INVITED PAPER

How social media could teach us to be better citizens

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In 1995, social scientist Robert Putnam proposed a broad and wide-ranging critique of American civic life. (Putnam, 1995) Further developed in his influential book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), Putnam argued that America was experiencing a sustained decline in civic life, one that might spread to advanced democracies around the world. His argument was multifaceted: not only were Americans voting less, they were also participating less in voluntary organizations, in churches and religious organizations, in labor unions and work organizations. Charity, once a space for social engagement, was becoming a financial transaction, with mailing-list fueled "professional" charities supplanting local volunteering.

The overall result of these changes: less social capital. Putnam worried that the horizontal bonds of social connection - what sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) termed "weak ties" - would have less room to form in a society where we retreated from private spaces into our homes. In turn, we should expect our lives to become less resilient and more fragile. We would miss our weak, horizontal connections when we looked for a new job, for friends in a new city, or even seeking a kidney donor, a key example in Putnam's book.

Putnam's book struck a cultural nerve, influencing not only a cottage industry of academic studies to support or challenge Putnam's conclusions, but spawning at least one long-standing business: Meetup.com. Scott Heiferman, an internet advertising executive, was living in a building close to the World Trade Center during the 9/11 terror attacks, and met his neighbors for the first time on their roof as they watched the tragedy unfold. (Botsman, 2018) The experience of building real-world connections with his neighbors led him to Putnam's book, and to founding Meetup, an internet service focused solely on helping users make real-world connections around shared interests, meeting at coffee shops to talk about their corgis or their Casio keyboards. "The core idea was to figure out how to help people use the internet to get off the internet", Heiferman told reporters.

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More than two decades after the initial publication of Bowling Alone, some of Putnam's predictions have proved incorrect. Reviewing the book on the twentieth anniversary, Alexandra Hudson (2020) observes that some declines that concerned Putnam have slowed or even reversed. Voting in US presidential elections hit an all-time low in 1996, as Putnam was writing his book, but recovered significantly in subsequent decades, recently exceeding participation rates in the 1950s and 1960s, a time of civic engagement Putnam celebrates. Other declines have proved more lasting: participation in labor unions in the US has collapsed since the 1980s and continues to shrink, despite some high-profile organizing successes (American Presidency Project, 2016, https://usafacts.org/articles/labor-union-membership/); Americans who are unaffiliated with a church or organized religion continue to grow. (https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/ab out-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).

Hudson suggests that Putnam's observations of civic decline might reflect a change in how civic engagement takes place, rather than a collapse in civic and social capital: "Putnam's method, which might be summarized as assessing how America had changed since the early 1960s, tells a story of decline only if the American workplace of the 1960s was the ideal." Instead, we should consider the possibility that new institutions emerge, displacing those we've relied on in the past in a process she terms "civic churn":

> *"If we avoid treating the America of the mid-20th century as the norm and instead look at both the condition of long-standing social and civic institutions and the emergence of new ones, we would find that American society never stops innovating and experimenting with new forms of common action... This 'civic churn' - a term that describes the creative destruction of American civic institutions and activity - is nothing new. When Tocqueville traversed America examining our norms, institutions, and culture, the national benevolent associations and temperance societies he encountered were relatively new developments. Responding to social and demographic changes related to the increasing integration of the country as a single nation, these groups replaced older civic assemblies like craft guilds and town meetings."*

Perhaps the most transformative social change in the years since Putnam published Bowling Alone has been the widespread adoption of the internet as the underlying infrastructure for most of our social interactions. When Putnam gave the lecture that grew into Bowling Alone, there were less than 40 million internet users worldwide - the number had grown to 300 million globally by the time his book was published (Internet World Stats, 2022), but in 2000, the internet was still mostly a world of static websites and simple shopping portals. Facebook was not founded until 2004, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010. Now 72% of American adults use at least one social media site, and social media usage is even more pervasive for young adults, with 84% of Americans 18-29 using social media. Usage is particularly high in the US, where many of these platforms are based, but social media is used by the majority of EU citizens (57%), and many developing nations experience heavy social media use. In the Philippines, 73 million of the nation's 109 million people (67%) identify as active social media users (Pew 2021).

Putnam was aware that the growth of the internet could lead to significant civic shifts, noting, "No sector of American Society will have more influence on the future state of our social capital than the electronic mass media and especially the Internet" (Putnam, 2000, p. 410). Putnam was not convinced that digital communities would strengthen social capital. For him, the key question was whether social networks led to active participation:

> *"Let us find ways to ensure that by 2010 Americans will spend less leisure time sitting passively alone in front of glowing screens and more time in active connection with our fellow citizens" (ibid.).*

He urged software designers to "make the Internet social capital-friendly", hoping "technology can reinforce rather than supplant place-based, face-to-face, enduring networks."

The effects of the internet, and specifically social media, on civic life, or even just on social capital, would require a shelf full of books to examine fully. It's likely those books would disagree with each other as much as they agree. Reviews of literature on the Internet and social capital (Neves, 2013; Williams, 2019) find support for three different arguments: that online interactions have increased social capital, reduced social capital and that there's no relation between internet use and social capital. Press coverage warns of devastating effects on democratic society tied to political polarization and mis/disinformation on social networks. Broader scholarly works indicate that harms like polarization owe as much to broadcast and print media as to social networks (Benkler et al., 2018) and suggest skepticism about broad claims that social media is harmful for most individuals (Appel et al., 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019) As social media scholar Casey Fiesler puts it "Social media is good for a lot of people. Social media is bad for a lot of people. Both things can be true."

Perhaps it is helpful to focus on one specific aspect of civic life that Putnam saw as threatened by retreat from public spaces: civic learning. Putnam argued that

"associations and less formal networks of civic engagement instill in their members habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life" (Putnam, 2000, p. 410).

In other words, serving as the president for your local bowling league might serve as training for broader civic participation. The habits we learn from holding productive meetings, resolving disagreements between people working on a common venture, articulating our point of view and seeking common ground arguably are the skills we need to participate in a functioning democracy in ways deeper than giving to political candidates or casting votes.

Putnam relies on Alexis de Tocqueville, the celebrated observer of American civic life, to make the argument that these skills are learned, not inherited. Participation in associations transformed men, de Tocqueville believed: "feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another" (De Tocqueville, 1899). As a result, Putnam believes voluntary associations are "schools for democracy", where "Members learn how to run meetings, speak in public, write letters, organize projects, and debate public issues with civility" (Putnam, 2000, p. 338). Losing the associational life associated with spaces like the union hall and the social club likely has significance beyond the weakening of social fabric. Without this education in practical citizenship, individuals are less likely to learn the skills and capabilities they need to be efficacious citizens.

In 1954, Angus Campbell and colleagues theorized that political participation depended heavily on a citizen's sense of efficacy – if she felt her voice, vote or action was unlikely to make a difference, she would be less likely to participate in civic processes. George Balch refined the concept in 1974, distinguishing between "internal efficacy" – a sense that one possesses the skills and understanding to make civic contributions – and "external efficacy" – the sense that one's contributions will have influence on existing systems. The distinction is important especially as concerns marginalized populations – it is possible to have high internal efficacy as a trained civil rights advocate, but low external efficacy, facing a hostile and reactionary political climate. The social spaces Putnam celebrates likely increased both forms of efficacy: a member of the Elks' Club was likely both to improve his speaking and organizational skills, and to meet people in positions of local political power, increasing his practical civic influence. Indeed, the power of these social clubs – which often excluded women from membership – led to US Supreme Court challenges of their membership policies, arguing that women were damaged by not having access to the same influential networks men were admitted to. (Rotary Int'l v. Rotary Club of Duarte, 1987; Roberts v. US Jaycees, 1984).

Social media spaces provide ample opportunity for individuals to participate in conversations with one another, and these spaces tend to be less exclusive than the clubs Putnam celebrated. These conversations often have civic implications, sometimes centering around events in the news or public life, based on journalism shared on Facebook, Twitter and other networks. These conversations differ from those in physical shared spaces in several key ways, but one particular aspect deserves our attention here: in online spaces, we are very rarely in charge of making and enforcing the rules that govern our speech.

Facebook and other large social media platforms are, at best, "accidental" civic spaces. Their raison d'être is not to create spaces for civic conversation, but to capture information about user's psychographic preferences, used to resell their attention to advertisers in an economic model Shoshana Zuboff (2019) describes as "surveillance capitalism". While these spaces are routinely repurposed for civic purposes, they are governed by rules that rarely respect those needs: while using Facebook to organize the Tahrir Square protests that ultimately toppled Hosni Mubarak, Wael Ghonim routinely lost his ability to log into Facebook because he was operating the group under a pseudonym, counter for Facebook's policies (it is not hard to imagine why it might be helpful to use a false name while organizing a political revolution) (York, 2022).

Corporate accountability advocate Rebecca MacKinnon refers to platforms like Facebook as "internet monarchs", who make decisions about the rights of their users with absolute power and without meaningful checks and balances. Her 2012 book, *Consent of the Networked*, advocates for companies to issue a Magna Carta, a recognition of basic rights that citizens have even within a monarchy, a reference to the foundational political document establishing rights in the English monarchy. Unfortunately, in the decade since she raised that idea, very little accountability has actually emerged. Facebook has announced, with great fanfare, an advisory board that can review some of the company's content moderation decisions, either because users have appealed a decision, or because the company has referred the case for further consideration (given that 524,000 cases have been referred to the board, the company's selection of cases for consideration is likely to be very important) (Olson, 2021). For all the criticism Facebook's oversight has received (for a perceived lack of independence, for serving as a "fig leaf" for Facebook's opacity) (Ingram, 2020), many large platforms have done even less to make their moderation decisions visible to their userbase.

In the 1990s, as "user-generated content" – where users create their own content, hosted by a website that makes money by serving ads alongside user content - became a viable business model for websites, business leaders made a critical decision: they decided to treat moderation of content as a customer service task. I was one of these leaders, and I created our terms of service and the team that enforced them without entertaining the thought that my users should have a significant voice in crafting the rules for their online behavior. MySpace, Facebook and other subsequent social networks – the modern generation of user-generated content businesses – repeated the mistakes I and my peers made, and amplified the problem further. Seeking cost reductions, platforms outsourced content moderation to overburdened workers in low-wage nations, who make hundreds of content decisions a minute, following complex rules dictated from corporate headquarters. These workers often do not work for the platform companies themselves, but for contractors, and often have little agency in identifying rules that may be unclear or problematic (Gray & Suri, 2019).

In other words, I and others involved with designing the structure of contemporary social media mistakenly decided that content moderation should be a customer service problem. We missed a critical opportunity to make it a space for governance.

Consider an alternative model: the governance of forums on Reddit, commonly called "subreddits". Like Facebook, Reddit is an ad supported platform that hosts user-generated content. Unlike Facebook, most content moderation decisions are made by tens of thousands of volunteer moderators, who vastly outnumber the company's less than a thousand paid employees. Moderators put in dozens of hours a week to ensuring their communities within the rules they have set, sometimes holding polls to determine what rules the community wishes to set for itself. They work not because volunteer moderation is a path to a paid job, but because the work itself is satisfying. As Reddit moderator Robert Peck explains, "It's fulfilling to be needed and to be skilled. We don't own the site, but we consider its spaces ours" (Peck, 2019).

Peck and his comrades may not be getting paid, but they are likely gaining key civic skills. They are learning how to resolve conflicts online, to listen to the concerns of the people they govern, to apply rules fairly. In the case of subreddits that hold polls on governance issues or elect moderators, participants as well as moderators gain civic experience from participation. Research from the Civic Signals project suggests that frequent users of Reddit rated the platform more positively on questions of promoting inclusion, thoughtful conversations and sense of belonging than heavy users of other platforms rated the platforms they used on these metrics (Stroud & Pariser, 2021).

Without participation in the ways Reddit moderators are involved with governance of their communities, we may experience changes of mind or heart from encountering other views, but we do not gain the sorts of civic experiences we gained in the process of managing real-world civic spaces. In most online communities, we are not permitted to do the hard organizational work that Putnam and de Tocqueville rightly celebrated and we do not gain the associated skills in the process. Instead of engaging in the challenging work of determining what sorts of behavior are permissible in the spaces we belong to, and how we handle violations of those rules and norms, we are subjects of an opaque and distant regime. Existing social media teaches us how to be subjects, not civic actors.

There is another option: we could build and govern the spaces we use the most. Science fiction writer Naomi Novik has been deeply involved with the "fan fiction" community for decades. Fan fiction is the practice in which amateur authors extend works created by professional creators – a fan of Harry Potter, disappointed that JK Rowling wrote only seven books in the series, might write stories that extend and expand the characters and universe. Because fan fiction authors build on materials that are copyrighted and sometimes trademarked, user-generated content platforms are sometimes reluctant to host fan fiction material. Frustrated with arbitrary decisions by platforms that did not understand the culture of fan fiction, Novik and dozens of allies launched a new platform: An Archive of Our Own (Fiesler, 2016).

This new archive – commonly known as AO3 – was designed and programmed by fans, for fans, and now hosts over 9 million fan works, with almost five million registered users and more unregistered visitors. It is the centerpiece of a community organized around an association called the Organization for Transformative Works, which maintains a legal defense team for fans threatened with legal challenges, a peer-reviewed journal about fanworks, and other projects central to the community's needs. Participants in AO3 and OTW have gained experience in programming and design as well as organizational management and governance, and hundreds of activists and scholars of fandom have developed their competencies within the framework of the community. The decision to create a fan-led community produced not only one of the most successful examples of a purpose-build social network, but an inspiring and instructive social movement.

Not all communities will have millions of enthusiasts to draw from in building their own infrastructures. A new project in The Netherlands offers another model for community social networks. Pubhubs, launched by computer scientist Bart Jacobs and media scholar Jose van Dijck, builds small social networks around existing social institutions like primary schools, neighborhood football clubs, or local governments. Parents whose

children attend the same schools can easily create a social network where they can debate issues, plan events and cooperate, without participating in the surveillance economy that underlies an alternative platform like Facebook. While the project is currently charitably funded, Jacobs and van Dijck are both members of Public Spaces, a consortium of publicly funded Dutch organizations who are building open source alternatives to restrictive commercial software. It is possible that Pubhubs will become a core part of the infrastructure provided by social organizations like schools and clubs, a digital public infrastructure used to build and strengthen social ties (Monterie, 2021).

Pubhubs will be launched in early 2023, and it is not yet clear how communities will govern themselves. One option would be to include in the software a toolkit for democratic governance, like Policykit, created by Amy Zhang and colleagues (2020) at the University of Washington. Using Policykit, community leaders can hold elections and polls within a social platform, allowing platforms to move away from the benevolent dictator model and towards participatory governance (arguably, any online platform is subject to arbitrary control by whoever physically controls the webserver – she or he can always pull the plug on a project). By basing online communities in real-world communities that already practice some degree of self-governance, Pubhubs seems a likely platform to experiment with participatory online civic spaces and strengthening of civic skills through online engagement.

As scholars work to determine whether online platforms are negatively affecting democratic participation, and legislators propose legislation to limit misinformation and increase platform transparency, we should work towards another goal as well. We should shift our use of social platforms towards ones that communities own and govern. We should make this shift not just to limit the power and profits of existing internet monarchs. We should make this shift because participating in social networks we ourselves govern could turn online spaces into Putnam's "schools for democracy".

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