Debating Civil Society

On the Fear for Civic Decline and Hope for the Internet Alternative

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abstract: At the start of the third millennium social scientists' preoccupation with the weakening of *Gemeinschaft* is – particularly in western postmodern societies – again at its peak. Waning social capital is believed to have undermined community, as reflected in widespread feelings of social mistrust, in citizens turning away from prime institutions and political authorities, and even engaging less in informal interactions. This diagnosis of civil society as advanced by especially American scholars would be a very serious account of our present times, *if* the debate and research in this field were not impaired by a set of equally serious theoretical and methodological problems. This article addresses a number of these basic problems. The main issue is the lack of sensitivity in civil society studies to new, alternative and innovative forms of solidarity, connectedness and civic and political engagement, particularly those facilitated by the Internet. It is time to thoroughly define today's forms of civil society made by contemporary people with contemporary means, in a contemporary world. This article aims to reframe the civil society research agenda.

keywords: civic decline ♦ civil society ♦ generations ♦ the Internet ♦ political engagement

Social Science's Ongoing Quest For Community

The history of social science can be read as a continuous reflection on the negative side-effects of modernization in western society. As modernization accelerated in the 19th century, leading social scientists (Durkheim, Marx, Weber) were clearly concerned about these effects, such as the loss

of solidarity, the weakening of *Gemeinschaft*, the spread of feelings of anomie and impersonalization and the overemphasis of instrumental rationality. Though rooted in distinct paradigmatic assumptions, there was a shared notion of the erosion of community in modern society (Paxton, 1999). At the beginning of the third millennium the concern with the 'collapse' of community is once again at the very heart of the social science research agenda as forwarded by American and European scholars particularly. It even seems that in an era of widespread disillusion with the disciplinary status of the social sciences, the preoccupation with the assumed decline of community develops into what appears a growing unifying theme (Misztal, 1996). The number of publications by western social scientists, particularly from sociology and political science, dealing with the crumbling of community identity and engagement, often framed as the loss or erosion of social capital, is booming (e.g. Dekker, 1999; Foley and Edwards, 1997; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999).

Contributions vary from highly normative approaches, embodied in the morally pronounced writings by (new) communitarians (e.g. Etzioni, 2001), to more matter-of-fact quantitative approaches that study empirical trends in citizen involvement (e.g. Norris, 1999a; Nye et al., 1997). We witness a significant growth of studies on trends in citizens' civic virtues, political participation, volunteering and involvement in informal social networks, which accumulated in Robert Putnam's both much applauded and criticized book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). We believe that the emerging tradition of civil society and declining social capital studies do point at major weaknesses of contemporary western communities and the way citizens advance the common good. At the same time, many of these studies have serious weaknesses themselves. These weaknesses should be taken into account before conclusions on the decline in civic virtues and civic engagement and on its correlates are drawn. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the loss of community debate in western societies is the major theme of this article. One of the striking weaknesses is the lack of sensitivity in civil society studies to new, alternative and innovative forms of solidarity, connectedness and civic and political engagement, particularly those facilitated by the Internet. In this article we attempt to address the potential of the Internet for the study of civil society. To put the debate in perspective we first have to elaborate its main theoretical assumptions a little further. This reconstruction will make clear that although civil society theories, communitarian approaches, social capital analysts and mainstream social science research on civic engagement are rooted in different conceptual frameworks, methodologies and moral propositions, they all *share* a common assumption of a widespread decline of civic involvement in western societies.

The End of Civic Virtues

A common assumption of political moral thinking about the good society is that citizen participation is based on collective interests inspired by a sense of altruism and idealism (Dekker, 1995). Prosocial behaviour is the expression of advancing the civic cause, of being in touch with one's community. It is *bon ton* among the vast majority of civil society theorists to sketch the contemporary moral climate in pessimistic terms:

> We do not have to read deeply in the philosophy and literature of today to sense the degree to which our age has come to seem a period of moral spiritual chaos, of certainties abandoned, of creeds outworn, and of values devalued. (Nisbet, 2000: 33)

The general idea in the contemporary concern about what constitutes the good life, the good citizen and the good society is that prime social institutions such as the family, the school, the neighbourhood, the church, civic organizations – the 'little schools of citizenship' according to de Tocqueville – no longer fulfil essential psychological and symbolic functions in providing people with basic values and meaning structures. These traditionally mediating institutions between the individual and society have lost their significance, led to a fraying of the social fabric, deunification of moral standards, and fragmentation of individual pursuits. The enlargement of scale, the professionalization and bureaucratization of the welfare state, the 'thickening' of the state, have disintegrated the societal midfield, so many civil society analysts hold. The social capital as embedded in primary social institutions has inflated and the postmodern citizen becomes detached, non-affiliated, and feels no personal loyalty to the wider community. Malcontent is said to boom:

> numerous signs – unstable voting patterns, a return to religious orthodoxy, increases in antisocial behavior, opposition to scientific and technological advance, a withdrawal from public issues into private worlds, and the rise of irrationality – indicate, for reasons both sound and unsound, a feeling of discontent with progress. (Wolfe, 2000: 51)

Overlooking the legacy of civil society theory, it seems that it typically holds two sets of related explanations: a more structural explanation in terms of severe weakening of basic intermediating social institutions and a more cultural explanation. The first line of reasoning is that as the societal midfield between the citizen and the state has moved to the periphery of society, the (young) individual is no longer 'naturally' exposed to role modelling forces of civic involvement, which in the end deprives the community of its moral foundation. 'Mediating structures are the value-generating and value-maintaining agencies in society' (Berger and Neuhaus, 1996: 147). The second explanation takes off from here by arguing that as values become fragmented and individualized, vital public

ethics and a common public agenda have become obsolete. The privatiz-ation of values and norms, no longer bound by common moral principles, has brought about a society where each individual is involved in private matters and is no longer committed to the public cause. Modernization has also diminished the saliency of traditional values and norms as histori-cally advanced by moral and ideological institutions in the religious and political realm (e.g. Ester et al., 1993). The grand old narratives, each embracing its own version of the good society, are no longer with us. Soli-darity, so civil society proponents argue, has thinned and at best is prac-tised by anonymous chequebook altruism (Putnam, 2000). The *tristesse* of the postmodern era seems, in summary, that people are neither united by the search for a common conception of what a good society means nor by a consensus on moral principles and civic virtues.

Rethinking Major Premises

The present debate on community decline, civic decay and political dis-engagement is at its crescendo and today includes all social problems known to contemporary society: divorce, juvenile delinquency, alcohol and drugs abuse, school drop-out, intolerance, excessive television watching, inner-city degradation, widespread cynicism, etc. It is crucial to address a set of basic issues central to this debate. For civil society theory and research not to stagnate these issues need reflection. Only in this way may they maintain their relevance for answering the questions of what it means today to be civically engaged, to be a good citizen, to foster the good society, to counter the erosion of community in a post-modern, highly individualized, fragmented and technologically highly developed society which just entered the 21st century. These issues especially relate to the need for a better understanding of the emergence of new forms of civic, political and social participation that go beyond the classic 'modern' 20th-century ways of civic engagement, political involve-ment and social connectedness. Specific forms of social action afforded or facilitated by cyberspace connections may provide examples of more contemporary ways of this engagement, involvement and connectedness. In the following section these points will be further elaborated.

Weaknesses of the Civil Society Debate

Civil society theory and research have serious weaknesses. A central issue is their lack of awareness of contemporary forms of solidarity, connect-edness and civic and political engagement. This section addresses this theme, so obviously overlooked in the traditional civil society debate.

Looking for the Signs of Time

Mainstream political science survey research on quantitative trends in political participation is conservative as it typically lacks a sharp eye for new and innovative forms of political action, particularly among younger generations. The 'signs of time', it seems, are not well read or covered in customary empirical studies of developments in civic political engagement. This lack of sensitivity for new forms of political action is not intentional, nor does it reflect an absence of professional sophistication, rather, it has to do with the very nature of political trend studies per se. In order to be able to detect trends and trend changes, political scientists – as well as many other social science researchers – prefer to measure the *same* longitudinal quantitative indicators of political participation. This enables them to come up with robust trends. By continuously adapting measurement instruments to new, upcoming and alternative forms of political action, neat trends would be obscured as comparisons with the past are no longer possible. Basic anchor points would be missing and this would seriously hamper time comparisons. Mainstream political science survey research thus favours a focus on the longitudinal study of rather traditional and stable 'easy' indicators of political participation such as voting behaviour, writing letters to congress, attending political meetings, signing petitions, etc. (e.g. Almond and Verba, 1973; Jennings et al., 1990; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995). These behaviours have been studied for decades now in several well-known longitudinal survey studies among random samples of the American public such as the General Social Survey (GSS), the National Election Studies (NES), the Roper Social and Political Trends, or the DDB Needham Life Style Surveys. By analysing these data over time, political scientists did and do a valuable job in detecting political action trends but are likely to simply miss novel forms of political participation. If one finds, for example, that younger generations are less inclined to vote, to write letters to their political leaders, to attend political party meetings, or to sign petitions, does this consequently imply that their political participation is below that of older generations? Framed in these terms, it is. But it may very well be that younger people use *alternative forms* of political action, particularly through the Internet, which they think are better suited to boost political discussions and to influence the political arena, such as by being involved in forms of political 'hacktivism', by massively sending emails to political leaders, by using information technology for community building, by designing and maintaining political websites, by participating in political chat groups, by raising political awareness and support through websites and zines (the web's version of magazines) or by launching mass political demonstrations through the web (see, for example, Hill and Hughes, 1998). Standard political participation scales as used in mainstream political

science survey research do not cover such new forms of political engage-
ment. According to Bennett (1998: 744), 'what is changing in politics is
not a decline in citizen engagement, but a shift away from old forms that
is complemented by the emergence of new forms of political interest and
engagement'. The cultural dynamics of political engagement are simply
underrepresented in the toolbox of the average political scientist, who is
interested in longitudinal data on political action using repeated
measures. True, these data pertain to long time periods, some over more
than two decades. But:

> compared with earlier decades, by the end of the century [American] citizens
> may not be joining the Elks or striking in trade unions or demonstrating about
> civil rights, any more than they are hula-hooping or watching sputnik or going
> to discos. But they may be engaged in civic life by recycling garbage, mobiliz-
> ing on the internet, and volunteering at women's shelters or AIDS hospices.
> (Norris, 1999b: 328)

It seems as if mainstream political science research on civic engagement
and social capital could do with a fresh shot of sociological imagination
with a sensitive antenna for the political meaning of new cultural
phenomena, particularly as expressed by younger generations. For the
debate on declining civic engagement and social capital is not an innocent
one. If it is true that young people are indeed less committed to the old
forms of shaping a good society *but* are much more involved in new and
alternative forms, this would put the moral concern about young people's
societal roles – a concern that by the way has always been there – in a
radically different perspective. What the debate on civil society needs is
a solid combination of quantitative political science trend research and an
imaginative sociology of culture approach focused on today's forms of
civic engagement, political involvement and social connectedness. Seri-
ously studying the meaning and value of the Internet in this respect,
would be a good start.

The True 'Machers' and 'Schmoozers': The Long Civic Generation

The necessity of this approach becomes particularly evident when looking
at the celebration of older generations. One of the repeating themes in
social capital studies, particularly in the Putnam variant, is that compared
to the prewar 'long civic generation', i.e. Americans born between 1910
and 1930, the postwar generation of baby boomers shows a dramatic
disengagement from community life. 'It is as though the postwar gener-
ations were exposed to some anticivic X-ray that permanently and increas-
ingly rendered them less likely to connect with the community' (Putnam,
2000: 251, 255). Civic decay becomes almost a defining feature of younger

generations. This rather tormented intergenerational picture of civic (dis)engagement by Putnam definitely needs some counter-arguing.

First, he seems to glorify the 'long civic generation' for their above average accumulation of social capital and community involvement, and there are many good reasons for doing so.[1] Controlling for educational disparities, members of this generation of American 'civic champions' were more likely to be members of civic organizations, to trust other people, to vote during election times, to work on community projects and to read daily newspapers to keep up with political developments, compared to the generation of their grandchildren. From a civil society point of view one may applaud these civic virtues. But there is a darker side to this long civic generation that also needs consideration. It was a generation that strongly thought in terms of rigorous bipolar value systems of what is good and what is wrong, of 'us' vs 'them', which fostered male dominance, emphasized the importance of traditional gender roles, favoured authoritarian power balances in work and family life, expressed rigid ingroup/outgroup stereotypes (they may have bowled together but certainly not across racial lines), were intolerant vis-a-vis different ideologies and lifestyles, and were convinced of the American lead in showing the way to other countries. This assessment is based on present-day 'moral' and cultural standards, but, then, most ideas of contemporary youth's civic involvement are based on the standards of yesterday.

Second, a careful look at Putnam's indicators of civic engagement leaves the (post)modern reader with feelings of fundamental ambiguity and even a little sociological fatigue.[2] From a democratic point of view it is surely important to vote during election time. But what about the political system itself? Much of the assumed former appeal of the political process may well have lost its significance in the eyes of younger generations: old ideological conflicts have vanished; classic left–right differences have lost much of their political substance; transparent antagonistic political party lines have disappeared; politics have turned into a sometimes grotesque media circus (particularly at election times); there still is a marked gap between politicians and voters; and the political patronage system has moved far beyond ordinary citizen representation. We may overstress these points but only to underline that the political system itself has changed considerably since the formative years of the long civic generation, yielding different intergenerational political responses. Classic indicators of civic involvement may very well have less significance to young generations, who are likely to express alternative forms of engagement that are both more meaningful and more functional to them. One should not, thanks to the availability of longitudinal indicators of what used to be civic involvement, endlessly apply them to each new generation. New generations will invent new forms of political participation that for the

sake of the older forms do not necessarily mean less civic engagement. The social parameters of what constitutes a good citizen are not culturally invariant but do change over time. New eras witness new definitions of meaningful community involvement. Sticking to the old parameters leads to serious misperceptions of what is going on in the civic political realm. The world has changed and so have the ways in which citizens voice their political concerns.

One of the topical themes on the immediate civic involvement research agenda is, therefore, the question of whether the assumed decline of classic civic engagement and social capital is not so much caused by its devitalized public commitment but in fact is the mere result of conceptual confusions and measurement fallacies that fail to include new and more imaginative forms of political behaviour that move beyond traditional ones. If the answer to this question turned out to be positive this would surely problematize the supposed widespread political malaise and political disengagement among contemporary citizenry. Each generation is likely to develop its own unique style in addressing political issues, its own unique way in advancing the public cause and in acquiring and maintaining social capital.

This observation is perhaps even more salient when looking at Putnam's ideas on informal social relations, of connectivity or the realm of *schmoozing*. With Putnam two Yiddish terms have entered the vocabulary of the social sciences: *machers* and *schmoozers*. Machers are people highly involved in formal community settings, schmoozers have an active social life in the informal social world (Putnam, 2000: 93–5). Machers organize meetings, are the politically interested and take the lead in community projects, schmoozers give parties, play cards, visit family, have dinner with friends, etc. Schmoozing, Putnam ensures us, does not build civic skills, but is important only in attaining social networks (Putnam, 2000: 95). Schmoozing is waning in the US too. The trend in informal socializing is downward among all social categories and on all major indicators found in the American diary surveys Putnam cites. Looking at what Americans do as an alternative he focuses on sports (with a downfall of organized team sports and a rise of individualized sports) and music (less making, more listening). The ultimate instrument for modern-day schmoozing, the Internet, is overlooked in this list. In the US, the Internet is primarily used for entertainment, to play games and to have fun, alone or with others, as well as to communicate, to get in touch and to form relationships, as many studies show (e.g. Gray, 2001). The popularity of the Internet is on a par with many real-life forms of informal socializing, and in both virtual and real-life types of schmoozing young people are particularly skilful. The problem is not only that it is not univocally clear what the exact generational positions in schmoozing are with

Putnam, but also that he does not look into the power of the contemporary alternatives for his traditional forms of schmoozing, such as the Internet. He fails to acknowledge that probably every generation has its own forms of socializing. Card playing seems not the best match of entertainment in the contemporary digital world. Adding this point to the aforementioned power of political action, mobilization and community building that is also attributed to the Internet, this virtual environment might well be a real crossroad for both machers and schmoozers. In the next section we attempt to address this potential, a potential that probably no other technology has been able to provide before.

Thoughts on the Internet: Online Community Building and Connectivity

As outlined, one basic critique on civil society theory is its lack of sensitivity and responsiveness to what the Internet might represent to people today. It seems as if the vast majority of civil society theorists neglects a whole line of theory and research on this topic. In this body of knowledge it is claimed that with the Internet almost every aspect of human life and society is changing fundamentally. Leading authors in the field both hope and fear that the Internet as a medium, but perhaps much more so as a cultural force, has an unprecedented impact on all previously discussed phenomena, including civic virtues and civic engagement, community life, informal socializing, politics and much more. The literature on the Internet at first sight seems a powerful mix of postmodernism, pessimistic prophesying as well as pie-in-the-sky utopianism, all with its classic and much-cited leaders, and with its applauding circles. Here, with 'a minimum of digression into complex French philosophy' (Gray, 2001: 5), we take a closer look at this literature. It might enhance the understanding of why people are on the Internet, what they do there and what they value about it. The Internet debate is in full progress, and speculation still has the majority position in it. Empirical research is scattered, often anecdotal, and largely underdeveloped. The many ideas about the Internet and its consequences taken together, however, do make out a strong case that the potential for advancing civil society is more likely to be rising than declining.

Hot and Cool
The key issues concerning the Internet seem to be that new types of media and waning types of old media merge in this one meta-medium, a medium composed of many other media and with which users are both consumers and producers. The Internet provides the opportunity to communicate in a transparent, direct, full and immediate way, with all our senses in accord, as McLuhan, the grand-old media guru, would

probably have argued (Heim, 1998; Horrocks, 2001). The Internet allows people not only to participate in the medium but also to manipulate it. What is a 'hot' or what is a 'cool' medium, what is a 'strong' or what is a 'weak' one, therefore, no longer depends on the medium, but on the network of individual users. As we argue in more detail later, it is the richness of the medium and the power of a network of individual users to determine when and to what degree to connect to others that might make the Internet an alternative for classic, 'real-life' forms of commitment, engagement and connectedness.

Messageries Generationelles

This increased power to engineer one's own Internet experience is something a reputed thinker of the Internet's social and cultural impact, Manuel Castells, emphasizes. Castells (1996) reveals himself as a strong advocate for the rise in autonomy of the wired individual. From the early Internet systems onwards, individuals searched to be networked with other individuals to satisfy their need for personal expression (including *les messageries roses*, as Castells calls the sex-related conversations that ensured the rapid diffusion of the French Minitel system in the 1980s).[3] Individuals enthusiastically turn to the Net because of the self-directedness of communication, because it builds on chosen (real or delayed) time ('prime time is my time'), because of its interactive power, its informality, its idea of communicating many-to-many where 'yet each one has his or her own voice and expects an individualized answer' (Castells, 1996: 357). The whole range of reality has entered a virtual setting, almost everything is there and what is not there yet is speeding up to take part in the new system (Norris, 2001). It is however a realm where society's traditional senders (government, church, political parties, old media, etc.) of information have no directive power and where they have to compete with all other senders and thus where they are confronted with the fact that the symbolic power of their message is no longer self-evident. With the issue of the loss of hegemonic control of traditional institutions over the secrets of truth, Castells adds to the case of the Internet as an alternative to classic forms of civic engagement. What is right or what is wrong, whom to support or to neglect, whose voice to listen to or to ignore, and, moreover, with whom to interact or to lose sight of, is determined by its users. These features, of course, encouraged the belief of the Internet as a truly new reality in civic involvement. The Internet provides people with their own means of producing civil society and thus with their own reality of civil society. Dialogue, exchange of ideas and even policy construction, so the promise goes, are back in the hands of the tech-empowered individual citizen. Large-scale, detailed and thorough social science study of the benefits and risks involved is yet to be conducted.

Internet is like Germany

Many theorists have emphasized the consequences of the Internet as a new reality. Far more than a mere instrumental technology to get a better grip on reality, on life offline, the Internet is a space that encourages practices which serve to construct new types of subjects. The Canadian historian Poster (2001) elaborates on the constitutive character of the Internet, constructing new cultural forms and new types of personal and social identity. The interesting element of his analysis is that it exceeds at least two rather simplistic positions on what the Internet is about: the Internet as an 'alternative' and the Internet as a 'tool'. In the first case the Internet is regarded as the new space, the alternative public sphere where, for instance, politics and the people can meet again and finally start communicating. This 'cybtopian' view has inspired government, political institutions and interest groups to get online as fast as possible (see, for example, Norris, 2001). Many Habermasian ideals are transferred to the Internet from this perspective (e.g. Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000). Of course, there are scholars who display serious doubts about the power of the Internet to serve as an alternative political domain (e.g. Guggenberger, 1999). The point we make here is that these 'cybsceptics' frame the Internet in the same way the cybtopians do: as a platform where you cannot (or can) mimic the real world. The second instrumental view, the Internet as a 'tool', is omnipresent in studies on politics and the Internet (e.g. Harwood and Lay, 2001; Hill and Hughes, 1998). The Internet is the technology with which real life, the offline world, can be enhanced, revitalized or even radically changed. The arrival of the Internet is messianic in its offline promise. Things seen and things learned on the Internet can be taken back to other environments, making these other environments, ranging from neighborhood communities to the political arena, better places to live in. Again, many doubt these positive social ramifications and political implications (e.g. Winner, 1996).[4] More importantly, the issue is that those who doubt, also interpret the Internet in terms of its effects on real life. The Internet is seen as a 'thing', separate from real life, as a technological apparatus that is (or is not) an alternative platform for real life or a tool that may (or may not) contribute to real life.

The effects of the Internet, says Poster:

> are more like those of Germany than those of hammers: the effect of Germany upon the people within it is to make them Germans (at least for the most part); the effect of hammers is not to make people hammers . . ., but to force metal spikes into wood. As long as we understand the Internet as a hammer, we fail to discern the way it is like Germany. (Poster, 2001: 177)

The more important questions about the Internet are not about what it can do for real life or about how real life can best be mimicked with it,

but about what it is as a constitutive force for the identity of people who engage in it, for the way people will experience the world and for the cultural forms that will arise from this.

In the cyberage, the process of articulating and negotiating what one's identity is, seems increasingly intervened by information media (see also Turkle, 1997). New identities emerge because the medium that does the mediating, the Internet, is new, to put it in a simple way. The Internet, unlike previous media, does not direct individuals into a clear path, but it does solicit construction and creation. It is open to continuous reconstruction, resymbolization and redetermination by its users, giving them the opportunity to appear and disappear in multitudes of different spaces, times, social roles and even bodies.[5] For virtual identities to exist at all, there is one requirement: interaction. Not only is the Internet, or better, are the Internets not there without interaction, virtual identities too do not exist without interaction.[6] Here lies the constitutive power that one-to-one or one-to-many media from the older days do not have. Only through interaction with the medium, through presence on the Net, do individuals become identities, fluid identities however, which are open to transformation from the very start of interaction. It is the idea of a forever-unfinished personal identity, of real people who can be nodes in an unlimited circuit and who can freely experiment with their identity in contact with an infinite network of others.

In the edited volume on cyberspace by Smith and Kollock (1999) many examples are provided of the heightened importance of questions of identity, in this case among Usenet participants, for example concerning discussions on race or gender issues. They report on almost continuous questions about the identity of discussion group members, questions about members' reputation, race or gender. With the lack of visual social cues, these identities are seldom made very explicit, as are stereotypical and conventional views on what it is, for example, to be 'white' or 'female', views that are sometimes far harsher than in real life. This is counterbalanced by a higher acceptance among the participants of discussion groups of variety, of the exploration of multiple personae and sending divergent signals on one's own identity, and of crossing the multiplicity/ inauthenticity boundary (O'Brien, 1999).[7] The promise of the Internet for civic engagement, political involvement and social connectedness, again at least in a highly individualized western world, lies in these features of openness, of the permeable and of the forever unfinished, inviting people to be constantly involved in the key questions of why they would engage in what type of issues and why they would connect with whom.

Indoor Community Life

Constructing open-ended virtual identities with heightened individual governance in a space where every conceivable message is present on demand in a rich ecology of other people, are the powerful elements of the Internet. The other is the establishment of virtual communities, a topic that is widely discussed in the literature on Internet culture (e.g. Kollock and Smith, 1999).[8] The Internet represents and generates communities of a range that is almost larger than life and the variety of people and topics converging in virtual communities is beyond exhaustive description. Any conceivable group flocks the Internet's different types of platforms, such as news groups, mailing lists, bulletin boards, web forums, muds and chat channels. The discussion on virtual communities especially, however, suffers from the lack of thorough ethnographies or surveys of web life framed within an educated and imaginative sociological analysis. One of the few attempts to frame the discussion sociologically by Wellman and Gulia (1999) shows the potential of the Internet to shape communities, not the village-like type where each member provides and receives every kind of support to and of all others and has a life-long connection with all community members, but the modern type. In modern societies everyday communities are partial communities not controlling members' full allegiance (see also Wuthnow, 1998). Relationships are supportive and reciprocal but specialized, based on weak ties that help maintain contact with diverse social circles, that are intimate on a wide range of indicators (frequent, companionable, voluntary, long-term, etc.), even between people who do not share the same time and space and who are increasingly more homogeneous in terms of shared interests rather than in terms of social indicators, Wellman and Gulia (1999) convincingly argue. Relationships on the Internet have all of these characteristics.

The Internet itself has some extra features that explain its good fit with modern life. The ease to shop around for social resources in a busy, heterogeneous, safe and 'big city' environment – especially when one lives in a low-density suburb – be it for information, for support and advice on social, physical or mental problems, for companionship and a sense of belonging, for political mobilization, etc., is unmatched in offline life. The speed, accuracy and low, distance-free costs likewise. The lack of social and situational cues encourages contacts between people from very different social circles. Because of its many-to-many character, moreover, helping someone is observed by all others and increases status in such a community. One is recognized as a community member and this enhances the probability to receive help some day from one of the community members (not per se the one helped). Intimate online contacts between numerous online friends, many of whom meet offline too, are frequent, informal and supportive, but also more playful, creative and profoundly

more apt for role-playing than is the case in offline life. Specialized Internet groups provide the basis for more multiplex relationships between participants who would be otherwise unaware of one another. It allows one to be part of many partial communities, much more than offline life with its time and space limits can provide. All in all the Internet possibly reverses the trend to less contact between community members, that is increasingly less placed in public space. Community life is there but has moved indoors.

Wellman and Gulia do not present detailed data and have to rely on assertion and anecdote too, they frankly admit (Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 188). More recently Wellman et al. (2002) report on a number of specific studies from North America and Spain and one international survey that all reveal that many people use the Internet to supplement real-life face-to-face social relationships. They do not explicitly present data that deal with the hypotheses that Internet use decreases or transforms community life offline. Looking at the promise of community life on the Internet just presented, it is time to counterbalance the pessimism about the loss of Putnam's village-type total communities with analyses and data on the Internet that move beyond 'travellers' tales'. Before drawing final conclusions, we take a look at another element of the Internet relevant for our discussion: cyberpolitics.

Political Theatre in Cyberspace

Media traditionally play a crucial role in politics. In the new informational age these traditional media are outwitted and outmanoeuvered, so the prophecy goes. With the Internet, the traditional providers of one-way political information, the newspaper and broadcast media have met millions of competitors. Today anyone can be a political broadcaster, publish and voice one's political views and take one's own place among the big players on the Internet. The information seeker can get political information tailored to his or her private interests and make his or her self-production of political experiences. Political discussion, moreover, no longer only takes place in real-life social networks but also in a wide range of virtual ones. The number, furthermore, of experiments with online political meetings, political decision-making and even with voting on the Net is rapidly increasing.

Between all hyperboles on the Internet's promise for political revitalization, the critical theory studies reconceptualizing 'discourse and decision making in the information age' (Hague and Loader, 1999; see also Jordan, 1999), and the large amount of anecdotes the Internet itself provides, there is little basic empirical evidence that can face serious critique.[9] Full-scale social science research on Internet users and usage is very limited and predominantly American.[10] The use of the Internet,

including its political use, is an issue that is still hidden in the dark. There are case studies on specific Internet communities and politics, democracy, governance and the like (e.g. Patrick, 1997; see also the many examples in Hague and Loader, 1999), studies that are not easily generalized outside their specific political, social, cultural and even technological settings. Online survey studies in experimental settings (e.g. Kraut et al., 1998) or among the general public (e.g. Nie and Erbring, 2000) are very scarce and are more directly tapping in on the discussion of social isolation, civic engagement, trust and contentment with life than on political themes.[11]

There are exceptions and one of these is the study by Hill and Hughes (1998). Using survey data and data from the Internet itself, the study identifies the profile of US political activists among the Internet users. Internet users on average have a liberal profile, political activists on the other hand use the Internet for political activities and discussion for mostly right-wing and anti-government political messages, especially in the asynchronous communication on the worldwide bulletin board Usenet. Debate on non-US-oriented discussion and news groups are especially strongly developed and anti-governmental in countries with non-democratic governments. This in itself raises hopes of cybtopians. Still, as Norris (2000, 2001) also concludes, even with this study, it is impossible to generalize more widely from Net activism within America to online communities in other postindustrial countries.

Online Machers United

The literature suggests that the Internet is a true meta-medium, which taps into people's need for immersive, multisensory experiences, which enables them to individually engineer those experiences, and which provides more experiences than real life can. These experiences are set in a culture of libertarian utopianism of infinite openness and unrestricted individual freedom of expression. These are, furthermore, placed in an institutional setting in which no single agency of power has the main say and competition between institutions is vivid. Next, these are found in a system of social interaction that solicits for active and creative construction of identities and social roles and that admits fluidity, multiplicity and flexibility of these identities and roles. This system is an indoor 'big city' where many resources are available on demand and are provided tailored to one's needs, where relationships are specialized, but where social contacts are multiplex, intimate and supportive. Word has it that it is a playing field for liberal political activists and for anti-governmental, non-mainstream fringe political organizations. It is a large (if not largely American) network where machers of identities, communities and the body politic converge. Having an open eye for social actions in these types of networks in civil society studies – the more contemporary, more

permeable, loosely structured networks of community life, civic involvement, connectivity and identity, instead of just looking for the village-type, Putnam-sort of networks – is today's challenge for civil society studies.

Discussion and Conclusions

For more than a century social scientists have claimed that *Gemeinschaft* is weakening. At the start of the third millennium the preoccupation with this theme seems at its peak. American scientists in particular have sounded the alarm bell. Waning social capital is believed to have seriously undermined US community as reflected in widespread feelings of social mistrust, in citizens turning away from prime institutions and political authorities, and even engaging less in informal interactions. Solidarity, connectedness, moral principles, civic virtues and altruistic involvement in organizations that foster the 'good cause' are believed to be phenomena from bygone days, modern memories known only to a rapidly declining number of members from the great prewar 'civic generation'.

This alarming diagnosis of western civil society would be a very serious, even painful account of our present times, *if* the debate and research in this field were not impaired by a set of equally serious theoretical and methodological problems. This article addresses a number of these basic problems. The main issue, we believe, is the lack of sensitivity in civil society studies to new, alternative and innovative forms of solidarity, connectedness, and civic and political engagement. Forms that allow people to build trust, communities and supportive social relationships, acquire and maintain social capital, contribute to a common cause, and in so doing, change themselves and the world they live in; new, alternative and innovative forms that are particularly facilitated by the Internet. The well-understood routine in many civil society studies is to focus on forms of social capital and of civic engagement that date back to the formative years of previous generations, such as writing letters to representatives, signing petitions, joining the Elks, Kiwani's or Rotary, playing cards with friends or other face-to-face, informal interactions. The claim that community life, civil society and even democracy are in serious trouble because younger (American) generations no longer engage in these types of activities is in our view at best a misunderstanding of the 'signs of time'. Not being engaged in traditional forms of advancing the common good is not equal to refraining from any civic engagement.

We evaluated a number of classic studies on the Internet to counterbalance this lack of understanding of recent cultural and political developments in traditional civil society theory and research. In spite of its speculative theoretical character and its scattered and still largely

underdeveloped empirical evidence, studies on the Internet show that the Internet is likely to be the ultimate tool for particularly younger generations to gain and advance social capital, to build and take part in communities, and to contribute to the common good and their personal identity. Scattered evidence does show American younger generations, the same ones that are blamed for endangering traditional civil society, are massively present on the Internet and use the Internet in line with the cultural labels, such as individual freedom of expression, attributed to it. Analyses of the scarce data indicate that these younger users are the articulate part of the populace.

Research is developing in which the offline impact of Internet use is assessed. Particularly, questions are raised on how users of the Internet behave in real communities, in real politics, in real organizations that advance the common good. In this article we have argued that the Internet has an importance in itself. It is not only a valuable object of study because of its implications for real life. The Internet is, or better still, considering the individual control and use of the medium, the many Internets that exist are a constitutive force of a civil society that is online and online alone. It is equally interesting to find a way to assess what people value from online communication with others, how they constitute a social life online, as it is to find out how communicating online affects people's social lives offline, both in western *and* non-western societies. To know whether or not those online trust online institutions is as fascinating as knowing what level of trust users display to real neighbourhoods, organizations or political authorities. Moreover, being online and contributing to communication, perhaps even helping to build a website or a community channel, is as such an act of putting one's social capital on the line if not an act of volunteering. Engaging in online political discussions is not only important because it creates the capital to engage in real-life discussions, with friends for example. It is an act of engagement itself. Studies known to us do look at the impact of Internet involvement on the engagement in civil society that is still framed with the perspective of only the traditional indicators of civic engagement often restricted to the individual nation-state. Civil society, however, is for a large portion of younger generations an online and global phenomenon with online resources to maintain online social capital, trust and engagement. It is time to thoroughly define and empirically grasp today's forms of civil society made by contemporary people with contemporary means, in a contemporary world. For massively going online may well be the 21st-century expression of community, civic involvement, connectivity and identity.

Notes

1. The core cohort of this long civic generation, according to Putnam, was born between 1925 and 1930.
2. Another problem not further discussed here is that Putnam fails to address the reasons why younger generations have become less civic. Despite the fact that generational change according to Putnam (2000: 283) is responsible for at least 50 percent of the decline in civic engagement and social capital, making the generational argument the single most important one in his analysis, he stops at pinpointing the mechanism of change, not the exact causes. See also McLean (2002) for comments on Putnam's use of the generational perspective.
3. See also Jordan and Taylor (1998) on the development of the Internet, its technological features and more importantly, its libertarian undercurrents.
4. See Wellman and Gulia (1999) for other examples.
5. O'Brien (1999) makes a strong point that in online interactions gender identities are very outspoken and stereotypical ('hyper-gendering'), leading the author to the conclusion that these interactions generate greater homogeneity rather than new forms of identity.
6. The ultimate postmodern interpretation of multiplicity of identities suggests that there can be no 'the' Internet, but that there are likely to be an endless number of Internets. We acknowledge this argument, but for the sake of brevity use the Internet in a singular form. An almost similar argument is made by Norris and Jones (1998), where they argue that there is no shared Internet experience and question whether or not the Internet can be regarded as a single medium if some use it for email, others for online research or electronic access to other media, or take part in chat rooms, etc. This is a point survey researchers of the Net easily overlook (e.g. Nie and Erbring, 2000).
7. The heightened importance of continuously constructing one's own identity with the aid of technology, being networked in a more-ways communication system, either in cyberspace or in 'meatspace', is also the significant signal of cyborg theory. See especially Gray (2001) and see www.routledge-ny.com/CyborgCitizen for an extensive commentary.
8. See also the very recent contribution of Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002).
9. See www.TheHacktivist.com for news on political protest and activism on the Internet. Read Cassel (2000) about web attacks, but also about the way Internet actions are taking into the streets and even into the very heart of WTO meetings (see for an example of cyberaction: www.theyesman.org/wto; see

also: www.nytimes.com/2001/01/07/weekinreview/07word.html and www.RTMark.com

10. The Pew Research Center with the Pew Internet and American Life Project (see: www.people-press.org), the Internet and Society Study by the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (see: www.stanford.edu/group/siqss), the Georgia Tech-University longitudinal GVU-study (see: www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu), the Surveying the Digital Future project by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy (see: www.ccp.ucla.edu). Political issues get irregular attention in these studies. More frequently if themes are touched upon, the phrasing of indicators, both of Internet use (making no differences in types of use, for example) and of political engagement, is rather crude and elaborate analyses are missing.

11. The study of Kraut et al. (1998) shows slacking social involvement and psychological well-being 'caused' by Internet use based on 93 families from eight neighbourhoods in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in the years 1995 and 1996. This study is widely cited to prove the negative effects of Internet use (by, for example, Shah et al., 2001). What the study proves to us is that it is time to start improving research on Internet use. The study by Shah et al. (2001) shows with data of the 1999 DDB Life Style Study that information-seeking via the Internet has a positive effect on civic engagement (framed in traditional terms: doing community work offline) for Generation X (everyone born after 1965 in this study). Television and newspapers are the positive correlates for the baby boom generation (born between 1935 and 1964).

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