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## **The People Behind the Press: Building Social Capital in New Media Ecologies**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to introduce an original framework in which new media ecologies can be understood to develop. Specifically, it examines the unique, world-leading online ecology of South Korea, to suggest how new forms of democratic process and social organisation can be emulated elsewhere. The discussion identifies and analyses several policy and cultural factors to distil three encompassing variables that comprise a framework for understanding the Korean situation, and the application of new technologies: structure, ethos and activity. Ultimately, it is a framework that may be used to investigate social organisation mechanisms that may potentiate news media's role in democratic society. This concept of social organisation is constructed around the notion of social capital and theorised as an infrastructure for new news media models. In the outcome, it is argued that news media could themselves become civic socialization mechanisms that encourage a more active and engaged citizenry, reflecting social capital's strong relationship with political participation, and thus a continuing foundational role for journalism in democracy.

**Keywords:** Social capital, new media, South Korea, Information Communications Technology, networked news, pro-am, Asia-Pacific

## Introduction

News as a desideratum for democratic society represents a sustained and core research interest for disciplines concerned with liberty, equality and life opportunities. In the past decade, technological advancement in digital media has given rise to several challenges and opportunities to investigate and redefine the parameters of this discussion. While news media being a cornerstone of democracy is not a heterodox belief, the structures of production and largely the 'social contract' between professional news media and the public is open for conjecture. The digital revolution, more specifically uptake of Web 2.0 technology, has meant the financial and cultural capital required to publish has been drastically reduced, opening floodgates to a seemingly egalitarian news media (Klinenberg, 2005, p. 190; Usher, 2011, p. 265). This has raised concerns regarding the integrity of public discourses and political deliberation in a self-governing society, when such processes are informed by a news media where almost anyone could be a journalist (Calhoun, 1998; Gillmor, 2004; Tremayne, 2006).

This article pursues that line of research, and focuses on social organisation mechanisms in new media ecologies as a means to potentiate news media's role in democratic society. This concept of social organisation is constructed as social capital and theorised as an infrastructure for new media models. Specifically, the networked news model (a model that brings together members of the public to produce news with professional journalists) is examined for its potential to build social capital, and thus infrastructures that may support democratic processes. To actuate this approach, South Korea's online ecology, one considered to exhibit world-leading levels of social capital (Ok, 2011), will be examined to identify factors that contribute to social capital building.

First, a review of literature will be made to contextualise the dynamics in which new media developments have occurred. Second, the networked news model will be elaborated upon to distinguish its potential to allay aforementioned concerns about viability and integrity. Third, it will be established that the place of people behind such new media models is an underdeveloped area of the literature, and that the being and state of these participants can be conceptualised as social capital. Last, this article will identify and articulate factors that contribute to social capital building online, and posit networked news models as a means to facilitate such factors.

## **Journalism as a Cornerstone of the “New” World**

### **Journalism and the public sphere**

Political philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s first major book, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1991), explained the public sphere as a space in which the public body could engage in critical debate, with the purposes of regulating civil society (Habermas, 1991, p. 52) This notion dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century London coffeehouses where citizens, informed by the media, debated matters of public interest as equals (Habermas, 1991, p. 51) . In this way, journalism can be seen to enable a public sphere, as voting requires an informed citizenry (Fanuzzi, 2003; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956; Trinkle, 2002). However, Habermas argues the social contract between media and the public was compromised when the media became a commercial interest during the twentieth century (Habermas, 1991, p. 50) . Essentially, an ideological fault line formed between those who viewed journalism as a public service, and those who viewed it as a commodity. Furthermore, the past decade has seen these dynamics exacerbated with the proliferation of digital media and dispersing of advertising revenue. As Scott (2008, p. 11) suggests, in this highly fragmented media world, “commercial broadcasters will be less able to deliver ... valuable public services [such as] high quality news and current affairs...”. This notion of market failure in the digital age is a nebulous problem; as such an ethos marginalizes the possibility of enhanced civic engagement through Web 2.0 technology.

### **Web 2.0**

Web 2.0 is often characterised by push-publishing tools that “facilitate production and distribution of content produced by everyday people” (Stefanone, Kwon, & Lackaff, 2012, p. 451). As explained earlier, uptake of this technology means less “economic, social and cultural capital” is needed to publish (Klinenberg, 2005, p. 190), which leads to “decentralised forms of authority and control” (Briggs, 2007; Bruns, 2005, p. 8). Optimists for democratic or anti-capitalist interests claim to varying extents that these characteristics expiate mainstream media’s elitist tendencies towards privileging official and influential sources (Hall, 1978; Fisk cited in McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Though this may be, news produced by professional media has been observed to often drive the conversations in online communities, where content is disseminated or re-distributed rather than produced (Bruns, 2005; Perlmutter, 2007; Rodzvilla, 2002). For example, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and Press in 2009, as cited in Newkirk (2011),

comprehensively monitored the media ecology in Baltimore (a city considered to be highly wired), and found that 95% of original news stories were still produced by the professional news media. While this demonstrates a somewhat symbiotic relationship, this is a development that is draining resources from traditional journalism (Beckett, 2008; Meikle & Redden, 2011, p. 55). Ultimately, there are concerns about the viability of professional journalism in an age where anyone could publish (Gillmor, 2004; Tremayne, 2006).

### **The “New” Public Sphere and Knowledge Gap**

Overholser (2006, p. 20) sums up several issues by explicating a salient concern, that with the proliferation of digital media “we are not lacking for ways to deliver information ... what we are lacking, increasingly, is the particular kind of information that keeps free people free”. Overholser’s observations are apposite to the ensuing discussion, which transitions in focus from news media to the social dynamics of the online public sphere. As Rosen (cited in Clark & Slyke, 2011, p. 239) suggests, “the authority of the press to assume consensus, define deviance, and set the terms of legitimate debate is weaker when people can connect horizontally around and about the news”. This elucidates an increasingly emphasised role for citizens in media literacy, and evokes concerns raised by knowledge-gap theories.

The knowledge-gap hypothesis has been researched for the past 40 years, and observes that as mass media permeates a social system, certain segments of the population utilise and comprehend the media faster than other segments, which is usually representative of higher and lower socioeconomic status groups respectively (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970, p. 159). Hargittai (2005, p. 372) stresses the gravity of this observation, and explains that as vital services move online, in this case news delivery and consumption, populations with low digital literacy “will become increasingly disadvantaged in our digital world”. There is an extensive body of literature that covers this “digital inequality” (Hargittai, 2005, 2008; Selwyn, 2004; van Dijk, 2005) however the scope of this article concentrates on the notion that “different patterns of media usage [and] particular activities in which people engage online” influence people’s life chances (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009, p. 275). This form of “informational capitalism” (Preston, 2001, p. 272) is a crucible for new media models to overcome, ensuring engagement with these models encourages patterns of media usage that increase people’s life chances by way of building social capital.

## **Why Networked News Models?**

### **Definition**

Networked news models are founded upon the notion of professional and amateur collaboration, principally collaboration between professional journalists and citizens (amateurs) often mediated by Web 2.0 technology. Jeff Jarvis (2006) explains that the structures behind such models facilitate public engagement in the journalistic process, from inception to post-story updates, often with citizens eventually creating and reporting stories autonomously in this setting. This allows for more equitable coverage of events by professional journalists, which creates a two-step flow between the news produced and the construction of new angles via driving conversation in online communities (Perlmutter, 2007; Rodzvilla, 2002). This model addresses criticisms raised from Schudson's work (cited in McChesney & Pickard, 2011, p. 239) regarding the role news media may continue to play in perpetuating an exclusive public domain. Equally important is the view that Beckett (2008) puts forward, which suggests that sharing the news process with the public in this manner cultivates a relationship of "greater transparency and responsibility". Likewise, research has shown that audience participation increases understanding of the news (Bimber, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998). Such a model has the potential to revitalise journalism's social contract with the public and address its weakened authority to "assume consensus, and set the terms of legitimate debate" online (Rosen cited in Clark & Slyke, 2011, p. 239). Livingstone (2004, p. 11) sums up the benefits of participation and content creation as "crucial for the democratic agenda" because in the process users become citizens rather than mere consumers.

### **A case for further research**

While the premise of network news models may be persuasive, the work needed to enact and research their potential essentially remains to be done. A fundamental aspect of this field, which is integral to advancing the discussion, is the study of the social infrastructure supporting these models, which is the being or state of the participants in online communities (conceptualised as social capital in the latter sections of this article). As rational choice theorists assert, it may be more reasonable for individuals in a pluralistic democracy to "free-ride" on the efforts of others in political deliberations (Downs, 1957). Comparably, it is possible that those inclined to participate in networked news models may already be heavy users of other media, as is usually the case of those who seek political information online (Bimber, 2000). This possibility bears a semblance to the original knowledge-gap theory,

which focused on politically relevant knowledge; it attributed part of the gap to a lack of motivation among subsets of the population to overcome the information-cost of being informed in this manner (Ettema & Kline, 1977). This has severe ramifications for any professional-amateur collaborations, as public participation is based upon a perceived service or social good, as much as it is on the meagre pay or prospect of it (Beckett, 2008, p. 71).

Beckett (2008, p. 21) crystalizes this challenge as more than having to overcome a lack of motivation, and extrapolates it to be symptomatic of audiences losing a “whole culture of paying attention to conventional news”. If networked news models are to be developed in part to expiate this liminal news culture, renewed focus on cultivating a social infrastructure as much as a news service is needed. The potential for this can be observed historically, as previously the social context in which technologies penetrated society played a vital role in their uptake, use and development (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009, p. 287). Hargittai (2000, p. 327) explains that the Internet is a paragon of malleable technology, and represents a unique opportunity for those who want to shape its development. In the same way, the Internet’s ineluctable future as a dominant information aggregator highlights the potential for contextualising new news structures, such as the networked news model, as supportive, social capital building, and civically engaging activities. As Han (2007) explains, there is promise for this as the Internet shortens the “time in which social issues become part of the national agenda, especially among populations previously excluded from the national discourse”. To further understand how networked news models may achieve these objectives, it is necessary to focus on the social context of these outcomes, which is made accessible via social capital constructs.

## **Social Capital in New Media Ecologies**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social capital is often described in varying capacities as the “sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14). While research into social capital has gained widespread attention in the last decade, most conceptions and definitions can be traced back to the work of three scholars: Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993). For the purposes of this article, applied definitions and constructs in the online realm will be used, as a comprehensive discussion of the differences between each scholar’s application and theoretical development of social capital is beyond the scope of this article.



Mass communications literature uses contentment, interpersonal trust and participation as three dimensions for measuring social capital (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Additionally, key markers such as people's attitudes towards government and association with civic groups have concatenated theories in this field (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Initially, social capital was proposed as a framework to understand where collective action solutions emerged (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Subsequent proliferation of digital media saw the emergence of technologies thought to enhance social capital building activities, such as social networking sites (Resnick, 2001). Some believed the emergence of online communities would lower the cost of collective action and bring about profound change (Carpini, 2000). While findings in this respect are mixed, increased Internet use overall has been observed to improve community networks and activities, and have a positive effect on political participation (Gibson, Howard, & Ward, 2000). For this reason, political knowledge features heavily in analyses as an outcome of social capital (Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 2000), potentially providing a strong foundation for democracy. It is at this juncture that social capital becomes a pertinent framework for the network news model.

### **Social Capital as Social Infrastructure**

Putnam's work (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003) indicates the existence of a "virtuous circle" between social capital measures such as social trust, norms and networks, and participation efforts in one's community. In this way, Putnam (1995) popularized social capital as a way to understand how involvement in one's community cultivates compassion and responsibility that benefits civic functions in a reinforcing manner. This notion of social capital stands to be fundamental to the success of online communities as well, and consequently new media models that build upon these communities, such as the networked news model. Bruns' (2005) conception of web communities as a form of participatory media illustrates this point, as the participation required to keep the community alive can be interpreted as a function of users' inter-personal trust, civic engagement, and sense of responsibility to the community – all markers and measures of social capital. In turn, networked news models could become civic socialization mechanisms that encourage a more active and engaged citizenry, reflecting social capital's strong relationship with political participation, and thus journalism's foundational role in democracy (Putnam, 2000; Shah, et al., 2001).

However, Internet use alone does not guarantee higher levels of social capital (Zhao, 2006). Furthermore, the collective action dilemma raised by rational choice theorists suggests

there is a current lack of social infrastructure present online for networked news models to reach critical mass, as the incentive to “free-ride” on other’s participation may outweigh any additional benefits of participation (Ostrom, 1990, 2000). For example, past uptake of the Internet by young people in America (88% in 2006) did not necessarily result in significant increases of social capital (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006). While this may be the case, it is possible other underexplored factors may be at play, and so further research is needed to identify variables in social capital building. South Korea’s new media ecology presents a unique opportunity to explore this avenue of enquiry as it offers an alternative depiction of Internet use and high levels of social capital. Hauben (2007, p. 20) stresses this prospect by highlighting South Korea’s extensive broadband Internet access and “democratic ferment” as “an environment where such new institutional forms can be explored and lessons learned about their nature and the potential for crafting new democratic processes”. South Korea’s *OhmyNews* (a news service that is often considered the most successful citizen journalism operation worldwide), and its role in the country’s 2002 presidential election will be explored as a case study. By identifying contributing factors to the outcome variables of social capital in this setting, a framework can be established for the development of networked news models in building social capital.

## **The Case of South Korea**

### **Background to the 2002 presidential elections**

South Korea’s 2002 presidential election of Roh Moo-hyun was the first in the country’s history that could be directly linked to the netizen movement (citizens of the Internet). The election represented a struggle between the conservative press (consisting of three main newspapers amounting to a 70 per cent market share) and the discussion of netizens online (Hauben, 2007, p. 9). Prior to the election of Roh Moo-hyun, no politician had ‘won elections against the will of these papers [the conservative press]’ (Lee Eun-Jun cited in Hauben, 2007, p. 4). As this section will discuss, a key to Roh’s victory was an alternative public sphere online, inhabited by motivated supporters, which included a significant number of younger voters. An online newspaper, *OhmyNews*, complemented this online public sphere and provided valuable aggregation of the public discourse.

During the primary election, the major conservative press newspapers consistently carried articles that criticized “both implicitly and explicitly” candidate Roh Moo-hyun, who was considered to be outside the political mainstream (Yong-Ho, 2003, p. 148). As Hauben (2007, p. 9) explains, this sustained criticism was countered by a “broad discussion online of

the issues of the election” that utilised a variety of online forms, such as forums, social networks and online journalism. As Yong-Ho (2003, p. 235) elaborates, the Internet became an instrument that changed the political process for Roh and his supporters. This ideology was also evident in his campaign platform, which advocated citizen participation in democratic process, and was the basis for much of his popularity (Hauben, 2006). In addition to these dynamics, *OhmyNews*, an online newspaper launched early in 2000, was refining a form of participatory citizen journalism (akin to the networked news model), which played a vital role in the late stages of Roh’s campaign.

*OhmyNews* was started with the aim of addressing the power imbalance in South Korea’s media (Hauben, 2007; Oh, 2005). Oh Yeon-ho (2005, 70), journalist and founder of *OhmyNews*, explains how his service provided a needed complement to the mainstream press, giving Roh a 95 in newsworthiness, as opposed to the conservative newspapers’ rating of 30. This put *OhmyNews* in a unique position that proved to be crucial in the lead up to Election Day. Hauben (2007, p. 13) explains that at 22:30 the night before Election Day, Chung Mong-joon, previously a presidential candidate, withdrew his support of Roh. The conservative newspaper, *Cho-sun Ilbo* broke the story and urged voters to “follow Chung’s lead and withdraw their support from Roh” (Hauben, 2007, p. 13). *OhmyNews* followed the story closely and observed a flood of site visitors that rallied around Roh. As Oh (2005, 66) proposes, this support was more to do with a movement of young netizens wanting to be felt in mainstream politics. However, low turnout on voting day threatened Roh’s election (54.3 per cent at 3PM), as younger demographics often skipped voting; many netizens posted messages online that urged friends and family to vote, and “the message spread by the tens of thousands, playing a key role in Roh’s victory” (Deok-hyun, 2002).

### **Contributing factors: ideology**

There are a number of political, social and economic factors that contributed to the social capital necessary for the collective action solutions exhibited during Roh’s 2002 election. Since 1980, “technological modernization” and “informatization” have been imperatives of South Korea and were expected to bolster the “economy, national military power, and social well being” (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007). Hauben (2006) explains that in 1995, when America legislated to privatize its portions of the Internet, there was a commitment in South Korea to “prevent commercial colonialization” of the South Korean Internet. The Internet was viewed as an instrument with which to cultivate a healthy civic society with the aim of democratizing South Korea. People interested in the

“democratic potential” of the Internet joined newsgroups where “online communities developed and the experience was one that trained a generation in participatory online activity” (Kang cited in Hauben, 2006).

This historical context partially explicates the burgeoning online communities in present-day South Korea, where websites that host these communities often become more influential than “individual power-bloggers”, and in the face of social issues “quickly become sites for the public debate [accompanied] by new forms of political action, such as online petitions, cyber protests, and the relay of banners” (Ok, 2011, p. 325) . These sites are also home to a plethora of interest-driven online communities that provide avenues for “active knowledge building and informal learning motivated by diverse leisure activities” (Ok, 2011, p. 325). This incidental information-retrieving activity online is a strong indicator of social capital among young people when compared with their non-using counterparts (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). Ultimately, this participatory culture is reflected in *OhmyNews*’s ethos, as Oh (2004, p. 2) explains: “Every citizen is a reporter ... Journalists aren’t some exotic species, they’re everyone who seeks to take new developments put them into writing and share them with others”.

### **Contributing factors: technological investment**

South Korea is often cited as the most wired country in terms of broadband Internet connections (Yun, Lee, & Lim, 2002, p. 11). This is a result of sustained policy interest on behalf of the South Korean government to pursue an advanced national information structure. A plan to roll out a broadband network accompanied by “application software, computers, and information products and services” was established in the mid-1990s and was called the Korea Information Infrastructure (KII) (Yun, et al., 2002, p. 10). According to the Office of Economic Cooperation and Development (2001) in June 2001 South Korea’s broadband penetration was the highest among OECD countries, registering more than double the rate of the second-best performing country.

In 1997, when the Asian economic crisis hit, South Korea responded in part by investing heavily in the information technology industry, producing the “Cyber Korea 21” project in 1999. Yun et al. (2002, p. 9) details that the amount of “value added for the IT industry grew at an average annual rate of 18.9 percent from 1996 to 2000, exceeding the gross domestic product growth rate by a large margin”. Several adjunct industries also benefited from these policies, including South Korea’s gaming industry, and have subsequently become benchmark models for other countries such as China (Chung, 2008).

Evidence suggests this high quality technological infrastructure improved South Koreans' Internet experience, with users spending a high amount of time online compared to other nations in 2001 (Yun, et al., 2002, p. 13), a trend that is also observed in digital inequality literature. Relatedly, improved technological infrastructure online does not wholly alleviate digital inequalities.

### **Contributing factors: human capital investment**

South Korea's socio-political dynamics, prominently attitudes towards education, have also played a vital role in the social capital of their online ecology. Legislation enacted in 1997 pertaining to the integration of information communication technologies (ICTs) in the education system still remains effective, with a nationwide e-learning system in place as well (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2012; Selwyn, 2004; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). The apogee of this advanced policy transpired in 2000, when the government launched the "Ten Million People Internet Education", an Internet literacy program targeted at "housewives, the elderly, military personnel, farmers and excluded social sectors such as low-income families, the disabled, and even prisoners" (Yun, et al., 2002, p. 16). Yun et al. (2002, p. 16) describe the success of the program in generating the "nationwide Internet boom" with 3.4 million people learning Internet skills in 2000 alone. Policymakers' identification of the importance of Internet commitment on behalf of housewives for diffusion among households, demonstrates strategic, efficient policies, which have played an integral role in the cultivation of online ecologies for social capital and collective action exhibited in the previous case study (2002, p. 17).

## **Building Social Capital using Networked News Models**

### **Framework**

There are several factors that contributed to the unique online ecology present during Roh Moo-hyun's 2002 presidential election, which can be used to direct research and development of networked news models. These factors can be grouped into two main enabling categories: the availability of the technological infrastructure (in this case high-speed Internet networks), and the sociological context in which the infrastructure exists. Currently, the Australian government is constructing a national broadband network (NBN), which represents the country's largest infrastructure project ever to be undertaken (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2012). Australia is ranked 21<sup>st</sup> out of 34 OECD countries in terms of fixed broadband penetration (America is ranked 15<sup>th</sup>), and is one of the most expensive

countries for broadband (OECD 2012). According to the Australian government, the NBN will support the country in becoming one of the world's leading digital economies by 2020. This substantial investment ensures there will be competitive technological infrastructure present. However equally important is the sociological context where the future capacity lies to “develop applications that exploit the infrastructure in ways that are consistent with need in the local environment” (Yun, et al., 2002, p. 24).

This researcher distils three encompassing factors that are pertinent to the ability and construction of networked news models to build social capital: structure, ethos and activity. Considerable investment in the network structure (NBN) should be accompanied by research into the ideology underpinning use of the structure (ethos), as well as encouragement of capital enhancing activities (human, social and cultural). Networked news models represent a possible means to cultivate a more active citizenry by promoting Journalism's social responsibility ethos in dedicated online communities, and by encouraging social capital building activities through social networking, collaboration and participation online. However, this interdisciplinary approach constitutes an overlap between Journalism and Sociology fields that are both new and rapidly involving. Exploratory experimentation may provide an essential avenue to marry these research areas.

### **Experimentation for Future Research**

Social capital itself is still a relatively nebulous concept due to its rapid uptake and reappropriation by several disciplines in the last decade. What should be included in social capital measures and outcomes is often unclear when referencing the source literature. Critics claim Putnam and Coleman confuse sources of social capital with outcomes and facilitating factors (Ottebjør, 2005, p. 24). Causality ambiguities have persisted in consequent research (Brandtzag, 2012; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). As a result there is a lack of research that establishes causal inferences in social capital building. Pasek, More and Romer (2009, p. 210) suggest that a valuable contribution to the field would be experiments that compare social capital with changing patterns of Internet usage. This is because no other methodology “regularly matches the characteristics of causal relationships so well” (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 7). The design characteristics native to experimental methodology highlight the weakness of other methods, such as the cross-sectional or correlational study, where it is often unclear whether cause preceded effect, or even the longitudinal study, where alternate explanations for causes (extraneous variables) make inferring a causal relationship difficult.

It is hypothesised that a positive relationship can exist between participation in networked news and increasing levels of social capital. Exploratory experimentation is needed to construct and measure presumed variables that contribute to social capital levels in this setting, and as the framework posed earlier infers, will fall into the structure, ethos and activity of the operation. There is literature to also support that constructing an original news service for the purposes of instilling an ethos for experimentation may provide unique insights, as Pasek, More and Romer's (2009) research on website-specific culture avers that certain websites and platforms have an innate influence on social capital. Indeed, varying levels of social capital between social networking sites, such as Facebook and Myspace, lend support to this theory (Pasek, et al., 2009). Ultimately, experimentation in this field presents a means to catalogue and maximise the heuristic value of collaborative publishing start-ups worldwide, providing a wealth of needed data viable for meta-analysis.

News media must adapt as settings for the public sphere change. While evidence may not converge upon one clear adaption, there are clear indications that in order to aggregate public discourse for a self-governing society, future news media will have to be able to engage citizens, and be highly responsive to rapidly changing communication dynamics. The networked news model has the potential to do this, but only if it is developed to cultivate participation through social capital enhancing infrastructures.

A key definer for success in the information age will be the capacity of nations to anticipate the sociological context, as much as the potential of future information communications technology. At the core of social capital is the sense of belonging and purpose that is inherent in human nature – the desire to feel as if we are participants in the world around us. As more of the world's communicative action moves online, there will be an ineluctable shift in Internet users from observers to participants, and with this shift will come an increasingly important question for future researchers to ask: for what purpose?

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