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Getting Connected: Can Social Capital be Virtual?

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Abstract

This article reports on an analysis of data from a study conducted in Australia on the impact of Internet access on social capital. The debate regarding the definition of social capital is explored, and basic indicators of social capital resolved. The apparent emergence of the phenomenon of virtual social capital is also discussed. Australians overall have widely adopted the Internet as a source of information and communication. Data collected in a mass survey conducted in 2004 is analysed and considered. Factors associated with Internet access are: access to the Internet in the home and employment status. There are also strong links between the levels of education completed and use of the Internet. On the basis of the evidence, Australians with Internet access are more likely to engage in activities generally regarded as indicators of individual expressions of social capital.

Keywords

Social capital; Virtual activism; Civic engagement; Social cohesion; World Wide Web; Internet access

Introduction

Social capital continues to be a controversial and contested concept in the arena of policy practice and also among academics in the social sciences. It is variously regarded as conceptually defunct, as the glue in a cohesive society, and a necessary but declining resource remembered nostalgically (Winter, 2000). This paper considers the proposition that social capital is in decline, concluding that this is not supported by the evidence. Although it is apparent that fewer face to face interactions are occurring, this does not necessarily translate to a reduction in social capital (Wilson et al., 2005). Furthermore, it is suggested that social capital can occur in new forms that have emerged from Internet interactions and relationships, often labelled as 'virtual', but in effect as real as any other. While further research is needed before a conclusive statement can be made, a descriptive analysis of the demographic factors associated with access to the Internet in the home and through employment gives an indication of likely trends. On the basis of the evidence provided about Australia, Internet access is wide and furthermore those with Internet

access are more likely to engage in activities generally regarded as indicators of individual expressions of social capital.

Methodology

This data ([UTAS/ARCBS](#), 2004) was collected in 2004 through a mass survey to 14000 Australians randomly selected from the Australian electoral roll and the database of registered blood donors held by the Australian Red Cross Blood Service ([Alessandrini](#), 2007). For the purposes of this article, the data has been analysed to identify statistical relationships between demographic characteristics, access to the Internet and indicators of the presence of social capital. These indicators were developed from criteria established by the Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS](#), 2004) and the World Bank ([World Bank Group](#), undated). The project focussed on the phenomenon of social capital occurring at the level of the individual. Elements measured in the survey instrument were: the number and intensity of social contacts, the level and degree of civic engagement and the status and diversity of individual networks of influence. This paper reports on exploratory bivariate analysis but nevertheless provides a vivid picture of just who is using the Internet and how this correlates with the indicators of social capital at an individual level. In addition, regression analysis has been conducted to establish whether there is a significant relationship between Internet access and the indicators of social capital as civic engagement.

Social Capital: not drowning, just waving?

Agreeing on a definition of social capital has been a matter of debate in the social sciences and also in political circles particularly since its revival as a concept by Robert Putnam in 1993 when he published *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. This extensive comparative study of two distinct regions of Italy was widely regarded as influential ([Putnam](#), 1993). Prior to this, Pierre Bourdieu had defined social capital as: The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition ([Bourdieu](#), 1985).

Subsequently, James Coleman developed a less technically precise conception of social capital, identifying a number of important characteristics: Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors . . . Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible ([Coleman](#), 2000, 16).

Putnam's conception of social capital is a positive one, emphasising the benefits of bridging and bonding types of social capital, but overlooking the distinct possibility that strong social connections can be detrimental in their impact ([Putnam](#), 1993). He defined it as:

'the features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' ([Putnam](#), 1993, 67).

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam expressed a conviction that social capital in America was dramatically in decline and in a state of crisis ([Putnam](#), 2000). As evidence of this, he evocatively described how 'more Americans than ever are bowling, [but] they are no longer organised in networks of leagues . . . Instead, Putnam insists they are bowling alone, or at best, in small homogenous groups of family and close friends' ([McLean, Schutz & Steger](#), 2000, 3). He extends this analysis to predict:

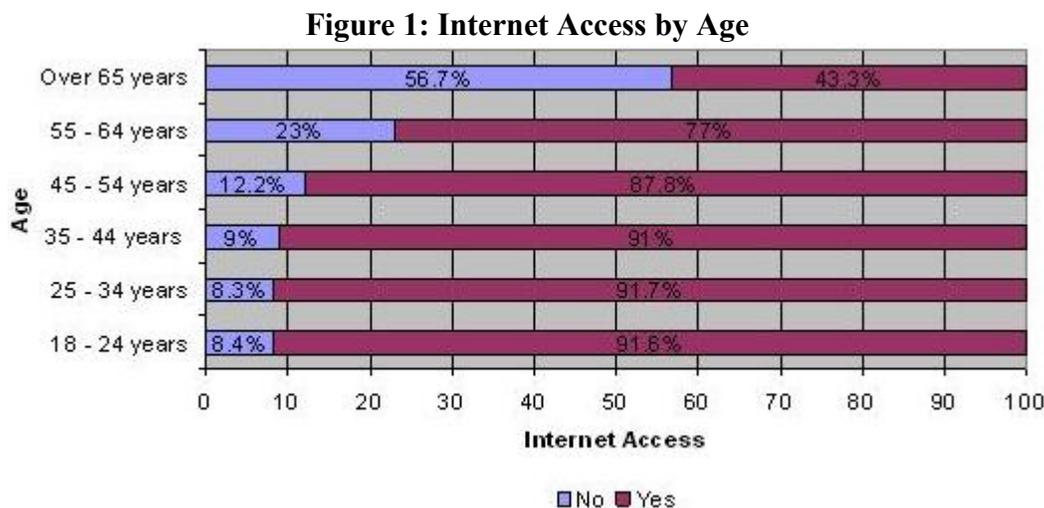
[An] image of alienated Americans "bowling alone" in post-modern alleys dominated by omnipresent television screens ([McLean, Schutz & Steger, 2000, 1](#)).

Identifying a trend of decline beginning in the 1950s, Putnam is apparently of the view that social capital requires face to face contact and interaction: this is not clearly stated in his definition, but he laments the detrimental impact of television, and the apparent visible decline in face to face social activity among American bowlers.

However there is considerable evidence that social capital- or rather the widely accepted behavioural indicators of its presence, are enhanced by Internet access and use, suggesting that social capital may not require direct or even real time contact. Individuals may in fact be civically active and able to participate in their virtual and actual communities to a much greater extent because they have access to and use the facility of the World Wide Web. From the data analysis it is clear that a number of demographic factors are statistically related to Internet access. Regression analysis shows that access to the Internet is a significant factor of greater participation in activities commonly regarded as indicating high levels of social capital.

Who has access to the Internet?

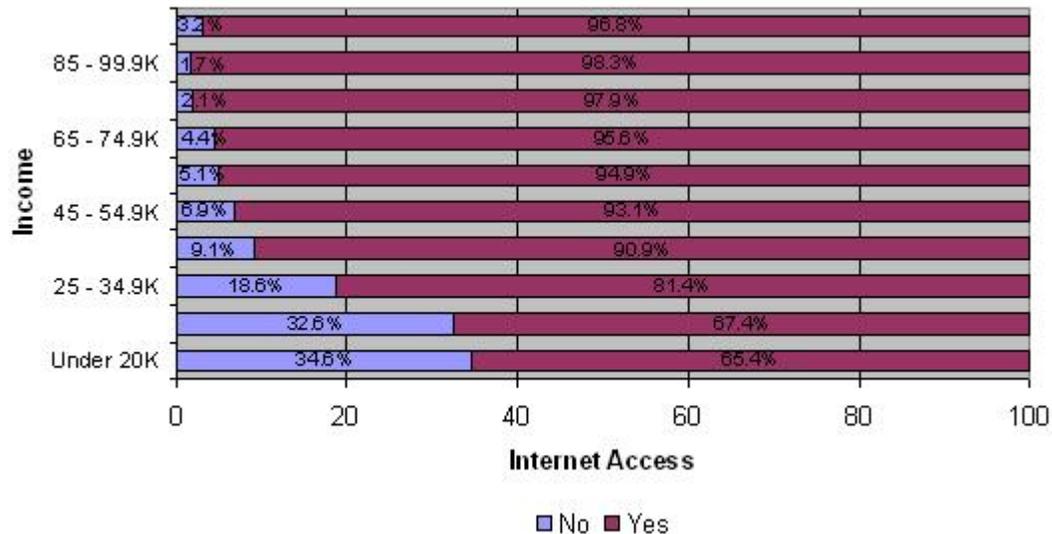
It is helpful at the outset to explore just who is using the Internet. This gives a picture of the characteristics of Internet users on which to build. Of those surveyed, at least 91 per cent of those aged 18 to 44 had Internet access on a daily basis (see Figure 1). This declined slightly for the 45 to 54 age group to 87.8 per cent, and further to 77 per cent for the 55 to 64 age group. There was a sharp decline for the over 65 age group to 43.3 per cent. Young people then are much more likely in Australia to have daily Internet access.



Source: Community and Lifestyles Survey 2004 © UTas/ ARCBS

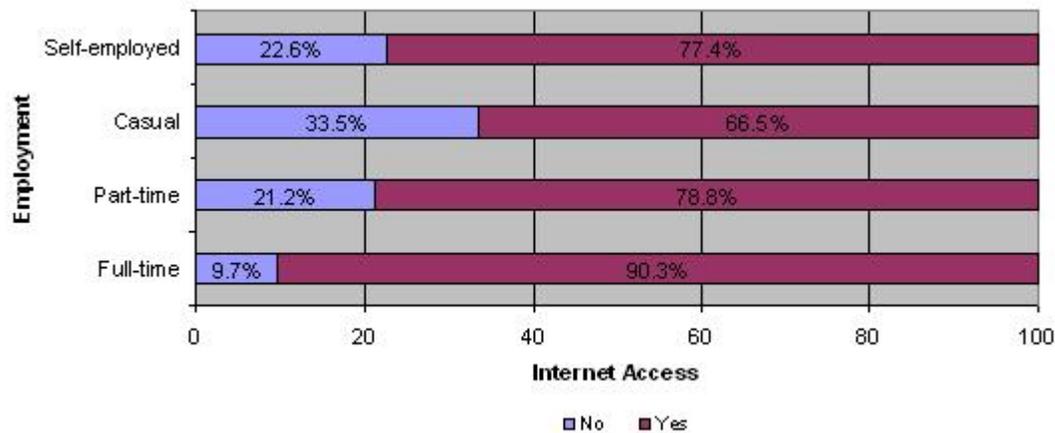
While income data does show some decline in Internet access at lower income levels, still approximately two thirds of respondents with incomes under \$24000 had access to the Internet (65.4 per cent for those with incomes under \$20,000 and 67.4 per cent for those with incomes between \$20,000 and \$24,999; see Figure 2 below). This rises to 81.4 per cent for those with incomes between \$25,000 and \$34,999, then flattens to a more gradual increase for incomes up to \$99,999 rising to 98.3 per cent. The highest income group, over \$100,000, recorded a slightly lower level of access to the Internet at 96.8 per cent.

Although there is an approximately 30 per cent difference between the highest and lowest levels of Internet access, it is important to note that nevertheless a significant majority of the lowest income group had daily access to the Internet.

Figure 2: Internet access by Income

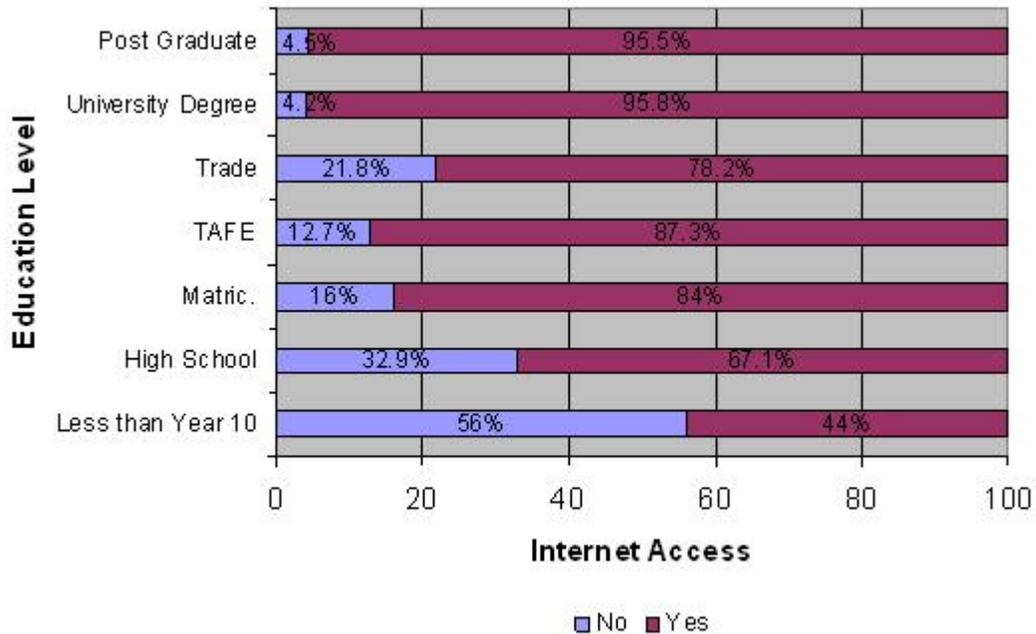
Source: *Community and Lifestyles Survey 2004* © UTas/ ARCBS

Employment status was found to be an important indicator of access to the Internet, both at home and at the place of work (see Figure 3 below). Of those who were in full-time employment, 90.3 per cent had access to the Internet, either at home or at work. The percentage of Internet access for those employed on a part-time basis was found to be 78.8 per cent and 66.5 per cent for those employed casually. Self-employed people had comparable or greater access than those marginally employed at 77.4 per cent but less access than the full-time group. Stability and security in employment such as that experienced by the full-time group and to a lesser extent the part-time group, is linked with access to the Internet.

Figure 3: Internet access by Employment status

Source: *Community and Lifestyles Survey 2004* © UTas/ ARCBS

The levels of education completed by survey respondents enhances this picture further (Figure 4 below refers). Those with university degrees or post graduate qualifications were much more likely than any other group to have ready access to the Internet. Those with upper secondary or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications were also likely to have access to the Internet, at 84 per cent and 87.3 per cent respectively. The group recording the lowest level of Internet access were those who had not completed secondary school. While these results do not precisely mirror the employment results, it seems likely that there is a relationship, which is coupled with the increased level of awareness and self-esteem arising from educational achievement ([Alessandrini, 2005 and 2006](#)).

Figure 4: Internet access by Education

Source: *Community and Lifestyles Survey 2004* © UTas/ ARCBS

These demographic explorations give an indication of the pervasive impact of the Internet. How does this impact on social capital building activities? Does this accelerating medium damage mechanisms that contribute to social capital in the same way that Putnam lamented the impact of television?

Virtually involved: social capital indicators and Internet access

The level of ABS indicators of social capital was explored to establish the relationship if any between this and Internet access. Those who are civically engaged and have confidence in their capacity to influence political matters would be more likely to contact a politician, display a political badge or sticker, perform unpaid work for an organisation or participate in a politically motivated boycott. Of the survey respondents who had contacted a politician, 78.5 per cent of them had Internet access (Table 1 refers). Furthermore, regression analysis revealed that those surveyed with Internet access were 1.5 times more likely to contact a politician, government or local government office than those surveyed without Internet access. Those surveyed with Internet access were 1.6 times more likely to have worn or displayed a campaign sticker or badge than those surveyed without Internet access. Although more modest, 73.8 per cent of respondents who had signed a petition in the last 12 months had Internet access, and were 1.2 times more likely to have done this. Those surveyed with Internet access were 1.6 times more likely to have attended a Parents and Friends meeting than those surveyed without Internet access. Overall, 75.9 per cent of respondents with Internet access had worked for an organisation other than an environmental one (see Table 1), and those with Internet access were 1.4 times more likely to have worked in another organisation or association than those surveyed without Internet access. A high 80.8 per cent of respondents who had participated in a product boycott for ethical or environmental reasons had Internet access, and were 1.7 times more likely to have boycotted products than those surveyed without Internet access. Financial donations to political organisations was found to be more common as a practice among those with Internet access. Those surveyed with Internet access were 1.4 times more likely to have donated money to a political organisation or group than those surveyed without Internet access.

Table 1. Civic and political activities

Activities	Internet access	Number	% of total surveyed
Contacted a politician	No	132	21.5%
	Yes	483	78.5%
Worked for an organisation or association other than environment	No	127	24.1%
	Yes	401	75.9%
Signed a petition	No	337	26.2%
	Yes	951	73.8%
Boycotted products	No	140	19.2%
	Yes	591	80.8%

Source: *Community and Lifestyles Survey 2004* © UTas/ ARCBS

Table 2. Voluntary work

Activities	Internet access	Number	% of total surveyed
Sport or Recreation Club	No	164	25.2%
	Yes	486	74.8%
Environmental	No	32	22.5%
	Yes	110	77.5%

Source: *Community and Lifestyles Survey 2004* © UTas/ ARCBS

Of those respondents who disclosed they had performed voluntary work for a sport or recreational club, or an environmental organisation, 74.8 per cent and 77.5 per cent of them had access to the Internet (see Table 2 above). Those surveyed with Internet access were 1.2 times more likely to do unpaid voluntary work within a sporting or recreational club/group than those surveyed without Internet access. In addition, those surveyed with Internet access were 1.7 times more likely to do unpaid voluntary work within a youth development organisation such as Scouts, Police and Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) than those surveyed without Internet access. This bivariate analysis and supporting regression analysis demonstrate that any decline in social capital then cannot be attributed to the Internet. There are strong indications that the reverse is the case: that those with Internet access are more likely to be actively involved in such social capital building activities as volunteering to work for community organisations and lobbying politicians.

Conclusion

Quantitative data of this kind does not of course say anything about causal relationships. Further research and analysis is needed to establish this with any certainty. Nevertheless, it is possible from this indicative analysis to draw some conclusions about the Internet and some of the indicators of social capital.

Although it is not possible from this exploratory research to identify the nature of the social capital activities engaged in by respondents- whether face to face or virtual- it is clear that Internet access does not preclude social capital building activities, and in fact it appears likely that those with Internet access are more likely than those without to engage in activities normally expected to create and enhance levels of social capital. This was especially evident when the civic engagement aspect of social capital was considered. It is also possible to say that individuals with high income are more likely to have Internet access at home and at work. Those in stable full-time employment are more likely to have Internet access as are those with high levels of educational achievement. Notably, although

their skill and training level are relatively high, people with trade qualifications are comparatively less likely to have Internet access, either at home or at work.

Overall then there are indications that the Internet is not detrimental to social capital and civic engagement in particular, and that it may in fact facilitate this type of engagement. Further research and analysis would enable the nuances of this relationship to be explored.

Acknowledgements

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