I read:


Summary:

William (2006a) developed an instrument, called Internet Social Capital Scales (ISCS), able to be used to test the two dimensions (Bridging and Bonding) in online and offline settings. I felt the most important thing in this paper is that William had a nice literature review about social capital. The first thing mentioned is the definition of social capital, which includes the stress of network, the effect of the network and the process of maintaining the network, and William pointed out that what has been captured in the instrument focused on the effect of the network, not the other two. Then, the author critiqued the views that Internet use can lead to the offline isolation and thus “the Internet is at heart an isolating medium,” and considered that these views overlooked the establishment of online social capital. Thus, William called for an investigation of changes of social interactivities in total, a sum of both online and offline activities. Therefore, the inventory tested address four areas: online bonding and bridging, and offline bonding and bridging.

Motivated by the arguments proposed by Putnam, Nie, Negroponte, VanAlstyne, and Brynjolfsson that Internet use may establish a boundary between people and thus diminish the social capital offline, William (2007) examined the influence of the Internet on social capital both online and offline. The results showed that 1) people are more strongly tied to one another (measured as “bonding”) but less connected with a broad range of others (measured as “bridging”) offline than online; 2) the use of the Internet (measured as the time spent online) is associated with a loss of offline social capital but a gain of online social capital in both bridging and bonding dimensions; 3) Internet use is correlated with diverse interactions online, but doesn’t destroy offline interactions; and 4) no direct connection between the internet use and online or offline out-group antagonism is supported.

William (2006b) continuously raised the attention to investigating the impact of technologies (particularly, online games) on online community establishment, and changes of social activities
Putnam (1995) revealed a decline in social capital in America, such as reduced union participation and churchgoing, volunteer reduction, and political disengagement. Then Putnam claimed that social trust is an important factor that bond people together and establish a sense of membership. Finally, the author illustrated the reasons resulting in the loss of social engagement, such as women entered the job market, lack of residential stability, changes of American family, and technologies.

My Stands:

William (2006a) critiqued the view that simply blaming the Internet as a factor prohibiting social engagement offline by claiming “the key point is that we do not know whether total social activities are or are not in decline.” I echo William’s view to consider offline and online social capital as an integral. I think the total is increasing with the use of the Internet. Obviously, the Internet provides an environment for us to know more people, which largely enhance the bridging aspect of social capital. I knew more people by just checking out their websites and sending emails to them. I added people whom I don’t know as my friends in delicious and facebook. I also could not imagine how I could apply for our program without the help of the Internet. As to bonding, I think the Internet as well as other technologies definitely helps me conquer the spatial distance so that I could feel closely connected to my family and friends. Yet I am not positive that the Internet per se could establish a sense of intimacy. I never had any experience that I know someone completely online and felt that I could treat the person as my close friend.

I also think about another two points that relates to the social capital: 1) a sense of bridging and bonding (especially bonding) are sometimes subconscious, and thus may not be able to be self-realized, 2) the subjects to whom we could feel socially engaged are not just limited to someone we know, but could be extended to a broader range of the audiences whom we don’t know.

My own experiences speak for the first point. I never really realized a bond to my parents (I know this sounds crazy!) or my close friends when I was in China, just because I had it all the time and I kind of took it for granted. I only realized such a strong bond after I came to the US, the moment when it was not tangible to me so easily anymore. Thus, I think that any study of social engagement may be subjected to the risk that the participants could not be aware of the attachment that they get used to.

Putnam talked about the decline of social capital; Williams developed the instrument and argued that a new form of social connections is established online. I, however, feel that their discussions assume that the people whom our social connections linked to are just limited to someone we know, but overlook the ones we don’t know. When the earth quake occurred in Sichuan last May, I saw that people from the whole nation were closely tied to the victims in Sichuan spontaneously. I was in Beijing at that time, and I saw so many people on the street waiting in the long line to donate their blood. I saw lots of people donate their money. Teachers, doctors, counselors, and other people went to Sichuan, trying to help people they don’t know.
When something special happened, strong bonds to strangers formed. Citizens suffering in the War, audiences in the Olympic Games, and survivors from an airplane crash... Or we even don’t need the occurrence of any special things. People can think about their own kids when they see others and thus had an instant feeling of emotional attachment; People can feel a strong connection to some roles in movies sometimes... So I just feel that the audience that we should consider about social capital should not be just restricted to the ones we know.

Questions:

Could the out-group antagonism increase the in-group intimacy or interdependence (that is bonding within a group)? If this is possible, then out-group antagonism may also increase social capital!