Online Social Capital and Political Engagement; facilitating and blocking aspects

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We are presenting preliminary (Delphic study and / or exploratory research) into the intersection between:

Political Engagement & the younger demographic
Social capital, online capital, offline capital and trust
Media framing & media habits

This research will seek to add to the body of literature in three interrelated fields. First the nature of political engagement and participation will be evaluated in today’s context (Ekman & Amna, 2012: Fox, 2014; Hooghe, 2014; Livingston, 2013; Van Deth, 2014). We will be looking at the various ways in which engagement has been measured (Putnam 2000, versus Norris 2000, for example) and whether political engagement can still be measured along these lines.

The second theme will be looking at millennials but this time in relation to media systems and media ecologies. We will be mapping various capitals and levels of engagement by media platforms and systems. From here media platforms will be evaluated and levels of engagement as mapped. Which application, platform and creates or facilitates engagement … and then by default which one does not? This will help in determining what changes if any have occurred in bridging and bonding levels (Williams 2006)

Finally the themes / strands will be brought together in order to ascertain when and how politically relevant social capital is created and whether this exists online (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004: Ho et al., 2003; Resnick, 2002; Skoric et al., 2009; Steinfield et al., 2008; Velenzuela et al., 2009) and if do in what fashion. The idea here is too look at what engages younger voters and where this locus exists – online and offline and finally the nature of capital (social or trust) created.

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1 Please note that this is a draft work in progress; please do not cite without permission.
Apologies for spelling and grammatical errors

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Social Capital

Preliminary research in the format of a Delphic study is proposed in order to firm up a detailed large-scale research agenda:

1. In what way does the internet affect social capital? And to what extent?
2. Do digital networks create / deteriorate bridging / bonding social capital relationships?
3. What are the factors and influences behind mobilisation?
4. How do current political processes shape and direct social capital formation and direction online?

According to Putnam (1993) social capital leads to the creation and the facilitation of:

"...features of social organisation, such as trust, norms [or reciprocity], and networks [of civil engagement], that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions."

Invariably social capital becomes an outcome (or a by-product) of the process and interactions (World Bank 2000) "....the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions."

Social capital in this context refers to the rules; norms, obligations and reciprocity weaved within social structures. These become the norm and part of expected behaviour in reaching personal and community objectives (Narayan: 1997). At times social capital as a concept can be troublesome due to multiple capitals – these include economic, cultural, education, and aesthetic. We can add trust capital and even digital capital to this increasing list. Social capital can and does bridge these disparate capital formations. Capital and by implication social capital become contested concepts. These are inevitably locked within specific institutions, places and people generating different meanings.

Economic capital refers to financial assets that are tangible and intangible; in contrast human capital refers to the attributes or traits of specific individuals or class of people (artists, software designers etc.) In contrast social capital refers to the linkages and connections between individuals based on networks. This leads to norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. At this stage these concepts can be linked to political engagement and civic virtue.
Being embedded within a social structure (network) is crucial for civic virtue – having virtuous but isolated individuals is not equitable to social capital (Putnam: 2002). Unfortunately as Krasny (2013) has highlighted social capital has become a construct with a myriad of meanings as it traverses disciplines and spans multiple levels of applications and analyses. In short is social capital a by-product of social institutions? (Such as education, security or community). Or is social capital a precursor necessary in order to have a healthy community with high educational standards and low crime rates.

A key component underpinning social capital (either as precursor or as by-product) are the networks and the relations facilitated by weak / strong network ties (Benkler: 2006). How this capital (culture) is created, exchanged and shared becomes crucial in how fairness, justice and civic participation are conceived, valued and pursued (or not). What social media and the rise of ubiquitous connectivity create are increasingly free, transparent and open participatory and engaged individuals (Deuze: 2007). This leads to the emergence of a debate on social capital formation and expressions online and offline.

An additional consideration is the claim that (Hellewell & Putnam, 2004) negative social capital can be created through digital connections / networks. In fact, "some social networks have been used to mobilise extremists and help terrorist fund and conduct their activities" (Skoric et al., 2009: p. 417). ISIS would fit within this template; it is ironic that political engagement is being created – ostensibly one, which we can argue, is the form or kind of political engagement we are not striving for. We can widen this to consider what law and order intuitions label as deviant behaviours (drug and sex for example).

From an organizational perspective, it has been argued that although the Internet may lead to higher connectivity and new forms of working (think of instant messaging, skype, etc..) it creates at the same time higher social distance because it is used by employees to create a sort of shield with respect to their superior (Quan-Hase et al., 2005). Added to this is the pervasive nature and rise to daily use of social media networks.

**First area of Investigation**

The intention is investigate three inter related areas via a Delphic study. Embarking on a pre-research investigation will yield feedback on methodological tools and questions can be confirmed and retuned (if needed). Additionally, a Delphic study can expose new fault lines in media habits.
among the target audience, motivations and current levels of political engagement (online and off line).

What we will look at is how the internet (digital network) either facilitates or restricts the formation of social capital online. This first area of research will concentrate on various degrees of participation and engagement that exist within the traditional political arena (party memberships, canvassing, leaflet stuffing, voting, debating etc. …).

Questions on trust and sociability online and off are part of the area to be investigated. Previous research conducted by PEW in 1998 and 2000 uncovered a lack of linkage between light and heavy internet usage and sociability and trust. What is important to note is that both research data predate the interpolation within most individuals’ daily routines of social media. Building on from this point is the absence of causality for social media (digital) in additional studies.

From this perspective the online world is constructed as a neutral instrument whereby no affordances (positive or negative) can be allocated (Robinson & De Hon: 2006). This conclusion is echoed by Uslander (2004) where social capital in the offline world is accorded greater primacy. Within the realm of digital networks social capital was at best described as “an additional outlet”. Additional research by Franzen (2003) and Cole (2000) confirms the finding that social capital is not created or maintained solely by digital networks.

Questions covering notions of trust and in particular branded media content (for news, for political coverage and reliability) where also posed. Wider notions of trust with immediate and wider family and friends was captured. The intention was to provide a benchmark (offline and online) for social capital formation. Additional aspects of trust and civic attitudes where measured by looking at trust with doctors and the NHS and also with the police force.

**Second area of Investigation**

Another area researched is the relationship between millennials, media trust and usage and social capital. There is the problem of volatility; media ecologies are evolving and mutating at rapid rates. What is trending and popular today may start to lose cache and users at a later point (for example twitter haemorrhaging users). Additional data (linked to the first research area) will attempt to map trust, social capital loci with media preferences and levels of “lean-in” or “stickyness”. Lean-in in this context echoes Facebook
COO Sheryl Sandberg description of lean in as detailed attention and close engaged participation (in contrast to lean back, scrolling or passing time).

In contrast there is a large body of research that demonstrates how digital networks are key and active constituent elements that build social capital. This leads to a bifurcation of social capital – building versus bridging. Bonding capital can be referred to as homogeneity or that which brings like-minded and similar people together. This can be broadly based on similar themes or shared interests and experiences. Other aspects that have been cited as nurturing bonding social capital include shared backgrounds, social class, education, religion, ethnicity and so forth. In contrast bridging capital is that which brings people together from disparate communities or areas of society. It can be viewed as heterogeneous in nature (Harvard: 2015). Bridging my link individuals on a short term basis on single issues, petitions or a single shared purpose (community issue).

As has been made clear social capital is a multidimensional construct (Putnam, 2000), "the most important distinction between different types of social capital can be made on the basis of the inclusivity/exclusivity dimensions" (Skoric et al., 2009: p. 417). This Delphic study will pose questions measuring bridging/bonding social capital (Hofer & Aubert, 2013; Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006) have been set up based on work completed by Williams (2006). Linking the presence of bridging or bonding capital within the online / offline binary will help in directing further and detailed research.

In order to ascertain the presence of bridging or bonding capital a series of questions derivative of Williams study in 2006 were put to undergraduate students earlier this month (March 2016). The sampling technique was random (a mix of different years, gender, nationality and degree programme at UAL). Added to the questions posted by Williams (2006) are inquiries on media usage, levels of use, and finally notions of trust.

**Third area of Investigation**

This final area focuses on the nascent form of social capital identified in the Delphic study. It will link different data points and findings from parts one and two. It may be too premature to stipulate whether this research will identify clear aspects of ‘social capital’ is politically engaged. The intention of this study (and in particular this section) is to identify clear gaps and fault lines requiring further detailed examination. This section will concentrate on looking at interactions (does online impeded or accelerate social capital
formation) and identify key relationships. As a summary this section will attempt to highlight and point out (if present) anomalies and co-relations.

In linking findings from the first and second sections there may be a degree of repetition. Finally there are two additional points that requires additional consideration in assessing social capital today. These are alternate non nation state social capital formation and creativity. First; as mentioned above (Skoric et al., 2009) some social capital formations are directed towards a highly destructive end and raise concerns. Terrorism, and non nation state based social capital must be accounted for. Secondly is the milieu within which digital natives operate because of ubiquitous connectivity. Through social media, smartphones high levels of connectivity coupled with demands of engagement are creating multiple facets and different loci for social capital (Benkler: 2011)

**Preliminary Findings & Discussion**

The first area looked at is broadly listed as political engagement and millennials. Both online participation and online debate scored low with this sample. Additional elements including posting comments and was equally low. What is significant is that those following current events scored high (over 60%).

Additional dimensions of online and trust included questions on sharing intimate details, advice and trust on line. These all scored very low. A preliminary conclusion is that social capital formation online tends to be weak, and not directed towards political means (or political engagement). Additional questions on specific political engagement (traditional and non-traditional) are required. Exploratory questions on why this trust is weak are also needed.

The responses in the second area; trust and its variations between online and offline are broadly similar to previous studies and expectations. Family and friends score quite high (and teachers / lecturers). In contrast politicians and media outlets in general score very low. Linking these findings to media habits throws up an initial anomaly – media usage and habits.

Respondents do not trust traditional or digital media; yet social media platforms and streaming web sites are highly popular (integral part of there day). This is one area that will require detached correlational research; linking platforms and media with activities. Bonding capital tends to be high; and additional research based on gender and nationality will need to be conducted.
Conclusion

It may be worthwhile considering a more diffuse definition of social capital – especially in the context of bridging via digital networks. Additional research needs to widen the scope of behaviours that may be deemed as political. Additional research on attitudes to current processes and systems may also be required in order to benchmark solutions.

Based on the Delphic research and findings to date the following areas require adding to the research agenda and are worth critical exploration:

1. Highlighting physical aspects that either facilitates greater interactions and those that hinder or impeded dialogue and trust

2. Link to social behaviour reciprocity on themes of respect, acceptance and difference (sexuality, ethnicity and gender)

3. Probe and look for non-traditional forms of civic engagement – participation and behaviour changes based on boycotts, petitions, environmental concerns, participation in hackathons etc. …

4. Attempt to establish a wider sense attitudes and thoughts to present institutions and future hopes and aspirations. Link to notions of justice, future well being and concerns

A key aspect of the ongoing malaise of democracy (or why do we still hate politics?) is the strange juxtaposition between constant connectivity (and the concomitant network logic) with contrasting low levels of political engagement (Savigny & Wring: 2009). It may be that millennials are not apolitical or apathetic but averse to political marketing.
Appendice 1 – Findings

Trust

Trust – Take 2
Media Habits & Usage (platform)

- Streaming
- Twitter
- Snap chat
- Whats App
- Instagram
- Facebook

Media Usage – Category

- Radio
- Television Digital
- Television Terrestrial
- Newspapers

Legend:
- Rarely Use
- Daily Heavy
- Daily Light
Bonding Capital

![Spider diagram showing various bonding activities]

Bonding Capital – Part 2

- Close Friends - money
- Close Friends - countries
- Close friends - Interests
- Close friends - Race
- Close friends varied

- No
- Yes
Bridging

Political Questions
Social Capital

- **Lend money**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Loyal & Trust**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Emergency loan £250**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Helpful**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Lonely online**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Advice online**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Share intimate online**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

Social Capital II

- **Online - New things**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Online - differeny POV**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Online is fun**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Online connected + diversity**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Online new places**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **Online new things**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'

- **New events online**
  - 1: 'never'
  - 2: 'rarely'
  - 3: 'neutral'
  - 4: 'occasionally'
  - 5: 'very often'
REFERENCES
Benkler, Y., (2006), The Wealth of Networks, Yale University Press, London,


