Pew Internet & American Life

PROJECT

a project of the Tides Center

Online Communities:

How Americans Use
e-groups to Connect with Each Other—Across
Distance and Across Town
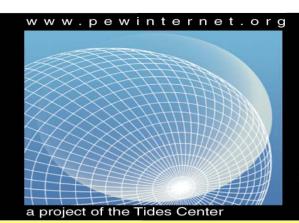
John B. Horrigan, Ph.D.

jhorrigan@pewinternet.org

202.557.3465

Pew Internet & American Life Project

Washington, D.C.

http://www.pewinternet.org

September, 2001

- Overview of presentation
  - Hopes & Fears
  - Designs
  - Evidence
  - Best Practice

Hopes & Fears

- Decline in community in the U.S.
  - "Bowling Alone"
  - Declining voter turnout
  - Declining membership in organizations like PTA
- Suburbanization, spatial fragmentation
- Main worry is that community is on a steady decline in the U.S. and little can be done to reverse the trend

Pew Internet & American Life
Project

Hopes & Fears

- Internet as new "public commons"
- Internet as a way to build *Social Capital*
  - The 'Net promotes social networks
  - Internet lowers transactions costs → improves efficiency of institutions, transforms institutions
- Internet lowers cost of democratic participation, promotes direct democracy

Designs

- People are taking specific steps to use the Internet to reverse the decline of community:
    - The rise of the Community Technology Activist, i.e., an advocate for community computing projects.
    - Creation of new institutions: community technology centers.
- Building community networks
    - National Public Telecomputing Network
    - Free Net: access and training
- Emphasis on putting geographical communities online

Pew Internet & American Life Project

Evidence

- Internet is being used as an associational tool in the United States.
  - 84% of all Internet users—we call them Cyber Groupie--have at one time gone to an online community.
  - 79% of Cyber Groupies say there is one group that they stay in touch with.
  - Cyber Groupies try different groups; on average, he has gone to 4 groups at one time.

- Types of groups:
  - *Cyber groups:* Trade/professional (21%), hobby (17%)
  - *Local groups:* Religious (29%), sports team (10%), neighborhood association (7%).

Evidence

- Online Communities promote the two C's
  - Chatter & connection
- 60% of all members of online groups email other members, 43% on weekly basis.
  - This means 28 million Americans are active in e-groups
- Half of all online community members say they have met new people via the group.
- Almost half (47%) say they feel connected to members of their online group.
- Online groups are *Virtual Third Places*

Pew Internet & American Life Project

Evidence

- The Internet draws people to online communities
  - 56% of members of online groups joined <u>after</u> they had first contacted the group via the Internet.
  - For online groups with local orientation, 20% of members joined <u>after</u> first contacting the group online.
  - Joiners of online groups are younger and more ethnically diverse.

- Online communities tend to attract young people
  - Young people go to online groups for fun, but then often come upon groups that have civic purposes

Pew Internet & American Life
Project

Internet, local government, and activism

- 52% of users say "yes" their city or town has a Web site, 12% "no", and 37% "don't know."
- 20% find local government Web site very useful, far less than that for main Cyber Group
- 51% say the Internet is publicly available in their community, most (42%) at libraries, 1% at Internet cafés.
- 11% know of a local issue where the Internet played a role in public deliberation.

Evidence

- The Internet & connecting to the local community
  - 9% find Internet most useful for getting involved in local community
  - 67% find it most useful things outside local community
- But there's lots of surfing for what's going on nearby
  - 35% of Internet users get local news online
  - 35% look for information on community events
  - 41% look for information on local stores
  - 30% look for information about local govt. or services.
  - 13% email public officials

Evidence from the Field:

Case studies of 5 U.S. cities: Austin TX, Cleveland OH, Portland OR, Nashville TN, Washington, DC

❑ Internet ⬅➡ social capital:

  ✓ Two way street—the Internet can shape social capital in cities and towns, but people in a community can shape the Internet.

- Internet as catalyst to social networking:
    – Community Development Corporations beginning to adopt "social network strategy" with Internet as driver.
    – Local entrepreneur networks—online and physical forums for stimulating idea creation

- Encourage the creation of local content
    – Community entrepreneurship
    – Web pages part of educational/job training programs

Recommendations for Best Practice

- Bottom-up initiatives
  - Community members demand access, not imposed from top-down by governments.

- Encourage individual catalysts
  - Media should showcase successful projects, advocates

- Public funding
  - Most community technology projects get state or federal financial support

- Encourage experimentation
  - No single model for successful community technology projects