

**Helping Serendipity Along:  
The Internet's Role in the Evolution and Enhancement  
of Social Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## INTRODUCTION

American civil society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a much different concept than it was in the middle and even at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to a 2006 US Census Bureau report, we are a populace on the move—nearly 50 million people reported moving in the previous year. 57% of those who reported relocating were under the age of 30 and 28% were between the ages of 30-49. (1) We are a young and mobile society, ready and eager to experience as much as we can. Long gone are the days of settling into one home and one career for the long haul. Today, it is common to change careers 3 times in one's lifetime. (2) There are those who are nostalgic for the days of yesteryear when a family occupied the same home for the duration of a lifetime, fathers toiled at one occupation from quarter life to retirement, mothers maintained the household, and children spent their days riding bicycles and joining bowling leagues. Those days are gone. They are gone because we as a nation have evolved. Opportunities have expanded for all minorities who, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, weren't able to fully express themselves. We have seen that civil society can take many forms and we have adapted to modernization. In my opinion, this has only helped us as a society. We have held true to the American spirit of exploration that took us Westward with the Manifest Destiny of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and now we have harnessed the power of the Internet to expand and enhance civil society.

In 2006, the Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered that “the Internet helps build social capital.”

Our evidence calls into question fears that social relationships—and community—are fading away in America. Instead of disappearing, people's communities are transforming: The traditional human orientation to neighborhood- and village-based groups is moving toward communities that are oriented around geographically dispersed social networks. People communicate and maneuver in these networks rather than being bound up in

one solitary community. Yet people's networks continue to have substantial numbers of relatives and neighbors—the traditional bases of community—as well as friends and workmates. (3)

The traditional notions of community have expanded and have been enhanced. We were shackled by the restrictions on our movement as social citizens and, as soon as we were able, we took advantage of the freedom of the Internet to increase our social capital. It is true that there was a dearth of attendance and membership of civil associations at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (I will address this in detail in the “Literature Review” portion). And it is quite possible that what contributed to the decrease in interpersonal trust felt by American citizens (4) was the result of boredom with the old ways of socializing (therefore, less joining of clubs and associations) and a desire for a new, more permeable mode. Americans have always desired the newest and latest in all aspects of life. It is only natural that we would use the Internet and modern technology to make our human interactions and our civil society better.

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1800's, he was amazed by the citizens' propensity to form civil associations. He remarked:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have...associations of a thousand...kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books...If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of great example, they form a society. (5)

Tocqueville's impressions hold just as true today. We may have suffered a dip in the proliferation and membership to civil associations at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but now American civil society is back. This can be attributed to individual innovators who saw a deficit in our social capital and created new avenues for interaction. One particular individual is Scott Heiferman, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Meetup.com. To me, Meetup.com epitomizes this new form of social capital and I will analyze it in great detail. Heiferman saw the

confluence of a decrease in community building and a bounty of opportunities provided by the Internet. Meetup.com is, of course, far from the only example of a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Tocqueville's description of American association forming, but it is a concrete vehicle by which the new civil society has proliferated. Perhaps one could call it "American Civil Society Version 2.0."

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

My desire to research "American Civil Society Version 2.0" arose after reading Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Putnam analyzes the areas in American civil society where participation has dwindled. He focuses on political, civic, and religious participation, connections in the workplace, and informal social connections. Putnam sees a steady and alarming decrease in the strength of such kinds of participation. For each of these segments of civil society, he argues that Americans are becoming more isolated, less participatory, more "fly-by-night" in their connections with others, and less trusting of others. Bowling Alone delves deeply into the data that Putnam provides, showing civic disengagement in every area of his focus. On political participation, he says "the slow slump in interest in politics and current events is due to the replacement of an older generation that was relatively interested in public affairs by a younger generation that is relatively uninterested." (1) Turning to civic participation, he uses the decline in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) as evidence that the strength of our communities is shrinking. Speaking about the robust days of the PTA, Putnam remarks, "[The success of the PTA]—membership encompassing eventually nearly half the families in America—was due no doubt to the fact that this form of connectedness appealed to millions of parents who wanted to be engaged in some way in their

children's education." (2) Religious participation has seen a decline. To Putnam, this is quite bothersome as "Churches provide an important incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interests, and civic recruitment. Religiously active men and women learn to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibility. They also befriend others who are in turn likely to recruit them into other forms of community activity." (3) Workplace connections trouble Putnam as well. Regarding the American trend toward shorter job tenure, part-time and temporary jobs, and independent work, he states, "The implication is clear—nearly one-third of all U.S. workers have jobs that discourage durable social connections, and that fraction is rising." (4) And finally, informal social connections have reached a dire place in Putnam's eye. Putnam analyzes the decline in card playing among Americans, emphasizing the importance of this pastime as it fosters "microdeliberations" about current events and happenings in the community. Instead, substitutes have risen to popularity.

Substitutes for card playing have emerged...everything from computer and video games to casino gambling. Like cards, these pastimes provide the spice of chance. Unlike card playing, however, these successors are distinguished by their solitary nature. My informal observation of Internet based bridge games suggests that electronic players are focused entirely on the game itself, with very little social small talk, unlike traditional card games. (5)

The truth is, Putnam could not have foreseen how the Internet could have helped us evolve in terms of how we communicate, what information we broadcast to the world and what details we can learn about most anyone, and how this would foster greater social capital and trust.

My reaction to Putnam's findings in each of his categories of civic engagement is to counter his argument with my evolved, "Version 2.0" view in the digital age of 2008. What is acceptable to share with others has expanded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—we do not need orderly social organizations to satisfy our desires to interact with one another, to discuss current events and politics, and to create change in the world. The author Barry Wellman has coined the term

“Networked Individualism” to describe the burgeoning way in which we communicate and build community—we are individuals who are very linked-in with a bounty of others. We cannot, and do not want to, function alone. We have enhanced our relationships with others thanks to, not in spite of, the technology of our modern age. (6)

I do believe that sometimes Americans can be a nostalgic people who romanticize the “good old days.” I see a lot of this in Putnam. The problem with romanticizing the past is that we don’t see the advancements that have recently occurred and we fail to recognize the troubles of yesteryear.

The political climate of the past 4 to 8 years has truly changed the participation of young voters. A comparison of the percentage of 17-29 year olds who voted in the Super Tuesday democratic primaries in the past 4 years shows a median 5% increase from 2004 to 2008. And some states show an even larger increase in participation percentage—Georgia and New York each saw a 7% increase. (7) I believe that this jump in young voter interest is a combination of a general disappointment with the current administration and the explosion of grass roots participation via the Internet. This is perhaps the first election cycle in which the average, young voter can make a direct impact—donating time, money, and opinions. This is facilitated by social networking sites like Facebook.com, Myspace.com, and Meetup.com. One example of this new format for culling interest in the current political climate occurred when, in advance of Sen. Barack Obama’s gathering in Austin, Texas in February 2007, a University of Texas law student created a Facebook.com group entitled “UT Students for Obama.” “More than 500 students...joined in support of the Illinois Democrat, and about 100...signed up to help [volunteer at the gathering].” (8) These students were able to mobilize solely because of this

new form of communicating. I could write an extensive piece on the Internet's ability to cultivate grass roots political participation, but that is not the subject of this paper. What I will say is that, when Putnam was measuring the interest of the younger generations in politics, these social networking sites did not exist. I believe that the younger generation was waiting for this ability to greatly participate in politics and they are now using it to its fullest capabilities.

Why was the PTA so successful 50 or 60 years ago? One would have to consider the role of women in the average family. Women were not able to penetrate the workforce and therefore perhaps one of the only avenues for interacting with other contemporaries was through the PTA. Obviously now that is not true, as women have exponentially progressed professionally and have myriad ways of forming bonds with age cohorts. But also, as it relates to the proliferation of the Internet, the PTA is no longer as necessary. Now, parents can readily monitor their children's academic progression via Internet-based report cards updated daily by teachers. Parents may also email and instant message with teachers as much as they like. There is no longer the need to have one organized PTA meeting each month—that would be redundant as parents are already well aware of the progress of their children's education and they have other means by which to build community with cohorts.

In terms of religious participation and work connections, Americans have also evolved. Once upon a time it may have been that the church was the only available place in which citizens could gain self-expression skills (like giving speeches), make friends who were also civically active, and develop community interests. But this has all changed, in my mind, with the advent of social networking sites on the Internet. These days, we express almost every

detail about ourselves via this new technology, we make new friends and strengthen our core ties, and we learn more than we ever imagined we could about goings on in our local community as well as the global village. Work is also no longer one of the only places where we can create “durable social connections.” I believe that we have the desire to compartmentalize our time, creating a balance between work and life. We do not need our coworkers to be our best friends—we are able to maintain better relationships with our current friends via new forms of communication. This was not available when Putnam analyzed his research.

Putnam’s last area of diminishing social capital is crucial to my argument and research. As we have become a citizenry of “networked individuals,” we have enhanced our informal social connections because we need them. We have made them better and they are not nearly as informal as was previously supposed. Even when we are playing video games, we are connected to others. Take, for instance, the popular online video game World of Warcraft. At least 9 million players from around the world play World of Warcraft (9), competing against one another and communicating while playing. Players form “guilds” for the purpose of enhancing the gaming experience through togetherness. According to the World of Warcraft website ([www.worldofwarcraft.com](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com)), individual players are encouraged to form these “guilds” and to interview guild members to create a good team. Per the website, “If you find a guild you like, interview some of their guild members. Ask them how things are in their guild and if they enjoy it. If you’re interested in joining, ask them who you should talk to. Be very careful when messaging guild members because their impression of you is very important...Asking to join one of the more powerful guilds can actually be similar to a job interview in real life.” This is about teamwork, not sitting alone in front of a computer. The World of Warcraft website even

highlights positive attributes of guild leaders—clearly this can be a way to learn important managing skills. A recent USA Today article details how the “real world” permeates the “virtual world” especially when it comes to political issues.

...World of Warcraft (WoW) has been “teeming” with people gabbing about the [2008 presidential] election, says Sean Goldman, 36, a player from Van Nuys, California. “Here we are, logging into a virtual world to escape the grip of the real world for a few hours, but this election has brought the real world closer to the virtual world,” says Goldman, who was running a “heroic dungeon” (a more challenging level) with a pickup group of players recently when a break in the action led to an online conversation about supporting [Sen. Barack] Obama. And the debate continued through the rest of the game. (10)

The old form of “microdeliberations” about community affairs and current events that occurred at the bridge table have been enhanced and have permeated ways of communication that Putnam could not have imagined. We are now able to build social capital and discuss a wide array of issues with a larger audience than ever before.

Putnam postulates that the “collapse of American community” is attributable to several factors—time and money pressures, mobility and sprawl, technology and mass media, and generational change. According to Putnam, generational change has made the largest impact, and he dubs American youth “the TV generation.” (11) What Putnam did not anticipate was that “the TV generation” would morph into “the social networking generation.” This new generation, part of “American Civil Society Version 2.0,” has the ability to push past the time and money pressures, and the mobility and sprawl. Society is welcoming technology and mass media, therefore cross-cutting generational divides, for a more connected populace. In her book Social Capital; A Theory of Social Structure and Action, Nan Lin suggests that “we are witnessing a revolutionary rise of social capital, as represented by cybernetworks. In fact, we are witnessing a new era in which social capital will soon supersede personal capital in significance and effect.” (12)

Above all, Putnam proclaims that America's diminishing social capital endangers neighborhood safety and productivity, economic prosperity, and democracy as a whole. He sees more bonding social capital as opposed to more bridging social capital and worries that "some kinds of bonding social capital may discourage the formation of bridging social capital and vice versa." (13)

After this careful reading of Robert D. Putnam's Bowling Alone, I respect the author's concern for the collapse of the old form of social capital and I see evidence of a new, more engaged populace that has more outlets through which to form and nurture civil society.

## **QUESTIONS**

In what ways has this new form of social capital engendered interpersonal trust? What types of communities have been strengthened and created thanks to new technology? Is this new form of social capital bridging different groups of people who normally would not have met? With the permeation of the Internet into our daily lives, are we increasing our face-to-face interactions or are we isolating ourselves behind our computers? Are we now able to cross cut cleavages that we could not before? Is "American Civil Society Version 2.0" concentrated in one particular part of the country? Is this way of creating social capital expanding to other parts of the world? What does it mean for democracy?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

When Scott Heiferman read Bowling Alone, he certainly must have zeroed in on Putnam's questions about the future of the Internet:

The most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it. How can we use the enormous potential of computer-mediated communication to make our investments in social capital more productive? How can we harness this promising technology for thickening community ties? How can we develop technology to enhance social presence, social feedback, and social cues? How can we use the prospect of fast, cheap communication to enhance the now fraying fabric of our real communities, instead of being seduced by the

mirage of some otherworldly “virtual community”? In short, how can we make the Internet a part of the solution? (1)

Heiferman’s creation of Meetup.com in 2002 was largely influenced by his reading of Bowling Alone. (2) Heiferman envisioned a way for the Internet to actually bring people physically together to “meet up.” By creating Meetup.com he answered Putnam’s call to harness the potential of the Internet to build social capital. At Meetup.com, the Member Bill of Rights spells out the manifesto to build community: “The Right to Meet: We encourage all Meetup Groups to have a local monthly Meetup that’s open to anyone interested. The Right to Meet About Most Anything: Meetup.com is non-partisan and non-denominational. We believe that everyone should have access to a Meetup Group about most anything. (There are a few exceptions for hate- and adult-related topics.)”(3) By reading Meetup’s Company Overview, more of this commitment to “American Civil Society Version 2.0” is apparent. According to the website:

Meetup, Inc is the world’s largest network of self-organized clubs and community groups. We make it easy for anyone to organize a local group, or find one of the thousands already meeting up face-to-face. Why? Because we believe in the power of self-organized groups to meet people needs (and change the world). Meetups help their members advance causes, network with professional peers, get health support, pursue hobbies or just organize a regular playgroup for their kids. Over 3 million people are taking part. (4)

Heiferman’s vision has succeeded at impressive rates and in ways that are unprecedented. I chose to focus on Meetup as a case study example of the new way that social capital is burgeoning thanks to the Internet. (Putnam has even given Meetup his stamp of approval—he is a member of the company’s Advisory Board. (5))

I concluded that Meetup was truly at the forefront of the new wave of social capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and therefore I made it the focus of my research. My first step was to fully

familiarize myself with how Meetup is organized and how the company operates. As I explained previously, the goal of Meetup is to use the Internet to get people to “meet up” in real life. Those who start Meetup’s are dubbed Organizers. They establish the purpose of their Meetup and plan the actual meetings. For instance, the “What’s Cookin’ and Bakin’ Detroit?!” Meetup exists so that members may, “Meetup locally with other people who like to cook and bake! [This Meetup] seeks out all things related to food...” (6) Members provide input on the Meetups via a message board for each group. If a Meetup has yet to be established for an interest, Meetup.com members are brought together via a mutual desire for such a group to exist and are encouraged to form a Meetup. Showing that this is not just a fly-by interaction, members are asked to pledge (pledging to plan the first meeting, for instance) to help make a future Meetup successful.

I wanted to see the inner-workings of Meetup for myself, so on Monday, March 31, 2008 I met with Karina van Schaardenburg at the Meetup headquarters in New York, New York. She is a research analyst at the company and I felt that she could provide me with valuable background data on the networking site’s success and operations. I also drew upon her analytical expertise to glean statistical information about Meetup.

Then, I focused on the US cities with the largest number of Meetups and I proceeded to contact a wide array of Meetups. The top US cities for Meetup are Atlanta, GA; Austin, TX; Boston, MA; Brooklyn, NY; Chicago, IL; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Houston, TX; Las Vegas, NV; Los Angeles, CA; Minneapolis, MN; New York, NY; Orlando, FL; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Portland, OR; Raleigh, NC; Sacramento, CA; Saint Louis, MO; San Antonio, TX; San Diego, CA; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; Tampa, FL; and Washington, DC. I also contacted Meetups in

Detroit, MI and Nashville, TN. I contacted at least 2 very different Meetups in each of these cities, in total contacting 70 Meetup groups across the country. I emailed a questionnaire to each Meetup Organizer asking the following:

What was your main reason for starting the Meetup?

How many people came to your first meetings?

How many people come to the meetings now?

Do you feel that you have made life-long friends through this Meetup, people who you trust?

Do you feel that you have met people who you wouldn't have through this Meetup?

Have other Meetups spawned from this one?

Is there anything else you have to add?

In the end, I received responses from the Organizers of 28 of the Meetups that I contacted. The

Meetups from which I received feedback were:

Philadelphia Pug Meetup  
Chicago Euchre Card Game Club  
Chicago Comic Books Meetup  
Chicago EarthLANParty (For videogamers)  
Chicago Goth Meetup  
Chicago Philadelphia Eagles Fan Meetup  
Windy City Wanderers Soccer Team Meetup  
Chicagoland Digital Photography Meetup  
Boston Hiking Meetup  
New York Spanish Language Meetup  
Denver Wine Meetup Group  
Houston Film Industry Meetup  
Las Vegas Dachshund Meetup  
Orlando Bellydance Meetup  
Portland Witches Meetup  
Fair Oaks (Sacramento) Fun and Fitness Meetup  
St. Louis Graphic Design Meetup  
The Weekly Dinner San Francisco  
San Diego Kayaking Meetup  
San Antonio Sportbike Riders Meetup  
Raleigh Write 2 Publish Meetup

Philadelphia Tennis Meetup  
Good Deeds Society Minneapolis  
Los Angeles Culture Sponges  
Houston Museum Meetup  
Austin Paranormal Meetup  
Nashville Scrappers and Stampers (Scrapbooking)  
What's Cookin and Bakin Detroit?

The Organizers of these Meetups were extremely excited to discuss their vibrant groups with me. While each group was quite different in focus, I was struck by many commonalities of community and friendship that cross-cut any categorical cleavages one might suppose. As I believe my research shows, these 28 Meetups (and they are merely the tip of the iceberg as there are currently 37,641 Meetups in existence with 3.4 thousand created in March 2008 alone (7)) represent the burgeoning form of new social capital in America and the way in which people are now using the Internet to positively impact our communities, bringing people together who never would have connected before.

## **RESULTS**

When Kathryn left her job at the Houston Museum for Natural Studies, she felt that something was missing in her life.

“I started the Houston Museum Meetup because I had left my job at the Houston Museum for Natural Science and severely missed being around that environment. Since I had contacts within the museum sector, I felt that Meetup would be a great way to share venues that aren't as widely publicized and to help promote some of the smaller museums and events. What started as a continued loyalty to my previous employer, has morphed into a way for me to have one or two people attend an event that I want to see that those within my circle of friends aren't interested.” (1)

The desire to fill an activity void as a catalyst for forming a Meetup is a common thread that runs through the results of my research. Many of the Organizers were already interested in a

particular hobby or cause or way of life and sought an avenue through which they could bring people together to participate in the activity that they enjoy. Joelen, the Organizer of What's Cookin' and Bakin'? Meetups in Detroit, Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis, DC area, and Calgary, Canada, formed her groups for a similar reason.

"I started the What's Cookin' and Bakin' Chicago Meetup group as a result of not finding a food community that fit my needs and expectations. I attended several cooking classes offered by various places in the city but none of them satisfied my culinary needs that were fun, casual and affordable. As a result, I created food related events that interested me and shared them publicly through the Meetup site in hopes others would join me." (2)

Some Organizers fell into their roles a bit by accident. In the early days of Meetup, groups were formed by Meetup headquarters. There weren't any Organizers, but individuals could volunteer to be "hosts." This was a less sophisticated mode of leadership than the Organizer role that was created later. Sorcha, the current Organizer of the Portland Witches Meetup, explains how she became the leader of her group:

"I went to a Witches Meetup that was already going. This was very early in the Meetup process. I think Meetup just scheduled the Meetups in different cities. There was no Organizer of the Witches Meetup. After going to a couple Meetups, I think Meetup sent me an invitation to be a "host" as they called them then. Since no one else stood up to be the host, I volunteered. That was about five years ago. If you're curious about why I went, it was because of the Meetup process. I was addicted to chat rooms on the Internet, and it was not really a good thing for me; I could hardly talk in person (although I was very witty and erudite online), so a meeting that was organized online and then got together in person seemed a great segue into getting into society again. I have since given up online chatrooms, mostly because my in-person social life is so full." (3)

Sorcha's remarks about allowing the Internet to isolate her socially and then eventually desiring the company of others illustrates both the negative and positive effects of Internet communication. However, I believe that Sorcha's experience of harnessing the Internet's resources to "get into society again" is the positive trend that is currently growing. Sorcha's personal discovery of her Meetup group is a perfect example of how Meetup has capitalized on the Internet's potential and has culled social capital. Christopher, the Organizer for Los Angeles Culture Sponges, remarked that he formed a Meetup in order to broaden his circle of friends: "I

rejoined [Meetup], in 2006, this time I started a group. I did so to rebuild my social network. I had returned to college, but being 20 years older not likely to make any serious friends. I went to one Meetup, but only a few of the dozen showed...But there were no other groups I liked, so I started my own.” (4) Many people form or join Meetups for similar reasons, especially if they have moved to a new place where they do not know anyone. Lisa, Organizer of the Chicago Euchre Meetup (devoted to playing the popular Midwestern card game Euchre), shared that many of her members joined the group because they were new to Chicago, wanted to meet new friends, and wanted to play the social card game. (5) Dave, current Organizer of the San Diego Kayak Meetup, recalls,

“I was new to sea kayaking and looking for someone to paddle with. I ran into this group out on the water one day. I liked the idea that it was open to all levels of experience, including beginners. When the previous organizer had to leave, I didn't want to see it fall apart so I stepped in. Now I have new friends to kayak with. I found that it also feels good to offer what is in effect a community service. I help get people out kayaking who might not have the opportunity otherwise.” (6)

Although the Organizers take the responsibility to create and/or lead a Meetup, they are merely one of sometimes thousands who share in a similar interest and want to create community. People are clamoring to build social capital—they want to connect, face-to-face, with others even if those others come from quite different walks of life. On average, there are 77,000 Meetup meetings (in person events) each month. 47,000 of these meetings garner 4 or more RSVPs. And there is an average of 616,000 RSVPs per month. (7) For instance, the Organizer of the Windy City Wanderers Soccer Meetup reports that, “Our first Meetup had around 30 people. That quickly grew to around 60 within a few months...[Now] average attendance for pickup [games] is around 80 people.” (8) Every single Meetup Organizer reported that the number of people attending each of their events has markedly increased

since the Meetup's inception. A few of the Meetup Organizers even provided me with statistical data detailing their group's growth. Randy, Organizer of the Houston Film Industry Meetup, shared that he has seen an average monthly new member growth of 61% since February 2007. He took over the Organizer position for this group that February when there were only 7 new members added during that period. He also reported that now about 50 people usually attend the events, whereas initially only around 4 people would show up. (This is important to note because some members are part of the Meetup online, but have yet to come to an actual meeting.) (9)

When asked if these Meetups have fostered friendships and interpersonal trust, the answer from Organizers was unequivocally "yes." Rick, Organizer of the Chicagoland Digital Photography Meetup, remarked that he has "even been asked to be a groomsman at the wedding of a good friend [he] met through Meetup. [They] even plan on starting a business together." (10) Sarah, Organizer of the Chicago Goth Meetup (who is also a music DJ) said, "There are some very strong friendships (and a few romantic relationships) that have formed out of our group. It makes me smile when I'm deejaying an event and notice groups of people hanging out together who I know have met through the Chicago Goth Meetup." (11) Bill, Organizer of the Boston Hiking group credits Meetup with helping him regard other people in a more positive light: "This Meetup has enlarged my circle of friends and opened my eyes to the ways that other people live. It's also made me more willing to let myself be open to other people. For the most part I have met a lot of nice folks through Meetup and as a result, I find that I have a more positive feeling about people." (12) Specifically regarding the idea that these Meetups cultivate interpersonal trust, the Organizer of the San Antonio Sportbike Racers

Meetup said, "I trust many of these people with my life every day. Motorcycle riding can be very dangerous if someone is not careful. If one can't trust the bikers they are riding with, one needs to find new bikers to ride with." (13)

Bill's account of his experience with the Boston Hiking Meetup brings up another trend in my research: Meetup as a venue through which to meet people with whom you would otherwise not have been in contact. Clearly, this is a form of bridging capital, not the dangerous bonding capital that can foster intolerance and discrimination. Continuing with his impressions, Bill reported:

"These Meetup events have exposed me to people I had no idea that I would meet, speak with or know. The list is endless. I have met attorneys on Wall Street, I have been interviewed by a New York Times journalist...I was contacted by a talent scout from Hollywood looking for active people willing to do a screen test for a show that will be a combination of *Survivor* and *The Greatest Race*. These are people I wouldn't ever have come into contact with if I stayed within my own little circle of friends. But more than that, I have met local people, brewers, businesspeople, computer folks. I met a guy who makes violins for a living. The list is endless and I love it. I am exposed, available and open to meeting all sorts of folks and I feel as though, now when I have a question about something, I have a litany of people that I can draw upon. It's been great." (12)

Because Meetup is egalitarian in terms of who may join each of its groups, it follows that disparate types of people would come together. Bill's effusive praise of the Boston Hiking Meetup is not an isolated case. Erik, Organizer of the DC Metro Volleyball Meetup, Weekly Dinner DC, Weekly Dinner Minneapolis, and Weekly Dinner San Francisco, summed up the idea by stating, "In my normal life, there are a limited number of ways to interact with people. Meetup is a way to help serendipity along." (14) Terry, Organizer of three Meetups – Chicago Area Dungeons and Dragons, Evanston Social Networking, and Chicago Comic Books – strengthened the case for Meetup's important role in "helping serendipity along." He states:

"In every case, there are people I would never have met without Meetup. Either due to geography, social skills or general interest, many of these people would have only met me if they were as outgoing as I am...Most of the

people who share interests with me, wouldn't know that I had those interests if they met me on the street. I'd have to be at some sort of mass gathering of nerds to meet them.” (15)

Simply put, many elements of our modern lives discourage social interaction (driving to and from work, for instance) and we look for other avenues through which to interact with others. We have now harnessed the Internet for a positive cause—and it is working.

## **DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Meetup.com has filled a void in our modern culture—we were in danger of becoming “the TV generation,” but we found a better use of emerging technology. I believe that my research proves that the Internet in general and Meetup.com specifically are bringing disparate groups of people together based on shared interests, allowing bridging social capital to form and cross-cut cleavages. The Internet has shattered the fears about suburban sprawl and increased mobility wrecking havoc on social relationships and interpersonal trust. Time and space have taken on a new meaning. Everyone is much closer in terms of ease of communication. The respondents to my Meetup.com survey all remarked that their groups introduced them to people from varying geographic, racial, socioeconomic, etc... caches. Stan, Organizer of the Philadelphia Tennis Meetup, remarked that one of his members is from Spain, but joined the group because he travels to Philadelphia often and wanted to meet people who shared his love of tennis. (1) Joelen, Organizer of the What’s Cookin’ and Bakin’ Meetups, shared that people have traveled from out of state to attend her events. Regarding her Chicago Meetup, she’s had attendees fly in from Pittsburgh, Detroit, Houston, and St. Louis. (2) This never would have been possible if the Internet had not been harnessed as a vehicle for social connectedness. This also speaks to the interpersonal trust issue—it takes a lot of trust in

people to invest the time and money to travel to a Meetup, whether it's in the next town, next state, or next continent, at which one may not know any other attendees other than via the Meetup's website. I think this is a testament to our desire to connect with one another face to face. According to a 2007 Pew Research Center report entitled "Americans and Social Trust: Who, Where and Why" 45% of adults surveyed felt that most people can be trusted while 50% said that one cannot be too careful. 59% of respondents felt that most people try to be fair as opposed to taking advantage of others. And 57% of those surveyed thought that most people try to be helpful instead of just looking out for themselves. The authors of the study concluded that "social trust has rebounded to roughly the same level it had been before [the 1990s when measured levels of interpersonal trust dipped for a number of years]." (3) Social trust is on the rise and I have to believe that sites like Meetup are engendering this positive trend in the populace.

We are "networked individuals" who see the world as much smaller thanks to our use of technology. We are also eager to join these groups to engage in our current interests, but we are open to the possibility that these groups may introduce us to life-long friends in whom we trust. We now have more and different ways to share and gather more and different information about our interests and other people. I think that we are constantly surprised by the connections we make thanks to the Internet both with our current friends and family as well as our new relationships. Sites like Meetup energize us and surprise us—and we want more of the social contacts that these online venues provide. Some may be skeptical about the value of these Meetups when looking at the number of people who have joined the different groups in comparison to the amount of members who have actually attended a meeting. It is

true that often there are many Meetup members who have yet to actually attend a face to face event. But I believe that this is a positive sign for the cultivation of social capital—for members who haven't been to an actual event, the intention is what is important. These people *want* to be socially active, but they may be too busy with family obligations and work. More studies must be done to analyze the social connections and levels of interpersonal trust of Meetup members who have joined a group, but haven't been to a group's meeting. I would speculate, however, that these people (and there are a lot of these people) do enhance the levels of social capital in our society. They are probably members of different clubs, have many core ties, feel interpersonal trust for others and are waiting for the next Meetup event that fits into their schedule. I can use myself as an example. I am a member of the Milwaukee Social Fitness Meetup. However, I travel extensively for my job and therefore am rarely at home to attend a meeting for this group. But my intention to do so is very real. And I feel interpersonal trust for my fellow human beings, am very socially active, and I have many core friendships.

Meetup.com is the ultimate form of bridging social capital. It is incredibly egalitarian. Each group runs itself and the opinions of the members are honored by the Organizers. People join Meetups based on interest, not other elements like race, gender, socioeconomic level, etc... We take these social capital building associations further due to the ease of communication. We do not solely rely on the actual Meetup meeting to share information with other members—thanks to email and sites like Myspace and Facebook, we can continue our in-person conversations and interactions online.

What does Meetup.com mean for democracy? I contend that it means a lot. I believe that it is strengthening the level of democracy in this country and that it is incredibly important.

Freedom of association is the catalyst behind Meetup and the proliferation of so many groups speaks to our desire to have these associations without restriction. I believe that Tocqueville would be proud of Meetup. He would be incredibly impressed with the “associations of a thousand kinds” present via the website. I think he would say that, regardless of the nation’s approval of the current government, the American people are still participating in the democratic society that he witnessed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meetup is also an indicator of the growth of democracy outside of the United States. Meetups exist in 110 countries, but they are banned in China and Saudi Arabia. (4) Clearly, even the idea of allowing people to freely “meet up” is so scary for the Chinese and Saudi Arabian governments that they decided to prohibit such a possibility altogether. These Meetups are not merely frivolous connections—these are groups where, amidst playing tennis, cooking dinner, or playing Euchre, the very essence of civil society is created. Strong associations are formed and microdeliberations occur on a bevy of subjects. This is democratic society at work and that just doesn’t jibe with China and Saudi Arabia. I do not mean to make a bold proclamation that, if China and Saudi Arabia allowed Meetups in their countries, they would instantly transition to democracy, but if the day ever comes when Meetup is welcomed by these two nations, many other elements of democracy would be burgeoning as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

Initially, Meetup.com received a lot of attention due to the site’s role in Howard Dean’s rise to popularity during the 2004 presidential election. A January 2004 *Wired* magazine article explains Meetup’s role in Dean’s meteoric rise to popularity:

"We fell into this by accident," Dean admits. "I wish I could tell you we were smart enough to figure this out. But the community taught us. They seized the initiative through Meetup. They built our organization for us before we

had an organization." In early 2003, Dean himself was lured to an early New York City Meetup where he found more than 300 enthusiastic supporters waiting to greet him. Meetup quickly became the engine of Dean's Internet campaign. (1)

Dean himself was surprised and inspired by the power of everyday people to associate and create change. Although his campaign ultimately failed, its revolutionary way of empowering and engaging individual voters paved the way for the Internet's role in the 2008 presidential contest. Before Meetup, effecting real political change perhaps seemed only possible at the elite level. After Meetup, the power was again put in the hands of the common citizen, no matter if that power came in the form of opinions shared, a small donation of money or time spent volunteering. And as Meetup has grown up, its number and variety of associations has blossomed, allowing a larger population to be involved. Political participation is only one part of the Meetup equation. It is also not a dating site, although romantic relationships have occurred as a result of membership and some jokes have been made (Bill, of the Boston Hiking Meetup, said that, at first, he "jokingly referred to [Meetup] as shackup.com"(2)).

Meetup.com's premise is revolutionary because it answered the call to utilize the Internet to bring people together and more people are joining every day.

"American Civil Society Version 2.0" is an evolution of the traditional forms of creating community. It is a testament to our desire to engage with one another in more ways. Scott Heiferman of Meetup.com is the epitome of the American spirit to innovate and improve upon deficiencies. And by now Putnam's fears for civil society should have abated. We did not retreat into anti-social behavior, our computer monitors' glow the only light we see. We have embraced the possibilities provided by our new forms of communication and have made the world a smaller place in which physical distance and outward differences are not obstacles in

the face of creating lasting bonds with others. The power to associate and create change is truly in the hands of the common citizen thanks to sites like Meetup.com. This is only the beginning and it is a sure sign that democracy is alive and well.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

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- (3) Pew Internet and American Life Project study "The Strength of Internet Ties" January 25, 2006
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- (2) Bowling Alone Page 56
- (3) Bowling Alone Page 66
- (4) Bowling Alone Page 90
- (5) Bowling Alone Page 104
- (6) Taken from an excerpt in the Pew Internet and American Life Project study entitled "The Strength of Internet Ties" January 25, 2006.
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- (2) "Gathering steam: People are racing to the Internet to organize in-person meetings on a wide range of topics" The Spokesman-Review, Spokane, Washington, November 23, 2003
- (3) <http://www.meetup.com/about/rights>
- (4) <http://www.meetup.com/about/company>
- (5) <http://www.meetup.com/advisory>
- (6) <http://cooking.meetup.com/472/>
- (7) Author's email communication with Karina van Schaardenburg, Meetup.com research analyst, April 8, 2008

### RESULTS

- (1) Author's email communication with Houston Museum Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008

- (2) Author's email communication with What's Cookin' and Bakin'? Meetups Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (3) Author's email communication with Portland Witches Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (4) Author's email communication with Los Angeles Culture Sponges Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (5) Telephone interview with Chicago Euchre Meetup Organizer, April 11, 2008
- (6) Author's email communication with San Diego Kayak Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (7) Author's email communication with Karina van Schaardenburg, April 8, 2008
- (8) Author's email communication with Windy City Wanderers Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (9) Author's email communication with and statistical data provided by Houston Film Industry Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (10) Author's email communication with Chicagoland Digital Photography Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (11) Author's email communication with Chicago Goth Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (12) Author's email communication with Boston Hiking Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (13) Author's email communication with San Antonio Sportbike Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (14) Author's email communication with DC Metro Volleyball, Weekly Dinner San Francisco, DC, Minneapolis Meetups Organizer, April 13, 2008
- (15) Author's email communication with Chicago Area Dungeons and Dragons, Evanston Social Networking, and Chicago Comic Books Meetups Organizer, April 13, 2008

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- (2) Author's email communication with What's Cookin' and Bakin'? Meetups Organizer, April 13, 2008
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- (4) Interview with Karina van Schaardenburg, March 31, 2008

#### **CONCLUSION**

- (1) "How the Internet Invented Howard Dean" Wired Magazine, January 2004
- (2) Author's email communication with Boston Hiking Meetup Organizer, April 13, 2008