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### **Status of Online Communities**

According to the works of Putnam and Feldstein, Shade, Larsen and Trippi, online communities exist, often in a vibrant fashion. Putnam, the most skeptical of the authors, defines communities in terms of the social capital existing within the connections of a group – albeit in their social networks, their community norms, or the trust manifested from within.<sup>1</sup> It should be noted however that these online communities are not reinventing the wheel or changing human nature. They are simply online extensions of communities that exist – or could exist – offline.

The first idea that emerges from the reading is that the most successful online connections are those with roots in the offline world. When talking with the authors of *Better Together*, Craigslist.org founder Craig Newmark “insists that the localness of the Craigslist sites is what keeps them alive and growing and what makes it possible for people to feel a community connection online.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the web site is largely a tool for facilitating civic communication within an existing locality. In this manner, Craigslist.org has become a technological replacement for the coffeehouse bulletin board, with ads for jobs, rides, requests for new friendships and junk to be sold. Shade experienced a similar situation in her study of gender online. In Shade’s words, “the most popular use of the internet for women was email, which was used to keep up with distant family and friends and served as an ‘isolation antidote.’”<sup>3</sup> She goes on later to say that one of the chief benefits of the internet, in the mind of women, is that they are able to keep in touch with a greater number of people that they would otherwise. Again, the internet here is a tool to enhance or maintain relationships whose roots are in the offline world. Finally, Larsen found that “those who seek religious material [online] most often ... are more likely to attend church weekly.”<sup>4</sup> Here, the internet is once again taking a predilection, and giving it an online outlet. Religious web sites take people who are already inclined towards spiritual growth, and give them the opportunity to enhance that growth via another outlet.

The second idea that emerges from the reading is that the most successful elements of online communities are often felt offline. This type of statement is almost obvious in the context of online activism (where people online work to change the offline world) but it merits some exploration. Trippi spend copious amounts of ink explaining that while the internet was a great tool, the main benefits of the online activities of the Dean Campaign happened offline, in the face-to-face Meetup.com events in New York and Seattle, and via the Dean Corps community volunteer activities across the nation. “That was the beauty of the Dean Campaign in the summer of 2003, the fact that it wasn’t the Dean Campaign” says Trippi. “People all across the country were engaging in civic life again.”<sup>5</sup> Putnam and Feldstein say much the same thing about Craigslist.org, though somewhat begrudgingly. “However much Craigslist may be a community itself, it unquestionably functions as a tool to create community by bringing people together.”<sup>6</sup> They cite people who would meet offline for backgammon, or for dinner, or for jobs or relationships. Also worth noting, is that communities online have the possibility of being significantly more shallow. Norris noted that “commitments to any particular online group can often be shallow and transient when another group is but a mouse click away.”<sup>7</sup>

The final idea that emerges from the reading is that the internet doesn’t change human nature, it just brings human nature online. Much of the data to support this idea comes from Norris. In all of her research on bonding (people finding like minded people online) and bridging (people finding new and different people online) she found that – across the board – “...the experience was slightly stronger for bonding.”<sup>8</sup> She found that even when people were bridging, they were bridging to people they already had more exposure too, like their elders. According to Norris, “more groups fell into the mixed [both bridging and bonding] category ... by age group than by class or race.”<sup>9</sup> Larsen discovered some evidence that the online experience doesn’t change human nature, and its need for offline interaction, when she noted “a whopping 85% responded that it was easier to initiate [discussions on spiritual matters] in their personal circles rather than online.”<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, it is important to note that there is little hard evidence that this new online component of society will make people more tolerant or rewrite human nature. Like all technological advancements before, the internet is a step in the right direction. There is little doubt that online communities exist. There are social networks of online prayer groups and motherhood support networks. Craigslist.org and BlogForAmerica.com both had extensive, self policing, social norms. Perhaps Newmark said it best. "If people feel connected, it must be a community."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Daniel, Richard A. Schwier and Gordon McCalla, "Social Capital in Virtual Learning Communities and Distributed Communities of Practice," *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology Volume 29*, Fall 2003. <[http://www.cjlt.ca/content/vol29.3/cjlt29-3\\_art7.html](http://www.cjlt.ca/content/vol29.3/cjlt29-3_art7.html)>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 231.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Regan Shade, "Bending Gender into the Net: Feminizing Content, Corporate Interests and Research Strategy," in *Society Online: the Internet in Context*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2004), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Elena Larsen, "Deeper Understanding, Deeper Ties: Taking Faith Online," in *Society Online: the Internet in Context*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2004), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet and the Overthrow of Everything*, (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Putnam and Feldstein, 236.

<sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris, "The Bridging and Bonding Roles of Online Communities," in *Society Online: the Internet in Context*, (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2004), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Norris, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Norris, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Larsen, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Putnam and Feldstein, 240.