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## **Internet and Social Capital: The Power of Virtual Bonds in Social Life**

## **Presentation Content and Structure:**

- Internet and new communication paradigm**
- Internet's impact to sociostructural changes**
- On social capital**
- How does the Internet affect social capital**
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## Internet and new communication paradigm

- New information and communication technologies have established **new and specific forms of communication**, i.e. entirely **new communications standards**.
- **Digitalization** and integration with **multimedia** content, **interactivity** and action in **real time**, expanded the content and potential of information to the extent that were unknown until now.
- Moreover, they offer the range of choices available to the individual, promoting him/her from a **passive consumer** to **active participant**.

## Internet and new communication paradigm

- **Interactivity**, as a crucial difference and huge advantage in comparison with classical media, enables users to "one-to-many" and "each-to-all" communication, everything in **real time**.
- This ability created **virtual sphere** (cyberspace), completely new phenomenon which acts as organic part and an extension of **real social life**. It hugely enhances possibilities of political or social action to extent unimaginable since recently.
- This is the point where **fundamental change** appears, not only **communication modes**, but also the whole **communication paradigm** with different than usual and quite new **impact** on social and political life.

## Internet's impact to sociostructural changes

- Internet, by its technological and communication potentials, creates a **network society** as a realm of everyday living, the arena of social, political, economic, cultural and almost all other parts of social life.
- It diminishes, or deletes a boundaries between **"real" world** and **cyberspace**, when considered from a standpoint of modern developed world functioning.
- **Network society** (which is term that refers more toward technological side of phenomenon) is the basis for **information society** (that refers more to the essence, regarding the social meaning and significance of phenomenon).

## Internet's impact to sociostructural changes

- The availability of information has enabled many people to get both **informed** and **involved** what simultaneously **encouraged** the growth of **civic awareness** about various social, political, ethical problems and other issues of today's world.
- **Information society**, understood as a social resource and agent, increases both the citizens' **competence** to better **understanding** and their **capacity** to **participate** in **decision-making process** and to **control** government affairs, both locally and nationally.
- Through the **interactivity** offered by Internet, people are fostered to become **active** producers of information rather than **passive** recipients, as well as to take an **active role**.

## On social capital

- **Social trust** and **engagement in civic associations** are the tissue of joining together for common purposes, or in other words, expression of **social capital**.
- Social capital is therefore a **feature of the structure of social relations** and **social resource**. Its potential depends on the mutual relationship between members of society, or on the **forms** and **quality** of their interdependence.
- More the people are **familiar** with each other, **stronger** will be the **social capital**. If social relations are not maintained, they are dying. Over the time, the expectations and social bonds become smaller and disappear.
- That way, importance of **social norms** is **relativized** because it depends just on the **active social communication**.

## On social capital

- Civic associations, NGOs, social movements and developed relationships within civil society have **positive impact on the development and maintenance of democracy**.
- **Democracy**, which is rooted in the social life **rich with associations**, develops civic responsibility and solidarity, which, in making decisions, affects the reflection of the common good rather than narrow interests.
- **Social trust** and **civic engagement** are tightly linked there, and higher density of membership in associations often means greater trust.
- Social capital **enhances democracy**, among the others, because the **participants**, through the **civic associations** – follow the **collective goals**.

## How does the Internet affect social capital

- Early Internet utopians envisioned an **explosion of possibilities** for social capital, hypothesising **huge potential** of Internet for the development of social bonds (Gutenberg's "typographic" man analogy to Internet's "networked" man).
- But there is a question **what is the real impact** of Internet on the structuring of social capital in society, particularly on the level of **trust, civic association and participation** as its key features, regarding to the **"asocial"** nature of communication and interaction that has been established by new ICT.
- First answer implies that Internet **diminishes social capital**, mainly because – through the entertainment and information capabilities – it **draws people away** from each other.
- Also, by facilitating global communication and involvement – it **reduces interest** in the **local community** and its **politics**.

## How does the Internet affect social capital

- So, R. Putnam claims that generations that were socializing in the **age of television** have less sense of community, express less sensitivity for citizen duties and less awareness of need for participation in citizens' associations.
- He describes the differences between these generations and the previous ones which were socializing in the **age of newspapers**, and implies an analogy between generations of the **television age** and **Internet generations** which seem even **more asocial**, a phenomenon which is probably leading to a further **decline** of social capital.

## How does the Internet affect social capital

- The Internet may be a lonely place to a greater extent than the television. People addicted to the Internet spend hours of their time surfing and ignore their families, and dissociate themselves from friends.
- But, via the Internet, users **can socialize even more** than in "real" life through a variety of virtual groups, forums and associations, and create new communities with the significance and social influence as those of communities in "real" life.

## How does the Internet affect social capital

- Furthermore, the Internet offers quite a number of new forms of socializing which, among other things, **bypass various barriers** (social, economic, cultural, etc.) which are usual in "real" life.
- That way, they could **rebuild** our decreased sense of community and, therefore, **foster** civic engagement and cooperation among members of society.
- So, the second answer implies that Internet **supplements social capital** on a way that communication **facilitates existing social relationships** and **follows** patterns of civic engagement and socialization by **increasing them online**.

## How does the Internet affect social capital

- Third answer, in turn, leads to a major transformation in social contact and civic involvement **away** from local and group-based solidarities, and towards more spatially-dispersed and not so interest-based **social networks**.
- Some surveys reveal that Internet users have higher levels of **generalized trust** and larger social networks than nonusers (Netville experiment, for example).
- Another ones show that, generally, **interpersonal trust** does not matter for most types of computer usage. People who use e-mail are more likely to trust others, and people who buy goods online are slightly more trusting.

## Final remarks

- There is little evidence that simply going online creates or destroys communities. Most relationships with trust are weak, and there are no significant relationships with any form of traditional social networks. People who go online a lot are not more likely to be misanthropes. And they have strong social bonds.
- It is possible to conclude that the Internet **has no intrinsic effect on social interaction and civic participation**.
- Under various circumstances different effects are produced, which leads to the differentiation of various profiles of Internet users with different orientations.
- So, the **quality** of online **content** and **relationships** is crucial to evaluating the **role, function** and **impact** of Internet, on both social capital and civic participation, and, consequently, on democracy.

## Final remarks

- On the one hand, the Internet undoubtedly **foster orientations** toward sociability or community involvement, particularly among those who already have such orientations or are inclining towards them.
- On the other hand, there is no unambiguous evidence for the claim that the Internet **by itself** have a **direct** impact on social capital and participation **increase**.
- It is rather, its ability to provide non interested users with different kinds of information that **could serve** as a fertile ground for **stimulating** them to become more interested, and eventually involved.
- So, it is possible to say generally that **it is not primarily about the technology, but about the people**. Internet is powerful resource and agent, but pretty much depends on **who and how use it, and for what purpose**.