# Summary of the Panel Session R-3
## "Open Forum: The Internet and Communities"

*Co-chairs: Goran Bubas, Faculty of Organization and Informatics, Varazdin, Croatia; John B. Horrigan, Pew Internet and American Life Project, Washington, USA (via Internet)*

Main worry in the US is that community is on a steady decline and that little can be done to reverse the trend. The Internet is viewed as a new "public commons" and a way to build social capital by promoting social networks, lowering transactions costs, and promoting direct democracy.

During the panel the statistical evidence was presented that Internet is being intensively used as an associational tool in the United States. In fact, as many as 84% of all Internet users have at one time gone to an online community and 79% of them say there is at least one online group that they stay in touch with. The types of online groups were also analyzed. Most Internet users connected to some global online group, while some also participated in local groups. It was found that people who belong to online groups are active in them, emailing other members frequently and often meeting other members face-to-face.

At least 1/3 of Internet users surf for what's going on nearby in the local environment. Case studies of 5 U.S. cities reveal that the Internet can shape social capital in cities and towns, but people in a community can also shape the Internet. The Internet is used as a catalyst of local social networking and the creation of local content is encouraged, as well as its use for community entrepreneurship. The recommendations for best practice in building local Internet communities were related to facilitation of bottom-up initiatives, encouragement of individual catalysts, public funding of projects, and support for experimentation in designing such community technology projects.

The discussion during the panel was related to how on-line community should be defined, the applicability of presented research findings to the situation in Croatia, and the causes of community decline in the U.S.

One of the surprising findings of the research of online communities in the U.S. was that their participants were unexpectedly heterogeneous considering their ethnicity and religion. Also, an important suggestion considering the development of local online communities in Croatia was that the needs of the local communities and potential users are assessed before creating the technical support and online content that the local community is provided with.

Related material (by John B. Horrigan, Pew Internet and American Life Project, Washington, USA):
- [Cities, Cyberspace, and Social Capital: How Five U.S. Cities Are Adapting to the Internet](#)
- [Online Communities:](#) The Internet's role in fostering e-groups and deepening people's ties in their local community
- [Online Communities:](#) How Americans Use e-groups to Connect with Each Other—Across Distance and Across Town (presentation)