Chapter LII
The Impact of Communications Technology on Trust

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the formation and generation of social trust through communications technology in postmodern society, and presents some possible solutions to social disintegration. One view of social capital sees it as the strength of a network of relationships within a community. Evolutionary theory holds that any group whose members were prepared to help one another and were truthful and trusting with each other, would be victorious over other groups. Modern communications technology in postmodern society can be seen thus far to have led to a greater individualization and atomization of experience which presents a problem for the reinforcement of social trust. Virtual communication has been built upon social capital generated in the physical world but is in danger of depleting the very basis upon which it is constructed. The author's belief is that technology that better enables and enhances mechanisms of social coordination and trust are needed. Some observations on the nature of such technology are provided.

Science is organized knowledge. Wisdom is organized life.

—Immanuel Kant

INTRODUCTION

Social Groups

Social groups have existed for a very long time throughout human evolution and extended periods of group interaction through work and play form the basis of social trust and the accumulation of social capital. It is through life experience that people come to know and trust one another and form tightly knit bonds. The evolution of trade and commerce between groups necessarily leads to a depletion of

trust because goods are exchanged without intimate knowledge of their provenance. Money as a medium of exchange facilitates this process when goods are exchanged in markets. Social trust is however, the basis of commercial exchange, as without it, it would be very difficult for humans to live together in groups. Social groups are characterised by a division of labour and cooperation which both rely upon trust. In fact without trust humans could not be social beings.

Social Capital

Social trust is very much the basis of culture in modern society and is the foundation upon which social capital is generated. Beyond commercial relationships (markets, shopping etc) people engage in many cooperative and collaborative activities that reinforce bonds and create a sense of shared experience and history. Examples of this are the so-called "third sector"; clubs, societies, schools, colleges, friends, families and religious worship. Religious gatherings are still one of the few places where people frequently sing together in large numbers (the other is football matches). This is highly significant as it indicates that a social need that is not being fulfilled in a traditional forum (as evidenced by declining attendance in churches), is now being fulfilled in a commercial setting where people pay for the experience. Football supporters participate in a strong shared identity which gives meaning and value to their lives. The experience of being there is what counts.

Postmodern Capitalism

Industrial capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was fundamentally characterised by the manufacture and exchange of goods in markets. The post-industrial society or information society is now focused upon the delivery of digitised goods and services over information networks. Property relations are changing from a traditional ownership model where a commodity would be transferred from a seller to a buyer in an exchange of ownership, to a service model where ownership of a commodity or access to a service becomes a temporal phenomena, limited to a rental period of an agreed contractual duration. Profit is still the principal rationale, but certain fundamental relationships between buyers, sellers, employers, employees, companies and consumers are rapidly and perceptibly changing. This has major implications for all parties. Traditional capitalism focused on the commodification of goods and services and has successfully reached a comfortable level of material wellbeing for vast numbers of people. Having saturated material needs the digital revolution means that modern capitalism can now extend its reach into the commodification of culture and experience. This has major implications for trust.

Experience as Commodity

Music is an excellent example of the way in which a shared cultural experience has been packaged, objectified and commodified for consumption way beyond its provenance. Music is fundamentally the expression, communication and sharing of emotion. For many cultures music has a meaning and significance that reaches far deeper than a purely surface or cosmetic experience. It can represent the feelings and emotions experienced by people throughout prolonged periods of conflict or struggle. It can represent a whole range of feelings, from spiritual to conflictual to celebratory, and functions as a very strong binding force within social groups. The way it is packaged and sold within modern first world markets is however very far removed from its original intent and meaning. So called "World Music" has become very popular in recent years as postmodern capitalism seeks new ways to "create" new and different commodified forms to satisfy a constant ongoing need for new marketable products. Salsa music for example, was originally a music of Latin American protest as much as Blues music was on the North American continent, with all the inherent cultural meaning that is not obvious to an outsider just consuming the music as a sensory experience. Some world musics from the Third

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