

Virtual Communities

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SOC 350 – Internet and Society

Lecture Objectives

- Discuss some key sociological terms used to talk about virtual communities and social networks
 - Communities
 - Social Capital
 - Social Ties
- Understand how communities can reproduce inequality, and how the Internet can address this situation

How do we define virtual community?



How do we define virtual community?

- First, let's describe what community means in the "off-line" world (there is no agreed upon definition)
- People in a community:
 - Share common references (family, religion, history, symbols, language)
 - Have developed their own rules (norms) about how to deal with each other
 - Have history of reciprocity (I scratch your back, you scratch mine)
 - Share a common identity as being a part of the community

How do we define virtual community?

- For most of human history, we assumed that in order for communities to develop, they needed to share **physical space and time**
- The Internet has changed this understanding
- We can make a definition for this class combining the off-line definition with the new capabilities of the Internet

How do we define virtual community?

A collection of people who communicate through computer technology. They develop a sense of common identity through interaction. They understand the symbols and norms used in the community, and share resources with other members.



Social Capital

- Social Capital: "...features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 2001: 67)
- Properties of groups (not individuals)
- More social capital in a groups means:
 - More information is shared
 - People help each other out more

Social Capital

Bonding Capital:
produced in
associations that are
relatively homogeneous

Bridging Capital:
produced in
associations that are
heterogeneous

- Church groups
- Neighborhood meeting places (barbershops, bars, etc)
- Sports associations
- Hobby organizations

Social Networks

- Social Networks: an egocentric social structure made up of connections (social, personal, informational, etc.) between people
- Egocentric means that the network is seen from the point of view of an individual
- Social structure means that the ties develop are stable, and form patterns through which the person acts
- Connections can be either "strong" or "weak" (Granovetter 1973)

Social Networks

Strong Ties

- Long-lasting ties between people
- Ties are often “emotional”
- Ex: family, friends, lover, spouse

Weak Ties

- Task-oriented, fluid connections between people
- Ex: People met at a band camp, professional conference, students in class

Understanding the Concepts from a Sociological Point of View

For the most part, everyone belongs to some type of community with some level of social capital, and has their own social network



Understanding the Concepts from a Sociological Point of View

- However, the benefits gained from their communities and their networks are not equal

WHY?

Understanding the Concepts from a Sociological Point of View

- Culture (norms, values, symbols, language) is passed on through our communities and networks...some cultures are valued more than others
- Belonging to communities with high levels of social capital means that you can get help when needed
- Belonging to social networks that pass along “treasured” information can lead to job opportunities, scholarships, and other types of knowledge

Understanding the Concepts from a Sociological Point of View

- Scholars and community leaders are excited about the Internet because...
- It allows people to form virtual communities where they can access new people (and culture)
- It allows people to develop more ties – usually weak ties – with people who have valuable information

Understanding the Concepts from a Sociological Point of View

- A personal example...
- I wanted to collect information on “Professional Sociologists” in the news
- Who could I ask? My colleagues, family, and friends could only provide limited info.



Summary

- Virtual Community
- Social Capital
- Social Networks
- The power of the Internet to increase social capital and expand social networks

References

Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties",
American Journal of Sociology 78 (6): 1360 -1380.

Putnam, Robert. 2001. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and
Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon
and Schuster.
