

Website Meetups and Community

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Rural Pennsylvania: After driving two hundred miles, a woman steps out of her car in the driveway of a bed and breakfast. A dozen other women leap up from the porch the house, shouting “Heather, Heather!” They all rush to each other and exchange hugs. Heather has never seen these people before. Heather and the other women are members of an online forum for people who enjoy scrapbooking. Occasionally the members of the message board organize get-togethers they call “crops,” which serve as weekend-long scrapbooking sessions and parties.

Heather and the other scrapbook forum members are not the only groups of people who meet up as a consequence of interactions on websites. Members of many websites that have forums or comment sections organize get-togethers, most commonly called meetups, with other members. Some of these get-togethers bring together people from across the country, but many are casual local affairs.

These gatherings run against a trend observed by Robert Putnam and others that participation in community organizations – bowling leagues, PTAs, VFW, Kiwanis – is declining across America.¹ Participation in this type of organization may indeed be slipping, but at least some people are participating in something else. The website meetups are as rich for their participants as the activities described by Putnam; they produce social capital among their members, and are ultimately an example of the ways in which the Internet enhances or even becomes community. The ties formed between website members and meetup participants can fit

¹ Robert Putnam. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

within a definition of community proposed by Wellman: “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity. I do not limit my thinking about community to neighbourhoods and villages.”² Separation of the idea of community from physically bounded neighborhoods and towns is also consistent with Wellman’s idea of a “liberated community”³ and emerging models of network sociality⁴ and elective sociality,⁵ in which people are held together in social networks by their personal choices rather than pre-given relationships such as location or interest.

Social Capital and Community

The falloff in participation in traditional community organizations alarmed Putnam because he sees these interactions as critical in nurturing social capital. Social capital is an individual’s social network or connectedness and represents the networks of trust and reciprocity on which they can rely for support. In the sense that social capital and communities both consist of social relationships and embody trust, cooperation, reciprocity, and responsibility, the two ideas are often confused with each other.⁶ Colclough and Sitaraman clarify the distinction by describing social capital networks as focused on “meeting specific and immediate goals... [they] express the rational, instrumental side of human relations side where networks become activated to accomplish specific tasks and trust is based on people’s ability to contribute.” In comparison, communities “express a social and cultural aspect of relationships that maintains regardless of

² Barry Wellman. 2001. “Physical Place and CyberPlace: Rise of Personalized Networking,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol 25.

³ Barry Wellman. March 1979. “The Community Question: The Intimate Networks of East Yorkers,” *American Journal of Sociology*. 84: 1201-31.

⁴ Andreas Wittel. 2001. “Toward a Network Sociality,” *Theory, Culture, and Society*. London: SAGE. 18:6, 51-76.

⁵ Stokes Jones. 14 November 2005. “Grass Roots Campaigning as Elective Sociality (or Maffesoli meets ‘social software’): Lessons from the BBC iCan Project,” *Proceedings of the 2005 Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference* (Draft).

⁶ Glenna Colclough and Bhavani Sitaraman. November 2005. “Community and Social Capital: What is the Difference?” *Sociological Inquiry*. 75:4, 474-496.

the increasing rationalization of modern society.”⁷ Putnam describes two types of social capital in his work – bridging and bonding – that map well to Woolcock’s argument that intra- and extra-community ties each have a role in supporting communities.⁸ Bonding social capital forms in homogenous groups of people and helps hold them together. Bridging social capital forms between people from different groups and connects communities. Both are necessary, though Putnam focuses more on the generation of bridging social capital, as interactions of people of diverse views facilitate meaningful discourse.

While social capital and community are distinct concepts, they also share a relationship. Development of social capital can lead to healthy communities, as trust and cooperation supports collective action that can solve community challenges.⁹ Social networks serve as a path to recruitment into political and community causes and provide a context “in which various democratic virtues are enhanced.”¹⁰ Because strong communities tend to draw more people into their institutions and activities, they can also help build social capital.¹¹ Since social capital and community are often linked and mutually supportive, I chose to use community participation as one tool in evaluating the social capital and community experiences produced by website meetups.

Community Participation

In a study of civic engagement in the Philadelphia metro area, Greenberg identifies two types of civic engagement – governmental and nongovernmental – and a variety of traits of the people

⁷ Ibid, 494.

⁸ Michael Woolcock. 1998. “Social Capital and Economic Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework,” *Theory and Society*, 27: 151-208.

⁹ Jeffrey C. Bridger and AE Luloff. 2001. “Building the Sustainable Community: Is Social Capital the Answer?” *Sociological Inquiry*, 71: 458-72.

¹⁰ Nojin Kwak, Dhavan V Shah, and R. Lance Holbert. December 2004. “Connecting, Trusting, and Participating: The Direct and Interactive Effects of Social Associations,” *Political Research Quarterly*. 57:4, 643-652.

¹¹ Colclough and Sitaraman, 2005, “Community and Social Capital,” 476.

who become involved.¹² In both cases, people have a strong sense of personal efficacy (they believe they can make a difference), identify strongly with one value system or another, and tend to have a family history of civic involvement. Additionally, someone who believes their existing investments in the neighborhood or community are threatened is more likely to be civically active. Participants in Greenberg's study were more likely to be civically engaged out of self interest than altruism. Beyond these common values, the motivations for the different types of engagement often vary, particularly in the area of trust.

The first type of engagement identified by Greenberg occurs when individuals engage with political processes and work to affect change through the government. Individuals who involve themselves with their communities in this manner are characterized by a distrust of the government and the others in their community; they believe that if they do not speak out, others will and the outcome will not be in their best interest. This finding conflicts with Putnam's expectation that civic engagement increases as trust increases; indeed, if Greenberg is accurate, a high level of trust could lead to a general apathy about a government's decisions and actions. There are other situations in which trust does not necessarily lead to healthy communities; Levi reports that labor unions' distrust of leadership can lead to improved leadership and debate.¹³ To some extent, though, the trust may still be necessary – if everyone fought every decision, governments would accomplish little.

In the second type of civic engagement, individuals volunteer their time at schools, hospitals, and other public venues. Greenberg found that people who choose civic engagement through nongovernmental organizations were disproportionately involved in community

¹² Michael R. Greenberg. 2001. "Elements and Test of a Theory in Neighborhood Civic Participation," *Human Ecology Review*, 8:1, 40-51.

¹³ Margaret Levi. 1999. "When Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: A Transaction Cost Approach in Trust and Distrust." Russell Sage Foundation Paper from the Working Group on Construction and Maintenance of Trust, 153.

organizations: clubs, religious or other study groups, continuing education classes, or regularly playing cards or a board game with a group. Moreover, Greenberg reports “those active in non-government civic activities trust people who are part of their clubs and activities,” a finding consistent with Putnam’s theories on the role of these activities in the production of social capital.

Enter the Internet

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam reacts somewhat ambivalently to the Internet’s effects on communities. He acknowledges that some Internet interactions can have the same community building effects as the more traditional groups; he is, however, cautious about extrapolating these observations to predict the consequences of the Internet as a whole, citing the inaccuracies of early predictions of the telephone’s effects on community and social capital. He also questions whether or not virtual communities are actively drawing people into engagement, or whether they are simply attracting people who would otherwise be engaged in their physical communities.

Putnam is also skeptical of the quality of the engagement in cybercommunities. The Internet could “attract reclusive nerds and energize them,” fully achieving its potential as a social capital generator, or it could “disproportionately attract civic dynamos and sedate them,”¹⁴ much like the effects Putnam believes television has on Americans. In 1995, James Katz and Philip Aspden surveyed Americans on real world engagement and Internet use. Their findings do not support either of the two scenarios; once corrected for demographic differences, Katz and Aspden found at the 0.05 confidence level that Internet users were neither more nor less likely to

¹⁴ Robert Putnam. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 171.

participate in real world community organizations than those without Internet access (if a confidence level of 0.08 is permitted, their findings can be interpreted to show that long term Internet users are slightly more likely to be engaged in real world organizations).¹⁵ Corroborating Putnam's concerns that some uses of the Internet have more in common with television viewing than with more social interactions, Shah, McLeod, and Yoon found that social-recreational uses of the Internet are negatively related to indicators of social capital and civic participation.¹⁶

Even if social use of the Internet is found to increase participation of some people, Putnam and others are skeptical of the quality of online discourse. Anyone can talk online by posting to a forum, emailing the White House, or writing in a blog, but that does not mean that anyone is reading it and it certainly does not mean that anyone who disagrees is reading. In Putnam's view, much of the communication on the Internet is just "din" – everybody is talking and nobody is listening.¹⁷ This parallels an imbalance he sees with many face to face organizations, where the decline of listeners and participants has been much greater than the decline in people who speak and run for office. Even in places where conversation is more balanced, the relationships formed may be centered around one particular interest to the extent that nothing else is really discussed; Putnam calls these "single stranded" relationships. In some forums, conversations not relating to the theme are rule "off-topic;" some provide alternative forums for off-topic conversations, in others it is simply verboten. Additionally, people can self-mediate by quickly exiting online situations. Turkle observes that the mediated form of communication offered by the Internet has more in common with television than with real life

¹⁵ James Katz, Philip Aspden. 1997. "A Nation of Strangers?," *Communications of the ACM*, 40:12, 84.

¹⁶ Dhavan V. Shah, Jack M. McLeod, So-Hyang Yoon. 2001. "Communication, Content, and Community: An Exploration of Print, Broadcast, and Internet Influences," *Communication Research*, 28:4, 464-506.

¹⁷ Putnam, 2000, *Bowling Alone*, 173.

interaction, and online experiences should not be assumed to be analogous to the real life interactions they mimic.¹⁸

My own experience as a political blogger confirms many of Putnam's fears. A great many blogs go essentially unread while others work as rallying points for large numbers of readers. The readers, who identify strongly with the blogger who runs the site, express their agreement on topics. The conversation may be cathartic, but it is not debate. People offering views that contrast strongly are often flamed or publicly harassed by more vociferous blog readers; they are silenced by a "hundred little bullies."¹⁹ Serious discussion and debate does occur on some blogs, exceptions to this generalization, but the majority of political blogs have become what former blogger Peter Merholz describes as little "echo chambers."²⁰ The strength of the echo chamber and lack of meaningful debate eventually led Merholz and me to stop blogging. Merholz described his reasons for stopping:

A key element of Quaker practice is the weekly Quaker meeting... the group sits, silent. Again, no clergy, no sermon. The only time a Quaker speaks is when the spirit moves her. A Quaker is asked to speak only if it will improve upon the silence. This is a substantial threshold. Entire meetings may go by without a sound. A kind of group meditation. Encouraging real reflection.... In the chattering world that is media, Internet, urbanism, that notion of silence becomes even more powerful, useful. It's made me wish that everyone took to hear that request – speak only when it will improve upon the silence... I was posting out of obligation to an audience, not because the spirit moved me.

I was also growing increasingly frustrated with the echo chamber effect of weblogs. A meme drifts out there, and then 38 different people post their take on that meme, and they

¹⁸ Sherry Turkle. 1 December 1996. "Virtuality and its Discontents: Searching for Community in Cyberspace," *The American Prospect*, 7:24.

¹⁹ Laura. 29 June 2004. "Bully on the Pulpit," *Apt. IID*.

²⁰ Merholtz, Peter. 29 March 2003. "In a Quaker State of Mind, or Why I Had Stopped Blogging," *Peterme.com*.

all link to each other, and, as a reader, you will bounce from post to post, the semantic feedback growing until it's deafening. I need to remove myself from that for a while.²¹

Research supports these anecdotal experiences; work at HP Labs by Adamic and Glance validates arguments that political blogs are echo chambers²² and are unlikely to produce bridging social capital. Cass Sunstein, in 2001's *republic.com*, issued a similar warning as Putnam: "New technologies are dramatically increasing people's ability to hear echoes of their own voices and wall themselves off from others."²³

Despite the warnings, there is cause for some optimism about the Internet's effects on social capital. While Katz and Aspden's work did not show that the Internet results in increased engagement in real life organizations, they did find that friendships are forming on the Internet. People meet each other and develop meaningful relationships. Furthermore, unlike friendships made in person, an individual's likelihood of forming a friendship on the Internet does not seem to be linked to traditional personality attributes associated with social connectedness. As the researchers note, this finding "perhaps points to the Internet deemphasizing the importance of sociability and personality differences," i.e., the Internet may offer more equal opportunities to form friendships than real life.²⁴

In *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold describes first hand his experience with the WELL, an early Internet community. He experienced a group that became tightly knit; members gave each other advice on topics related to their own expertise. When a WELL member got sick, others pitched in to contribute funds to help her recover, and when the WELL needed a

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance. 4 March 2005. "The Political Blogosphere and the 2004 US Election: Divided They Blog."

²³ Cass Sunstein. 2001. *republic.com*. Princeton: University Press, 49.

²⁴ Katz and Aspden, "Nation of Strangers," 85.

more robust server, the members got the money together.²⁵ Rheingold describes a social network that exhibits trust and reciprocity much as people in a physical community might. The community's interests are broader than the single-strands discussed by Putnam, and its members, localized in the San Francisco area, often met in person. WELL members were engaged in its upkeep, and to the extent that the WELL server is a community space and resource, this is a rough proxy for the non-governmental civic activism described by Greenberg. Rheingold does not offer examples of this engagement reaching into government or even into local, physical communities and adds his own caution: "perhaps cyberspace is precisely the wrong place to look for the rebirth of community, offering not a tool for conviviality but a life-denying simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another."

Despite Rheingold's care to add skepticism in to his accounts of the WELL, his critics call his view "utopian" or reject his work as taking an "uncritical and celebratory stance on virtual community."²⁶ Wittel describes the optimism in *The Virtual Community* as implausible "social sci-fi construction of virtual communities."²⁷ While seeking to understand the contrast between the skepticism of Rheingold's detractors and the optimism he expressed in his book, I began to contemplate the in-person contact that the WELL members had with each other, and specifically how that could effect their virtual experience.

Websites and their Meetups

A variety of web communities exist that combine an active meetup community with a focus that has the potential to appeal to readers from a cross section of political views and value systems.

²⁵ Howard Rheingold. September 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, p. 10.

²⁶ Ian Goodwin. 2004 "Book Reviews: *The Virtual Community*," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. 1:1, 103-109.

²⁷ Wittel, 2001, "Network Sociality," 63.

Topics for these sites include humor, hobbies, and frequent flier programs and other travel concerns, and there are also sites that might be best described as being open to any topic thoughtfully or amusingly expressed.

To investigate what effects these websites have on their users, I chose to study three in detail, attempting to get a cross section of topics and meetup experiences. The first, MetaFilter.com, falls into the category that might best be described as a site about everything – the site’s guidelines are about how to communicate rather than about what to communicate. MetaFilter’s meetups tend to not follow a regular schedule. SomethingAwful is a sometimes off-color humor site; the Something Awful member I talked with is part of a meetup group that gets together weekly. ScrapLove, the third, is a scrapbooking site in the hobbyist category, and has meetups every few months for which people may travel hundreds of miles. For each, I read through posts and discussions and interviewed a member who attends meetups whenever possible.

MetaFilter

MetaFilter describes itself as “weblog,” though unlike most weblogs, any member can post a topic to the front page. The site’s creator, Matt Haughey, says in his new user message that “one of the guiding principles here is trust in each other.” This is why he feels comfortable letting any registered user add to the webpage. His goal, he says, is to “break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members.” Nowhere does he describe topics that should be posted, but Haughey instead tells new users to look around for a few days to get a sense of what fits with the site, and he has more recently imposed a one-week waiting period between registration and posting to the front page. While Haughey does not specify what should be posted, he does describe what makes a good

contributor. Paralleling some of Merholz's comments about Quaker meetings and speaking only in contribution to the meeting, Haughey says:

If you have a unique perspective on a topic, by all means contribute. If you'd like to express an opposing viewpoint in a respectful way, by all means contribute. If you'd like to add supporting facts and statistics or stories from others you've found elsewhere on the web, by all means contribute. One of the things that makes MetaFilter valuable to its members is the contributions of the community. This means that a comment is appreciated for the value that it adds to the discussion. With many topics, members go into a conversation already having a general idea of how they feel about the subject. The most valuable posts present new information, new perspectives, and new ideas that challenge each of us to consider not just what we believe, but why we believe it.²⁸

Elsewhere, Haughey states that MetaFilter “exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members.”²⁹

To a large extent, the MetaFilter community has achieved Haughey's goals. Discussions on the site are characterized by civility but not an echo chamber. In my observations, the more political discussions tend towards the liberal side, but do include a diverse set of views. A non-scientific survey of MetaFilter members in 2003 confirms that most respondents fit in the left to libertarian range of political views, though there are nontrivial numbers of members who fall more to the right.³⁰

The front page stories at any given moment might include links to current events news, humor, new products, arts and entertainment, games, sports, art, or other random web finds. Each post, or thread, may get anywhere between two and a few hundred comments; thirty to sixty is

²⁸ Matt Haughey. “Create a New User,” *MetaFilter*

²⁹ Matt Haughey. “About,” *MetaFilter*.

³⁰ dgaicun. 18 February 2003. Thread on *MetaTalk*, <http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/3046>. Graph at http://linnwood.org/outbound/mefi/political_plot.gif.

typical. Two other sections round out the places available for members to post. In the first, AskMetaFilter, members post questions to get advice from other members. They might ask for help on relationships, suggestions of where to take a vacation, or for computer help. Community members support each other here. One MetaFilter member credits answers he received to a variety of questions posted to AskMetaFilter with giving him enough knowledge to start his own independent movie theater. Conversation in the second, MetaTalk, focuses more on the site and its community: how MetaFilter can be improved, technical questions, and meetup planning.

Like everything else on MetaFilter, a meetup starts as a post. The original poster might propose a time or a location, or just gauge interest if there has not been a previous meetup in the area. Users respond based on their interest and availability – saying they will be there, possibly suggesting different times or different places. Bars and restaurants are by far the most frequent meetup location, but users have gotten together elsewhere too, including art museums, a zoo, and a protest. Some locales enjoy semi-regular meetups, though most are organized when someone starts the organization process with a post to MetaTalk. A typical meetup might have anywhere from a half dozen to twenty people in attendance.

MetaFilter's designers are aware that interactions can span the online and offline, and they offer some tools to track and facilitate these interactions. On an individual's profile, a user can add "connections" – people they know – and record how they know them. Options include "I have met this user in the real world" and "co-resident" or "neighbor." MetaFilter also allows zip code searches of members who have chosen to provide this information. This feature comes in handy for meetups; several groups use the zip code feature to search for local members who have registered since their last meetup – i.e., who have a higher member number than the newest member at the last get together – and send them personal invitations via email.

The intersection of meetups and real life does pose some challenges. Some people are active members of the MetaFilter community but prefer to keep their Internet identities anonymous. Meetup organizers try to accommodate this too. A commenter in the lead up to one Cleveland area meetup says “Cleve meetups are always laid-back and totally amiable, and no personal details of any ‘anonymous’ MeFites will be shared on MeFi without your consent! We'll even keep you out of pics/shoutouts³¹ if you want.” Pictures do make it back online and users are usually identified by their username in follow up threads, rather than their actual names.

SomethingAwful

Something Awful is an online humor site, consisting of a variety of front-page satirical “news posts,” and reviews of bad television shows, movies, video games, and websites. The site also includes several recurring features, such as the the well known “Photoshop Phriday,” in which Something Awful members submit humorous edited images that match the week’s theme. Something Awful also has a store where members can buy clothing and other products featuring the website’s logo.

Something Awful’s forums are open to members only; in order to help maintain the site, there is a one-time ten dollar fee. Nearly seventy thousand forum members participate in the site’s more than twenty discussion boards. Topics include user reviews of music and movies and discussion of cars, guns, games, and computers. Within the forums, users also have the option of buying banner ads to communicate in addition to posting something to a discussion board. Users can also pay to have another user’s title (what appears below their user name on posts)

³¹ After meetups, members often post pictures or give “shoutouts” – essentially, comments to say they were thinking of meetup regulars who were unable to attend the meetup from which they posted the pictures.

changed, which can be done either as a thank you or as an insult, and a user would also have to pay to change his or her title back. The money generated from the ads and name change fees goes to support the website.

I interviewed one member of the Something Awful community who began attending meetups about a year ago. Peter, a college junior in Boston, has been attending local Something Awful meetups for about a year. Peter first joined the Something Awful forums because there was a cluster of users who discussed and participated together in a game he played. One day, he and classmate, Jason, who also read the site, were looking for something to do, and recalled that they had seen a discussion thread about a meetup for that night. On a whim, they decided to go.

The meetups are held at a large bar a little ways from downtown. Upon entering, Peter and Jason looked around for the Something Awful table – they sort of had an idea from the thread of where the group sat, but they still tentatively approached and asked if they were the meetup group. After sitting down, the experience was a little intimidating; everyone else already knew each other. Having Jason there definitely “made things easier” for Peter, who says that “showing up by yourself makes me very self conscious. It makes me very nervous; it makes me very apprehensive. When you show up with someone else you aren’t as worried about whether you’ll get along.” Once the conversation got going, though, they each found themselves blending in and participating in different conversations. Entering with someone reduced Peter’s apprehensions, but, since they got split up pretty early in the night, he does not think it significantly changed the actual experience.

Leaving that first night, Peter did not know if he would go back. He had a lot of fun, but found himself returning only sporadically; the pressures of school involvement competed for his time. Peter stayed in the area over the summer and found himself more actively looking for

things to do, and so he began attending regularly. From there, the experience kept building on itself; “every time I went, I had more of a reason to go. And now, I go by default. I block off time in my schedule; it’s become kind of a priority for me.” Peter enjoys the meetups because they are a chance for him to get away from his mostly liberal arts campus and see people from different backgrounds – one of the meetup attendees is an engineering graduate student, another is a college drop out, and others have graduated and are in the workplace. Compared to his small college, the meetup is a chance to meet new people and get to know them, but not necessarily see them every day.

ScrapLove

ScrapLove is a basic, bare-bones forum with an attached store, but it has a passionate group of members that at times seem as dedicated to each other as they are to their hobby, scrapbooking. When traveling, members of the site can almost always find someone else to put them up at their destination. A “Sunshine Club” reaches out to members who are going through tough times, sending cards or care packages. One woman’s husband came back from Iraq only to be killed in a car crash a week later. She credited ScrapLove members with helping her get through things, saying it was like having a “support system that spans from coast to coast and Canada.”³² People might come for the scrapbooking at first, but they keep coming back for the support as much as they do for scrapbooking tips; in the words of one member, ScrapLove is “cheaper than therapy.”³³

³² TXKat. 12 October 2005. “drama drama drama,” *Scraplove*.
<http://www.scraplove.com/forum/showthread.php?t=9924&page=7&pp=10>.

³³ Jclizzard. 22 September 2005. “Jahagajoel,” *Scraplove*.
<http://www.scraplove.com/forum/showthread.php?t=8840&page=7&pp=10>.

I talked with one member of the site, Heather, who has now been to two ScrapLove meetups, which ScrapLove members call “crops.” Crops have their origins elsewhere; the first were held by scrapbooking stores looking to increase loyalty from their customers. They would charge a small fee, for which shoppers could setup and work on their scrapbook projects in the store, with access to advice from other people at the crop. Heather has been to a few different store crops. She goes because there are no distractions, so she gets a lot done. A typical crop might last five to twelve hours and include food. ScrapLove crops are different in structure from the MetaFilter and Something Awful meetups and might best be described as extended, privately organized parallels to the store events. Members get together for an entire weekend, many traveling hundreds of miles by car or even plane, nominally to scrapbook but with lots of talking and drinking interwoven with their crafts.

Before going to the crops, Heather was already an active participant of ScrapLove. She participated in the threads about scrapbooking, those about parenting or relationships, and the “morning coffee” threads, where members start chatting as they begin their days. Other members’ positive reviews often persuade her to make scrapbooking purchases. She calls people who post these reviews her “enablers” and trusts their word of mouth endorsements. She had heard about the early crops in Texas, where the site’s founder lives, and hoped to make it to one sometime. When planning for the second east coast crop started, she immediately made plans to go. She decided to bring her mother, also a scrapbooker, to get in some quality time before heading back to school at the end of the summer.

When Heather showed up, she was greeted by a sea of hugs. The first question from the women was “what do you want to drink?” Then the others helped her and her mother unpack, and showed her to her room. To finish settling in, Heather and her mother claimed some adjacent

space at the scrapbooking table. The rest of the weekend consisted of scrapbooking – during which both ideas and materials were shared – trips to craft stores, a first night pot luck dinner, restaurant trips, raucous conversation, and smaller, more personal discussions. Some people like to get scrapbooking done during the weekend, others do not; for Heather, the balance is about half and half. Three days after getting home from the first crop, she bought her plane ticket to the second.

Discussion: Impacts of Interactions Online and Offline

After learning about user experiences on MetaFilter, Scrap Love, and Something Awful, I explored how their communities and the communities' impacts compared to the traditional communities and activities associated with the generation of social capital and civic engagement. For indicators of social capital, I examined the meetups' effects on in-person and online relationships and I considered the levels of trust present as well as the diversity of its members. Among the meetup members, at least, social capital is being generated.

In Person Relationships

Among their members, the meetups produce trusting relationships in which people help and support each other. For Peter, realizing he had developed these relationships and become part of the core group was his most exciting meetup experience. One evening, after the non-regular attendees and many of the regulars had gone home for the evening, the conversation took a turn, transitioning from

very general talk – mixed group talk – to, very, uh, very personal. And now the subjects were much more about their personal lives and going into things that were not to be shared with the rest of the group. This was when I was exposed to a lot of the dynamics of the group. Things opened up drastically at that point.

To Peter, this solidified that he had developed a rapport with the group, and they were now “entrusting each other with secrets.” Being able to talk about the more personal aspects of people’s lives – anxieties, relationship or friendship problems – and having people trust him with that “mattered a lot.”

As a regular, Peter’s experience is a little different. Most regular members get to the bar a half hour before the meetup and stay around for an hour later than most. Peter has phone numbers for several of the members, though they are used more for sending text messages than for actual phone calls. Members exchange instant messaging screen names, allowing them to contact each other to coordinate events or for longer, more personal conversations. This increased connectivity also allows the members to let another know they are thinking of them. Peter often uses instant messages to say hi to one woman at work, since he knows she is often bored with her job. Members of the group will sometimes do movie outings, invite each other to parties, or get together to play the video game Halo. One regular just had knee surgery and cannot get out as much, so Peter and other members stop by at times to say hi, often bringing him and his girlfriend their favorite ice cream flavors. In the past, meetup attendees have helped each other move and put together care packages for regulars who were assigned to duty in Iraq. Peter remarks that the favors are easy to give and accept, because you know it’s easy to “settle the score – you just buy them a beer” at the next meetup.

Asked if there was any chance of him getting to know people from Something Awful without a regular meetup, Peter responded “Goodness no. There would be absolutely no context for me to get to know these people at all. There would be absolutely no way to encounter them without the meetup.” And without the Something Awful people, Peter elaborated, he would probably have a smaller and less diverse circle of friends.

Heather, too, has developed strong relationships with crop attendees. After first attending a crop, Heather discovered that meeting people in person “definitely changed my on-board relationships.” These relationships are “more than knowing people now,” and she made a “really good friend” with whom she regularly trades text messages, phone calls, and emails. These conversations go to a personal level that neither would consider discussing on the forums. This winter break, she will fly to Texas to visit another woman she met a crop. Heather expects this will be a more social visit, but “may still bring some scrapbooking stuff because it feels wrong to spend time with scrapbooking people and not to do some.” During this visit to Texas, Heather plans to also get together with some other local ScrapLove members, and another ScrapLove member is coming to visit Heather and a nearby crop regular at their homes in Maryland, also over winter break. Heather’s friendships with people on the website cut across age groups, backgrounds, and physical location, though the woman with whom she is closest is also the regular on the site who is closest to her age.

At MetaFilter, website members are supportive of each other. After and during summer 2005’s hurricanes, people offered places for hurricane evacuees to sleep, and refugees organized a special refugee meetup in Houston. Sometimes magic happens at the meetups, too; at least one couple that met at a MetaFilter meetup married. The groom’s user profile now reads “MetaFilter, thank you for the very best thing in my life.” In the thread commenting on the wedding, another MetaFilter member wrote “let this stand as another testament to the real community this is.”

Meetup Effects on Online Interactions

Meetups create and strengthen in person ties, and these ties carry over to interactions on the websites. At least sometimes, this is at the expense of online-only ties. Peter notices that his

meetup engagement has affected his overall participation in Something Awful. During the week, he reads and posts several times to a Boston meetup thread. This is an ongoing conversation where members of the meetup group ask for tech support, rant about their days, or share news. They also might comment on features or discussions elsewhere on the site within the meetup thread. Unlike MetaFilter, meetup regulars call each other by their real names in the threads, which can be confusing and a bit intimidating to people who have not attended enough meetups to match real names to screen names. Peter finds that he has stopped posting to the other areas of the site. He might read them, but his comments almost always go into the Boston meetup thread.

While Heather pays more attention to some people as a result of the face to face meetups, she finds, much like Peter, that the physical interactions have “polarized” her. “I keep track of people I’ve met, and care less about the other people and their posts,” says Heather. If her friend starts a post, she will read it immediately. There is “something about being able to hear a person’s voice on a post,” she says, and adds that many others have found that this changes their interactions with the websites. Heather also pays considerably more attention now to whether or not someone lives near her – is the member a potential crop attendee? Could she be someone Heather will get to know?

Trust and Community Participation

Across all of the websites and interviews, the idea of trust came up frequently. Feeling trusted made Peter feel like a real part of the Something Awful meetup group. Heather talks about completely trusting the word of mouth recommendations of her ScrapLove contacts. Haughey emphasizes the role of trust in making MetaFilter possible. The community members back these words up with actions. The informal fundraisers across the various sites could be scams, but this idea does not enter members’ minds. Members of MetaFilter and ScrapLove offer people they

have never met a place to stay. Haughey lets the community run MetaFilter with limited moderation. This trust element of social capital is present in the meetup groups, and reciprocity is also evident in the favors group members do for each other. The strong ties formed within the groups between people from backgrounds that are both similar and different include both bonding and bridging social capital. The websites that unite meetup groups serve as another context for the formation of bridging social capital through the exchange of views and experiences of people from across United States and the world. They may also serve as a setting for the national identity that Putnam seeks in organizations that have the potential to generate large-scale civic engagement.³⁴

The members of the meetup groups and websites participate and support each other in their lives, but they rarely extend this participation into their physical communities. In contrast to their frequent favors to each other, the Boston Something Awful meetup group does not have a strong history of contributing to others outside of their group. There are some exceptions, and members do often participate in larger charitable activities organized through the main site, including fund drives for hurricane victims, a funding campaign that worked with a defense manufacturer to procure advanced armor plating for an entire unit in Iraq, a fund drive to pay for a Something Awful member's kidney transplant, and an annual toy drive. A meetup group in New York City organizes the toy drive. Each holiday season, they collect donations from Something Awful members everywhere. Then, one day, the organizer goes to a Toys R Us in New York and buys a bunch of gift cards. As meetup group members come in to the store, he

³⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 151. Putnam acknowledges an increase in small social groups – reading groups and support groups, for example – but expresses concern that they are too small and isolated to be linked to an active public life.

hands them gift cards and they buy toys; the group then travels to the local Ronald McDonald House and immediately delivers the gifts.

Whether or not they have met in person, ScrapLove members seem quick to help each other. In addition to relationship and parenting advice or day-to-day support, many members of the site are experts on specific topics. Well-known experts include a computer specialist, a flight attendant, and a dog foster care provider. The support goes beyond words; when one woman, reacting after her area was hit by Hurricane Rita, remarked on the site that “we don’t have any meat,” she received several boxes of high quality meat by overnight express thanks to community members. ScrapLove members also contribute beyond their immediate circle; also in response to the hurricanes, members collected money and sent it to a teacher in a school district that many hurricane victims called home, so that she could distribute it to the children and allow them to purchase school supplies.

The first type of civic engagement observed by Greenberg – nongovernmental – is somewhat present when ScrapLove members send money to school children in Texas or when Something Awful members raise money for toys. Sending money or mail, though, is a type of engagement whose importance is downplayed by Putnam. He finds fault with arguments that mail-in organizations such as Greenpeace are the modern equivalent of civic organizations, as they do not foster debate or generate ties among their members. Greenberg’s second type of civic participation – governmental – is even less present. I identified no links between members’ activities on the board and their engagement in local government. Only MetaFilter members ever substantially discussed politics. At Something Awful, politics might be discussed, but wrapped in the same cynical humor that defines the rest of the site; within the meetup group, it rarely gets

mentioned. Among the ScrapLove members, the topic of politics is actually “taboo,” according to Heather.

I did find one tentative link to increased local community participation. Peter has been to three area LGBT groups he found on the Internet, and is working with one to produce a zine. These groups have very sparse Internet presences, and since they do not have visible online communities to draw him to them, Peter does not think he would have been comfortable starting to participate without his experiences with the Something Awful meetup. This example illustrates the difficulties using purely ethnographic methods to show causality or even correlation between meetup participation and local community engagement. If the causality is there but not conscious – for example, a ScrapLove member might be more likely to participate in a local food drive as a consequence of hearing first hand on the message board of hard times in New Orleans but not attribute her participation to this knowledge – then it would be almost impossible to observe ethnographically. A more quantitative study of the correlation between Internet meetup participation and activities associated with civic engagement may confirm or dispute my findings.

Shifting the search from engagement within the local community to engagement within the website community tells a different story. Suddenly, the support members provide to each other – whether or not they know each other in person – is part of picture of engagement. If the community bounds are the website, then the donations to members and the activities in which members participate are representative of engagement. When website users participate in discussions about posting guidelines, membership rules, or website etiquette, they too are engaged in a way that almost parallels the governmental engagement in local communities. The meetups, settings in which members come to trust each other, produce trust that transfers to

members of the website they have not met. This same transfer or extension of trust has been observed in traditional communities; participation in a subset of a community will lead people to trust secondary groups in the community as well.³⁵ The websites appear not to be enhancing local communities but are functioning as communities themselves.

The Question of Community

I sought to set these groups in the larger discussion of what makes a community, both to help explain my findings and suggest other areas in which one might look for similar results. Two community models currently receive the majority of attention from academics: traditional communities and communities of interest (also referred to as communities of practice).

Traditional communities are characterized as having membership set by pre-defined relationships such as proximity or political boundaries, and they rely on strong and weak ties between their members. The websites and meetup groups do not fit this traditional model; their members know each other because they participate in the website and live in the same general area, not because they frequently run into each other around a given neighborhood.

None of the websites I studied can be adequately described as a community of practice either. Communities of practice often geographically dispersed and are held together primarily through shared interests and activities rather than through strong interpersonal ties. For some visitors who drop in and participate primarily for the scrapbooking, ScrapLove probably does meet the definition of community of practice. The experience, though, is something different for the members who comment in the morning coffee threads, get parenting tips or vent about their

³⁵ Michael Welch, Roberto Rivera, Brian Conway, Jennifer Yonkoski, Paul M. Lupton, and Russell Giancola. November 2005. "Determinants and Consequences of Social Trust," *Sociological Inquiry*. 75:4, 453-473. Also: Frank Hearn. 1997. *Moral Order and Social Disorder: The American Search for Civil Society*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

husbands throughout the day, help others with recipe suggestions in the dinner thread, and travel hundreds of miles to crops. This sharing makes the ScrapLove members more than a “group of people informally bound together by a shared expertise and passion for joint enterprise.”³⁶ The women of ScrapLove are there by choice, and many have developed strong personal ties to other community members. MetaFilter and Something Awful meetup members have also developed strong ties, and it is difficult to find a common interest that can be credited with holding them together.

Wittel proposes the concept of “network sociality” as an emerging model for dispersed community-like interaction.³⁷ In this model, people are connected through their own personal networks, the people with whom they choose to associate. People have many unrelated ties, most of them weak. Schulz described a shift in social networks from pre-given relationships to social networks that are highly mobile and dispersed, and are chosen by the people in them.³⁸ Wittel follows this idea, seeing a shift from sociality in closed systems to sociality in open systems.³⁹ With network sociality, there are few clusters of ties, the groups that Wittel says would otherwise form into clear social groups or communities. To the extent that members of the website groups tend to be more dispersed and participate voluntarily, the network sociality model fits. However, because the meetup members organize around the websites, clustering into groups of connections rather than just individual networks, the model does not hold.

³⁶ Etienne C. Wenger and William M. Snyder. January-February 2000. “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier,” *Harvard Business Review*, 139-145.

³⁷ Wittel, 2001, “Toward a Network Sociality.”

³⁸ Gerhard Schulze. 1993. “Digital Media in the Technology Culture – Perspectives for Arts and Cultural Policy.” The Netherlands: Office of the State Secretary for Education, Culture, and Science.

³⁹ Wittel, 2001, “Toward a Network Sociality,” 64.

Maffesoli proposes another model. Studying sports clubs, music festivals, and other leisure groups, Maffesoli observed that experiencing the other is the basis of community.⁴⁰ Unlike the communities held together by location or by an interest, many of the participants in the communities he studied participate to simply be with other people; the community is not the side effect, it is the goal. Stokes Jones found the same patterns when studying civic activists in the United Kingdom; many of them cared passionately about the issues, but many of the organizers participated because they enjoyed the togetherness and connectivity. When one campaign ended, they would move on to the next. Maffesoli and Jones describe this as “elective sociality,” somewhere between traditional communities and communities of interest.⁴¹ In elective sociality, people members are typically held together by strong ties, their connections are voluntary, and are often but not always supported by local proximity. The Something Awful and MetaFilter meetup communities are squarely in this category; the ScrapLove group is likely somewhere in between elective sociality and a community of practice. At least in these groups of elective sociality, the togetherness and experience appeals to people from a variety of backgrounds and physical locations. This blurs the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital and allows for the formation of both. Indeed, many of the activities within traditional communities that Putnam saw as essential for producing social capital – singing groups, bowling leagues, and others – show many of the same elements of elective sociality.

This raises questions of why similar groups are not necessarily resulting in the civic engagement associated with the groups Putnam observed. Assuming that the engagement is not

⁴⁰ Michel Maffesoli. 1996. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage Publications.

⁴¹ Stokes Jones. 14 November 2005. “Grass Roots Campaigning as Elective Sociality (or Maffesoli meets ‘social software’): Lessons from the BBC iCan Project,” *Proceedings of the 2005 Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference* (Draft).

present – as previously discussed, it may be there but unobservable because of methodological limitations – I can only suggest that the lack of civic activity produced is a consequence of geographical dispersion. Even Something Awful members, the most proximate group I studied, may travel up to forty five minutes to get to the meetup; they are not a neighborhood group. People may find neighborhood issues and activity more accessible than issues at the level of the geographic area encompassed by meetup members, and without a common neighborhood to give people that entry point, significant civic engagement does not occur. The experiences of the meetup members contrast with observations at the Blacksburg electronic village, where a set of computer-mediated tools, including health information, bus schedules, school projects, the football schedule, discussion of regional power line and highway proposals, information on area museums and a string quartet,⁴² was overlaid on an existing town and neighborhoods to produce increased civic engagement.⁴³ At Blacksburg, the network tools deployed were about the actual localized community, and so they were able to support engagement in it.

In contrast to Blacksburg, the meetups I studied stem from the websites; the website is the context, not the tool. Website members, especially meetup members, work to support other website members as well as the website as a whole. Unlike network sociality, which knows no bounds, the websites are displacing physical neighborhoods as the place or bounds of community. This fits well with current community theory, which recognizes an ongoing shift from communities of place – that is, communities whose membership is implied by where people live – to communities in place.⁴⁴ Communities in place exist voluntarily, but the interaction and

⁴² John M. Carroll and Mary Beth Rosson. December 1996. “Developing the Blacksburg Electronic Village,” *Communications of the ACM*, 39:12, 69-74.

⁴³ Andrea Kavanaugh. 21 October 1996. “The Use of the Internet for Civic Engagement: A View from Blacksburg, Virginia” (Luncheon Address to the Virginia Municipal League). Roanoke, Virginia.

⁴⁴ Colclough and Sitaraman, 2005, “Community and Social Capital,” 478.

ties between people are facilitated by a common place. MetaFilter, Something Awful, and Scraplove to do more to bring people together than members' physical locations, and so the majority engagement generated as a result of the meetups translates back to the websites, rather than the members' local communities.

Conclusions

If my observations are typical of the Internet, Putnam may have good reason to be alarmed but perhaps for the wrong reasons. The Internet is unlike television. It is producing social capital; the meetups and other interactions are meaningful experiences for their participants. However, unlike the social capital Putnam studied, there is no clear linkage of the social capital generated by the websites and meetup groups to public life in local communities. Members do favors for each other, and with few exceptions, their external engagement is limited to sending money. These are good deeds by caring people, but they are unlikely to result in local engagement. Instead of flowing into local communities, the engagement is flowing into the websites. Members support each other and the websites through discussion and monetary contributions. The extended trust networks supported by the meetups do not reach into the local community but instead out onto the websites.

The outlook for meetups' effects on local communities is not entirely pessimistic. Largely because of his experiences at the Something Awful meetup, Peter was more likely to participate in the LGBT groups he found online. These groups are active in public life and discourse. The members of Something Awful, MetaFilter, and ScrapLove hear life experiences to which they might not otherwise be connected; they know and care about hurricane victims and soldiers serving in Iraq. MetaFilter members do have discussions on ethical and political issues, and trust and respect the people who present the opposing views. When people with these

experiences do participate in civic life, they will remember the other perspectives to which they have been exposed, and their views will be nuanced by this. I believe this has a potential to result in meaningful, respectful debate and discourse. A still open question, though, is how engaged members of these websites and meetup groups are now and will be in the future compared to peers without the same experiences.