

SOCIAL CAPITAL: Future Implications

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“The key is to keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best.” Epictetus

In any exploration of Community and Social Capital, it is only fitting that we consider what the future might hold. Certainly, any such effort is risky, as the future is so difficult to predict, yet people are drawn to think about the future if only to have fun speculating.

In the future, however, we believe one thing is predictable: people will continue to build and develop social capital. These relationships will be both actual and virtual, and people will be better because of them.

The Role of Social Media

For those of us interested in social capital, forecasting can be helpful. We know of the enormous benefits of people building, sustaining, and maintaining relationships. In fact, the incredible influence of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn have dramatically broadened people’s lives and begins to beg the question of virtual community and virtual social capital.

The research on social capital, as explored by sociologists, suggests that three major values are associated with social capital. These are 1) Instrumental value, 2) Emotional value, and 3) Informational value. When you look at Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn today, some people actually reap all three of these values from their virtual friends. People post or give status updates on their problems, struggles, careers, or interests and their friends/connections weigh in with advice, counsel, or suggestions. Certainly, the information that is exchanged, whether it is accurate or bogus, is amazing. People share intimate details and photos, and they literally log in where and when they travel.

This amount of sharing with Social media “friends” or “followers” cannot be dismissed in an exploration of this concept of social capital. For many people with disabilities or mobility limitations, Facebook or Twitter becomes their entire life. Through the virtual dimensions that level the playing field, a person who might not command direct attention can be deeply embraced by his or her Facebook friends or Twitter followers.

Recently, I participated in an international conference of augmentative communication (AC) users. Augmentative communication is when a person uses a

computer or another talking device to express his or her thoughts, concerns, or issues. For many people who experience speech impairments brought on by disabilities or medical issues, these communication devices are gateways to other people. Certainly, we know that the fuel of social capital is communication, and if a person experiences limitations in this area, his or her development of social capital is lessened. With AC devices, people can engage, setting the stage for developing relationships.

But the downside of AC is that of spontaneity. For many AC users, spontaneity in communication takes time. The AC user has to plug in the appropriate letters or symbols to get the word or thought he or she wants to express. This is tedious and can certainly affect the development of a relationship—especially in our fast-paced society.

With Facebook, however, the AC user can post or communicate at his or her own pace and not adversely impact the relationship he or she is developing. Additionally, because people can choose the profile pictures they post, what they display can create an initiation that can often be positive or engaging, further baiting the developing friendship.

At that AC conference I attended, a full session on the use of Facebook for AC users was presented. It was amazing how active and passionate most of the AC users were with Facebook. It was a clear testimony to how important community is in people's lives. It was also interesting to me that most of the people in the session had 500 + "friends" logged on Facebook.

The notion of virtual relationships and connections has also been influenced by text messaging. More and more people are communicating with their friends via text. Now, people from earlier generations often have a hard time understanding the world of text messaging, wondering how it is not easier and faster to just call the person, instead of typing out a message.

But these critics don't fully understand the lore and utility of texting. For many people, texting has not taken the place of face-to-face or real conversations but has supplemented and in many ways enriched the relationship. People can text when a verbal conversation is impossible—and given the character limitation of a text, they are able to get the essence of the point more quickly. A recent article suggests that receiving texts boosts morale and spirit—good things for people to have boosted.

Another virtually enhanced trend is found with Instagram and Pinterest. These medians are primarily designed for uploading and sharing photos. Of course, with the smart phones we all have, a camera is instantly available to all of us, at any time. This phenomenon has a number of ripples both good and bad. First off, the uploading of photos and videos on to social media outlets can help us see and learn, but can equally embarrass or indict. Photos of people doing unsavory things posted from a public

experience, can end a career, or be used against them in a variety of ways. Of course, on the flip side, these posted photos or videos can enhance, or continue to sustain important relationships that may be marred by distance and time.

The Need to Meet

One phenomena that has emerged with the advent of social networking on the Internet, be it Facebook, Twitter, LindedIn, and others, is the powerful need o meet and connect. Virtual connections are good to start a relationship, but clearly, at some point in the connection, people want to engage face-to-face. This is fueled by anecdotal stories of people finally connecting after years of Internet communications. Some of these stories have good endings, and some have bad ones. Either way, you cannot discount the powerful urge for direct relationships.

It is interesting that an entire website, www.meetup.com is dedicated to this strong need to be face-to-face with other like-minded people. The concept of meetup.com is simple. People type in their zip code and interests, and the website matches the interest with a group of people who gather around the interest topic. So even though virtual sites create a start point, the human drive of meeting together is a concept that continues to carry the day, and there is no reason to suggest that the future will mitigate this energy.

In a basic, human way it is natural for people to want to personally meet. There is such a powerful and primal nature to seeing someone, to reading his or her face and body language, to actually seeing his or her reactions. Although virtual social networking sites give us the quick and easy tools to connect, the face-to-face needs still linge, even with the use of emotions.

Recent technological developments have attempted to seize on this energy. Once phones and computers, it was a quick transition to using these tools in relationship building. The first big development was Skype, which allows users to not only see each other but to connect at no cost! I know this development well as my son, Santino, who met a young lady while studying in France, has maintained a long distance relationship with her through Skype. Still, they work hard to find ways to be together face-to-face and he believes this is the key reason why their relationship has continued for the past four years.

Apple has continued the powerful development of face-to-face with the addition of "FaceTime" on their iPhone and iPad. This application allows people with an Apple product and a Wi-Fi connection to see watch other as they communicate by phone or pad. There is so much enrichment to a conversation when you see and hear each other. Even with businesses, the application of remote meetings where people can see

each other and engage has enhanced the vitality of organizations that use this technology.

Webinars, as well, have become a mainstay for professional development opportunities. With simple applications, a student can attend a webinar seeing the presenter along with other members in an easy to use format.

Another manifestation of the desire for personal connections are found in smart phone apps like "latitude," "four-square," and "Life360". People can follow the comings and goings of their friends and family with the GPs technology built into the phone. Sometimes, the user is even given a discount at the places they most frequent. Although this might seem creepy or stalker-like, remember these are mutually accepted apps and if you accept a friend's invitation you agree to keeping connected in the fullest sense of the word.

In a way, Facebook offers a similar feature when you "check in" on the site. Once you post your location, everyone on your friend list knows where you are at. Further, the site now allows you to know who among your friends is on the site when you are so that an instant chat can occur.

Conclusion

As mobility and technology evolves, relationships will certainly be altered, but the clear basics that affinities bond people, that face-to-face energy draws people, that expected behaviors will be present, and that gatekeepers introduce the new comers will continue to influence how people build social capital.

Human beings are social animals and need the power and potency their relationships bring. This has been true since the beginning of time. It is true today and will most certainly be a critical ingredient in the future. We are better people, have better meso systems, and are a better macro society because of social capital. As we get deeper into ourselves we are driven to develop deeper relationships. It is perhaps this greater self-awareness that is the most important variable of social capital. Surely the more we know about ourselves, the better we become with others and then the better we become as a society.

