

Chapter 5.18

Social Capital, Social Networks, and the Social Web: The Case of Virtual Volunteering

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction technologies create communicative possibilities that go beyond dyadic interactions and across physical boundaries, bringing a qualitative shift in the functioning of the Internet. The present chapter employs social capital and social networks perspectives to identify the social determinants of virtual volunteering in the age of Web 2.0, explores the social motivation of volunteers who perform tasks using the social Web in the context of online volunteering, and addresses the dynamic interplay of social capital, social networks, and the social Web with implications for virtual volunteering. The argument furthered is that active participation in social networks generates social capital and facilitates the development of the social Web.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-368-5.ch011

INTRODUCTION

The *Social Web* or *Web 2.0* refers to an aggregation of social interaction and collaboration technologies, including blogs, podcasts, wikis, social networking sites, photo and video sharing services, and simulated 3-D virtual worlds—a phenomenon, which has brought about a qualitative shift in the functioning of the Internet (O'Reilly, 2005). The Social Web has displayed an immense potential to create online social environments (Mikroyannidis, 2007). From a medium for information retrieval and electronic mail exchange, the World Wide Web has grown into a comprehensive platform for social interaction and collaboration with rich communicative possibilities. The Social Web has developed over the recent years through smaller decentralized initiatives worldwide. As such, the Social Web is becoming a platform for

the creation of a World Volunteer Web¹ where virtual volunteers can communicate and interact with volunteer organizations and volunteer managers to explore and pursue common goals and interests. This evolution has resulted in the formation of new web-based organizations in the U.S., such as the VolunteerMatch² which aims to help prospective volunteers find suitable volunteer opportunities in their communities.

Virtual or online volunteering is the process of volunteering performed from an offsite or remote location through the use of the Internet (Cravens, 2000, 2006; Ellis & Cravens, 2000; Fussell & Setlock, 2003). Today, many national and international organizations recruit virtual volunteers to perform various tasks (Capeling-Alakija, 2001). United Nations Volunteer Programme, Amnesty International, SeniorNet, and Elder Wisdom Circle are some of the early adopters of virtual volunteering. Created as a virtual volunteering segment under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)³, a UN global development network, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV)⁴ program has been designed to connect prospective volunteers, primarily from developed countries, with non-profit organizations to assist the low development regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Cravens, 2006). UNV defines online volunteering as “a form of social behaviour, undertaken freely over the Internet, which benefits the community and society at large as well as the volunteer, and which is not driven by financial considerations.”⁵ The United Nations Volunteers program launched a website⁶ to facilitate virtual volunteering by supporting collaboration between development organizations and volunteers over the world. In 2000, in association with Cisco Systems the UNV program started a joint initiative called NetAid⁷ to utilize the power of information technology to combat poverty around the world by raising awareness among young generations (Cravens, 2006).

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) expressed concerns that Americans are becoming

detached from civic activities and community life, resulting in a loss of so-called *social capital*. According to Putnam, social capital stands for the value—economic, emotional, spiritual, and social—that people generate by engaging in social relationships (1995a, 1995b). Putnam considered social capital as the glue holding communities together with the power of cooperative actions. At the core of Putnam’s proposition is the notion that social capital is dictated by how networks of individuals in a community create conditions where people are inclined to do things for one another. In his seminal work, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) argued that social capital in America was declining and that Americans were becoming less engaged in collective and informal interactions, including volunteerism. After attributing several reasons for the decline in social capital, Putnam singled out television for its detrimental influence.

Putnam (2000) asserted that TV has atomized local communities by providing people with a source of passive entertainment within the comforts of their homes. As a result, Putnam (2001) claimed, social activities and civic engagement in recent decades have been replaced with television viewing and cautioned that the Internet might take the same route. Some scholars, however, believe that unlike TV, the Internet has interactive potential and may connect rather than disconnect people (Benschoten, 2000; Galston, 2000). Overall, different technological innovations have helped people make time commitments to other than traditional volunteering and civic engagement activities (Robinson & Goeffrey, 1997). From the early 1950’s to the present day, television, videogames, the iPod, the iPhone, MP3 players, and electronic gadgets as well as the overall digitalization of entertainment have all had a profound displacement impact on the social engagement that takes place during leisure time.

As the Internet penetration among American households has grown, so have concerns over the possible unfavorable effects on social capital. A Pew Internet & American Life (2007) survey

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