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The Shifting Image of Social Capital: Digitizing Cooperative Ties

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The article examines digital discourse perceived as a rallying impetus for generating shared pro-active attitudes necessary to foster online cooperative action. The emergence of social media as a means of collaborative online communication has informed several distinct research agendas. The author is especially keen on studying the impact of Internet technologies on the creation and accumulation of social capital, comparing its formation and spread in online and offline environments. An equally important task is to identify the role its multiple research methodologies play in highlighting the functional features of various physical and/or virtual communities. A special point of interest for the author is in analyzing the ever-diminishing gap between web-based communication and real-world information exchange. Particular research emphasis is put on establishing the common ground between online and offline social interaction, which leads to the growing number of overlapping study results between the two spheres.

Keywords: collaboration, collective action, virtual networks, social (bonding, bridging) capital, digital ties, connectivity, public sphere

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Introduction

Widespread use of various social media platforms enhances and encourages greater inclusion, fosters diversity, promotes civic engagement and dialogue. All of this leads to increased activity within digital communication channels which can be shaped according to specific user expectations and agendas. More importantly, the digital medium allows for the creation and sustaining of favorable collective action conditions via a set of online interactive practices. With equal access to numerous e-based platforms, users are now in possession of truly egalitarian means of communication with transparent networking opportunities. The established status quo is additionally reinforced by the fact that all network

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participants can contribute to the common exchange pool serving not only as consumers but also through generating and validating the parameters of a shared informational field. The following procedure creates an incentive for additional deliberative selectivity, which helps online communities to establish conditions for the formation of concrete cooperative action. Based on this interpretation, we can note that virtual networks serve as unique platforms for consolidating various users based on their common nexus of shared intentions, interests, and values, resulting in cohesive, communicative exchange bringing about a synergistic effect.

This visible demarcation of the online cooperative dimension manifesting itself through fostering of virtual interest groups and communities often undergoes a further tangible transformation culminating in the creation of physical associations, activist groups, and public institutions. The latter provide their members an opportunity to formally disseminate ideas, attract new followers and coordinate their actions in the offline sphere. Another consequence of the rise of modern digital media is the ever- situation whereby the physical and the virtual reciprocally influence each other by laying the foundation for the emergence of novel forms of social activity and organization. In particular, virtual networks make use of the previously nonexistent means of collective action by allowing users who share similar professional qualities, personal and vocational aspirations to establish firmer collaborative ties.

Drawing a parallel, Manuel Castells views the flow of capital (social or otherwise), information technology, network associations, and symbolic interplay as the main driving forces stimulating (virtual) actors to engage in reciprocal exchange depending on their proximity and integration into a scheme of the resource reallocation centers. In such a globally dominant technological infrastructure of communication reigns supreme by determining this new interactive space almost as much as the railroads defined economic regions and national markets underpinned the preindustrial economy. Perceiving modern society as "a culture of real virtuality," a platform profoundly dominated by deterministic global communication systems, Castells believes that reality is completely captured and fully immersed in the virtual images of an electronic world in which the externally displayed messages do not just appear on your screen as transmitted visual and symbolic experience, but are the experience (Castells, 2007: 240). Accordingly, the web nowadays offers countless highly efficient collaborative instruments available to active users engaging in collective political action when compared to more conventional offline means of expression and participation.

Thiery Penard and Nicolas Poussing, on the other hand, believe that significant collaborative gains accrue when randomly occurring physical affiliations become linked to technological platforms shaping coordinated large-scale collaborative enterprises since such spontaneous networking allows to more effectively ensure shared creation and distribution of information and identities. Compared to more formally developed bonds and obligations based solely on a stringent hierarchical structure, spontaneous interaction gradually forms a fixed nexus of productive interdependence between individuals whose cooperative ties reinforce the overall effectiveness of jointly undertaken civic pursuits (Penard & Poussing, 2010: 575). Distributed across the various web-based platforms, these novel cooperative technological tools allow users to take advantage of effective ways to voice their opinions, shaping and adapting message dissemination algorithms to accommodate the constant flux of the ever-increasing data exchange.

Measuring online cohesion and communication

The cornerstone of any modern community is communication, whereby actors with the greatest chance of influencing power are those whose messages are able to generate the most noticeable disseminating impact. Viewed as an outcome of three major elements (information, relay, and reception), network communication presupposes that the message has to be accepted and decoded by the recipient as a prerequisite for subsequent reciprocal information exchange. Simply put, communicative success is the result of attracting the attention and motivation of other network participants. Having said that, successful communication cannot fundamentally depend solely on the realization of its selective content (meaning), whereby the impact of a particular digital activity is measured solely on the basis of calculating the number of subsequent response actions (comments) or other feedback metrics. Conceptually, this entails that communicative capital, while capable of being converted into other forms of reputational gains, is, nonetheless qualitatively different from human or any other sort of capital and is, therefore, not reducible to it.

The emergence of social media as a means of collaborative online communication has formed several distinct research areas. Researchers are particularly interested in studying the impact of Internet technologies on the creation and accumulation of social capital, comparing the peculiarities of its formation in an online and offline environment. Hence, when one takes a closer look at the methods of analyzing social capital accumulated due to enhanced connectivity and cyber cohesion (identifying the impact of its multiple functional features for various physical and/or virtual communities), what becomes apparent is a somewhat dated approach to the assessment of social capital through the definition of its main forms: social networks, trust, and modes of reciprocal behavior. Researchers of online social capital, viewing it as an addition to concrete social ties, argue that participation of the social network actors in joint Internet projects can be based either on active or passive inclusion (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The latter usually occurs as a mundane action of knowledge acquisition (gaining access to certain information) whereby a user is able to familiarize herself with a new piece of data by simply reading a post online. According to a number of authors, the borders between online and offline social capital are becoming increasingly difficult to demarcate (Hampton et al., 2011: 135). This is nowhere more evident than amongst young people actively utilizing the web for increased connectivity that results both in individual and interpersonal gains.

It is precisely the combination of these factors (passive affiliation to the social network as well as merging online and offline means of social ties) that questions the relevance of exclusively traditional study methods. The work of Dmitri Williams (2006) serves as a good illustration of the kind of criticism that such conventional (pre-web) approaches to measuring digitized social capital receive. In particular, it emphasizes the traditional survey's inability to accurately capture whether a potential respondent belongs to a specific group which reflects cooperative behavioral patterns spread within their Internet community. In order to provide an effective means of determining such parameters, Williams managed to develop a special technique (Internet Social Capital Scales) of comparing social capital corresponding to different types of an online and offline collaborative environment. More specifically, he tried to confirm the hypothesis that the particular mechanism for measuring the outcome of potentially cohesive relations (between the new vibrant virtual reality and the more orthodox social interactions) was already embedded within the information and communication technologies at the heart of the ongoing digital revolution (Williams, 2006). Accordingly, if the two main types (bridging

and bonding) of social capital did not differ significantly during the pre-Internet era, modern web-based means of data transmission drastically altered the channels through which social ties are currently being established and transformed.

With an ever-diminishing gap between virtual communication and real-world information exchange, it is becoming increasingly difficult to establish pronounced differences in online and offline social interaction, which leads to the heightened probability of overlapping study results between the two spheres. All this suggests that the main reason for the incorrect use of the predominantly survey-based methodology for measuring Internet-facilitated social capital stems from the multi-faceted nature of web presence as a phenomenon belonging to a new cross-platform communication space. In particular, high-speed transmission of large quantities of data leads to network users developing new trust markers applied to other communication participants and even more so to the informational and cooperative incentives received from them. What seems even more apparent is that nowadays, a rising number of individuals perceive the web as an environment with oftentimes misleading, unreliable information, a place with a high probability of monitoring and interception of private data (tracking of the user behavior analytics, automated manipulatory technologies, automated advertising networks, bots, popup recommendation services, etc.) No less important is the emotional aspect of interpersonal web exchange represented by the emergence of new communication practices such as the use of memes, emojis, and other means of pictorial messaging (Neves, 2013).

Accordingly, there appear to be two fundamentally different approaches to making use of e-technologies in order to facilitate collaborative action. In the first case, the Internet is seen and scrutinized merely as a tool for coordination of social cohesion that takes place in real physical space. A fitting example illustrating this would be all manner of public awareness affecting events, from peaceful flash mobs to protest rallies, organized with the help of virtual social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and other popular platforms. Thus, one can witness the impact of e-generated activism on politics, economics, education, and the daily lives of regular users who perceive the web as a medium drastically modifying normative forms of interaction. The second type of joint online engagement within the virtual space occurs with the aim of achieving interpersonal rapport and is geared towards establishing effective communication channels while encouraging collaborative data exchange.

Alternatively, when faced with these types of virtual environments coupled with mediated data transmission methods, online researchers are presented with novel opportunities (as well as facing equally new challenges) for examining the intricate nature of digitized social capital. In particular, the expansion of the existing methodology can be supplemented by the use of a non-dial approach (modeling situations through the process of enabled observation), semantic network analysis (viz. community cohesion analysis). These kinds of tools make it possible to take into account the interdisciplinary nature of the various objects of study, encompassing a wide array of anthropological, ethnographic, and cultural characteristics prevalent in virtual communities that are based on specific types of Internet connection and/or communication. When conducting research, the sociologist must, therefore, determine the basic study nexus based on a particular choice of social networks (Internet communities) in order to successfully implement a specific approach for collecting data and subsequent result interpretation. In addition, to these new types of data analysis (as well as utilizing measurements through polls and sampling), social capital researchers can employ webometrics as a method for data collection, which presupposes Internet scanning (Björneborn & Ingwersen, 2004). The advantage of this approach when compared to traditional polling lies in its minimal amount

of invasiveness, perfect for when the behaviors and opinions of people are studied as if 'under cover.' Lastly, when combined, the methods of content and network analysis make it possible to identify hidden patterns of application. These categories (language utterances, situational content) help designate various participants in pattern-specific collaborative virtual communities. When web resources provide users with access to their databases, offering researchers to interface application programming (API) tools while providing webometric scanning becomes especially relevant. An example of this kind of research may be the analysis of the cooperative interaction of social actors on Twitter. This platform is a perfect hybrid of microblogging and social network services.

Network ties and setbacks of shared interfaces

The severe social bias inherent in certain virtual network formats goes against all principal egalitarian tenets of participant equality and communicative freedom expounded by the pioneers of Internet technology, many of whom believed that genuine digital interaction has the ability to neutralize micro and macro level imbalance without negating the existence of rigid offline social stratification. With the impact of digital media on the level of disparity, a potentially fruitful avenue lies in applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields to the study of inequality appearing within virtual communities. In particular, his theory states that a medium's conventional utility is spread over a wide array of habitual practices regardless of their technical characteristics. This most prominently manifests itself in Bourdieu's approach to technology and, specifically, in his belief that technological infrastructures do not just help you attain a fixed narrow goal but are socially shaped along with their meanings, functions, domains, and utility. In other words, they cannot come into existence simply to fill a preexisting role since the role itself is co-created (defined) alongside its technical characteristics by the makers and users. Moreover, this designation is not a static function but something that can change over time depending on how people's perception shifts being influenced by particular technological functionality and preferences (Ignatow & Pierre, 2017).

Viewed through this lens, a social field is an arena of struggle between tech-savvy actors (members of the digital community) for the right to reinvest the results of their capital accumulated online within task-oriented, field-specific limits (the boundaries of the virtual community). Thus, actors occupying similar or close positions (proportional to the total capital they have in defining authority access) form a class with social field logic dictating a division of the totality of positions into two interlinked types based on the possession of class relational power. Since digital community participation principally comes in the form of information exchange, the ability to alter interpersonal communication (censoring debate platforms) can be interpreted as a form of direct constitutive power. Consequently, an inherent bias within a given online community exists as a division among users with and without control over other members' communicative tools and practice. It follows that digital inequality is embodied by an institute of moderators who exert legitimized symbolic censorship while representing the dominant e-stratum (Dhavan et al., 2001). With the old types of social inequality largely offset in the virtual space, the role of the classic forms of capital is, likewise, likely to be substantially reduced and/or significantly modified. Accordingly, cultural capital is digitized by means of users' internalized technological socialization directly corresponding to the scale, reach, and sophistication of their digital utilization patterns.

This Bourdieusian framework has documented empirical worth when applied to studies analyzing online user activity as well as those scrutinizing the interplay between digital and other more concrete forms of capital. In particular, the former can undergo a reverse transformation into each of the three major forms of capital (cultural, social, and informational) through unhindered professional networking, open access to public goods, and unrestricted dissemination of useful connections skillsets, and knowledge. This last point seems to hint at how the same kinds of ICT engagement can yield contrasting payoffs for skilled kinds of users. Indeed, the varying levels of digital habitus, access, and literacy have been shown to increase the gap in offline resource distribution, mirroring visibly lower levels of economic and cultural capital (Robinson, 2020: 488). Hence, acquired expertise is necessary for finding and assessing online data makes up one of the most prominent prerequisites for technologically advanced individuals whose digital adroitness serves as an advantageous precondition for the attainment of informational and operational superiority. Not only do better-trained Internet users reap steady benefits by arriving at desired outcomes with less effort and significant time efficiency, but they are also able to utilize the various ICT capabilities in a more versatile manner compared to their less-skilled peers. By seamlessly transitioning from one web resource to another, these individuals are taking further advantage of the Internet's cohesion, inducing platforms and algorithms via employing significantly more nuanced and productive tools available to those wishing to maximize their digital capital-enhancing potential.

Renowned German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas gives credit to this idea by emphasizing a distinction between instrumental and communicative action. The latter is seen as a byproduct of a special democratizing dimension of rational critical discourse, which facilitates wider inclusivity coupled with an increased quality of collective decision-making. As individual units of collaborative parlance, speech acts bolster interpersonal ties allowing the speaker to take up a relation to the world of legitimate social orders, representing existing states of affairs, while crystallizing his cooperative experiences through a first-person attitudinal stance. Communicative action, thus, relies on interlocutors aiming to reach a common ground in contentious matters coordinating their actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and through cooperation rather than undertaking a purely strategic, goal-directed course of action. Indeed, Habermas expressed concern that an overly commercialized attitude to all manner of social interaction and partnership would eventually spell doom for the ever-diminishing character of the genuinely public sphere of cooperation (Ramos-Pinto, 2012: 58). What especially seems to lend support to this notion is a presently alarming tendency of these discursive practices to turn into formalized sets of rigorous rules which supplant the more organic notion of deliberation with artificially imposed guidelines of the communicative contest. Modern society, thus, appears to be in dire need of readjusting of our rapidly shrinking discursive potential to prevent the previously accessible modes of the public forum from becoming utterly commodified. Expressing his dissatisfaction with our current shift from a culture-debating society to a culture-consuming one, Habermas placed the primary blame for this radical negative shift in the way we approach interpersonal communication on the disproportional growth in commercial mass media spread and popularity.

Conclusions

Social capital manifests itself as a form of transformative power affecting both concrete and digital means of collaboration and exchange. Accordingly, web-accumulated capital

might be defined not only as a set of skills, competencies, and cooperative predispositions embedded within a particular interconnected online infrastructure but serves the function of bringing together social actors by creating new as well as reinforcing established relational power networks. Communicative success often occurs as a concomitant result of attracting attention and harnessing the motivational resources of other network participants. Successful communication cannot only depend on the explication of its selective content since the impact of a particular digital activity is measured not just on the basis of predicting and calculating the number of potential response actions (comments) or other feedback metrics. While capable of being converted into other forms of reputational gains, communicative capital is, nonetheless qualitatively different from human or any other sort of capital and is, therefore, not reducible to it.

Studying the impact of various forms of social cohesion, researchers encounter models of Internet-facilitated discourse that tend to take an uncritical view towards web-fostered cooperation (failing to differentiate between distinct types of discourse facilitators), as well as neglecting to acknowledge the precise way freedom of expression is dependent on particular social platform architecture. By acknowledging the role social networks play in continually improving diverse forms of collaborative practice, one cannot disregard their massive influence as exclusive gatekeepers (exercising unilateral authority) of the ever-growing discursive online landscape. The last decade has undoubtedly witnessed a revolution in ICT proliferation that had a profound democratizing effect on allowing the widest social strata to partake in regional and global dialogue and deliberation by ushering in an era of almost utopian inclusivity and technological accessibility. With the old types of social inequality largely offset in the virtual space, the role of classic forms of capital is likely to be substantially reduced and/or significantly modified. Accordingly, cultural capital gets digitized by means of users' technological ties which are directly corresponding to the reach, scale, and sophistication of their online patterns of interaction.

Significant collaborative gains further accrue when randomly occurring physical affiliations are transferred to the level of technological platforms, taking advantage of their ability to shape and coordinate large-scale collaborative endeavors. Compared to more formally developed bonds and obligations based solely on a stringent hierarchical structure, spontaneous exchange gradually forms a fixed nexus of productive interdependence between individuals whose cooperative ties reinforce the overall effectiveness of jointly undertaken civic pursuits. When examining various types of virtual environments, researchers are frequently presented with novel opportunities for examining the intricate nature of digitized social capital. A potential expansion of the existing methodology stems from the use of the non-dial approach, utilizing a semantic network and community cohesion analyses, as well as turning to mediated data transmission methods. These kinds of tools make it possible to take into account the interdisciplinary nature of online social networking while encompassing a wide array of anthropological, ethnographic, and cultural characteristics prevalent in virtual communities that are based on specific types of connection and/or communication.

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