Virtual Communities and Social Capital Theory

Catherine M. Ridings
Lehigh University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a neighborhood where young children can play freely in the streets and various backyards without direct parental oversight, the implication being that other adults in the vicinity will watch out for the children. If a parent is late getting home before the school bus, the children know which neighbors’ house to go to and will be well cared for until the parent arrives home. The residents are very willing to help each other, perhaps by moving a sofa down to a basement or lending a ladder for a project. In such a neighborhood, the first place one turns to for recommendations for plumbers, dry cleaners, and preschools, or perhaps to borrow a tool, is each other. Perhaps one person has secured a job for a neighbor’s daughter, and another family has “paved the way” for their neighbor’s entry into a country club. If a person has a need for emotional support to deal with a personal crisis, she turns to a neighbor. Such a neighborhood can be said to have social capital—that resource that comes from relations between people that makes lives more productive and easier.

Social capital is not only created from groups of people living in very close proximity, such as in a neighborhood. It might be created between people belonging to the same church or civic group, or perhaps between people who met at a hospital support group for a particular affliction, or people who are alumni of a particular university. These groups of people can be said to constitute communities, or gatherings of people who have common interests or ties. In the past, these communities tended also to be focused in a local geographic area.

This article will examine social capital in the context on online communities. Online communities, like physically based communities such as church groups or neighborhoods, can also be said to produce social capital for their members. These virtual communities can create and foster social capital—and indeed, it may be social capital that draws and retains their members. The background of social capital theory will be examined and then applied in the virtual community context.

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

Economic theory has commonly referred to the notions of physical and, more recently, human capital. These provide a grounded reference point for understanding what social capital is. Physical capital is comprised of tangible items such as tools, transportation vehicles, buildings, machines, and equipment. Physical capital aids in the production of goods and services. Human capital, less tangible than physical capital, is the unique capabilities and knowledge of individuals. Human capital also aids in productive activity, but by applying the skills and expertise of individuals, rather than by applying a physical item.

Social capital is even less tangible than human capital—it comes from the relations between individuals (Coleman, 1988). The classic sociological definition of social capital is as a resource that facilitates social affairs and actions of individuals (Coleman, 1988). Social capital theory states that networks of relationships are valuable resources that provide members means to communicate, coordinate, and cooperate for mutual benefit (Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 1995, 2000). For example, in the previous description of the neighborhood, the trust created in the neighborhood allows parents to more easily monitor their children playing outside than they could individually. This is the direct result of the creation of social capital in that neighborhood—it makes one’s life more productive, or as Robert Putnam (1995) proclaims in his well-known book Bowling Alone, “Trustworthiness lubricates social life” (p. 21).

Table 1. Defining characteristics of social capital

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Created through exchange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owned jointly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Built by generalized reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits the collective group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exhibited by generalized trust</td>
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