does not play such an imposing role during the process, the non-verbal information lacking in the interaction constitutes a meaningful gap in information for the researcher. However, because scholars do not tend to write down each individual gesture and physical cue of their interviews for subsequent analysis, this information would be no more lacking on the transcript of an Internet interview as it would be for a standard real-time interview. Therefore, no explicit information is lost.

Finally, because the study was conducted overseas it was particularly important to ensure it met ethical guidelines. Before taking part, interviewees were informed of the nature of the paper and notified that the information they provided was not to be disclosed to anyone beyond the study. They were granted anonymity within the paper and full access once it was completed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In 2000, Professor Robert D. Putnam of the Harvard Kennedy School published his seminal work on American social capital, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community.* Within the book Putnam gives evidence of a drastic decline of social capital within America since the late 1950s and argues that a reduction in group membership, political activism, civic engagement and informal relationships is both a cause and an indicator of a considerable decline in social capital in the United States. He describes the detrimental effects that declining social capital can have on the economic productivity of a nation and the emotional well-being of its inhabitants, and provides a litany of potential causes. *Bowling Alone* was set to the backdrop of a developing Internet, one that was yet to see not only a 72% increase in American adult use in the next decade (Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey, 2010), but also the ubiquitous rise of online social-networking sites. In the book Putnam alludes to the potential future impact the Internet may have on declining social capital in America, but argues that it is too early to attempt to know what exactly this will be.

Any study on the ephemeral concept of social capital must contain a rigorous explanation. While this paper uses Putnam' aforementioned definition as the backbone for its conceptualisation of social capital, social capital is a broad and heavily contested concept, and finding a rigorous definition to satisfy all academic literature that employs it proves highly problematic. Putnam himself argues that some scholars possess an overzealousness in the jurisdiction of the term, claiming anything socially beneficial as instant 'social capital' (Clarke, 2004). He is not alone in this opinion, and Lin *et al* (2008: 7) suggest that there is looming danger the concept of social capital may be abandoned unless social scientists develop a framework that can meet the rigorous demands of theoretical validity and reliability.

Putnam's sound conceptualisation of social capital goes a long way to providing this framework. He divides social capital into two different types: 'bonding' and 'bridging'. The former refers to social networks that tend to reinforce identities and homogenous groups, such as ethnic fraternal organisations or tight knit religious circles. Such networks are useful, among other things, for providing social and psychological support for members within a community. Bridging social capital on the other hand, is what Putnam aphoristically refers to as 'sociological WD-40' (2000: 23), offering linkages to network members that provide information and assets outside regular social circles. A major benefit of bridging social capital postulated by economic sociologists is the job opportunities it brings; Granovetter (1973: 1368) argues that the cohesive power of 'weak ties' found in bridging networks are more valuable when job-seeking than well-defined 'strong ties' in bonding networks because they allow individuals to be diffused among acquaintances who move in different circles and provide a pluralistic assortment of favours and opportunities. Therefore, while bonding capital is good for 'getting by', bridging capital is better for 'getting ahead' (De Souza Briggs, 1998).

While recent research has added a plethora of varying definitions of social capital, the inconsistencies in scope and application of these definitions means they are not always compatible with Putnam's version of social capital. A primary distinction between different forms of social capital has been noted by Woolcock (2001), who argues definitions are based either on the *sources* of social capital (primarily social networks) or its *consequences* (such as trust and security). Putnam's definition leans more towards the former, such that social capital simultaneously exists as a quasi-tangible entity of networks and as a resource to be drawn from whenever necessary, rather than as the general levels of 'trust' or 'exclusivity' present in a society. While other approaches would be suitable for a broad analysis of social capital, because this paper is constrained within the boundaries of Putnam's research, it appears prudent not to stretch the concept beyond the scope of his own theoretical definition.

However, in the years since *Bowling Alone,* academics have suggested other dimensions of social capital that enhance Putnam's definition. The concept of 'maintained' social capital—the individual's ability to stay connected with members of a community they have moved away from—posited by Lampe *et al* (2007) was theorised to complement Putnam's already existing concepts of bridging and bonding capital, and their application of it to Facebook is relevant to this paper. Their study of the benefits of Facebook 'friends' among students at Michigan State University (MSU) found that not only was maintained social capital increased among regular users of Facebook, but also bonding and bridging social capital. The implication of these results is discussed later in this paper.

A final dimension of social capital worth mentioning, because it complements the three already noted, is 'linking' social capital, defined by Sretzer & Woolcock (2003) as the networks of trusting relationships between individuals interacting across explicit and formal authority gradients. Good relationships between citizens and their law enforcement officers, bankers, teachers and health care providers engender high quantities of linking social capital. In a sense, linking social capital is simply a theoretical refinement of bridging social capital networks, but incorporating only those connected across 'vertical' power differentials.

This paper will therefore limit its scope to the following four dimensions of social capital: *bridging*, *bonding*, *maintained* and *linking*, represented in the diagram below (Fig. 1). It is important to stress that the boundaries between different forms of social capital are by no means distinct and exclusive; on the contrary, it is often necessary to employ a multi-dimensional approach as bonding, bridging, linking and maintained social capital complement one another (Woolcock, 2001).
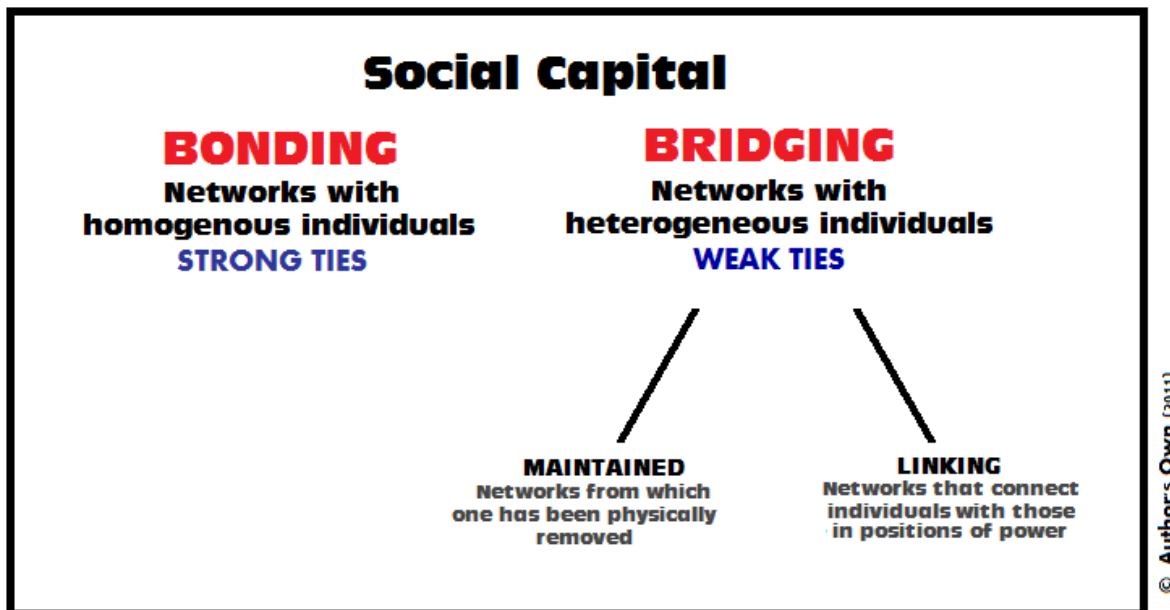
Social Capital

BONDING
Networks with
homogenous individuals
STRONG TIES

BRIDGING
Networks with
heterogeneous individuals
WEAK TIES

MAINTAINED
Networks from which
one has been physically
removed

LINKING
Networks that connect
individuals with those
in positions of power

© Authors Own [2011]

Fig. 1

As well as the aforementioned MSU study on the benefits of Facebook 'friends', there have been several other scattered attempts by researchers to analyse the effects of the Internet on social capital (Bhalchandra, *et al*, 2010; Lampe, *et al*, 2008; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001). However, when discussing these studies with Professor Putnam, he remarked to me that while this research is interesting, much of it does not control for possible spuriousness[2]. For example, socially engaged people may be more likely to use social networking sites, making levels of social capital difficult to gauge.

While Putnam himself has never directly addressed the questions on virtual social capital that he raised in 2000, a decade later he and colleague Thomas Sander recognised that while adult Americans have shown varying levels of civic and social engagement, their use of Facebook, Twitter and a plethora of other forms of 'civic technology' indicates that they are certainly engaging *differently* (Putnam & Sander, 2010). Researchers must try to examine what these new forms of engagement mean to social capital.

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[2] Professor Robert Putnam, personal correspondence, January 18 2011

In this same study Putnam & Sander (2010) are eager to draw attention to the disparities among class, age and race in Internet engagement. The work of Castells (1999) complements this theory, as he describes the emergence of social 'black holes': areas of a given population so socio-economically relegated as to be totally deprived of Internet technology and bypassed by information and financial opportunities available to those in wealthier regions 'plugged in' to online networks. Castells' theories are certainly applicable to the hundreds of thousands of Americans without regular Internet access and it is necessary, therefore, to keep in mind that not only are the effects of the Internet on social capital unknown, they are allegedly uneven.

Finally, it is important to address the increasing amount of media and scholarly attention given to the effects of the Internet on political activism, a useful indicator of social capital levels within the United States employed in *Bowling Alone*. The results have been far from consistent. In one field are the proclaimers of a new era of political engagement, arguably led by Clay Shirky whose popular book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2008) provides a cogent description of how online social technology encourages activism. A recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2011) shows evidence that groups with individuals interconnected by Internet technology are more likely to achieve their goals, such as getting a candidate elected to office or raising money for a cause. Putnam & Sander (2010: 13) remark how the Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 deployed classic organising techniques to expand its impact through new technologies like Twitter and Facebook.

However, a critique of this optimistic cyber-utopianism that appeared recently in *The New Yorker* was an influential addition to the growing body of work which claims that the Internet's capacity as a catalyst of activism has been grossly overestimated (Gladwell, 2010). Evgeny Morozov—who has pitched himself as Shirky's opposite in the debate on cyber-activism—goes so far as to claim that by accessing and storing details of individuals politically active on the Internet, authoritarian regimes can easily single out the

most radical members of society, such as those coordinating the grassroots discontent that occurred around the 2009 Iranian elections (Morozov, 2011).

Putnam's book is now more than a decade old but its content has resolutely stood the test of time. By combining the rigorous theory of his research with the contested, untried and ever-evolving world of online civic technology we have the potential to generate rich and revealing data about the future of American social capital.

Chapter 3: Social Capital, the Internet and Group Activity

Introduction

Scholars must be aware that while the Internet holds endless potential for a transformation of social interaction, it is imprudent to claim that the physical social world can ever be totally supplanted by an online one. Putnam exhibited similiar wariness in *Bowling Alone*, arguing that the simulacra of classic forms of social connectedness and civic engagement—for example, an online funeral, a 'cyberwedding' and a virtual march on Washington—are by no means representative of a brave new virtual community (Putnam, 2000: 170-171). Consequently, he was reluctant to make claims about a future that in 2000 would have been impossible to predict.

Nevertheless, like economist Frances Cairncross (1997) who once guaranteed the Internet would herald a total 'death of distance', early Internet researchers were unafraid to predict an inevitable 'virtual community'. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the Internet has had some impact on Putnam's network-based definition of social capital, simply because the Internet, in his own words, is "the network to end all networks" (Putnam, 2000: 171). Researchers must nevertheless embrace an intricate and dynamic approach to the power of the Internet if they are to comprehend the complex nature of its effect on social capital. In order to understand the impact of the Internet on aspects of social capital, the online social activities that individuals take part in must be closely examined.

Measuring the Effect of the Internet on Social Capital

The Internet—and more specifically digital tools like Facebook and Twitter—is intrinsically tied up with group membership and therefore social capital. Though the plethora of aforementioned literature

discussing the potential effects of the Internet on society already stands testament to the body of academics who have been aware of this fact for many years, the most convincing evidence was published recently by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Pew Research Center, 2011).

The Pew Project revealed that not only are 80% of Internet users involved in groups compared to 56% of non-Internet users, but Twitter and daily Internet use are powerful indicators of group participation (Pew Research Center, 2011). Furthermore, the flexibility, attractiveness and communicatory power of such groups have been greatly enhanced by the Internet. The overall conclusion drawn by the data generated from this report suggests that the Internet greatly improves the chances for group formation, and with that, various forms of social capital.

The immediate reaction of the media—and no doubt soon academia—has been to use this report to condemn the popular image of an Internet whose only effect was civic disengagement[3]. While this report is without doubt indicative of the powerful tool the Internet has become, researchers should be wary of jumping to conclusions without properly understanding what is actually occurring here. Most importantly they should make sure that it is indeed the Internet that encourages group membership, and not simply that those predisposed to more social activity are more likely to join a variety of real-life groups. This question is examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

Facebook: The Ultimate Social Network

There is no doubt that one of the Internet's most capable social tools is the website Facebook. Created in 2004 as an online social network for American university students, Facebook currently caters to 500 million active users, 50% of whom log in at least once a day (Facebook Press Room, 2011). The ubiquity of Facebook becomes relevant when coupled with the Pew Project's findings that 82% of individuals

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[3] For media examples, see Rydberg (2011) Popkin (2011) and Whitney (2011).

engaged with social networks like Facebook are more likely to be socially active group members (Pew Research Center, 2011). Facebook holds a key to generating social capital. The Lampe *et al* (2007) study of Facebook use at MSU supports this claim, and argues the site not only improves bridging, bonding and maintained social capital, but also provides greater benefits from users experiencing low self-esteem and life satisfaction. Of particular interest is their theory on maintained social capital, or "one's ability to stay contacted with members of a previously inhabited community" (Lampe, *et al*, 2007: 1143). Facebook is particularly good at providing resources of this form of social capital because, in the case of university students, it generates weak ties with old friends from home for those suffering from 'friendsickness' (Brier & Paul, 2001)[4].

In their attempts to explain the positive benefit suggested by their data on bridging and bonding social capital, Lampe *et al* (2007) uncover some interesting aspects of the site. Firstly, they show that by having the personal information of friends and acquaintances readily available, Facebook allows individuals to tap into social capital that would not otherwise be accessible. The hypothetical example they cite is a student's newfound ability to easily locate other students who might be helpful in some way, such as a maths major in a required calculus class. This form of weak tie is applicable outside the college environment: Facebook lists previous and current employers and other similar titbits of information about individuals that could provide the 'getting ahead' benefits of bridging social capital not easily accessible in the offline world. In this sense, Facebook allows highly engaged users to crystallise relationships that might otherwise remain ephemeral or even non-existent (Lampe, *et al*, 2007: 1162). Furthermore, Charles Steinfield, co-author of the Lampe (2007) study, elaborated on what made Facebook such a good 'network maintainer', by arguing that the information accessible on the Facebook

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[4] This may help to counter the social capital-diminishing qualities (Putnam, 2000) of a transient lifestyle.

pages of old friends—for example, updates about a new job—can make the awkward task of 'reconnecting' with them easier[5].

Proving the bonding social capital capabilities of Facebook is a harder task for Lampe *et al* (2007), who recognise that while various studies indicate the Internet can bring together people with similar interests or relational goals (as in those able to generate bonding social capital together), the proximity of offline and online connections on Facebook where the virtual community is geographically-bound to the physical community (such as workplaces and universities) makes it difficult to discern how social capital is generated.

The San Diego English Country Dancing Group (ECD) Study

In order to gain a better and more detailed understanding as to what exactly is happening to social capital online, I created the *San Diego English Country Dancing Group (ECD) Study* to examine the networks and social perceptions of a discrete group of individuals who use the Internet to stay connected. The individuals were regular members of the San Diego English Country Dancers, a group heavily embedded in and reliant on the Internet. There were two specific questions the study sought to answer:

1.) Does the Internet increase, decrease and/or change bonding, bridging, maintained and/or linking capital?

2.) How does the Internet affect the way in which the group functions and members stay connected with one another?

It is important to recognise that this study does not answer the crucial 'chicken versus egg' question of causation: that is, whether social capital is increased by online network membership or if socially active

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[5] Professor Charles Steinfield, personal correspondence, April 19 2011

people are simply more likely to use the Internet. Rather, the ECD study serves to explore the attitudes of group members, and to attempt a dynamic and ethnographic understanding of how their social networks have been enhanced or diminished by the Internet.

As the study progressed it became more apparent that the most crucial component to the online generation of social capital was Facebook. The pervasiveness of the site presented itself not just in how often it was mentioned in the interviews, but also in comparison with other online activities and site visits (see Fig. 2). The results reflect this emphasis.
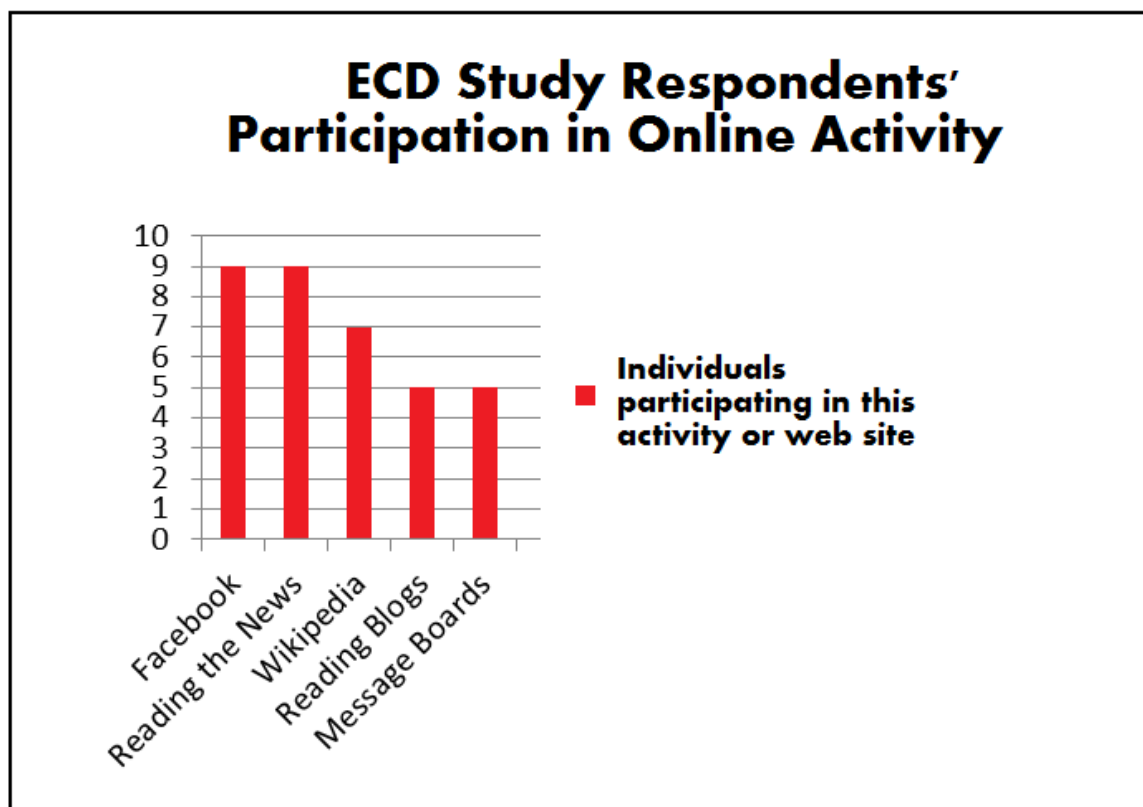
ECD Study Respondents' Participation in Online Activity

Individuals participating in this activity or web site

Facebook, Reading the News, Wikipedia, Reading Blogs, Message Boards

Fig. 2 NB: The following results received a value of 0 and were not included on the chart:Twitter.com, Myspace.com, Bebo.com, Classmates.com, Dating websites, Writing a blog

Overall, individuals were relatively disparaging about Facebook, and nearly everyone was wary of its alleged evils and privacy issues. Though participants each provided their own personal reasoning for their unenthusiastic engagement with Facebook, their reluctance touched upon an important aspect of

the study that needs to be examined. As previously mentioned in the research design, the study did not control for age because of Putnam's reasoning that declining levels of social capital are not limited to any single age groups of society. While age data was not explicitly recorded, the majority of members of the San Diego English Country Dancers were aged 55 and above. This leads to a number of important points. Firstly, it indicates why some participants were so reluctant to use Facebook. The site was, after all, initially created for young people, who continue to make up the vast majority of users today, while individuals aged between 55-65 account for only 7% of active users (Eldon, 2010). The unenthusiastic attitude of these older users toward joining Facebook is explored in the results.

Secondly, the age disparity of the study gives it an interesting twist. Unlike previous studies that often focus on young university students (Lampe, *et al,* 2007; Steinfield, *et al*, 2008; Valenzuela, *et al*, 2009), the ECD Study examines a group of individuals who have not always had the opportunity to be plugged in to an online network, simply because the Internet was invented in their lifetimes. As a result, their interviews provide us with a 'before and after' perspective on the effects of the Internet, mingling anecdotes of a time before Facebook was a lynchpin of social interaction with accounts of how it now plays a crucial role in their lives.

Results

After collation and analysis, the interviews with the thirteen participants of the ECD study provided three major conclusions:

CONCLUSION 1
INDIVIDUALS ARE FORCED INTO JOINING FACEBOOK JUST TO 'KEEP UP' OR OUT OF FEAR OF BEING LEFT OUT
CONCLUSION 2
FACEBOOK LEADS TO MUCH MORE EFFICIENT ORGANISATION CAPABILITIES OF THE GROUP, ALLOWING INCREASED MEMBERSHIP AND SUSTAINED INVOLVEMENT
CONCLUSION 3
FACEBOOK LEADS TO AN INCREASE IN BRIDGING CAPITAL AND ALLOWS A MEDIUM FOR INDIVIDUALS TO MAINTAIN THEIR WEAK TIES, CONNECTIONS THAT WOULD OTHERWISE DISAPPEAR

The reasoning and evidence behind these conclusions is explained below.

Conclusion 1:
Individuals Are Forced Into Joining Facebook
Just to 'Keep Up' or Out of Fear of Being Left Out

*"I DO THINK ONE PERSON NOT HAVING ACCESS [TO THE INTERNET] HARMS COMMUNICATION, BECAUSE THAT PERSON IS SIMPLY 'OUT OF THE LOOP'." – **AMY W.***

Many participants expressed concern about missing out on certain aspects of social interaction by not having a Facebook account[6]. They described their begrudging reluctance to create one, and many were quick to qualify this action by explaining that they simply wanted to see pictures and videos that were only accessible to those on Facebook. Some were worried that they were being 'tagged' (a Facebook application that allows individuals to identify themselves and others in uploaded photos) without permission.

While some claimed their motives for joining Facebook had little impact on their lives, others felt that Facebook had transplanted much of their social interaction and planning into a virtual realm. One respondent said:

*"I have no idea how I would know about classes, events, parties, if I didn't have the Internet." – **Kevin P.***

The participant's response indicates how relevant the Internet has become to his life. Despite the availability of more traditional means of social coordination—calendars, notice boards, telephone networks, address books—the Internet functions as a crucial component which, if absent, would severely detract from this individual's social activity. Facebook users appear grudgingly aware of how important the site has become, creating an interesting nuance in its social capital applications: do

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[6] Only one of the group's 30 members had no regular Internet access, and was unable to participate in the study.

reluctant socialisers generate less social capital than those who are more enthusiastic? This question is explored later in this section.

Conclusion 2:
Facebook Lends the Group More Efficient Organisational Capabilities, Allowing Increased Membership and Sustained Involvement

"[IF I WERE DENIED ACCESS TO THE INTERNET FOR SIX MONTHS] I WOULD FORGET THE ECD."
– RICHARD B.

Participants were enthusiastic in describing the ways that the Internet, and particularly Facebook, allowed them to keep up with group events, parties and cancellations. Some went into great detail about their reliance on the Internet and Facebook to maintain the housekeeping duties of the group. Those in leadership positions[7] described how useful the Internet was for learning the intricacies of various dances, coordinating meetings, exchanging information with other dancing groups across the country and working with musicians to ensure sessions were as efficient as possible. Some, like Richard B. quoted above, felt their membership would end without the organisational capabilities of the Internet.

While none commented about the efficacy of the group before the advent of the Internet, it was evident that Facebook had become an entrenched and reliable way of communicating and coordinating within the group. Putnam (2000) asserts that groups, by fostering networks and regular social interactions, generate social capital. It stands to reason, therefore, that by making groups more efficient and allowing them to better regulate and coordinate consistent membership, the Internet helps sustain social capital in groups that already exist.

Conclusion 3:

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[7] The ECD has a board of elected officers and coordinators.

Facebook Leads to an Increase in Bridging Social Capital and Allows a Medium for Individuals to Maintain their Weak Ties, Connections that Might Otherwise Disappear

"RIGHT NOW I HAVE A LARGE NETWORK OF ACQUAINTANCES, BUT BEFORE THE INTERNET I HAD A SMALL GROUP OF CLOSE FRIENDS." – JOSH H.

Perhaps most significantly out of all the conclusions, the ECD Study found that individuals were much better equipped to maintain weak ties, as Facebook provided them with the tools to keep up with old friends across the world. Facebook offered an instantaneous and universal tool, easy to access and free to use, allowing individuals to nurture old friendships and displaced acquaintances, which would otherwise be forgotten and lost. It broadened their networks so that weak ties within the group were suddenly accessible beyond the Sunday night sessions. Furthermore, some participants described how these new networks that Facebook had permitted them to tap into now allowed them to engage in social events they would have otherwise been unaware of:

"Since I'm a 'friend' to so many now, I also tend to get invited by people I don't know to yard sales and other events which are on the periphery of my Sunday night dance group. Many of them belong to several different groups so they actually see one another a few times a week." **– Kevin P.**

Whereas individuals who have not tapped into Facebook are only vaguely aware of the nebulous array of networks that revolve around them, regular Facebook users are privy to an entire field of interacting individuals, groups and events laid out before them every time they log on. Facebook serves as a permanent record of all the weak ties generated by an individual, even if these ties are very rarely visited upon. One participant remarked upon this specifically:

"Without the Internet, I expect my connections with distant friends would diminish over six months. And my nearby friends and I would have to spend a ton of time on the phone just to keep our regular activities organized." **– Cat G.**

The feedback from the ECD Study participants also suggests that weak ties can be made even stronger by Facebook. Facebook profiles convey information beyond just the name, location and appearance of their owners, and by allowing individuals to upload pictures, update 'statuses' and engage in public conversation on their 'walls', present others with a stream of constant information. Visitors to another's Facebook profile (even if the link between the two individuals is tenuous and weak), are privy to a range of information about that individual: online photo albums show where they went on holiday, relationship status updates announce engagements and break-ups, and casual conversations played out on walls broadcast weekend plans. In particular, several ECD Study participants mentioned how Facebook allowed them to hear updates about one member as she underwent surgery and was forced to miss a week's session. Ultimately, examining the details of somebody else's Facebook wall—a practice known in the colloquial parlance of Facebook use as 'stalking'—is a one-sided endeavor. However, many felt that by learning about the intricacies of others' daily lives, their connections to the other person were strengthened:

"I also tend to become more personally involved in individual lives, such as sharing pictures, comments about parties, injuries, adventures, thoughts, weather, and whatever is on my mind as well as read what they have to share. Therefore, I also learn about other members of my group in a more personal way and form closer friendships and bonds." **– Sarah H.**

Discussion: Can Facebook Save Social Capital?

It appears Facebook is capable of affecting weak ties in three ways: it makes wider social networks more accessible; it entrenches weak ties and prevents them being forgotten; and it allows weak ties to be strengthened and nurtured. The implications for social capital are potentially beneficial. Simply by giving individuals wider networks to tap into, Facebook increases levels of bridging social capital. Maintained social capital is also increased; individuals who have moved away from the physical locations of old

networks (schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces, for example) are able to entrench and crystallise their social bonds online, so that they are indefinitely accessible.

We must be wary, however, before declaring the application a universal solution to decreasing levels of social capital. The ubiquity of the Internet and its benefits for social capital apparent from the ECD Study have irrevocably changed how we construct, maintain and call upon the resources of social networks. There are, however, some aspects that must be considered when making arguments about the benefits of the Internet, and specifically Facebook, on social capital.

Firstly, we must be aware of the reluctance of Facebook use. While the Facebook Press Office will eagerly astound us with staggering usage figures conveying the dominance of its social network empire, usage is still far from universal amongst Internet users. The ECD Study suggests that older users might be more reluctant to engage with the site. This may limit the applications Facebook can have on their social networks, especially when compared with incoming younger generations, whose social lives are likely to be far more organically embedded in the Internet. Internet use is not only disproportionately weighted by age group, but also by socio-economic factors. Castells' (2010) concept of the network society—a society where the key social structures and activities are based around virtual information networks—complements the social penetration that Facebook has achieved. Such a society leaves little room for individuals without the means to regularly access the Internet, and there is evidence that access is increasingly divided along gender, race and class lines (Chen & Wellman, 2005; Mossberger, *et al*, 2003). Such individuals are unable to extract the social capital benefits of Internet networks, and are an important segment of society to keep in mind before making sweeping statements about Facebook connectivity.

Secondly, we must be careful not to overestimate the power of the weak ties that Facebook allows us to sustain. Granovetter's (1973) oft-cited claim that weak ties are essential for career networking may work

in the offline world, but undergraduate students at the University of Bristol who viewed the preliminary results from the ECD Study at a conference in January 2011 (Burns, 2011) found fault with this argument in an online context. Several argued that they would not feel comfortable contacting many of the weak ties they sustain on Facebook for career opportunities. While anecdotal, this critique provides a key insight: just because Facebook friends are still accessible even after physical displacement from a network has taken place, this does not mean that individuals can instantly and easily procure the social capital benefits normally available from offline networks. While a comparison of offline and online weak ties requires a more nuanced and subtle study of weak ties than there is available space for here, it is enough to note for now that they are dissimilar in some respects.

A final aspect of online social capital to consider is that it is firmly grounded in physical, offline relationships. Early research on Internet relationships suggested that those initiated online would be formed around shared interests rather than shared geography (Wellman, *et al*, 1996; Parks & Floyd, 1996). However, research suggests that Facebook users are far more likely to 'search' for people with whom they have an offline connection than 'browse' for strangers whom they would like to meet (Lampe, *et al*, 2006) and sites like Facebook are articulated on this premise. It is, therefore, crucial to remember that Facebook is far more effective at sustaining old social connections that might otherwise disappear than creating new ones.

Isolating the exact effect Facebook has on social capital is difficult. However, it is evident that under the right conditions it can be very beneficial. Pre-existing communities that transition from offline to online interaction exhibit these conditions, and the benefits brought to the ECD Group and its members are testament to this. The 2003 Toronto 'Netville Study' (Hampton & Wellman, 2003) drew similar conclusions, suggesting that a physical community, when completely 'wired' and provided with an online interactive channel such as a discussion board, undergoes increased neighbourly interaction and

higher levels of social capital. Like Netville, findings from the ECD Study suggest the Internet integrates and intertwines with other already existing forms of communication, and applications like Facebook become so embedded in communities that those without them feel 'out of the loop'. However, simply creating a Facebook account will not instantly generate social capital. Hampton & Wellman (2003: 306) argue that "people need corporeal, physical connections as well as ethereal, electronic connections", and access to an offline community that can then be interacted with online is crucial. When this community is a group, like the Poway dancers, it is made more efficient and more accessible. Members who leave town or are absent are only a mouse-click away from contact, and disparate social networks are crystallised online. Therefore, while certain preconditions must be met, while it is not universal for all individuals, while some users are reluctant and inconsistent and while online weak ties are not as effective at generating social capital as their offline counterparts, the Internet—and specifically Facebook—is certainly capable of increasing levels of social capital on a group-level scale.

Chapter 4: Social Capital and Downloadable Revolution

Introduction

The world of diminishing social capital described in 2000 by Robert Putnam was one where levels of civic activity were at an all-time low and Americans were less likely than ever to be signing petitions, attending rallies and running for public office. This chapter will argue that not only have online social media tools generated social capital among individuals at a local group level as discussed in the previous chapter, but that the Internet has made coordinated activism more likely to occur and capable of changing law and toppling dictators. While civic activity had the power to shake governments long before the advent of Internet technology, the ease of access and low-cost input afforded by sites like Twitter and Facebook have revolutionised its speed and potency. This chapter ends by examining the limits of online networks, and the delicate path scholars must tread when distinguishing between genuine activism and the rise of a wave of well-meaning but entirely ineffectual 'slacktivism'.

The Relevance of the American Tea Party Movement

On February 18th, 2009, US President Barack Obama announced the Homeowners Affordability and Stability Plan, a $275 billion program that would target homeowners on the brink of foreclosure by refinancing millions of mortgages across the country. The following morning, CNBC Business News editor Rick Santelli broadcast a long rant on live television railing against the Plan and calling for a "Chicago Tea Party". The footage of him outlining this call for a radical response quickly went viral across the Internet.

Within twelve hours, a local Chicago radio producer had launched ChicagoTeaParty.com. The official Tea Party Movement (TPM) was born.

The TPM is the epitome of mass-scale politically-oriented movements totally reliant on the networking and communication tools made available by social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Unlike the San Diego English Country Dancing (ECD) society described in the previous chapter, the TPM is not a group of distinct membership. Rather, it is an umbrella term used to refer to the thousands of 'Tea Party' affiliate groups spread across the country, corralling a legion of invariably conservative voters who unite under a single nebulous anti-government identity. For many months, individual Facebook group pages were the prime recruiting grounds for TPM membership, until the creation of TeaPartyPatriots.org, an online social networking site created by a local Tea Party group leader in April 2010 that assimilated the disparate groups into one umbrella website. Together TPM supporters attend localised and national protests, lobby government powers and launch select candidates into office—all organised largely through web-based interaction. There are several reasons why the TPM serves as an excellent example of an indicator of online media-generated social capital.

Primarily, it is arguably the first grassroots Internet-dependent national political movements in the United States. While the ECD group provides an example of the Internet facilitating social capital growth on a politically-neutral, micro-level basis, the TPM serves as model upon which to examine the effects of the Internet on a macro-level organisation with a political agenda. The TPM is heavily reliant on individual volunteers and protesters making exactly the same active civic engagements that Putnam (2000) had argued were not occurring at the end of the last century. Such civic enthusiasm from TPM members may lie in the movement's almost total dependence on social media, the second reason why the TPM is analysed in this chapter. Large conservative organisations like AmericanMajority are fully aware of the power of online social media as a tool to reach broader audiences and frequently train

local TPM leaders on how to spread their messages through Twitter and Facebook (AmericanMajority, 2010). Tea Party leaders are eager to boast about the sophisticated online networks created by the more tech-savvy supporters of the movement (O'Hara, 2010; Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010; Zernike, 2010).

The movement is also relevant to the study because of its political clout. Though strict 'membership' is difficult to gauge, various polls show anything from 19% (Gallup, 2010), to 28% (Winston Group, 2010) to 48% (Rasmussen Reports, 2010) of Americans reportedly support or affiliate themselves in some way with the TPM. A number of government candidates rode the wave of Tea Party support to incumbency in the 2010 mid-term elections, and espouse its cause in a House Tea Party Caucus. The movement mobilised conservative independents (Busch, 2010), leading Republicans to make historic gains in the US House, and wrenching the GOP toward the far right (Williamson, et al, 2011). It is evident that the TPM, a leaderless organisation with purportedly grassroot origins, has great political sway throughout the nation.

Most importantly, however, the TPM is relevant to a study on social capital because of its flexible structure and organic quality; a direct outcome of its reliance on the Internet and a vital factor in making it a nationwide organisation that is still accessible at local level. TPM organiser John O'Hara describes how the movement employs sophisticated websites like TeaPartyPatriots.org as 'hubs', allowing individuals to simply use the infrastructure already available on these sites to create their own local groups; anyone with an Internet connection can therefore "co-opt" part of the movement (O'Hara, 2010: 13-14). The result is thousands of small groups, unified under the name of a single cause, but increasing the growth of social capital of towns and cities on a local level. While accusations that the flow of cash to the TPM from Republican sources lead some to argue the movement is more 'Astro-Turf'

than grassroots (Monbiot, 2010; Krugman, 2009; Good, 2009), there is no evidence that that the TPM's dubious money trail makes the social capital it generates any less genuine.

Making Civic Action Easy

In the first chapter of this paper, I described some of the political activities suggested by Putnam (2000) as indicators of social capital, such as serving as an officer of a club or attending a political rally. These are all regular activities of TPM supporters. However, there is very little literature that examines the TPM from a theoretical perspective, let alone a theoretical perspective based on social capital. Such an approach is useful for providing an explanation for why it has been so successful. According to TeaPartyPatriots—the self-proclaimed "Official Home of the Tea Party Movement" — the TPM comprises more than a thousand community-based groups (Tea Party Patriots, 2010). These groups, made up as they are of so many like-minded fiscally-conservative individuals[8], are connected by ties of bonding social capital. Geographic dispersal kept these groups from uniting before the TPM began to take advantage of the tools made available by the Internet. They were nowhere near as successful in their policy-changing activities as they have since become.

To understand the role the Internet has played in TPM's success we can employ rational choice theory. Olson's (1971, [1965]) seminal book *The Logic of Collective Action* describes the inherent illogicality of rational civic action, and particularly of large rallies and protests: the costs of participation—time spent at the rally, the threat of arrest, commitment to a certain ideology or cause—are too high to bear by any single rational individual. Instead, it appears more logical for individuals to become 'free riders',

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[8] 89% of supporters are white, 75% are 45 or older and 56% have above-average incomes (CBS News Polling Unit, 2010).

capitalising on the efforts of those willing to take these risks without taking risks themselves. In this model large protests should not occur.

Numerous academics have accounted for this seemingly paradoxical conclusion with empirical analyses of the contexts in which civic action *has* occurred. Chong (1991) uses the American Civil Rights Movement as his model, describing how individuals with low 'participation thresholds'—the value that describes the necessary number of contributors already participating in an event for this individual to also participate—became leaders early on in the movement and encouraged further membership. Rational individuals are constantly confronted with 'assurance games', moments when they must be assured by the commitment of others to a cause before they themselves are willing to invest time and energy to also participate. Schelling (2006, [1978]) describes this as a 'critical-mass' model, such that groups must gather enough supporters to reach a tipping-point before sufficient momentum is achieved to allow the group to become politically potent.

The Internet has been instrumental in decreasing the participation threshold of potential Tea Party supporters and allowing the group to reach its membership tipping-point extremely swiftly. This is accomplished in two ways. Firstly, the Internet simply makes participation in collective action easier. Membership does not require explicit engagement with the TPM, but can mean simply embracing the symbolic community of the movement[9], a form of low-commitment activism. Individuals can show their support by attending a mass protest or simply by signing their name on an online petition. Likewise, as Tea Party websites broadcast locations of upcoming rallies and speaker events, and YouTube hosts videos of successful get-togethers, the Internet makes the social networks of the TPM efficient and coordinated in a way that would not have been possible before the advent of such technology. Disparate communities of similar interest have become bound across geographic distances. The result is

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[9] In one poll sample, 78% of self-proclaimed Tea Party supporters stated they had never even been to a TPM rally.

that in a world of diminishing social capital, communal participation, in the words of Shirky (2008: 194), is "[made] easy again".

Secondly, the Internet helps movements reach their tipping-points swiftly by making the extent and expansion of membership of others in the TPM more visible and lowering participation thresholds. Chong (1991) describes the heroic actions of the initial catalysts of the American Civil Rights Movement. Such action takes courage and can involve high risk for participants (Opp, 2001). However, the nearly instantaneous action of TPM supporters across the country—who built websites and organised protests all within the space of a few days or even hours of Santelli's rant—suggests that the movement somehow hastened the slow trickling of support normally necessary to achieve the 'tipping point' of movements in the past. The answer is that the Internet has made networks and social momentum visible. Instead of having to 'feel out' for fellow supporters, individuals now need only perform a Twitter, Facebook or Google search to find legions of like-minded Tea Party members to accompany to rallies. The 'public displays of connection' (Donath & Boyd, 2004) afforded by the Internet engender a sense of trust and commonality in online networks. Anonymity afforded by the Internet means that passionate bloggers or message board contributors need not be accurate, and their furious posts may easily agitate and strike a chord with others. The assurance game is automatically won; before individuals even see the crowds, they witness the enthusiasm for attendance broadcast on online social media sites and blogs. The participation thresholds of individuals are suddenly lowered and protests occur. At these protests, virtual networks can strengthen and crystallise further as Tea Party supporters mingle in the flesh. Furthermore, while there is often heavy overlap between online and offline identity (Arsand, 2008), individuals have relative control and fluidity about the selves they wish to portray online (Nip, 2004). The ease with which Tea Party supporters can show their superficial support for groups—signing public online petitions, joining mass Facebook groups, writing in the comments section of a political blog—means that online groups attract visible supporters faster than traditional groups demanding

greater costs of involvement. This means that not only does the low-risk quality of online group membership lower participation thresholds, but that the low-cost quality of online group membership makes initial membership faster, leading to what Shirky (2008: 54) calls "ridiculously easy group-forming".

The sudden perspicacity of TPM supporters who were until now seemingly unconscious of their like-minded ideological compatriots is reflected in the discourse they commonly employ. Adopting a phrase coined by Nixon in the 1970s, they label themselves the 'silent majority' (Fraser & Freeman, 2010)[10], suggesting an army of Tea Party sympathisers who, until they were finally linked into a coherent network by the Internet, had been a weak, voiceless community.

Ultimately, the TPM is an example of Internet-driven social capital generation in two ways. Firstly, by giving dispersed and risk-averse individuals the tools to form groups, the Internet encourages social interaction and network development. When motivated by likeminded people who they agree with, and incensed by politicians who they do not, individuals experience lower contribution thresholds. Social media encourages individuals to act because their sense of identity is visibly shared by so many others. Social capital is increased as the networks of loosely-linked individuals bonded by reciprocal values grow and strengthen. Secondly, in the process of fighting under the banner of a larger movement they are able to create their own smaller, localised groups based around the larger 'hub' of the national movement. In these thousands of pockets of government resistance, individuals engage with their civic duties, and political conversations occur where they otherwise would not.

Such interactions are not limited to the TPM and the ideological right: recent protests in Wisconsin over governor Scott Walker's attempts to cut spending and curb union power were heavily reliant on online social media tools (Knutsen, 2011) and the recent toppling of dictators in Egypt and Tunisia appears to

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[10] For examples of this discourse, see Armey & Kibbe (2010) and Amos (2010).

have been heavily reliant on Twitter and Facebook (see Olivarez-Giles, 2011; Fahim, 2011). Likewise, Putnam & Sander (2010) contend that President Obama's successful presidential bid "counted on an upwelling of youth civic sentiment" (2010: 13), in part engendered by the online social media techniques adopted by his campaign that were able to invigorate young voters. Facebook use during these elections—especially users seeing their friends perform political activity on the site—appeared to precipitate further civic activity offline (Lampe, 2011, *et al*).

Overall, these events have one thing in common: they relied on the unifying capabilities of online social media that developed the social networks capable of encouraging civic action and changing public policy.

The Perils of 'Slacktivism' and the Realities of Revolution

Having argued for its merits as a source of social capital, it is important to note how the power of the Internet may be overestimated by those attempting to encourage civic engagement. An oft-cited example of this overenthusiasm is Iran's so-called 'Twitter Revolution'. Evgeny Morozov (2009) describes how after allegations of vote-rigging surfaced in the 2009 Iranian Elections, Western media was awash with exaggerated stories about members of the courageous 'Green Movement' coordinating protests and sharing information through social media. Morozov (2009) argues that not only are proponents of online social activism such as Shirky (2008) overstating the role that Twitter played in the 2009 Iranian elections[11] but also that they are engaging in 'slacktivism', a word describing "feel-good useless Internet activism" (Morozov, 2009: 13). While the TPM was in part successful because of the low-cost and low-risk requirements for participation, it is this very ease of commitment that leads scholars like Morozov to argue that policymakers need not pay much attention to Facebook-based

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[11] Morozov (2009) argues that only 20,000 of the 70 million people in Iran used Twitter at the time of the election.

activism (Morozov, 2011: 180). He contends that showing support for online causes has become so easy as to be totally valueless.

Morozov offers a brave resistance to the ever-popular claims made by bloggers and journalists touting the universal social benefits of internet activism. He compels us to take a more nuanced approach to the Internet's capability as a generator of social capital and consequent civic engagement. While Tea Party leaders needed only to build the framework upon which to link their disparate supporters in order to elicit change, Green Movement leaders were forced to contend with an Internet penetration rate as low as 29% (World Bank, 2011) as well as the threat of execution and arrest. Unfortunately, dictators are often not the luddites that Western media assumes them to be, and frequently use the information garnered from social networking sites to hunt down potential protestors after only a few Tweets of discontent (Morozov, 2011: 59).

By comparing the successful Tea Party Movement with the failed Green Movement we can begin to understand what conditions need to be present in order for the Internet to aid the generation of social capital. Firstly, internet penetration needs to be high, as it is in the United States[12], leading to a greater potential for Internet-driven social capital generation. The thousands of like-minded individuals who are necessary to make up the TPM are online and simply waiting to be, in the words of Castells (1999), 'plugged-in' to a shared network. Secondly, the United States has a relatively higher level of 'linking social capital', defined earlier in this paper as the healthy relationships of trust between citizens and individuals in positions of authority (Sretzer & Woolcock, 2003). While this may seem antithetical for a movement based on deposing incumbent government, an accommodating relationship between protestor and state is crucial if Internet-driven protests are to be successful. High levels of linking social capital helped make Egypt's recent revolution—at least in its initial stages—a relatively peaceful one;

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[12] Around 75% of Americans are connected to the Internet (World Bank, 2011).

Facebook-wielding revolutionaries were safe under the gaze of the sympathetic military. Online social media, it appears, has the power to engage the apathetic masses. However, it is obvious that social capital cannot simply be downloaded, and the success of civic action depends on the conditions of the region it is taking place in.

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Discussion

When it was published in 2000, *Bowling Alone* did not simply serve to record the USA's diminishing levels of social capital. The book also raised the call for a saviour: someone or something capable of restoring the healthy, trusting networks of post-war America that had faded away in the 20th century's final decades. I have examined whether or not the country's rapid embrace of the Internet has worked to reverse this trend. This paper has determined that while social capital levels have not returned to earlier levels, the Internet has been and will continue to be a vital tool in creating and sustaining various forms of social capital.

As mentioned, the ephemeral quality of social capital makes quantifying it a challenge. Like Putnam (2000), I can only analyse the footprint it leaves behind, the indicators such as group formation and civic engagement that reflect how social capital may have been affected by the Internet. The San Diego English Country Dancing Group (ECD) Study examined a non-political group that met regularly for several hours a week and whose members employed the Internet as both a social and organisational tool. I concluded that many Facebook users were pressured into joining to stay 'in the loop', that Facebook allowed the group much more efficient organisation capabilities, and that Facebook led to an increase in bridging social capital. These three factors contribute to a dense network of weak ties for any given individual, an essential reservoir of social capital that might be absent without the Internet. While this conclusion applies to groups like that of the ECD Study, literature examining individuals not constrained to discrete groups (Lampe, *et al*, 2007; Lampe, *et al*, 2008; Lampe, *et al*, 2011; Valenzuela, *et al*, 2009) comes to similar conclusions: Facebook is an excellent generator and maintainer of the weak ties of bridging and maintained social capital.

The ECD study served to zoom in on some of the effects of Facebook on social capital on a micro level, and helped provide some details as to what effect the Internet might be having on a much broader scale. My analysis of the Tea Party Movement (TPM) provides one example of this. Like the ECD group, the Internet has made group formation and coordination much easier. In both instances, individuals' networks undergo 'crystallisation', as they are made tangible in a database of weak ties. The thresholds for civic engagement are consequently lowered as a swathe of potential bonding capital (in the form of thousands of like-minded individuals) is made visible online. Individuals find it not only easier to express their ideological preferences online, but also that the transient and malleable quality of online identities means they run much less of a risk in doing so. However, civic engagement is not limited to bland Tweeting or the meaningless Facebook group membership of slacktivists. The mass rallies and Congress-altering efforts of the TPM indicate that individuals are also engaging in the offline political world.

Weak ties were described in the opening chapter of this paper as essential for 'getting ahead', but social capital is useless without the strong ties necessary for just 'getting by'. Professor Putnam's colleague, Thomas Sander, suggested to me that the hours we commit to Facebook, tending to and updating ourselves on the delicate ties of our extensive networks, might actually undermine our bonding social capital (Sander, 2011)[13]; likewise, Kraut *et al* (1996) and Nie (2001) argue that the time spent online simply decreases the time we have available to spend offline with close friends. However, more detailed studies reveal that the Internet has become so normalised in day-to-day life that it interacts with and supplements offline bonding social capital (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Wellman, *et al*, 2001). This is especially true in geographically bound areas, such as 'wired-up' neighbourhoods and university campuses where there is little distinction between offline and online ties (Hampton & Wellman, 2003;

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[13] Thomas H. Sander, personal correspondence, March 7 2011

Kavanaugh, 2005). Indeed, claims of sectarianism and ethnocentrism directed at the TPM[14] suggest how tightly knit and exclusive it really is.

Ultimately, it appears that the Internet has answered Putnam's cries for help. As the Internet becomes increasingly ubiquitous across the USA, increased levels of social capital will follow. Facebook maintains and strengthens groups and the interconnected weak ties of individuals that comprise them. Likewise, the TPM and similar movements across the world prove that Internet-driven political action is powerful, easy and real. Putnam was right; we are still bowling alone. At least now, however, between strikes and spares we are Tweeting revolution.

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[14] For examples, see Campo-Flores (2010), Khan (2010) and Pergram & Shively (2010).

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APPENDIX :
Sample Interview

Semi-Structured Online Interview

This paper seeks to explore the effect of the Internet on social capital in the United States since 2000. This section of the paper involves online, semi-structured interviews with a number of members of the San Diego English Country Dancers social group.

BY AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS ONLINE INTERVIEW, YOU ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL BE ANONYMIZED, PRIVATE AND SECURE. THE ONLY PERSON WITH ACCESS TO THIS INFORMATION WILL BE THE AUTHOR OF THE PAPER (LUKE BURNS, POLITICS & SOCIOLOGY BSC. HONS.). AFTER COMPLETION THE RAW DATA WILL BE DESTROYED AND THE FINAL PAPER WILL BE AVAILABLE TO YOU IF YOU REQUEST IT. YOU MAY PULL OUT OF THE STUDY AT ANY TIME AND FOR ANY REASON. THE STUDY'S DATA PROTECTION PLAN IS AVAILABLE AT UPON REQUEST.

Please place an X in this box to confirm that you acknowledge and understand the above information [x]

THE INTERVIEW BEGINS HERE

Please answer the following interview questions with as much detail as possible. The more information you can provide the richer the results of this study will be.

Please place an X in the box next to any of the websites and internet activities listed below that you visit or participate in at least once a week:

Facebook.com	[x]	Bebo.com	[ ]	MySpace.com	[ ]
Twitter.com	[ ]	Wikipedia.com	[x]	Classmates.com	[ ]
EHarmony.com	[ ]	Match.com	[ ]		
Message Boards	[ ]	Reading the News	[x]	Writing a blog	[ ]
Reading blogs	[x]				

Please describe the ways in which your involvement with this dancing group might be affected by your access to the Internet.

The internet enables me to find out about special events, and it means that I don't need to write down the details or take a paper flyer. I can look it up at any time. Also, on the rare occasions when a dance in cancelled, they post the information on the website.

Does the Internet make it any easier to maintain friendships with other members of the dancing group? Please elaborate.

It helps, because I am able to see what some other members of the community are doing through Facebook.

If you and your friends both in and outside of the dancing group were suddenly denied access to the Internet for six months, would your relationships be affected? If so, how?

I think relationships would be affected, but I don't know that it would be bad, per se. Right now I have a large network of acquaintances, but before the internet I had a small group of close friends.

If you use a social networking site such as Facebook, MySpace or Bebo, what were your reasons for deciding to create an account? Has the site satisfied these reasons?

I chose Facebook because it enables me to find people that I used to know, and I like to know how they are doing and what they are currently "up to". I can also maintain some connection with current friends.

Please tick this box if you do not mind answering further questions online regarding your answers above   [x]

THE INTERVIEW ENDS HERE

Thank you very much for your time.