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The Internet and Virtual Civil Society: The New Frontier of Social Capital

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Ever since Alix de Tocqueville stressed the importance of America's vibrant associational life, democratic theorists have examined the relationship between participation in voluntary associations and the skills and norms that underlie a stable and effective democracy.[1] Participation in voluntary organizations encourages the core components of social capital; the norms of trust, tolerance and civic activity (Putnam 1993). Robert Putnam's (2000) seminal research advances the idea that "civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations" (19).

Several studies have described a recent decline in social group engagement in America, and with it a concomitant decline in social capital (Putnam 2000; Putnam 2002; Cf. Stolle and Hooghe 2005; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). For instance, Putnam (2000) argues that involvement in traditional fraternal groups, religious activities, union activities, and a host of other social associations—from bowling leagues to choral societies—have declined during the last quarter of the twentieth century. This has led to dire forecasts about the vitality of American society and democracy because of the decrease in social capital and its presumably negative consequences (Macedo et al. 2005; National Council on Citizenship 2006).

While traditional forms of civic association may be declining, technological innovations may be changing the ways in which people associate with one another. Today, 71 percent of American adults use the Internet (Pew Center 2007). The early studies on this topic examined simple Internet usage. Collecting information from the web or exchanging emails offers very limited social interactions. However, the so-called Web 2.0 offers new opportunities for social interactions through chat rooms, on-line meetups, blogs and social networking sites. These new developments have dramatically expanded the amount of social interaction that individuals now pursue through the Internet. These developments were unanticipated by early critiques of Internet-based networking, and thus a reappraisal is necessary. New forms of virtual civil society provide more significant opportunities for meaningful social interactions and are more functionally equivalent to participation in traditional social groups. Our key research question is whether these new forms of virtual interaction can have similar positive consequences for social capital formation as traditional social group activity.

Although scholars generally agree that social interactions within traditional social groups build social capital, they debate the benefits of a virtual civil society (Johnston and Kaye 2003; Shah et al. 2002; Wellman et al. 2001; Scheufele, Mattnew and Nisbet 2002). Putnam (2000: 176) argues that the face-to-face interaction within traditional social group activity is the most conducive to generating social capital, because it is through direct contact, social interaction, and sustained involvement that social capital develops (also see Putnam and Feldstein 2003). Others claim that the importance of face-to-face communication may be exaggerated (Hooghe and

Stolle 2003).

Our research examines how interpersonal social group activity and virtual activity differ in their effects for democratic attitudes and behaviors. We ask how different forms of social interactions may contribute to the multiple dimensions of social capital: social trust, citizen norms and political involvement. We expect that social group activity and virtual interactions might affect different dimensions of social capital, or perhaps complement one another. Our analyses rely on data collected in the 2005 Citizenship Involvement Democracy survey conducted by the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University. This survey provides unique detail on participation in both social groups and virtual interactions, coupled with a broad range of democratic attitudes and activities.

This research has important implications for debates over the decline in social capital in America. Although participation in traditional associations is waning, interactions on the Internet are rising rapidly. As these new virtual forms of association proliferate, it is important to consider how they might affect civic attitudes and behaviors. Evidence that points toward the critical nature of face-to-face contacts in social groups for building trust, tolerance and political activity would bolster the argument that America's social capital is in jeopardy. However, evidence demonstrating that social group activity and virtual interactions both foster democratic norms and activities would support a more positive view of current trends in associational life.

Social Capital and Associations

The linkage between associational life and social capital has a long history in social science research (Granovetter 1973; Coleman 1990). Scholars maintain that the civic attitudes, shared trust and reciprocal norms that make up social capital are rooted in social interactions. Robert Putnam's (2000) research highlights the benefits of social capital for cultivating democratic norms and habits, and ultimately for effective democracy. Interaction in social groups presumably engenders social trust, and these sentiments provide a foundation for other positive social and political norms (Putnam 2000; Howard and Gilbert 2008; Uslaner 1998). Civil society activity also should develop the norms of civic engagement, such as the belief in an active citizen role, and other such orientations. Participation in civil society groups can produce social and organizational skills that are vital for a participatory democracy—much in the tradition of Tocqueville's image of democracy in America. The development of these social norms and skills is the prime argument of the social capital theory.

In addition, a wealth of research concludes that social capital encourages political participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000, 2002). Organizations educate, build civic skills, and plug members into networks for recruitment. Scholars often point toward unions, churches and political parties as particularly strong mobilizers of electoral participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Social capital may be generated through several mechanisms, and some are more conducive to the democratic process than others. Scholars of social capital often stress that face-to-face communication networks are more likely to produce positive social capital. Putnam and Feldstein (2003) conclude that "our investigations strongly suggest that trust relationships and resilient communities generally form through local personal contact" (9). Putnam (2000) explicitly contrasts groups that engage their members in personal interactions as compared to checkbook membership that lacks such interactions. Face-to-face communications presumably

build stronger social capital effects among members through the experience of personal interaction, the reciprocity of such interactions, and the redundancy of contacts. Howard and Gilbert (2008) similarly find that the more frequently a person is involved in voluntary organizations, the greater their generalized trust and activity in politics.

In contrast, some scholars have questioned the necessity of *in-person* interactions as the basis for forming social capital. Hooghe and Stolle (2003, 11) warn that face-to-face interactions are "less distinctive in their effects on civic attitudes than is predicted by social capital theory". Other research suggests that the nature of the group environment is more important than simple membership (Warren 2000; Stolle and Rochon 1998). Further, alternative types of interpersonal interactions through such forums as self-help groups, social movements, community volunteering, and "checkbook" memberships in citizen groups have often been overlooked as potential sources of social capital (Wuthnow 1998; Berry 1999).

Social interactions that "bridge" together people from different backgrounds and interests may connect people to others beyond their normal social network and develop more generalized social trust and collective orientations. In contrast, groups that tend to bond together mostly like-minded individuals may be less likely to develop trust and tolerance that extends beyond the individual's own network (Putnam 2000, 22; Norris 2001, 2002). Associations with more diverse and more engaged members presumably generate generalized trust (Stolle 1998). In addition, multiple organizational ties may increase the potential for bridging ties. Hooghe and Stolle (2003, 10) state that the "bridging character of relations is not necessarily produced in the association itself but could result from overlapping memberships at the individual level".

The links generated by social interactions may be more formal or informal in nature. More formal traditional organizations such as trade unions or business associations tend to be more formal in their institutional structure and treat individuals as members rather than active participants. By contrast, some of the newer forms of association—such as environmental groups, women's groups, or self-help groups--often rely on "looser" more informal, flexible connections among participants (Hooghe and Stolle 2004; Wuthnow 1998).

Thus, there is a general consensus in the literature that participation in voluntary associations nurtures the habits of the heart that are essential elements of a democratic polity. At the same time, there are questions of whether in-person interactions are necessary, and whether the nature of interactions matters more than their quantity.

A Virtual Civil Society

Technological advances in the past decade have generated significant changes in communication styles among individuals (Bimber 2003). The early days of the Internet offered limited social contact, often with a unidirectional flow of information from website to Internet user. Although the Internet commonly acts as a source of information, it also serves as a communication medium and even as a virtual public sphere (Polat 2005). Today, a new style of Internet activity offers substantially more opportunities for interaction. Many people connect to established social groups through the Internet as they receive e-newsletters from their groups or visit group websites. In addition, cyber associations have expanded rapidly as individuals interact through online forums, chat rooms and personal pages that are separate from traditional social groups. For example, more than 20 percent of Internet users say that they participate in a chat room or in an online discussion (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2007). Social networking sites

provide another venue to meet individuals online, share information, and interact in other ways. In a 2006, nearly 20 percent of Internet users frequented online social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook or Friendster (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2007). These interactions have the potential to create a virtual civil society.

Virtual association is typically more anonymous than traditional group membership, and usually are less formal. Interactions on the internet have the potential to transcend socioeconomic and race and ethnicity barriers, and Norris (2002) finds online contact brings together people of different generations (also Ho and McLeod 2008). Without more formal registration rolls and interpersonal contact, exiting these types of groups may be easier than in the past. Along the same lines, joining a new group will be easy as well.

Many new virtual associations are niche groups. People choose from an a la carte buffet of small virtual networks, and can leave the virtual group for another if disagreements arise within the organization. Further, these virtual associations tend to draw together like-minded people, dampening the likelihood that members will exchange new ideas, bargain, and defend their perspective to the group.

Nevertheless, because virtual associations encourage the flow of information, social interactions and allow for a multiplicity of group ties, the rise of virtual association may build social capital (Corrado and Firestone 1996; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Wellman et al. 2001). Virtual associations facilitate the collecting and exchanging information, and allow members to make up their own minds on issues. In this way, virtual associations may develop skills in critical analysis. Greater flow of information may also alter the activities that organizations encourage. Today many organizations coordinate mass letter-writing or email message campaigns online. Members may be encouraged to contact a government official or politician via email or the Internet on a particular issue. Connected to more social networks through online activity, an individual may gain greater access to information, be more likely to receive requests to participate.

On the one hand, some studies suggest a limited role for the Internet in promoting political engagement. Although the Internet may supply a great deal of easily accessible information, citizens' interest and processing does not necessarily follow. Bimber (2001) finds that Internet use in the late 1990s is related to an increase in campaign donations, but not to other forms of political participation.Similarly, traditional media usage remains an important source of political information (Scheufele and Nisbet 2002).

On the other hand, some recent research links Internet use with higher levels of participation and social trust. Through analysis of recursive models, Shah et al. (2002) show that "time spent on the Internet contributes to increased levels of [civic] participation, but that civic participation is not a significant predictor of time spent online" (975). Tolbert and McNeal (2003) find that Internet users were significantly more likely to vote in the 1996 and 2000 Presidential elections, even after controlling for socio-economic status and age. Among Web users in the 2000 election, Internet usage spurred even greater political interest (Johnson and Kaye 2003). In Britain, long-time Internet users are more likely to join organizations, and to express social trust than those who do not use the Internet, all else equal (Curtis and Norris 2007). Other studies are less sanguine about the positive impact of Internet use on political participation (Bimber 2001; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). However, most of these studies compare Internet users and non-users rather than social interaction on the Internet, and may underestimate the potential effects of virtual civil society.

Our research builds upon these past studies to examine the impact of interpersonal social

group activity and virtual social activity upon the multiple dimensions of social capital. Empirically, we test several indicators of democratic attitudes and behaviors: social trust, norms of citizenship, and political involvement. From a democratic theory perspective, we argue that it is important to unpack the connections between different forms of association and the multiple dimensions of social capital. By determining which forms of association are more conducive to certain types of trust or political involvement, we may improve our understanding of how social capital is generated.

First, we expect that face-to-face interactions should foster *interpersonal and social trust* as previous research has demonstrated. However, this trust might focus on individuals within an individual's own social network, bonding them to these members of their network. In contrast, there are questions of whether virtual activity will nurture social trust. And if it does, a virtual civil society is not bound by physical space, which may foster a broader social network.

Second, we examine whether interpersonal social activity and virtual activity foster *democratic citizen norms*. Social interactions are theorized to inculcate the values of tolerance and citizenship that support democracy. However, Putnam and his colleagues (2002) are concerned that the role of the citizen is coming to be defined "more as spectator than as participant" (412). Declining levels of memberships in interpersonal groups are theorized to lead to greater individualism, undermining the shared sense of community shaping citizen norms.

The impact of virtual social activity on political norms is currently uncertain. Face-to-face interactions within more formal associations means that these organizations are difficult to exit, and members must stay and debate the issues, defending their positions, listening to others (Warren 2001). Virtual interactions, by contrast, allow for multiple, flexible memberships that are not bound by geographical limitations. The shared interests around which virtual interactions form may provide the bases for instilling the shared sense of community and expectations for the democratic process. Through these different bridging mechanisms, both types of association may benefit political tolerance and may encourage a general reciprocity toward others.

In addition, social interaction may affect the norms of democratic citizenship. Russell Dalton's (2007) recent research identifies two emphases in the role of the citizen: duty-based and engaged. Duty-based citizenship highlights obligations and social order—a more spectator oriented citizenship. By contrast, engaged citizenship prioritizes critical analysis, care for others and direct forms of participation-- a more participatory approach to citizenship. We expect that social interaction—either in-person through a social group or over the Internet—should promote a more engaged definition of the citizen's role.

Third, both social group activity and virtual interactions may encourage *political involvement*. Traditional in-person associations such as trade unions, public interest groups, and PTAs are often venues for mobilizing others to participate in conventional political activities, such as working for a campaign or voting, and even provide the networks for recruiting individuals into contentious forms of action (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, ch.13). Because of the face-to-face contacts in social group activity, in-person requests for political activity may be especially effective. In addition, the social capital thesis holds that such group interactions develop the norms and skills that facilitate involvement in society and politics (Putnam 2000).

In comparison, it is unclear whether virtual association encourages similar mobilization into political activities such as voting, campaign activism, and other forms of action (Polat 2005; Bimber 2002; Johnson and Kay 2003; Wellman et al. 2001). The proliferation of candidate websites and electronic networking, such as Moveon.org or Meetup.org, may mobilize participation in campaigns and other political contacting. Importantly, both types of social

activity may plug participants into networks of recruitment. Yet because virtual interactions are not bound by geographic limitations, they are less likely to lead to local participation than face-to-face activities. Further, the direct personal mobilization of participation that occurs in face-to-face interactions within a social group is difficult to replicate online.

Similarly, it is less clear whether virtual social activity generates the interpersonal skills and norms that facilitate involvement in politics. Recent research suggests that interactions on the Internet build cyberskills that lead to online participation, but not traditional forms of participation (Krueger 2002). Yet the relative magnitude of effects of both methods on political activity is unclear, as well as the effects of both methods on different modes of political action.

For political discussion, information on political issues is more easily obtained by Internet users, and thus may arm virtual participants with the background and time to think about their views to engage in political discussion more frequently (Tewksbury and Althaus 2000; Polat 2005). In addition, computer-mediated discussions may break down status barriers and reduce apprehension among participants, allowing for a freer exchange of viewpoints. Experimental evidence supports the positive role of the Internet in facilitating civic discussion, revealing that individuals in online chat room discussions are more likely to express an opinion than individuals in face-to-face discussions (Ho and McLeod 2008).

The goal of the paper is to compare these two forms of social interaction—through voluntary groups and Internet activities—to test their releative ability to predict the norms and skills that are the essence of the social capital thesis.

Measuring Civil Society Activity

One of the challenges in studying civil society is to agree on what it means, as a precursor to measuring public involvement in civil society activity. This challenge is compounded when we want to compare in-person engagement versus virtual civil society. For the former, there is considerable debate on whether membership in any social group sufficient to promote social capital (Warren 1999; Stolle and Rochon 1998). For the later, the options are even more diverse. A substantial part of Internet activity can involve impersonal activities such as ordering from a catalogue or looking up information. However, the Internet also opens a virtual door to a vast array of potential interpersonal interactions. These range from social networking sites of various forms, to reading and contributing to online forums, to the collaborative activity in Internet communities (such as in *World of Warcraft, Second Life,* and other communities). Explicit political activity on the web is less common (such as discussion lists on political websites or connecting to like-minded citizens through Moveon.org). However, the civil society thesis holds that social interactions—even in non-political social groups or non-political webgroups—can produce social capital. We are fortunate to have a dataset that focused on measuring civil society activity in both domains in forms that might reflect social capital formation.

The "Citizenship, Involvement and Democracy" (CID) survey of the Center for the Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University examined the political values and behaviors of the American public, partially replicating themes from the 2002 European Social Survey. The survey conducted in-person interviews with 1001 respondents between May 16 and July 19, 2005. International Communications Research (ICR) did the interviews using a clustered, area-probability sample of households and random selection of respondents.[2]

The measurement of in-person social activity is relatively straightforward. The CID survey asked a typical battery about membership *and participation* in a list of 16 social groups

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(plus an "other" category in which the respondent could identify another group):[3]

> *Q. 39. Now I have some questions about voluntary organizations. For each of the voluntary organizations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last 12 months, and, if so, which. A member of such an organizations; Participated in an activity arranged by such an organization; Donated money to such an organization; done voluntary (unpaid) work for such an organization.*

Studies of social capital often measure only membership in social groups, and the CID goes the additional step of measuring actual participation in these groups to capture the social interactions central to the social capital theory.

Although it is important to distinguish between the different types of social groups and their potential to develop politically relevant norms and skills, at this point we are interested in mapping the overall impact of social activity. Therefore, we simply counted the number of groups each respondent belonged to, and the number of groups in which they participated. The first two data columns of Table 1 display these results.

Table 1. In-Person and Internet Based Civil Society Activity

	Number of Interpersonal Social Group Memberships	Number of Interpersonal Social Group Participations	Number of Virtual Social Interactions	Number of VirtualSocial Interactions (have Internet access)
Six or more	3.4	2.9	6.2	8.4
5	2.2	2.1	5.5	7.5
4	4.8	2.9	5.3	7.1
3	7.2	4.6	5.7	7.7
2	11.9	6.8	7.2	9.7
1	19.6	14.4	8.9	12.0
None	51.0	66.4	61.1	47.6
Mean	1.20	0.84	1.28	1.73
(N)	(1001)	(1001)	(1001)	(744)

Source: CID Survey 2005
Note: Table entries are percentages in each column, with the mean and N for each type of activity.

Even though the survey presented respondents with a long list of possible social groups, half of Americans (51.0%) say they are not a member of any group. A sixth of the American public belongs to three or more social groups. The second column displays the percentages who have participated in an activity of the group, which necessitates in-person interaction. The level of participants drops off significantly, with two-thirds reporting no participation.

To measure participation in virtual civil society, the CID survey focused on social interactions that occurred over the Internet as a functional equivalent to in-person interactions in a social group. The CID asked a battery of seven questions:

Q. 7. Please tell how much, if at all, the Internet has helped you do each of the following things? How about (READ ITEM). Would you say a lot, some, only a little, or not at all?

a. Become more involved with groups and organizations you already belong to
b. Interact with people or groups who share your hobbies or interests
c. Interact with people or groups who share your religious beliefs
d. Interact with people or groups who share your political views
e. Interact with people of a different race from yours
f. Interact with people of different ages or generations
g. Interact with people from other countries

The advantage of this battery is that it does not just measure the amount of time spent on the Internet, but focuses on the types of social interactions that might generate a virtual civil society.[4] Much as with the group participation question, we are examining social interactions in a wide variety of settings—the exact phenomenon that is central to the social capital thesis.

The distribution of responses across these virtual options illustrates the diverse effects of Internet activity (Figure 1). As a baseline, nearly two-fifths of our sample report having no internet access or never using the Internet (43%). Still, a fifth of Americans say that the Internet helps them a lot or somewhat to become more involved in existing groups (19%); and substantial numbers use the Internet to interact with people sharing their hobbies (25%), their religious belief (13%), or their political beliefs (15%). In addition, the Internet broadens social networks beyond the immediate community and existing social networks. It also in a color-blind medium, so people of different races or genders can interact without first establishing each other's identity. These bridging interactions are quite common. Many respondents reported that they interacted with people of a different race (18%), of different ages (44%), or from other countries (28%). Almost by definition, Internet interaction open the door to a broader social network than an individual's immediate physical network.

The third column in table 1 displays the distribution of virtual activity counting the number who say "a lot" or "some" participation.[5] A majority of Americans report no Internet interactions at this level (61.1 percent). Among those who interact, more report multiple forms of interaction, so 17.0 percent report interacting in three or more of the listed options. The average interaction through the Internet (1.28 items) is actually higher than for membership in social groups (1.20) or participation in social groups—even though the social group list included sixteen possible groups. Furthermore, two-fifths of the sample reports no Internet access either at home or at work (Q.5) or no usage of the Internet; these respondents were not asked this battery of questions. Thus, if we focus only on those individuals who have access to the Internet in the fourth column of the table, reports of social interaction through the Internet are substantial. Twenty-three percent say they interact in three or more ways, and a majority reports some participation in a virtual civil society.

Figure 1. The Distribution of Internet-based Social Interactions
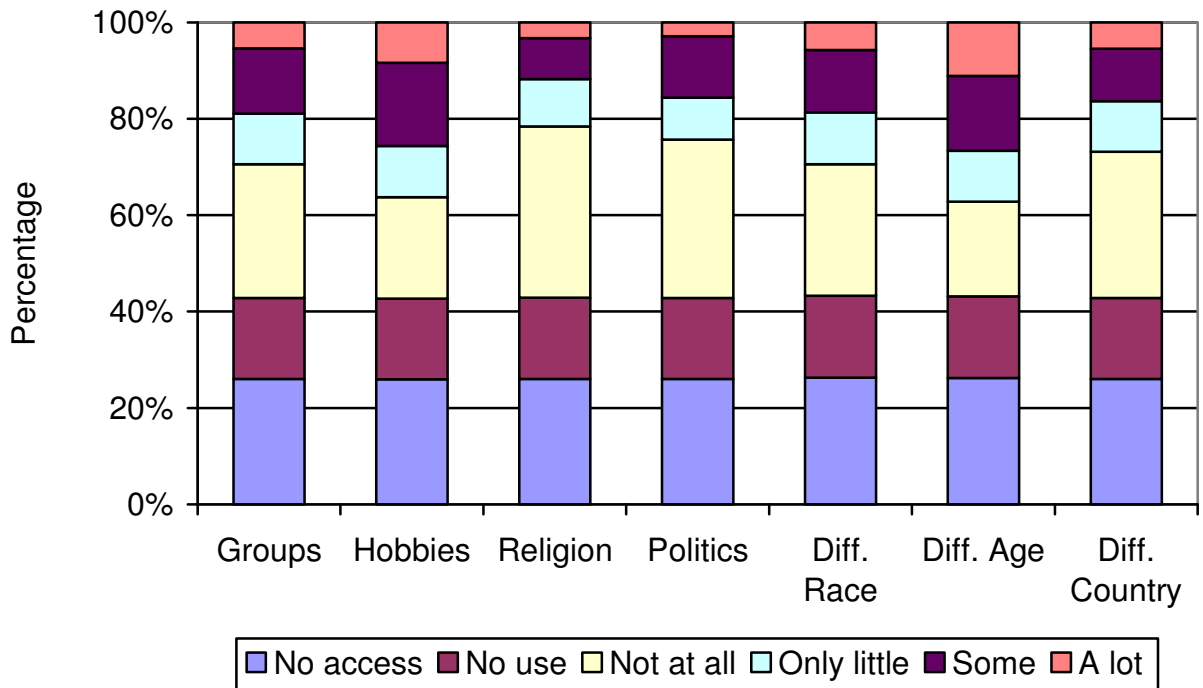
We believe both aspects of civil society participation—social groups and virtual interactions—can be complimentary forms of social engagement. Indeed, there is a positive relationship between both in-person and virtual civil society participation (approximately r=.20 depending on the choice of index). Better-educated Americans who possess the skills and norms to facilitate social engagement are more active in both domains. Virtual civil society thus represents an extension of the past patterns of social engagement through a new medium.

At the same time, virtual civil society represents a new style of social engagement that draws different people into social activity. For instance, as one might expect, membership in social groups strongly increases with age (r=.13), although participation in social groups is essentially unrelated to age (r=-.02). In contrast, virtual civil society activity is predominately the domain of the young (r=-.23). When age is combined with education, it clearly identifies the core of virtual civil society. Among young, college-educated Americans, 73 percent have some Internet interactions, while the comparable percentage among all older Americans (regardless of education level) is 15 percent! The young are the wired generation, who interact through the Internet, text messages and emails—while their parents are attending a church social, a book club, or a pilates class.[6]

The Correlates of Civil Society Activity

Researchers theorize that citizens' interactions in social groups have important consequences for democratic attitudes and behaviors. Based on our theoretical expectations for the ways interpersonal social and virtual group activity generate social capital, we focus on three areas: (1)

social trust, (2) citizen norms, (3) political participation.

Social Trust

As noted above, researchers have stressed that one of the prime effects of civil society participation is a potential for increasing trust of others (Newton 1997). Personal trust may translate into social trust when citizens participate in groups. Putnam claims that "Social networks allow trust to become transitive and spread" (1993, 169).

Table 2 presents the correlations between a brace of social trust questions and our four measures of civil society participation. A first battery of questions include the traditional interpersonal trust questions: most people can be trusted, most people would try to be fair, and most people would be helpful.[7] These items show modest positive correlations with membership and participation in traditional social groups, but little relationship with virtual civil society activity. For instance, the basic trust in other people question is correlated at .14 (pearson r) with social group membership, but only .05 with virtual social interactions. We think it is significant that participation in social groups—which should be the causal force shaping social trust—displays a weaker correlation with social trust than does the simple count of group memberships. This may suggest that group membership correlations benefit from the trustful joining groups (a reverse causality), and the actual influence of civil society participation on social trust is better measured by the group participation question.

Table 2 also indicates a weak correlation between virtual social activity and interpersonal trust. None of the six correlations for these relationships is statistically significant. On the surface, at least, this appears to validate claims that in-person interactions are needed to generate the positive benefits of civil society interactions.

To go beyond these broad categories, the CID also developed a battery that assesses trust in six specific types of individuals. Three types refer to people that respondents' might consider as part of their familiar personal network: neighbors, coworkers/classmates, and people in clubs/associations to which the respondent belongs. Three other groups measure trust in individuals outside one's immediate network: strangers, people of a different race, or people of a different religion. In broad terms, we might consider the first three items as tapping *bonding trust* to groups that include the respondent. The second three examples tap *bridging trust* to groups beyond an individual's normal personal network.

A more variable pattern emerges when we turn to these specific measures of interpersonal trust (in the lower half of Table 2). Social group membership and participation display significant positive correlations with trust in all six types of people. Again, the correlations tend to be higher for the simple count of the number of group memberships than for actual participation in social groups.

Virtual social activity displays a statistically significant positive correlation with most of these trust measures, albeit weaker than for traditional group activity. The gap in correlations between participation in social groups and participation in Internet networks is now much closer. In addition, virtual social activity appears to have a stronger impact for bridging social trust, while social group activity has a stronger effect on bonding social trust.

Table 2. Correlations of Social Trust with Interpersonal and Virtual Civil Society Activity

Measures of Social Trust	Interpersonal Social Group Membership	Interpersonal Social Group Participation	Virtual Social Interactions	Virtual Social Interactions (have Internet access)
Trust other people	.14*	.10*	.05	.05
People take advantage of others	.12*	.10*	.00	-.01
People are helpful	.09*	.04	.02	.01
Trust neighbors	.18*	.11*	-.01	-.04
Trust coworkers/classmates	.15*	.11*	.07*	.04
Trust people in clubs	.24*	.19*	.10*	.09*
Trust strangers	.20*	.13*	.09*	.06
Trust people of different race	.15*	.12*	.10*	.06
Trust people different religion	.15*	.11*	.04	-.02

Source: CID Survey 2005
Note: Table entries are pearson r correlations between social trust questions and alternative measures of interpersonal and virtual civil society participation.

   To examine this contrast between bonding and bridging social trust explicitly, and to ensure that these are not spurious correlations due to other factors such as age or education differences, we turn to multivariate analyses. We used factor analysis to create indices of bonding and bridging social trust.[8] We then entered both social group participation and virtual social activity into a multiple regression analysis along with other potential influences on trust as control variables: age, education, gender, race/ethnicity, and liberal/conservative orientations. Table 3 presents our findings.

   Participation in interpersonal social groups has a significant positive effect on both bonding social trust (ß=.08) and bridging social trust (ß=.10), even while controlling for the other variables in the model. These are the types of relationships that provide an empirical backing to the social capital thesis. In comparison, virtual social activity appears to only stimulate bridging social trust (ß=.07), with effects approaching those of in-person social group participation.

   In summary, we find support for the social capital thesis that in-person participation in social groups encourages interpersonal trust. Furthermore, we expect these effects might be stronger if we more precisely considered the nature of the group and the form of each individual's participation. A group needs to be civil and engaging for the civil society thesis to apply. In addition, participation in a virtual civil society seems to stimulate—albeit more weakly—social trust. Even more significant, virtual participation most directly encourages bridging social trust, that may be even more important in developing empathy, social concern, and the sense of collective interests that are embedded in democratic politics (Putnam 2000, 23). Whereas social group participation stimulates both bonding and bridging social trust, which leads to more ambiguous predictions about the total impact of social group engagement.

Table 3. Predicting Bonding and Bridging Social Trust

Predictors	Bonding Social Trust		Bridging Social Trust	
	Unst. B	Beta	Unst. b	Beta
Social group activity	.04*	.08	.06*	.10
Virtual group activity	.01	.01	.04	.07
Education	.24*	.26	.03	.03
Age	.01*	.20	.00	.04
African-American	-.41*	-.13	.03	.01
Hispanic	-.23*	-.07	-.14	-.05
Gender (Female)	-.10	-.05	.15*	.08
Left/Right self-placement	.02	.05	.00	.01
Constant	-1.01*		-.49*	
Multiple R	.39		.18	

Source: CID Survey 2005
Note: Table entries are the results of OLS regression analyses, presenting both unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients. Coefficients significant at the .05 level are denoted by an asterisk in for the unstandardized coefficient.

Citizen Norms

In addition to trust, researchers claim that participation in voluntary associations should socialize participants into norms of democratic citizenship. This is the essence of the Tocquevillian theme that civil society breads democratic habits of the heart. Putnam (2000) and others (Uslaner 2002; Warren 1999) have similarly stressed the development of citizenship norms as an essential element of social capital.

One key element of a democratic political culture is political tolerance. Interpersonal and virtual activities may bolster political tolerance by connecting participants to a wide variety of contacts. However, the nature of social interactions—within social groups and within virtual networks—is probably more important than the quantity of such interactions. This is the essence of Putnam's distinction between bridging and bonding social engagement.

The CID assessed political tolerance with an open-ended question framework. Respondents were first asked to identify the group they liked least from a set of different critical groups. Then, for their least-liked group, they were asked if this group should be allowed to make a speech in the community, to hold public rallies, or be banned from holding public office.[9]

Another measure of citizen norms flows from Americans' perceptions of what constitutes a "good" democratic citizen. Such normative expectations of what a good citizen should do are reflections of how people perceive the norms of the American political culture. The CID survey asks respondents a battery of questions regarding the qualities of good citizenship. Respondents reply to an eleven point importance scale for each item, representing recognized norms rather than whether the respondents actually do these things. Factor analysis indicates that the items cluster along two dimensions of citizenship: duty-based and engaged citizenship (Dalton 2007, ch. 2). Duty-based perceptions of good citizenship include traditional conceptions of citizen

norms, such as the importance of voting in elections, serving on a jury, serving in the military, always obeying the law, and reporting a crime. Engaged citizenship reflects a more participatory, elite-challenging view of citizenship, such as forming one's own opinion, supporting those who are worse off, being active in politics and being active in voluntary groups.

Table 4. Correlations of Political Norms with Interpersonal and Virtual Civil Society Activity

Social Norms	Social Group Membership	Social Group Participation	Virtual Social Interactions
Political Tolerance	.17	.17	.15
Good citizens: Vote	.20	.13	.11
Good citizens: Form own opinion	.09	.05	.11
Good citizens: Active in group	.24	.22	.17
Good citizen: Active in politics	.16	.18	.16
Engaged Citizenship	.23	.22	.21
Duty-based Citizenship	.03	-.04	-.03

Source: CID Survey 2005
Note: Table entries are pearson r correlations between political norms and alternative measures of interpersonal and virtual civil society participation.

Political tolerance shares a positive relationship with social group membership and participation and with virtual social interactions, and these bivariate correlations are presented in Table 4. Similarly, interpersonal and virtual interactions share a positive relationship with support for "engaged" citizenship, but not for duty based citizenship.

Following the previous analyses, we control for a host of theoretically important variables as well as including social group participation and virtual activity. The first panel of table 5 presents a multiple regression analysis predicting levels of political tolerance. We find that social group activity is a significant predictor of political tolerance, albeit with modest effects (ß=.11), while virtual activity is also positively related to tolerance but does not reach the level of statistical significance (ß=.06). Although both variables are significantly related to tolerance in simple bivariate relationships, the impact of social group and virtual activity substantially overlaps with other variables in the model—and each other—moderating the impact of each variable.

The right two columns of Table 5 display the regression models for duty-based and engaged norms of citizenship. Neither interpersonal nor virtual interaction is significant for duty-based citizenship. Thus these traditional norms of social order (and the norm to vote) do not seem conditioned by civil society engagement. However, both forms of interaction are significantly related to engaged citizenship is significantly related to both social group activity (ß=.16) and virtual activity (ß=14).

Table 5. Predicting Citizen Norms

Predictors	Political Tolerance		Duty-based Citizenship		Engaged Citizenship	
	Unstd. b	Beta	Unstd. B	Beta.	Unstd. b	Beta
Interpersonal Social Group Activity	.08*	.11	.02	.04	.11*	.16
Virtual Interactions	.03	.06	.02	.04	.07*	.14
Education	.22*	.21	.02	.03	.05	.06
Age	.00	.01	.01*	.18	.00	.02
African-American	-.13	-.04	-.23*	-.07	.26*	.08
Hispanic	.05	.01	-.07	-.02	.05	.02
Gender (Female)	-.14*	-.06	.09	.06	-.05	-.02
Left/Right self-placement	-.02	-.05	.13*	.29	.00	.01
Constant	3.9*		-1.18*		-.16	
Multiple R	.081		.134		.076	

Source: CID Survey 2005
Note: Table entries are the results of OLS regression analyses, presenting both unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients. Coefficients significant at the .05 level are denoted by an asterisk in for the unstandardized coefficient.

This suggests that virtual social activity is essentially as conducive as traditional social groups activity in building more grassroots, directly engaged values of citizenship that are the habits of the heart that Tocqueville stressed.[10]

Political Involvement

A long series of analyses expect that participation in social groups bolsters political involvement (Uhlaner 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). We also theorize that virtual interactions may encourage political involvement through similar mechanisms of mobilization. The CID survey enables us to look at the relationship between group and virtual social interactions for a wide range of political activities.

Our findings for political involvement are presented in Table 6. The first regression model predicts political discussion with higher values indicating more frequent discussion. Both virtual interaction and social groups are positive and statistically significant indicators of political discussion. This supports our expectations of the importance of social interactions, and we even find that virtual interactions exert a stronger influence on this broad measure of political

engagement than traditional group activity.

Table 6. Predicting Political Involvement

Predictors	Pol.Discussion		Electoral Activity		Protest Activity		Internet Activity	
	Unst. b	Beta	Unstd. b	Beta	Unstd. b	Beta	Unstd. B	Beta
Interpersonal Social group activity	.12*	.09	.07*	.11	.14*	.22	.15*	.21
Virtual social interaction	.18*	.18	.07*	.14	.00	.00	.12*	.23
Education	.36*	.19	.08*	.09	-.07*	-.08	.23*	.24
Age	.01	.07	.01*	.20	-.01*	-.17	.00	.03
African-American	.04	.01	.30*	.09	-.02	-.01	-.19	-.05
Hispanic	-.77*	-.12	-.06	-.02	-.04	-.01	-.15	-.05
Gender (Female)	-.62*	-.15	-.18*	-.09	.02	.01	-.09	-.04
Left/Right self-placement	.01	.02	.04*	.09	-.05*	-.12	-.03*	-.07
Constant	4.5*		.84*		-.72*		.58*	
Multiple R	.15		.108		.091		.257	

Source: CID Survey 2005
Note: Table entries are the results of OLS regression analyses, presenting both unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients. Coefficients significant at the .05 level are denoted by an asterisk in for the unstandardized coefficient.

The CID also asked respondents whether they had participated in a set of political activities over the past year, and whether they voted in the 2004 election. We used a varimax rotated factor analysis to distinguish between the separate modes of political involvement. The factor analysis identified three dimensions: electoral, protest and Internet activity.[11] The electoral activity dimension includes contacting a politician, working for a political party, action group, or campaign of a candidates, voting, donating money to a political group and displaying campaign materials. The protest dimension includes signing a petition, buying/boycotting a product for political or ethical reasons, and participating in a legal or illegal protest. The Internet activity dimension includes visiting the website of a political organization, forwarding an electronic message with political content, and participating in politics on the Internet.

We expect a positive relationship between group and virtual activity and each form of political participation. The results suggest that virtual interaction mobilizes participants not only into Internet political participation, but also into in-person electoral activities. The geographically disperse nature of the Internet may sever the link between virtual interactions and protest. It is likely to be more difficult to mobilize a distant friend met on the Internet to

participate in a local protest.

In short, interpersonal and virtual interactions are linked to participation in politics, both traditional and newer activities, even after controlling for demographic and ideological influences.[12] Social interactions outside of politics increase the odds that people will become involved in politics.

Conclusions

Many leading scholars have recently lamented on the decline of civic engagement and social capital in America, and the potentially dire consequences of these trends (Putnam 2000; Macedo et al. 2005; National Council on Citizenship 2006). Too many of us, they claim, are sitting at home in front of our televisions sets, and more recently our computer monitors, and not personally connecting to our fellow citizens. However, early Internet usage offered only a one-directional flow of information with minimal interaction, such as email. The nature of Internet interaction has changed dramatically with new innovations such as social networking sites and blogs. Rather than study simple Internet usage, we examined the amount of social interaction that individuals pursue through the Internet. This, we believe, provides a closer test of the theorized impact of social interactions and is more functionally equivalent to participation in traditional social groups.

Our findings suggest that while the traditional sources of social capital may be declining, the mechanisms through which citizens connect to others evolve with the new technology of the Internet (and other new technologies). Indeed, more people are sitting in front of their computer monitors, but they use this experience to connect to others in their social groups, others who share their cultural, social or political interests, and to garner information about the world and their fellow citizens through this new medium.

Virtual civil society appears to have many of the same benefits for citizen norms and political involvement as traditional civil society. We find that the shift toward virtual civil society is linked withbridging trust in people outside one's immediate personal network. Virtual activity is also related to participatory citizen norms. Overall, interpersonal social group and virtual activity are each similarly and positively associated with higher levels of political participation. Both forms of involvement contribute to heightened electoral and Internet activity. While interpersonal social group activity is more strongly linked with protest participation, virtual interactions share a tighter connection with political discussion. Interpersonal social group activity appears more conducive to social trust and tolerance.

A central theoretical question to the study of social capital is how social capital is generated. Social capital is likely generated in multiple ways, and those mechanisms are changing with social, economic and technological transformations. Specifically, our findings thus suggest that face-to-face interactions may not be the crux of social capital formation in the contemporary age.

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Endnotes

[1] An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the Western Political Science Association meetings, San Diego, March 22, 2008. We would like to thank Laura Stoker for her helpful comments, and give our special thanks to Marc Morje Howard and the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University that collected the 2005 Citizenship Involvement Democracy survey and made it available for our analyses.

[2] Additional information on the survey, the questionnaire, and other findings are available from the project website: www.uscidsurvey.org/.

[3] The list of groups includes: sports club, cultural or hobby activities, trade union, business association, humanitarian or human rights group, environmental or animal rights group, political party, education or science group, social club or fraternal organization, community or neighborhood association, veterans association, ethnic or nationality group, self-improvement or self-help group, social services group, or other group. See the project website for the full wording of each item.

[4] We are thus skeptical of previous research that often uses measures of Internet usage as a predictor, without determining what is done on the Internet. Participating in a chat room seems more analogous to social group activity than does ordering a book from Amazon.com.

[5] The table presents the count of the number of interactions that were done "often" or "sometimes". The survey skipped these questions for those who did not have access to the Internet at home or at work. They are included in the "none" category in the third column of the table.

[6] We use these examples because the most common types of group participation are in a religious group (16.9%), cultural or hobby activities (9.1%), or a sports club (8.8%).

[7] These items are often asked in dichotomous trust/distrust form. The CID asked about trust on an eleven point scale. For a discussion of the greater reliability of the expanded scale format, see (Zmerli, Newton and Montero, 2006).

[8] There is a strong correlation among all six social trust questions. But theorizing two separate clusters, we extracted two dimensions from a varimax rotated analysis. Then we created factor scores from this analysis that are used as the dependent variable in Table 3. The factor loadings are:

	Bonding	Bridging
Trust neighbors	.86	.11
Trust coworkers	.71	.38
Trust club members	.70	.42
Trust strangers	.57	.40
Trust other race	.26	.90
Trust other religion	.31	.86

Eigenvalues   2.22   2.03

[9] The three items were answered on a five point agree/disagree scale. The responses to the three items were added together and divided by three to generate a 1 to 5 scale of tolerance.

[10] Interpersonal social group and virtual interactions are both related to an index of reciprocity that measures how willing respondents are to help others in different situations, including their willingness to donate blood and pick up trash. These positive and statistically significant relationship hold even after we control for age, gender, education, race and ethnicity.

[11] The survey asked about participation in thirteen different forms of political action over the previous 12 months, and whether the respondent voted in the 2004 election. For the list of items, see the questionnaire on the project website (note 1). We entered these items into a factor analysis with varimax rotation. After exploratory analyses we constrained the result to three dimensions that explain 21, 17 and 12 percent of the variance respectively. The three measures in the table are factor scores constructed from this result. The full factor analysis is available from the authors.

[12] Alternative specifications of these models that include control variables such as political interest and strength of party identification yield substantially similar results. We present the most basic models and focus on the impact our variables of interest, interpersonal social group and virtual interactions.