

CHAPTER 9

Against the Tide? Small Groups, Social Movements, and the Net

NOT ALL ORGANIZATIONS in America have lost membership over the last quarter century, and not all personal relationships have atrophied. In this chapter we examine three important countertrends that must be weighed in any comprehensive balance of social capital. At one end of the spectrum of size, privacy, and informality is the plethora of encounter groups, reading groups, support groups, self-help groups, and the like that have become important anchors in the emotional and social lives of millions of Americans. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the succession of great social movements that swept across the land in the last third of the twentieth century, beginning with the black civil rights movement, followed by the student movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the abortion and right-to-life movements, the religious conservative movement, the environmental movement, the animal rights movement, and innumerable others. Finally, how is our story affected by the explosive growth in telecommunications in recent years, especially the Internet (or as it is fondly known among the cognoscenti, "computer-mediated communication," or CMC)? Could new "virtual communities" simply be replacing the old-fashioned physical communities in which our parents lived? In short, how do small groups, social movements, and telecommunications qualify our judgment about declining social connectedness and civic engagement?

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, the leading student of the small-group movement, reports that fully 40 percent of all Americans claim to be "cur-

rently involved in [a] small group that meets regularly and provides support or caring for those who participate in it." Roughly half of these groups are Sunday school classes, prayer fellowships, Bible study groups, and other church-related groups of the sort whose decline we discussed in chapter 4. On the other hand, nearly 5 percent of all the people with whom Wuthnow spoke claimed to participate regularly in a self-help group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or a local chapter of the Association for Retarded Citizens, and nearly as many said they belonged to book discussion groups and hobby clubs. Although Wuthnow's evidence represents only a single snapshot, he eloquently describes the small-group movement as a "quiet revolution" in American society, redefining community in a more fluid way, an antidote to social disconnectedness. Nearly two out of five members of such groups reported that other members had helped them out when someone was sick, three in five said that their group had extended help to someone outside the group, and four out of five agreed that the group made them "feel like you weren't alone."¹ Small groups like this surely represent an important stock of social capital. We earlier reflected on the strengths and limitations of religious forms of social connectedness in contemporary America. What about secular support and discussion groups?

Reading circles emerged as an important feature of middle-class American life in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the spread of education combined with the growth of leisure time. Then, as now, reading groups attracted predominantly women. In the first several decades after the Civil War participants concentrated on intellectual "self-improvement," but the groups also encouraged self-expression, intense friendship, and what a later generation would call "consciousness-raising." Their focus gradually widened from literary pursuits to encompass community service and civic betterment, as part of a quickening movement for social and political reform. By the turn of the century one newly elected president exclaimed to her group, "I have an important piece of news for you. Dante is dead. He has been dead for several centuries, and I think it is time that we dropped the study of *his* Inferno and turned our attention to our own." Another echoed, "We prefer Doing to Dante, Being to Browning. . . . We've soaked in literary effort long enough." From such groups in such moments were born the suffrage movement and numerous other civic-minded initiatives of the Progressive Era.²

Informal literary groups can be extremely long lived. One self-rejuvenating group of thirty-five in Fayetteville, Arkansas, for example, has met twice a month since 1926.³ Intense personal, intellectual, and occasionally even political bonds are forged in these lively discussions. Regular participants become more involved in wider community affairs as well, moving from Dante to Doing.⁴ In short, by converting a solitary intellectual activity (reading) into one that is social and even civic, discussion groups provide a fertile forcing bed for both *schmoozers* and *machers*.

Many observers believe that America is now in the midst of another boom in reading groups, much like the end of the previous century, and several grassroots organizations are striving to make it so.⁵ Sadly, evidence to support this hopeful view turns out to be hard to find. Although the numbers are a bit uncertain, it appears that as many Americans were involved in literary, artistic, and discussion groups in the 1960s and 1970s as in the late 1990s. In fact, since participation in such groups is heaviest among single women and college graduates, and since those categories encompass a higher portion of Americans today than three or four decades ago, it is somewhat surprising that the popularity of such groups has not blossomed more than it has. The proportion of single female college graduates who belong to a literary, artistic, study, or discussion group actually fell from one in three in 1974 to one in four in 1994. Our verdict on this form of small group must be mixed: such groups surely contribute to civic engagement and social capital, but there is little evidence that they have grown in numbers that would significantly offset the civic decay of the past several decades.⁶

By contrast, participation in self-help and support groups has unquestionably grown in recent years. The most common of these organizations are "twelve-step" groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (founded in 1935) and the more than 130 national analogues that have proliferated for other addictions, such as Gamblers Anonymous and Co-Dependents Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) itself claims roughly one million members in the United States, and its Al-Anon cousin for the family and friends of alcoholics counts another four hundred thousand members.⁷ Also relevant are the many support groups for victims of specific diseases or other problems, such as muscular dystrophy, AIDS, and single parenting. Finally there are commercially organized self-help groups, like Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, and some therapy groups. Firm numbers on all these groups are hard to come by, but one recent national survey found that 2 percent of all adults were currently active in some support or self-help group, and another comprehensive survey found a *lifetime* rate of usage of about 3 percent.⁸ (For some perspective, it is worth noting that all participants in self-help groups, newcomers and old-timers combined, are outnumbered two to one by the dropouts from league bowling over the last two decades, to say nothing of other, more "civic" forms of engagement.)

Self-help groups certainly provide emotional support and interpersonal ties that are invaluable to the participants. Wuthnow avers that "the small group movement is thus adding an important element to the way in which modern life is organized. It is extending the principles of formal organization into an arena of interpersonal life that was largely spontaneous and unorganized until very recently."⁹ Although some medical professionals still debate the advantages of this lay support versus professional therapy, in practice the two approaches are converging; one comprehensive study of self-help groups

in California found that more than 60 percent have professional leaders, blurring the line between self-help and group therapy. An increasing body of evidence suggests that support groups—and especially the interpersonal ties that they offer—provide measurable health and emotional benefits to many participants.¹⁰

In some respects support groups substitute for other intimate ties that have been weakened in our fragmented society, serving people who are disconnected from more conventional social networks. For example, the rate of participation in such groups is two to four times higher among divorced and single people than among married people. In their sympathetic overview of self-help groups, Alfred H. Katz and Eugene I. Bender ask us to recognize that “to be physically handicapped, poor, a former mental patient, or an object of exploitation or social disapproval is an identity that society forces on many unwilling ‘deviants.’ . . . We see self-help groups as vehicles through which these outcast persons can claim and grow toward new identities, redefining themselves and society; can overcome solitariness through identification with a reference group; and sometimes can work toward social ends or social change that they see as important.”¹¹

The growth of these groups reflects the application of social capital remedies to a set of previously neglected problems. Gay support groups, the Association for Retarded Citizens, and overweight people’s support groups bring problems hitherto dealt with in isolation into a communal forum. Just as AA helped recast alcoholism as a social problem needing social and spiritual remedies, these newer support groups bring what were thought to be private problems into the public realm. Thus support groups serve an important range of needs for many people who might otherwise lack access to social capital.

In some cases, such groups also come to pursue broader civic goals. Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Association for Retarded Citizens illustrate the range of public purposes and activities that have emerged from this sector of American life.¹² On the other hand, self-help and support groups do not typically play the same role as traditional civic associations. Alone among twenty-two different sorts of groups to which Americans belong, membership in self-help groups is completely unrelated to any other form of group affiliation. Self-help groups are not nearly so closely associated with regular community involvement such as voting, volunteering, giving to charity, working on community problems, or talking with neighbors, as are more traditional civic associations, such as religious, youth, neighborhood, school service, fraternal, and service groups.¹³ As Robert Wuthnow emphasizes,

[T]he kind of community [these small groups] create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional

states of the individual. . . . The communities they create are seldom frail. People feel cared for. They help one another. They share their intimate problems. . . . But in another sense small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as many of their proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied. . . . We can imagine that [these small groups] really substitute for families, neighborhoods, and broader community attachments that may demand lifelong commitments, when, in fact, they do not.¹⁴

IF THE LINKAGE OF SMALL GROUPS to public life is sometimes tenuous and hard to detect, the comparable connection for social movements is omnipresent. Although all social movements have historical roots, and nearly all epochs witness grassroots organization for social change, the sixties was without doubt the most portentous decade in the twentieth century from the perspective of grassroots social change. Beginning with the successes of the black civil rights movement, wave after wave of popular mobilization swelled and crested in the ensuing years—from the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley in 1964 to the Vietnam protests in Chicago in 1968 and then in Washington, D.C., and hundreds of other towns and cities in the 1970s, from the Stonewall Inn uprising for gay rights in 1969 to the mass demonstrations for environmental quality on Earth Day 1970, from anguished debates about women's liberation in boardrooms and bedrooms across the country throughout the 1970s to the massive and widespread demonstrations for and against abortion during the 1980s.¹⁵

The social activism of the sixties greatly expanded the repertoire of readily available and legitimate forms of civic engagement. Boycotts that began with blacks and buses in Alabama were then applied by farmworkers to grapes in California, abortion advocates to pizza in Michigan, and upholders of traditional family values to amusement parks in Florida. Protest marches that once outraged authorities in scores of local communities became so routine that police and demonstrators became joint choreographers. Segments of the American population, on both the Left and the Right, who had been quiescent or silently suppressed, suddenly felt empowered and plunged into public life. Standing at the close of the century, it is virtually impossible to overstate the impact of these social movements on the lives of most American communities and most American citizens. In our most private moments, as in our most public ones, our behavior and our values bear the imprint of those movements.¹⁶

Social movements and social capital are so closely connected that it is sometimes hard to see which is chicken and which egg. Social networks are the quintessential resource of movement organizers. Reading groups became

sinews of the suffrage movement. Friendship networks, not environmental sympathies, accounted for which Pennsylvanians became involved in grassroots protest after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident. Social ties more than ideals or self-interest explain who was recruited to Freedom Summer, a climactic moment in the civil rights movement. Local church connections account for the solidarity that underlies the Christian Coalition.¹⁷ Precisely because social capital is essential for social movements, its erosion could shroud their prospects for the future.

Social movements also *create* social capital, by fostering new identities and extending social networks.¹⁸ Not only did preexisting interpersonal ties bring volunteers to Mississippi to participate in Freedom Summer, but the annealing heat of that tumultuous summer forged lifelong identities and solidarities. "Mississippi exposed them to a way of life and a vision of community that most of the volunteers found enormously appealing," reports Doug McAdam, collective biographer of the volunteers, and they carried that vision with them into the student movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and many more. Moreover, "the volunteers left Mississippi not only more disposed toward more activism, but in a better structural position, by virtue of their links to one another, to act on these inclinations." As sociologist Kenneth Andrews has shown, the community infrastructure generated by the Mississippi civil rights movement in the early 1960s had an impact on local African American political power for decades to come.¹⁹

Whether among gays marching in San Francisco or evangelicals praying together on the Mall or, in an earlier era, autoworkers downing tools in Flint, the act of collective protest itself creates enduring bonds of solidarity. Ironically, many now domesticated sing-along favorites have their origins in highly contentious social movements: "Oh! Susanna!," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "We shall overcome," "Blowin' in the Wind." Collective protest strengthens shared identity, certainly for the participants and sometimes for their heirs, "anchoring individuals in participatory cultures."²⁰ In short, social movements with grassroots involvement both embody and produce social capital.

Whether national "social movement organizations"—from Greenpeace to the Moral Majority—do so as well is another matter. Even sympathetic commentators on the maturing movements of the sixties, like sociologist Margit Mayer, have observed that their organizational legacy was often Washington-based, full-time, professional, staff-run organizations, with "social entrepreneurs" cultivating comfortable conscience constituencies and "concentrat[ing] on manipulating the mass media so as to influence public opinion and to generate elite responses and policy changes."²¹ Indeed, sociologist John McCarthy has argued that professional social movement organizations arise precisely as a response to a "social infrastructural deficit"—that is, cases in which "widespread sentiment exists favoring or opposing a social change, but the lack of available infrastructures inhibits the mobilization of the sentiment."²²

McCarthy points out that although pro-choice and pro-life positions both garner substantial support in opinion polls, the two movements are structured quite differently. The pro-life movement rests on thousands of church-based grassroots organizations and can efficiently mobilize its supporters for direct action on the basis of those preexisting social networks. To take a single example, in 1993 the National Right to Life Committee claimed 13 million members and 7,000 local chapters. By contrast, the pro-choice movement (particularly with the demise in the 1980s of the organized grassroots women's liberation movement) lacks a preexisting social infrastructure and therefore must rely more heavily on national advocacy organizations, using the technology of direct mail, telemarketing, media campaigns, and the like.²³ Membership in the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, for example, more than tripled from 132,000 in 1989 to nearly 500,000 in 1996, but within two years membership had plunged to 190,000, of whom state leaders estimated that only about 3–5 percent had done more than write a check.²⁴ Such volatility in membership is emblematic of affiliation based on symbolic identification rather than on personal networks. As sociologist Debra Minkoff correctly observes, "In the absence of the opportunity or resources to establish face-to-face interactions, such symbolic affiliation may be the only available mobilizing structure that can link isolated individuals."²⁵ However, we should not mistake symbolic ties for personal ones.

Neither of these approaches—what political consultants sometimes label the "ground war" strategy and the "air war" strategy—is politically or morally superior. Rather, they are adapted to different resource endowments. The pro-life ground war (like the civil rights ground war before it) is adapted for a "social capital rich" environment with dense preexisting social networks of reciprocity, while the pro-choice air war is adapted to a "social capital poor" environment. In the latter case, the existence of a well-developed national social movement organization using "air war" techniques is a sign not of the presence of grassroots engagement, but of its absence.

BY COMMON CONSENT, the sixties (and early seventies) was a period of uncommon social and political mobilization. What was the historical significance of this period and what was to be its sequel? Did the movements of those years represent the cresting of a long wave of rising civic involvement—indeed, the very same upwelling whose conventional contours we traced in earlier chapters? And did this cycle of protest then recede, leaving behind it only professionalized and bureaucratized interest groups, still bearing the banners of social movements but deployed now as a defensive light air force, not a massed infantry for change? Is all that remains of that proud period of deepened citizenship now captured by the camp bumper sticker—"Nuke the gay whales for Jesus"? Or instead did the sixties produce a durable and more advanced reper-

toire of civic engagement, leaving as its legacy many rich new forms of connectedness, a "movement society" in which "elite challenging" behavior becomes perpetual, conventional, routinely deployed by advocates of many different causes?²⁶ In short, did the sixties mark the birth of an era or merely the climax of one?

This question is surprisingly difficult to answer rigorously. Perhaps because most of the best academic research of the last two decades has been produced by children of the sixties, much of it takes for granted that a new era of expanded participation dawned in 1968. To be sure, case studies of specific movements sometimes describe backlash, weakening, retreat, even quietism. Most social historians, for example, agree that as an organized, grassroots effort, the civil rights movement was receding by 1970, and the women's movement began to decline with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982.²⁷ By contrast, most studies of the environmental movement tout its continuing ability to rouse millions of Americans to civic activity.

The development of the American environmental movement over the last four decades of the twentieth century provides instructive insights into the fate of the social movements of the 1960s. Although a number of important grassroots conservation organizations, such as the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society (NAS), were founded at the turn of the twentieth century, the modern era of environmentalism began during the 1960s and was punctuated by the exclamation point of Earth Day 1970, celebrated by a reported twenty million participants across the country. With the ensuing acceptance of environmentalism in Washington and then the onset of the energy crisis, membership growth of the movement itself lagged during the 1970s, but under the threat to environmental gains posed by the Reagan administration, the movement rebounded during the 1980s. By 1990, according to one estimate, the environmental movement counted more than ten thousand organizations nationwide.²⁸

Over these four decades, as figure 43 shows, membership in national environmental organizations exploded.²⁹ Membership in the major organizations rose from about 125,000 in 1960 to 1 million in 1970, then doubled to 2 million in 1980 and more than tripled again to 6.5 million in 1990. Although growth slowed substantially in the 1990s, in quantitative terms this remains a remarkable organizational success story rivaling, for example, the PTA from the 1930s to the 1960s. This remarkable boom led some enthusiastic observers to speak of "participatory environmentalism."

Greenpeace illustrates the development in a nutshell. Founded in 1972, it tripled its membership in barely five years from 800,000 in 1985 to 2,350,000 in 1990, bounding past rival groups that had dwarfed it a decade before and becoming by far the largest U.S. environmental organization, more than twice as big as its nearest competitor, the National Wildlife Federation. This phenomenal growth in environmental organizations occurred precisely in the period in

which many other civic organizations were withering, and even the women's movement had wilted. At first blush, figure 43 seems strong evidence that the last several decades have witnessed, *not* a general decline in civic engagement, but merely a reorientation from "old-fashioned" to "contemporary" affiliations, away from Rotary and the League of Women Voters to Greenpeace and the Sierra Club.

Unfortunately, in the main this ebullient growth swelled the mailing lists of what we earlier termed "tertiary" organizations—that is, organizations in which "membership" is essentially an honorific rhetorical device for fundraising. Affiliation with Greenpeace (and its peers elsewhere on the ideological spectrum) does not represent the sort of interpersonal solidarity and intense civic commitment that brought millions of students, African Americans, gays and lesbians, peace activists, and right-to-lifers to thousands of marches and rallies and sit-ins as part of the social movements of the sixties and seventies. The crucial innovation that explains the trend in figure 43 is not a deeper civic consciousness, but direct mail.

In 1965 the National Audubon Society mailed one million invitations to membership, an extraordinary number for an organization that then counted fewer than fifty thousand members. Within six years its postage bill had doubled, as Audubon headquarters sent out two million letters in 1971. By then, with the stimulus of direct mail boosting growth to almost 25 percent a year,

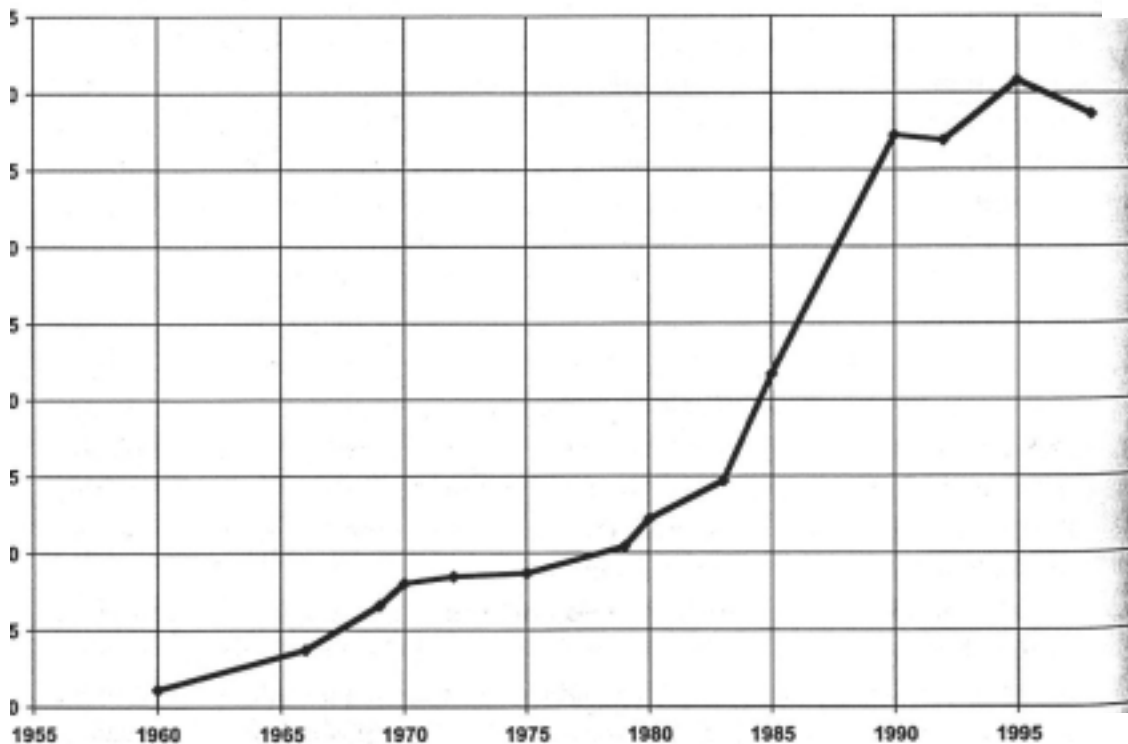


Figure 43: Explosive Growth of National Environmental Organizations, 1960-1998

Audubon membership had ballooned to more than two hundred thousand. The technique spread across the spectrum of environmental associations, and by 1990 Greenpeace was mailing out forty-eight million letters annually.³⁰

Virtually all the major American environmental groups (as well as dozens of smaller organizations dedicated to "charismatic" animals, like the Mountain Lion Foundation, Save the Manatee, and Pheasants Forever) are addicted to direct mail as a tool of mobilization and membership retention.³¹ Indeed, the few national environmental organizations, such as the Izaak Walton League, that have forsworn direct mail have experienced no growth whatsoever over the last thirty years. In 1960 the Izaak Walton League, for example, had 51,000 members, as compared with 15,000 for the Sierra Club. By 1990, after three decades of direct-mail growth hormones, Sierra Club membership stood at 560,000, as compared with 50,000 for the Izaak Walton League.³²

Direct mail serves multiple purposes. The leading academic expert on environmental fund-raising, Christopher Bosso, says that "direct mail has been a lucrative, relatively low cost way to educate the public about both an issue and a group; it lowers the cost of individual participation to just writing a check." Whether the technique is "low cost" for the organization depends on how we do the accounting. Typically these organizations allocate 20–30 percent of their budget to fund-raising and associated advertising.³³ Typically, too, the rate of return is 1 percent to 3 percent, depending on how well the mailing list has been chosen. Adding a "front-end" or "back-end" premium can double the rate of return. Once signed up, new "members" have a loyal organizational pen pal, for the average environmental organization requests money from its "members" nine times a year. (Fair is fair: eight of every nine direct mail appeals from non-profit organizations are thrown away unopened.)³⁴ Typically the dropout rate after the first year is 30 percent, although in some cases (like Common Cause in the 1980s) dropout can exceed 50 percent.³⁵ On the other hand, members who stay past the first year are more reliable sources of revenue. As one environmental strategist said, "We know what it costs us to bring in a member; we know we lose money to bring people in, [but] it is an investment program."

Recruiting "members" (actually, "donors" or "supporters" would be a more accurate term) has become an exact science. "We know how many new people we have to bring in each year," explained one membership director. "A large percentage are from direct mail. We are trying to get away from mailing so many pieces, but right now it is the most effective way to bring in new members." Added another, "We have a certain amount of attrition . . . and we have a certain amount of desired growth, and based on our response rate we have to mail that number of pieces to maintain our membership level and growth rate." A third wrote me with disarming candor, "Although our membership is not declining, it is becoming increasingly more challenging to bring in new members at an affordable cost per donor. . . . Whoever finds a new niche market is the winner!!!"³⁶

As one might expect from this process of recruiting “members,” organizational commitment is low. Compared with members recruited through face-to-face social networks (including recipients of gift memberships from friends and relatives), direct-mail recruits drop out more readily, participate in fewer activities, and feel less attachment to the group. Direct-mail recruits also hold more extreme and intolerant political views than members recruited through social networks.³⁷ It is thus perhaps less surprising that Greenpeace, which had tripled in membership to 2,350,000 between 1985 and 1990, then *lost 85 percent of its members in the next eight years.*

By contrast, *none* of the “old-fashioned” chapter-based organizations that attained record membership after World War II and whose travails we summarized in figure 8 lost as much as 85 percent of its membership in the *three or four decades* from its postwar peak to the end of the century.³⁸ The reason is obvious and yet crucial in understanding the difference between the older and newer organizational types: Members of the Moose Club or Hadassah are joined to the organization not merely by symbolic ties, but by real ties to real people—that is, by social capital. Members of the local American Legion post are kept there, not mainly by patriotism or by a desire to lobby for more funds for the Veterans Administration, but by long-standing personal ties among the guys. The tensile strength of the newer organizations is much weaker. As Christopher Bosso concludes, supporters of mail-order organizations are less “members” than “consumers” of a cause. “The sharp decline in Greenpeace’s numbers in the 1990s may reflect a market axiom that today’s hot product is tomorrow’s remaindered bin.”³⁹

Most affiliates of tertiary associations do not even consider themselves “members.” More than half of Environmental Defense Fund “members” say that “I don’t really think of myself as a member; the money I send is just a contribution.” Another survey of “members” of five top environmental organizations found that they averaged less than three years’ affiliation, that more than half were affiliated with four or more such groups, and that only 8 percent described themselves as “active,” all of which is consistent with a purely “check-book affiliation.”⁴⁰ (The remarkable overlap in membership among different groups is due, of course, to direct-mail recruitment, since the groups are prospecting from the same mailing lists.) They are valued supporters and genuine rooters for environmentalism as a good cause, but they are not themselves active in the cause.⁴¹ They don’t see themselves as movement foot soldiers in any sense like the young African Americans who sat in lunch counters in Greensboro in 1960, and neither should we.

Minimal commitment among mail-order members is hardly unique to environmental groups. For example, only one out of five Common Cause members said that they would like to be more active in the group, if given an opportunity. Membership in the National Rifle Association tripled between 1977 and 1996—despite (or because of) a national trend in favor of gun con-

trol—but the annual renewal rate of NRA members is barely 25 percent.⁴² Scarcely half of the “members” of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) describe themselves as members. Three-quarters of NARAL affiliates have no idea how many of their friends are also members, and two-thirds have never encouraged friends to join. As sociologist John McCarthy, who conducted these polls, concluded, the results “strongly suggest that [NARAL members] did not talk with their friends about membership in the organization.”⁴³ And indeed, why should they, if they think of themselves as fans, not players?

It is sometimes suggested that members of groups like Greenpeace are engaged in “proxy” political participation.⁴⁴ In fact, neither the groups’ leaders nor the members see the group as a vehicle for participatory democracy. Barely one in every five members of Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International say that “being politically active” is an important reason why they joined.⁴⁵ As two close students of tertiary groups conclude,

Mail-order groups permit a form of political participation which can be labeled cheap participation. For a cost below the threshold of serious analysis by the relatively affluent potential member, they can make a political statement of preference, without engaging in the costs (time and money) of “real” participation. . . . It is the casual nature of the engagement rather than subsequent disillusionment that accounts for turnover.⁴⁶

Even early observers of the sixties raised questions about how truly participatory those movements had become. In their classic analysis in the early 1970s, sociologists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald emphasized that “the functions historically served by a social movement membership base have been . . . increasingly taken over by paid functionaries, by the ‘bureaucratization of social discontent,’ by mass promotion campaigns, by full-time employees whose professional careers are defined in terms of social movement participation, by philanthropic foundations, and by government itself.” By the 1990s, political scientist Ronald Shaiko reported, “The era of flannel-shirted, ‘Flower Power’ antiestablishmentarianism has virtually vanished. Today . . . public interest organizations are hiring economists, Ivy League lawyers, management consultants, direct mail specialists, and communications directors.”⁴⁷

Some critics object to the new tertiary organizations as oligarchic and unresponsive, a product of political betrayal or “selling out.” That is not my view. On the contrary, as political scientist Christopher Bosso explains, “The major environmental groups in fact are playing roles that one expects of mature organizations within a political context that forces groups to grow and professionalize or die.”⁴⁸ Competition for dues makes tertiary organizations sensitive to their constituents, and those that fail to win support die. Moreover, traditional

civic organizations had important oligarchic features. Robert Michels's famous "iron law of oligarchy," after all, was coined to describe organizations with active grassroots affiliates.⁴⁹ My argument is not that direct-mail organizations are morally evil or politically ineffective. It may be more efficient technically for us to hire other people to act for us politically. However, such organizations provide neither connectedness among members nor direct engagement in civic give-and-take, and they certainly do not represent "participatory democracy." Citizenship by proxy is an oxymoron.

Only two or three of the dozen or so major environmental organizations whose massive membership growth is charted in figure 43 have any local chapters at all. As the membership director of one explained wearily when we asked about membership activities, "*Membership* simply means that you gave us some money at least once in the last two years." Even where a formal structure of state and local chapters exists, it has atrophied. A 1989 membership survey by the Sierra Club itself found that although its members were much more active politically than the average American, only 13 percent had ever attended even a single Sierra Club meeting. The National Audubon Society claims hundreds of chapters nationwide, but of the twenty-eight thousand NAS members in Texas, for example, state officials of the organization estimate that only 3–4 percent are active. In other words, fewer than one Texan in fifteen thousand is active in the one environmental organization with the sturdiest surviving local structure. By comparison, *every week twenty times as many* Texans gather for lunch at "old-fashioned" Rotary clubs.⁵⁰

Close observers of the environmental movement claim that "a fundamental change in environmentalism since 1970 has been a rapid increase in the number and prominence of *grassroots* organizations."⁵¹ At least on the surface, public support for environmentalism seems strong, although it weakened noticeably as the twentieth century ended. By 1990 three-quarters of Americans told the Gallup poll that we considered ourselves "environmentalists," although this figure fell sharply and steadily during the 1990s, so that by the end of the decade the number of self-declared environmentalists had fallen by one-third to only 50 percent.⁵² More than 60 percent of us claim that we often make a special effort to recycle, half claim to have given money to an environmental group in the past five years, 30 percent claim to have signed a petition about an environmental issue, 10 percent claim to be a member of a proenvironmental group, and 3 percent claim to have taken part in an environmental protest or demonstration.⁵³

There is, however, some reason to believe that these estimates may be exaggerated. Although local groups seem to have become more numerous on issues like toxic waste and land conservation in recent years, I have been able to find no hard evidence that grassroots environmentalism in general has grown. In fact, the only systematic evidence I have found on trends in conservation and environmental organizations at the state and local level and on en-

vironmental activism tends to suggest a *decline* over the last several decades. For example, according to annual surveys by Yankelovich Partners, the fraction of Americans who agreed that "I'm concerned about what I myself can do to protect our environment and natural resources" rose unevenly from 50 percent in 1981 to 55 percent in 1990–92 and then fell steadily to 40 percent in 1999, the lowest recording on that barometer in nearly two decades.⁵⁴ The gentlest verdict on the claim of growing grassroots environmental activism is "not proved."

If the evidence for grassroots involvement in "progressive" social movements is weak, the comparable evidence for grassroots vitality among religious conservatives is much stronger. In the 1950s and 1960s McCarthyism, the John Birch Society, White Citizens' councils, and the Wallace presidential campaign represented mass-based conservative, anti-Communist, and segregationist movements, but each of those groups mobilized at most several hundred thousand participants and many fewer activists. In the 1970s, riding a wave of religious fundamentalism, the Christian Right emerged as a political force, but organizationally it consisted of a few centralized national direct-mail operations, particularly the Moral Majority headed by Jerry Falwell. However, the 1980s saw the formation of several genuinely grassroots conservative evangelical organizations, ranging from the violently antiabortion Operation Rescue to the more mainstream Christian Coalition, headed by Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed, and the nominally apolitical Promise-Keepers. The Christian Coalition and Promise-Keepers each claimed several million active participants, an order of magnitude larger than any previous mass-based conservative movement in the twentieth century. The fate of these specific organizations, each founded less than a decade ago, is uncertain. What they (and other, smaller religiously based organizations of both the Left and Right) signify, however, is much more important—the appearance of a substantial cadre of highly motivated citizen-activists.⁵⁵

As part of the religious boom in America after World War II, the center of gravity of Protestant evangelicalism gradually moved from the rural and socially peripheral fringes of fundamentalism toward middle-class suburban communities. Membership in denominations associated with the National Association of Evangelicals (the evangelical equivalent of the mainstream National Council of Churches) more than tripled from the 1940s to 1970s, and as we saw earlier, evangelical churches have been hit less hard by the subsequent decline in religious observance.⁵⁶ More important, the traditional repugnance of fundamentalism for political involvement was gradually reversed.

Prior to 1974, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow has pointed out, most studies found evangelicals less disposed to political participation than other Americans—less likely to vote, to join political groups, to write to public officials, and to favor religious involvement in politics. After 1974, by contrast, most studies have found them *more* involved politically than other Americans.⁵⁷ This his-

toric change is due in part to the expansion of evangelicalism into social strata more accustomed to political participation, but also evangelicalism itself has become more sympathetic to civic engagement. As Christian Smith, author of the most recent study of evangelical involvement in public life, has observed, "Which Christian tradition is actually doing the work of trying to influence American society? It is the evangelicals who are most walking their talk."⁵⁸

This important change in the social bases of American politics aptly illustrates how social capital, civic engagement, and social movements feed on one another. In part, the political mobilization of evangelicals illustrates the effects of new issues (abortion, sexual morality, "family values"), new techniques (television and other instruments of contemporary political organizing), and a new generation of political entrepreneurs. On the other hand, unlike other newly mobilized groups, such as environmentalists, firm and enduring organizational foundations for the politicization of the evangelical community already existed. As several close observers of the new evangelical activism have noted, "Religious people are enmeshed in webs of local churches, channels of religious information, and networks of religious associations that make them readily available for mobilization."⁵⁹ So this social movement is both drawing on and replenishing stocks of social capital in at least one portion of American society.

In some respects, evangelical activists look very much like other activists in America—older, whiter, more educated, more affluent—but religion is extraordinarily important in their lives. Of one national sample of religious activists, 60 to 70 percent attended church *more than once a week*, compared with less than 5 percent of other Americans. And in a development that would have astounded and probably appalled their fundamentalist forebears, they are three to five times more active than the average American in virtually all forms of civic and political life.⁶⁰

In the 1996 election evangelicals were more than twice as likely as other Americans to discuss the election in church with a friend and to be contacted by a religious interest group. They were, in fact, more likely to be contacted about the campaign by religious groups than by parties or candidates. The most important predictor of this contact was neither demography nor theology, but simply social engagement in the religious community. And these religious contacts—especially talking politics in church with a friend—had a demonstrable impact on who voted and for whom. The link between involvement in the church community and political mobilization was powerful and direct.⁶¹ Religious conservatives have created the largest, best-organized grassroots social movement of the last quarter century. It is, in short, among evangelical Christians, rather than among the ideological heirs of the sixties, that we find the strongest evidence of an upwelling of civic engagement against the ebb tide described in earlier chapters.

What of the broader hypothesis that modes of "elite-challenging" partici-

pation introduced by the social movements of the sixties are now conventional across the political spectrum? One measure seems to support this hypothesis, for popular initiatives and referenda came to play a bigger role in politics in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, as figure 44 shows, the frequency of statewide ballot initiatives over the twentieth century is the mirror image of virtually all the other trends in civic engagement we have explored—*falling* from the first decade of the century until the late 1960s (except for a *rise* during the Great Depression), then skyrocketing in the last third of the century.⁶² According to some political rhetoric, this rise of ballot initiatives is an institutionalized form of “all power to the people.”⁶³

Contrary to their populist pedigree, however, these devices cannot be taken as a reliable sign of widespread civic engagement. In the first place, five states account for more than half of all ballot initiatives nationwide in the twentieth century—California, Oregon, North Dakota, Colorado, and Arizona—and much of the recent growth is attributable to California alone, so the use of referenda is not necessarily a good metric for citizen involvement everywhere.⁶⁴ Second, although civic activists have sometimes placed issues like coastal management and term limits on the ballot, most scholars agree that

[in] the past two decades, virtually all successful drives have relied, at least predominantly, on professional circulation firms. One study [by the California Commission on Campaign Financing] concluded, “. . . Any

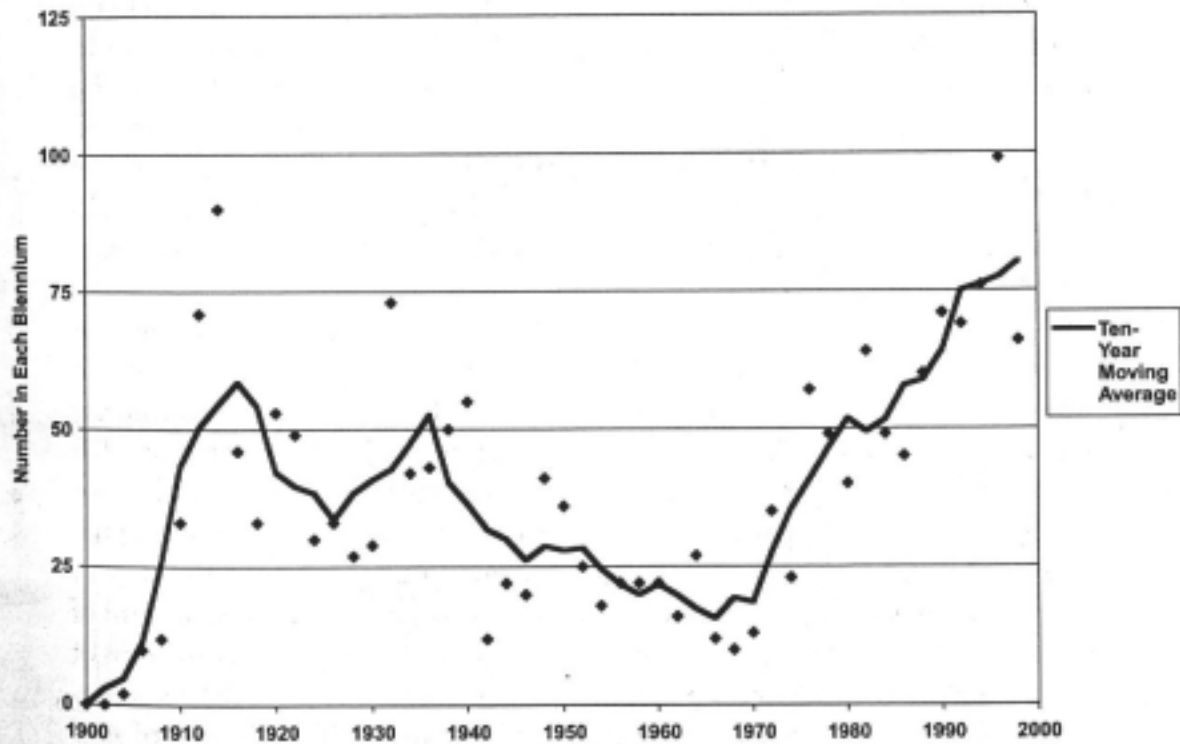


Figure 44: Initiatives on Statewide Ballots in the United States, 1900–1998

individual, corporation, or organization with approximately \$1 million to spend can now place any issue on the ballot. . . . *Qualifying an initiative for the statewide ballot is thus no longer so much a measure of general citizen interest as it is a test of fundraising ability.*"⁶⁵

Although one might imagine that such ballot contests might spark widespread political discussion by ordinary citizens, studies show that most signers don't read what they sign. During the campaign itself, direct-mail and radio and television sound-bite advertising, much of it deceptive, is more important than grassroots activity. It is thus hardly surprising that campaign spending is a strong predictor of the outcome and that surveys indicate "a very low degree of voter sophistication" on referenda issues.⁶⁶ Based on detailed study of ballot initiatives in Massachusetts, Michigan, Oregon, and California in 1976–1982, political scientist Betty Zisk concluded, "Far from replacing group lobbying efforts vis-à-vis the legislature, the initiative and referenda campaigns seem to provide an *alternative channel* for the very group activities the reformers denounced. . . . The opportunity for direct participation does not seem to have galvanized large numbers of voters."⁶⁷ In short, the rise of ballot initiatives is a better measure of the power of well-financed special interests than of civic engagement.

Demonstrations and other public protests in Washington have become somewhat larger and more frequent since the late 1960s, as media-savvy protest organizers have become more sophisticated about how to garner national television coverage.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the great civil rights and Vietnam marches of the sixties were preceded and followed by continuing activism in communities across the country, whereas a "March on Washington" in the 1990s provided no assurance of continuing, community-based action. For example, less than six months after sponsoring the "Stand in the Gap" rally of half a million men on the Mall on October 4, 1997, said to be the largest religious gathering in American history, Promise-Keepers virtually collapsed, laying off its entire staff.⁶⁹

Available survey evidence suggests slight growth in nationwide rates of demonstration and protest over the last quarter century. According to the Roper Social and Political Trends survey archive, the fraction of adults who say that they had *ever* been in a protest march or sit-in rose from 7 percent in 1978 to 10 percent in 1994. Other surveys, too, during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s consistently estimated participation in demonstrations and protests at roughly one in ten to fifteen adults, with a slight tendency for the estimates to rise over the years. The abortion issue alone appears to account for roughly one-third of all such activities. On the other hand, the explanation for the rising fraction of the population who have ever protested is the departure of the *pre-1960s* generation of *nonprotesters* at the top of the age hierarchy, *not* the addition of new protesters at the bottom. As figure 45 shows, protesting is *less* common among

twenty-somethings now than it was among people that age in the sixties and seventies, but protesting has become *more* common among middle-aged and older people, as the sixties generation itself aged. Protest marchers have steadily and rapidly grayed over the past several decades.⁷⁰

Strikingly, protests and demonstrations are not an *alternative* to conventional politics, but a complement, in the sense that protesters are unusually active politically in more ordinary ways, too. Even though participation in demonstrations and forms of civil disobedience is not much more common nowadays than in the sixties, it is more widely seen as legitimate by nonparticipants. These days “movement-type” political actions are accepted as “standard operating procedure” across the political spectrum, unlike three or four decades ago. On the other hand, actual involvement is limited to a small and aging fraction of the population. Moreover, as we noted in chapter 2, petitioning and participation at local public meetings have slumped over the last decade or two. As David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, proponents of the “movement society” hypothesis, ultimately concede, “The amount of highly contentious forms accepted and actually used by citizens seems to be more circumscribed than it was two decades ago.”⁷¹

The decline of grassroots protest should not be exaggerated. The 1990s saw much activity by gay and lesbian activists and pro-lifers, as well as a steady low level of local and campus activism. Grassroots social protest may well be as

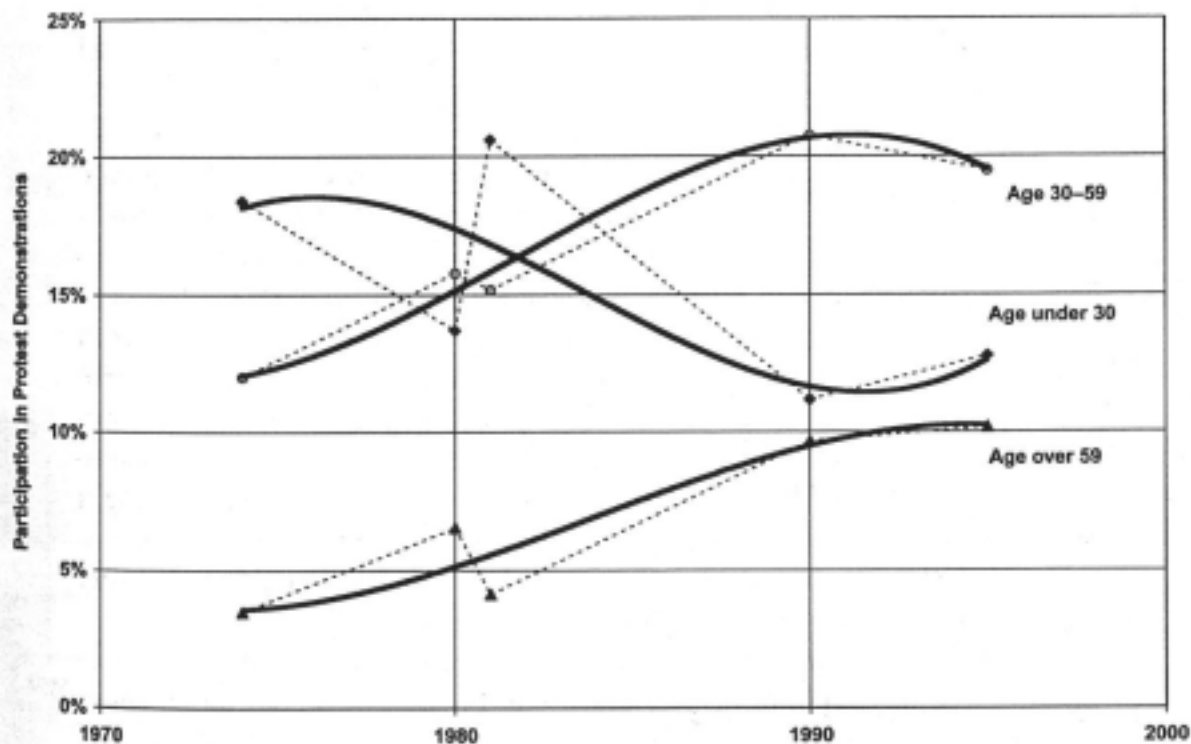


Figure 45: The Graying of Protest Demonstrations

common today as during the 1960s and 1970s, and tolerance for such protest is clearly up. However, I know of no evidence that actual participation in grassroots social movements has grown in the past few decades to offset the massive declines in more conventional forms of social and political participation.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS CONSTITUTES the third countertrend toward greater social connectedness considered in this chapter, and by all odds it is the most important. The humble telephone provides one instructive example. Throughout the twentieth century telephone use grew exponentially. As the first half of figure 46 shows, the diffusion of phones into American homes followed a familiar trajectory—rising steadily for the first two-thirds of the century, except for the Great Depression reversal. Between 1945 and 1998 local calls per capita climbed from 304 to 2,023 annually, while annual long-distance calls per capita exploded from 13 to 353. Most of this growth represented business and commercial communication, but purely social calls also increased. By 1982 almost half of all American adults talked on the phone (locally or long-distance) with friends or relatives virtually every day. Ties among distant friends and relatives were transformed from the written to the spoken word over the last quarter of the century, as the second half of figure 46 shows, accelerating after the deregulation of the long-distance telephone industry in 1984 before apparently leveling off in the 1990s. The rapid pace of technological innovation—especially the diffusion of cell phones in the 1990s—continued to make the telephone nearly ubiquitous. By 1998 the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press reported that two-thirds of all adults had called a friend or relative the previous day “just to talk.”⁷²

For nearly half a century after its invention in 1876 the telephone's social implications were badly misjudged by analysts and even by the phone company itself. For those of us who wish to anticipate the impact of the Internet on social relations, the astounding series of poor predictions about the social consequences of the telephone is a deeply cautionary tale. Alexander Graham Bell himself originally expected the telephone to serve the sort of broadcasting function that would later become the province of radio—“music on tap.” Well into the twentieth century telephone executives were so convinced that their primary customer was the businessman that they actually discouraged “socializing” by telephone. As Claude Fischer, the leading sociologist of the telephone, summarizes, “[F]or a generation or more there was a mismatch between the ways people actually used the telephone and how industry men imagined it would or should be used.”⁷³

Even with the benefit of hindsight it is surprisingly difficult to evaluate the effects of the telephone on social relations. Ithiel de Sola Pool, a pioneer in this field, observed:

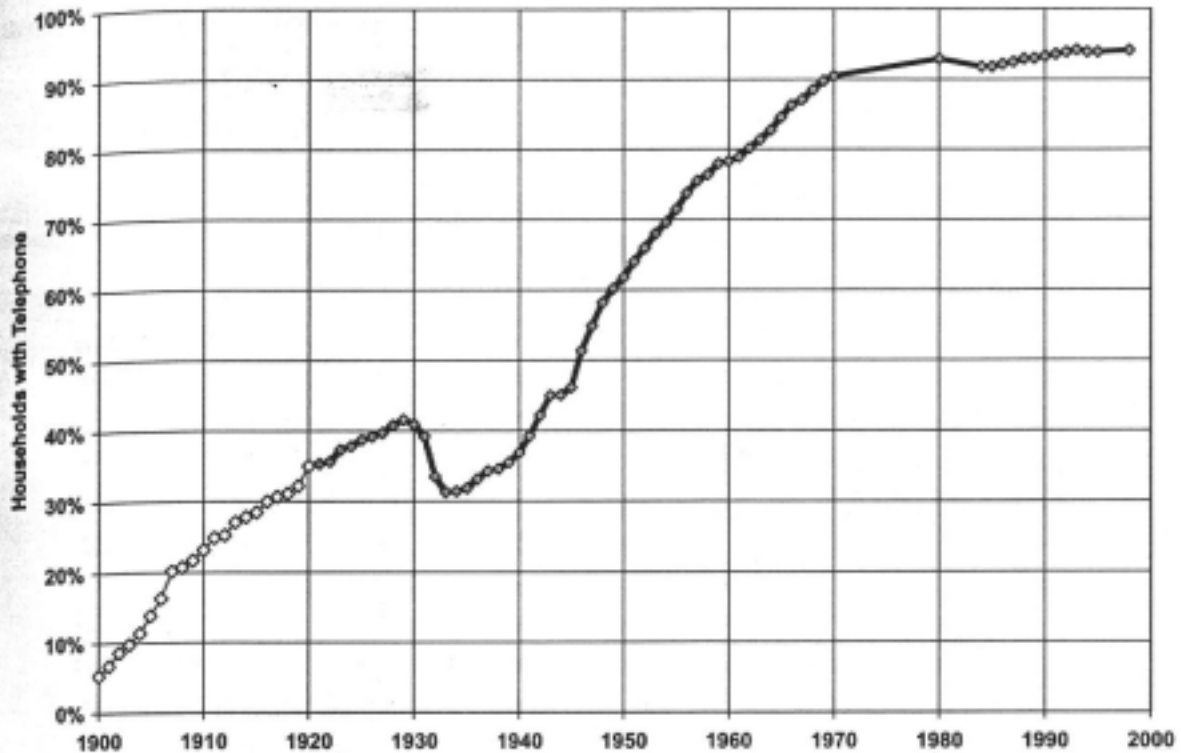


Figure 46a: The Telephone Penetrates American Households

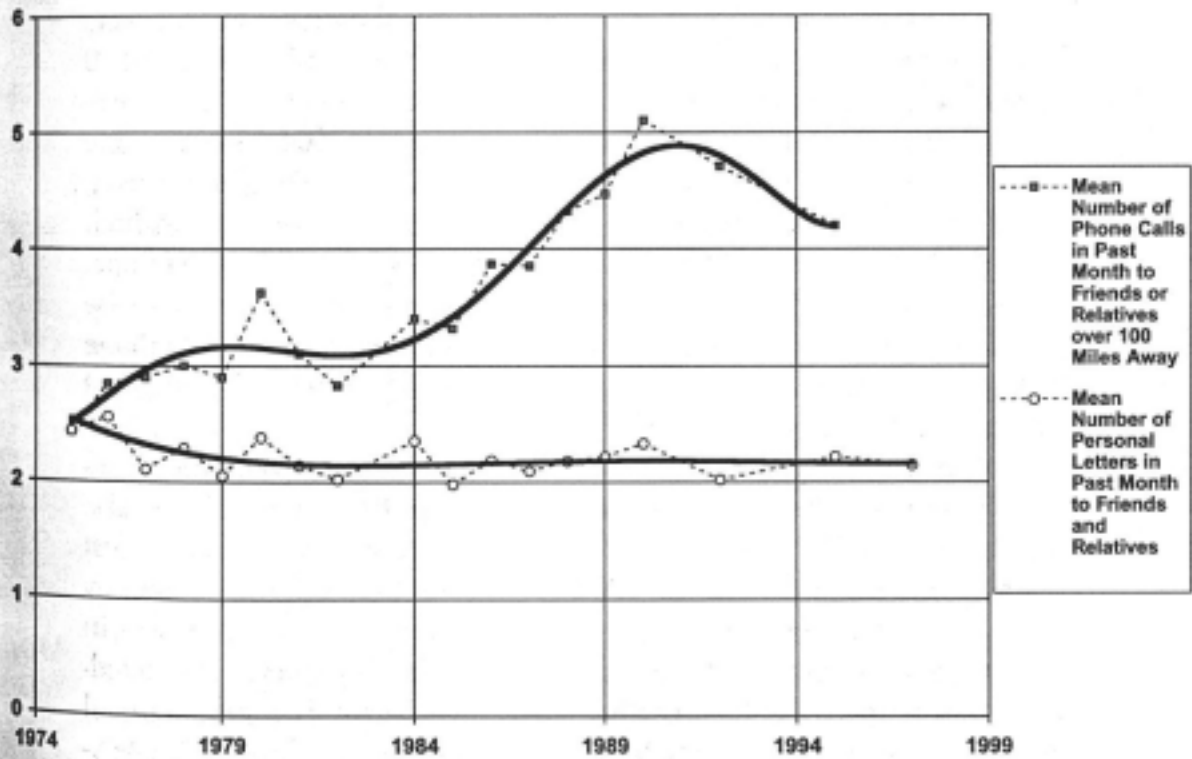


Figure 46b: Trends in Long-Distance Personal Phone Calls and Letters

Wherever we look, the telephone seems to have effects in diametrically opposite directions. It saves physicians from making house-calls, but physicians initially believed it increased them, for patients could summon the doctor to them rather than travel to him. . . . It allows dispersal of centers of authority, but it also allows tight continuous supervision of field offices from the center. . . . No matter what hypothesis one begins with, reverse tendencies also appear.⁷⁴

Socially speaking, the telephone both gives and takes away. When a fire in a switching center unexpectedly cut telephone service on the Lower East Side of Manhattan for three weeks in 1975, two-thirds of the people who lost service reported that being without a telephone made them feel isolated, but one-third reported that they visited other people in person more frequently. In other words, the telephone appears to reduce both loneliness and face-to-face socializing.⁷⁵

Many observers have theorized that the telephone fostered "psychological neighborhoods," liberating our intimate social networks from the constraints of physical space. As early as 1891 one telephone official suggested that the technology would bring an "epoch of neighborhood without propinquity." In fact, however, the first comprehensive study of the social impact of the telephone (in 1933) found that this point-to-point medium (unlike the mass media) reinforced existing local ties more than distant ones. In the mid-1970s phone company records were said to show that between 40 and 50 percent of all phone calls originating from a household were made within a two-mile radius, and 70 percent were made within a five-mile radius. Roughly 20 percent of all residential calls were made to a single number, and roughly half were made to one of only five numbers. Concludes Martin Mayer, summarizing these data, "People make most of their telephone calls within the neighborhood in which they live." The type of household that makes heaviest use of the telephone, Mayer reports, is a family with teenagers that has recently moved to a new neighborhood in the same metropolitan area—in other words, the telephone is used to maintain personal relationships now severed by space. "One does not meet new friends on the telephone."⁷⁶

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the telephone seems to have had the effect of reinforcing, not transforming or replacing, existing personal networks. Compare the top half of figure 46 on the diffusion of the telephone in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century with any of our earlier charts of community engagement over this same period, and the conclusion is obvious: At least in those years, telecommunications and conventional forms of social connectedness were complements, not alternatives. Similarly, Claude Fischer's historical analysis of the social impact of the telephone concludes that although the telephone vastly expanded the possibilities for personal communication, it "did

not radically alter American ways of life. Rather, Americans used it to more vigorously pursue their characteristic ways of life."

The adoption of the telephone probably led people to hold more frequent personal conversations with friends and kin than had previously been customary, even if it also led them to curtail some visits. . . . In total, calling probably led to more social conversations with more people than before. Perhaps these calls substituted for longer visits or chats with family members, or perhaps they simply took up time that would have been spent alone.

The telephone appears to be implicated more in another trend, that of increasing privatism . . . the participation in and valuation of private social worlds as opposed to the larger, public community. . . . There is little evidence that the telephone enabled people to become involved in distinctively new organizational commitments. . . . The home telephone allowed subscribers to maintain more frequent contact with kin and friends by chatting briefly perhaps a few times a week instead of at greater length once a week. There is little sign that telephone calling opened up new social contacts.⁷⁷

In sum, the telephone has without doubt facilitated *schmoozing* with old friends, and in that sense it has offset some of the disconnection described in chapter 6. On the other hand, it has not engendered new friendships, nor has it substantially altered the characteristic activities of *makers*. Historian Daniel Boorstin summarizes the surprisingly mundane impact of the phone on Americans' social capital: "The telephone was only a convenience, permitting Americans to do more casually and with less effort what they had already been doing before."⁷⁸

As the twenty-first century opens we are only a few years into the era of widespread access to the Internet, yet it is hard to avoid speculating that the implications of this new technology of communication may dwarf the effects of the telephone on American society. The speed of diffusion of this new technology has been substantially greater than that of almost any other consumer technology in history—rivaled only by television. To go from 1 percent market penetration to 75 percent required nearly seven decades for the telephone; for Internet access the equivalent passage will require little more than seven years. One survey organization reported that nearly one-third of the adult population (about sixty-four million people) had used the Internet as of the spring of 1999, up by more than ten million users from barely six months earlier.⁷⁹

Like virtually all technical consumer innovations, this one caught on most rapidly and fully among younger generations. One study in 1999 found that although young people were in general much less likely to seek out political information than older cohorts, they were more likely to use the Internet as

their preferred means of access. On the other hand, at about the same time the Web site of the American Association of Retired Persons reportedly was already receiving half a million individual visitors every month.⁸⁰ The new medium drew, as if mesmerized, people of all generations.

Within a few years of the Internet's launch, simulacra of most classic forms of social connectedness and civic engagement could be found on-line. Mourners could attend virtual funerals over the Web; a reporter for *Today in Funeral Service* told the Associated Press that the on-line funeral "kind of depersonalizes it, but it's better than missing it." Virtual vows arrived; America Online in June 1997 held the largest cyberwedding to date, marrying thousands of couples simultaneously while spectators "watched" and "cheered" from their virtual pews. At last count Yahoo mentioned more than five hundred places where one could pray virtually, including one—Yaale Ve'Yavo, an Orthodox Jewish site—that forwards e-mail prayers to Jerusalem to be affixed to the Western Wall. Easter services and Passover seders; grief counseling and cancer support groups; volunteering, cyberromance, and hundreds of thousands of chat groups; voting, lobbying, and even an AIDS Action Council "virtual march on Washington" that logged over twenty-three thousand "poster-carrying marchers"—all these forms of virtual social capital and more could be found in cyberspace.⁸¹

One central question, of course, is whether "virtual social capital" is itself a contradiction in terms. There is no easy answer. The early, deeply flawed conjectures about the social implications of the telephone warn us that our own equally early conjectures about the Internet are likely to be similarly flawed. Very few things can yet be said with any confidence about the connection between social capital and Internet technology. One truism, however, is this: The timing of the Internet explosion means that it cannot possibly be causally linked to the crumbling of social connectedness described in previous chapters. Voting, giving, trusting, meeting, visiting, and so on had all begun to decline while Bill Gates was still in grade school. By the time that the Internet reached 10 percent of American adults in 1996, the nationwide decline in social connectedness and civic engagement had been under way for at least a quarter of a century. Whatever the future implications of the Internet, social intercourse over the last several decades of the twentieth century was not simply displaced from physical space to cyberspace. The Internet may be part of the solution to our civic problem, or it may exacerbate it, but the cyberrevolution was not the cause.

We also know that early users of Internet technology were no less (and no more) civically engaged than anyone else. By 1999 three independent studies (including my own) had confirmed that once we control for the higher educational levels of Internet users, they are indistinguishable from nonusers when it comes to civic engagement.⁸² On the other hand, these oft ballyhooed results prove little about the *effects* of the Net, because of the likelihood that Internet

users are self-selected in relevant ways. The absence of any correlation between Internet usage and civic engagement could mean that the Internet attracts reclusive nerds and energizes them, but it could also mean that the Net disproportionately attracts civic dynamos and sedates them. In any event, it is much too early to assess the long-run social effects of the Internet empirically. Hence I consider here some of the *potential* advantages and disadvantages of computer-mediated communication for American civic life, recognizing in advance that neither the apocalyptic “gloom and doom” prognosticators nor the utopian “brave new virtual community” advocates are probably on target. How are “virtual” communities likely to be different from the “real” thing?

Community, communion, and communication are intimately as well as etymologically related. Communication is a fundamental prerequisite for social and emotional connections. Telecommunications in general and the Internet in particular substantially enhance our ability to communicate; thus it seems reasonable to assume that their net effect will be to enhance community, perhaps even dramatically. Social capital is about networks, and the Net is the network to end all networks. By removing barriers of time and distance, students of computer-mediated communication like sociologist Barry Wellman maintain, “Computer-supported social networks sustain strong, intermediate, and weak ties that provide information and social support in both specialized and broadly based relationships. . . . Computer-mediated communication accelerates the ways in which people operate at the centers of partial, personal communities, switching rapidly and frequently between groups of ties.”⁸³

Very much like nineteenth-century futurists contemplating the vistas opened by the telephone, enthusiasts for “virtual community” see computer networks as the basis for a kind of utopian communitarianism. Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff, early prophets of computer-mediated communication, predicted that “we will become the Network Nation, exchanging vast amounts of both information and socioemotional communications with colleagues, friends and ‘strangers,’ who share similar interests . . . we will become a ‘global village.’” Internet theorist Michael Strangelove wrote:

The Internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication—people talking with each other, people exchanging e-mail. . . . The Internet is mass participation in fully bidirectional, uncensored mass communication. Communication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows, and thrives. The Internet is a community of chronic communicators.⁸⁴

Howard Rheingold, self-described “homesteader on the electronic frontier,” reported, “The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel

passionately about e-mail and computer conferences. I've become one of them. I care about these people I met through my computer." John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, found no parallel in recorded history for the advent of computer-mediated communication: "We are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire."⁸⁵

The Internet is a powerful tool for the transmission of information among physically distant people. The tougher question is whether that flow of information itself fosters social capital and genuine community. Information is, of course, important, but as John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid of Xerox's famed Palo Alto Research Center emphasize, information itself needs a social context to be meaningful: "The tight focus on information, with the implicit assumption that if we look after information everything else will fall into place, is ultimately a sort of social and moral blindness." At its best, computer-mediated communication allows wider, more efficient networks that strengthen our ties to the social world and increase our "intellectual capital," for information can be shared at virtually no cost. People with different pieces of the puzzle can collaborate more easily. Computer-mediated communication can support large, dense, yet fluid groups that cut across existing organizational and geographic boundaries, increasing the involvement of otherwise peripheral participants, such as the recent retirees studied in one corporate experiment in electronic communication.⁸⁶

Social networks based on computer-mediated communication can be organized by shared interests rather than by shared space. By century's end thousands of far-flung, functionally defined networks had sprung up, linking like-minded people as disparate as BMW fanciers, bird-watchers, and white supremacists. Echoing precisely (but perhaps unconsciously) early speculations about the effects of the telephone, MIT computer scientist Michael L. Dertouzos speculated about millions of "virtual neighborhoods" based on shared avocations rather than shared space.⁸⁷ Certainly cyberspace already hosts thousands of hobby and other special interest groups, and if participation in such groups becomes widespread and durable, then perhaps the prediction may be right this time.

Virtual communities may also be more egalitarian than the real communities in which we live. At least for the foreseeable future, computer-mediated communication drastically truncates information about one's discussion partners. Rheingold argues that the invisibility of text-based communication prevents people from forming prejudices prior to their encounters. As the canine cybernaut in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon put it, "On the Internet no one knows you're a dog." Thus, assuming widespread cyberaccess, "virtual communities" may be more heterogeneous with regard to such physical factors as race, gender, and age, although as we shall see later, they may be more homogeneous with respect to interests and values.⁸⁸

Anonymity and the absence of social cues inhibit social control—that is, after all, why we have the secret ballot—and thus cyberspace seems in some respects more democratic. (Ironically, this advantage of computer-mediated communication depends on the fact that at least with current technology, it actually transmits *less* information among participants than face-to-face communication does.) Research has shown that on-line discussions tend to be more frank and egalitarian than face-to-face meetings. Thus computer-mediated communication may lead to flatter hierarchies. In workplace networks, experiments have shown, computer-mediated communication is less hierarchical, more participatory, more candid, and less biased by status differences. Women, for example, are less likely to be interrupted in cyberspace discussions.⁸⁹

Some of the allegedly greater democracy in cyberspace is based more on hope and hype than on careful research. The political culture of the Internet, at least in its early stages, is astringently libertarian, and in some respects cyberspace represents a Hobbesian state of nature, not a Lockean one. As Peter Kollock and Marc Smith, two of the more thoughtful observers of community on the Internet, observe, “It is widely believed and hoped that the ease of communicating and interacting online will lead to a flourishing of democratic institutions, heralding a new and vital arena of public discourse. But to date, most online groups have the structure of either an anarchy [if unmoderated] or a dictatorship [if moderated].”⁹⁰

The high speed, low cost, and broad scope of mobilization that is possible on the Internet can be an advantage for political organizers, by reducing transaction costs, particularly for widely scattered groups of like-minded citizens. For example, the 1997 Nobel Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines was organized by Jody Williams primarily over the Internet from her home in rural Vermont. As early as 1995, Mark Bonchek reported, “27,000 people read the alt.politics.homosexuality newsgroup regularly with an average of 75 messages per day. As its name suggests, alt.politics.homosexuality is a forum for people to discuss issues and distribute information related to politics and homosexuality.” Bonchek found a surprising range of positions on these issues in the postings to this forum, both sympathetic and hostile toward homosexuality.⁹¹

On the other hand, computer-mediated communication so lowers the threshold for voicing opinions that, like talk radio, it may lead not to deliberation, but to din. Consider, for example, the following advertisement that appeared on the inside back cover of *Mother Jones* in April 1999:

If you care
 you can do something . . . easy!
www.ifnotnow.com
 Be a full-time citizen activist . . .
 . . . for 5 minutes a week!

Over a dozen of the best social advocacy groups
 provide the information
 —you read alerts, send letters, get responses,
 and monitor results—all at the click of a button.
 It's a one-stop shop for staying involved.
 We want to make it easy for you to make a difference!
 Make your voice heard!
www.ifnotnow.com
 Sign up for a free trial now!

If generalized, this shortcut to civic expression would simply exacerbate the imbalance between talking and listening that is a prominent feature of contemporary civic disengagement, as we noted in chapter 2 and table 1. John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid point out that “the ability to send a message to president@whitehouse.gov . . . can give the illusion of much more access, participation, and social proximity than is actually available.”⁹² Millions more of us can express our views with the click of a mouse, but is anyone listening?

Nevertheless, the potential benefits of computer-mediated communication for civic engagement and social connectedness are impressive. The Internet offers a low-cost and in many respects egalitarian way of connecting with millions of one's fellow citizens, particularly those with whom one shares interests but not space or time. In fact, liberating our social ties from the constraints of time—through what the experts term “asynchronous communication”—may turn out to be a more important effect of the Internet than liberation from the constraints of space.

AGAINST THIS PROMISE, on the other hand, must be weighed four serious challenges to the hope that computer-mediated communication will breed new and improved communities. I shall discuss them in order of increasing complexity.

The “digital divide” refers to the social inequality of access to cyberspace. Certainly in the early years of the Internet heavy users were predominantly younger, highly educated, upper-income white males. An exhaustive 1997 study by the Census Bureau found that the least connected groups in American society were the rural poor, rural and inner-city racial minorities, and young, female-headed households. Moreover, these gaps by education, income, race, and family structure appeared to be widening, not narrowing. Media specialist Pippa Norris found that both in the United States and in Europe the Internet has *not* mobilized previously inactive groups (with the partial exception of young people) but has instead reinforced existing biases in political participation. Sociologist Manuel Castells argues forcefully that

because access to computer-mediated communication is culturally, educationally, and economically restrictive, and will be so for a long time, the most important cultural impact of computer-mediated communication could be potentially the reinforcement of the culturally dominant social networks.⁹³

This specter of a kind of cyberapartheid, in which bridging social capital is diminished as elite networks become less accessible to the have-nots, is indeed frightening. For that very reason, however, it is widely recognized as a key challenge that must be addressed. Given political will, this problem is tractable. If the Internet is seen as a kind of twenty-first-century public utility, then inexpensive, subsidized access (including both hardware and user-friendly software) can be made available in libraries, community centers, Laundromats, and even private residences, much as low-cost telephone service was subsidized in the twentieth century. This first challenge of the Internet to community connectedness is serious but not insurmountable.

The second challenge is technically more difficult to resolve. Computer-mediated communication transmits much less nonverbal information than face-to-face communication. MIT's Dertouzos asks the right question: "Which qualities of human relationships will pass well through tomorrow's information infrastructures and which ones will not?"⁹⁴

Humans are remarkably effective at sensing nonverbal messages from one another, particularly about emotions, cooperation, and trustworthiness. (It seems possible that the ability to spot nonverbal signs of mendacity offered a significant survival advantage during the long course of human evolution.) Psychologist Albert Mehrabian writes in *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes* that in the "realm of feelings" our "facial and vocal expressions, postures, movements, and gestures" are crucial. When our words "contradict the messages contained within them, others mistrust what we say—they rely almost completely on what we do."⁹⁵

Computer-mediated communication, now and for the foreseeable future, masks the enormous amount of nonverbal communication that takes place during even the most casual face-to-face encounter. (Emoticons in e-mail, like :), implicitly acknowledge this fact, but provide only the faintest trace of the information in actual facial expression.) Eye contact, gestures (both intentional and unintentional), nods, a faint furrowing of the brow, body language, seating arrangements, even hesitation measured in milliseconds—none of this mass of information that we ordinarily process almost without thinking in face-to-face encounters is captured in text.

Moreover, as organization theorists Nitin Nohria and Robert G. Eccles point out, face-to-face encounters provide a depth and speed of feedback that is impossible in computer-mediated communication.

Relative to electronically mediated exchange, the structure of face-to-face interaction offers an unusual capacity for interruption, repair, feedback, and learning. In contrast to interactions that are largely sequential, face-to-face interaction makes it possible for two people to be sending and delivering messages simultaneously. The cycle of interruption, feedback, and repair possible in face-to-face interaction is so quick that it is virtually instantaneous. As [sociologist Erving] Goffman notes, "a speaker can see how others are responding to her message even before it is done and alter it midstream to elicit a different response." When interaction takes place in a group setting, the number of "conversations" that can be going on simultaneously when the interactants are face-to-face is even harder to replicate in other media.

The poverty of social cues in computer-mediated communication inhibits interpersonal collaboration and trust, especially when the interaction is anonymous and not nested in a wider social context. Experiments that compare face-to-face and computer-mediated communication confirm that the richer the medium of communication, the more sociable, personal, trusting, and friendly the encounter.⁹⁶

Computer-mediated communication is, to be sure, more egalitarian, frank, and task oriented than face-to-face communication. Participants in computer-based groups often come up with a wider range of alternatives. However, because of the paucity of social cues and social communication, participants in computer-based groups find it harder to reach consensus and feel less solidarity with one another. They develop a sense of "depersonalization" and are less satisfied with the group's accomplishments. Computer-based groups are quicker to reach an intellectual understanding of their shared problems—probably because they are less distracted by "extraneous" social communication—but they are much worse at generating the trust and reciprocity necessary to implement that understanding.

Cheating and renegeing are more common in computer-mediated communication, where misrepresentation and misunderstanding are easier. Participants in computer-based settings are less inhibited by social niceties and quicker to resort to extreme language and invective—"flaming" is the commonly used term among cybernauts, a compelling image of communication as hand-to-hand combat with flamethrowers. Computer-mediated communication is good for sharing information, gathering opinions, and debating alternatives, but building trust and goodwill is not easy in cyberspace. John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid point out that "interactions over the Net, financial or social, will be as secure not as its digital encryption, which is a relatively cheap fix, but as the infrastructure—social as well as technical—encompassing that interaction."⁹⁷

For these reasons, Nohria and Eccles suggest, widespread use of computer-mediated communication will actually require *more frequent* face-to-face

encounters: "an extensive, deep, robust social infrastructure of relationships must exist so that those using the electronic media will truly understand what others are communicating to them." Experience in the Blacksburg, Virginia, electronic community network suggests that "when you overlay an electronic community directly on top of a physical community, that creates a very powerful social pressure to be civil. If you're going to yell at somebody on the Net, or flame them out, you may run into them at the grocery store, and they may turn out to be your neighbor."⁹⁸ In other words, social capital may turn out to be a *prerequisite for*, rather than a *consequence of*, effective computer-mediated communication. ✓

All these problems are less serious in dealing with clear, practical issues, but more serious in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity. If computer-mediated communication is nested within an ongoing face-to-face relationship, the complications are much reduced. Arranging to meet your spouse at the restaurant might be easily handled via computer-mediated communication, but wrangling with a new neighbor about her loud parties would not. The archetypal interaction with a new pal on the Internet lacks precisely the social embeddedness that seems essential to overcome the lack of social cues within the medium itself. Face-to-face networks tend to be dense and bounded, whereas computer-mediated communication networks tend to be sparse and unbounded. Anonymity and fluidity in the virtual world encourage "easy in, easy out," "drive-by" relationships. That very casualness is the appeal of computer-mediated communication for some denizens of cyberspace, but it discourages the creation of social capital. If entry and exit are too easy, commitment, trustworthiness, and reciprocity will not develop.⁹⁹

Video and audio enhancements of computer-mediated communication may in time reduce these difficulties, but that is unlikely to happen soon. The "bandwidth" requirements (communications capacity) necessary for even poor-quality video are so high that it is unlikely to be commonly and cheaply available for at least a decade or more. Moreover, some experimental evidence suggests that the negative effects of computer-mediated communication—depersonalization, psychological distance, weak social cues, and so on—are reduced but not eliminated even by high-quality video.¹⁰⁰ The pace and breadth of technological change make predictions about the effects of computer-mediated communication on social exchange risky, but this second obstacle to community building in cyberspace looks even more forbidding than the digital divide.

The third obstacle goes by the evocative label of "cyberbalkanization."¹⁰¹ The Internet enables us to confine our communication to people who share precisely our interests—not just other BMW owners, but owners of BMW 2002s and perhaps even owners of turbocharged 1973 2002s, regardless of where they live and what other interests they and we have. That powerful specialization is one of the medium's great attractions, but also one of its subtler

threats to bridging social capital. A comment about Thunderbirds in a BMW chat group risks being flamed as "off topic." Imagine, by contrast, the guffaws if a member of a bowling team or a Sunday school class tried to rule out a casual conversation gambit as off-topic.

Real-world interactions often force us to deal with diversity, whereas the virtual world may be more homogeneous, not in demographic terms, but in terms of interest and outlook. Place-based communities may be supplanted by interest-based communities. As communications specialist Stephen Doheny-Farina, a thoughtful and sympathetic commentator on the prospects for cybercommunity, observes.

In physical communities we are forced to live with people who may differ from us in many ways. But virtual communities offer us the opportunity to construct utopian collectivities—communities of interest, education, tastes, beliefs, and skills. In cyberspace we can remake the world out of an unsettled landscape.¹⁰²

Interaction in cyberspace is typically single stranded. Members of my e-group on nineteenth-century American history are connected to me only in terms of *that* topic, unlike my neighbor, who may also meet me at the supermarket, in church, or on the ball field. We cannot be sure, of course, how Internet communities will evolve, but if virtual communities do turn out to be more single stranded than real-world communities, that will probably increase cyberbalkanization.

Local heterogeneity may give way to more focused virtual homogeneity as communities coalesce across space. Internet technology allows and encourages infrared astronomers, oenophiles, Trekkies, and white supremacists to narrow their circle to like-minded intimates. New "filtering" technologies that automate the screening of "irrelevant" messages make the problem worse. Serendipitous connections become less likely as increased communication narrows our tastes and interests—knowing and caring more and more about less and less. This tendency may increase productivity in a narrow sense, while decreasing social cohesion.

On the other hand, we should not romanticize the heterogeneity of the real-world communities in which we now live. "Birds of a feather flock together" is a folk adage that reminds us that tendencies toward community homogeneity long predate the Internet. Whether the *possibility* of even more narrowly focused communities in cyberspace will turn into reality will depend in large part on how the "virtual" facet of our lives fits into our broader social reality, as well as on our fundamental values. Moreover, as computer scientist Paul Resnick has pointed out, perhaps what will evolve are neither all-encompassing "cybercommunities," nor watertight "cyberghettos," but multiple "cyberclubs" with partially overlapping memberships. In this sort of world,

weak ties that bridge among distinct groups might create an interwoven community of communities.¹⁰³

The final potential obstacle is more conjectural and yet more ominous: Will the Internet in practice turn out to be a niftier telephone or a niftier television? In other words, will the Internet become predominantly a means of active, social communication or a means of passive, private entertainment? Will computer-mediated communication "crowd out" face-to-face ties? It is, in this domain especially, much too early to know. Very preliminary evidence suggests, hopefully, that time on the Internet may displace time in front of the tube: one survey in 1999 found that among Internet users, 42 percent said they watched less TV as a result, compared with only 19 percent who said they read fewer magazines and 16 percent who said they read fewer newspapers. On the other hand, an early experimental study found that extensive Internet usage seemed to cause greater social isolation and even depression.¹⁰⁴ Amid these scattered straws in the wind, a final caution: The commercial incentives that currently govern Internet development seem destined to emphasize individualized entertainment and commerce rather than community engagement. If more community-friendly technology is to be developed, the incentive may need to come from outside the marketplace.

Having explored both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios, what can we conclude about the probable effects of telecommunications on social connectedness and civic engagement? The history of the telephone reminds us that both utopianism and jeremiads are very likely misplaced. Moreover, it is a fundamental mistake to suppose that the question before us is computer-mediated communication *versus* face-to-face interaction. Both the history of the telephone and the early evidence on Internet usage strongly suggest that computer-mediated communication will turn out to *complement*, not *replace*, face-to-face communities.

In a particularly striking parallel to the use of the telephone, a careful study by sociologist Barry Wellman and his colleagues of the use of computer-mediated communication by research scholars found that

although the Internet helps scholars to maintain ties over great distances, physical proximity still matters. Those scholars who see each other often or work nearer to each other email each other more often. Frequent contact on the Internet is a complement to frequent face-to-face contact, not a substitute for it.¹⁰⁵

This finding is wholly consistent with the informed prediction by MIT researcher Dertouzos, an enthusiastic champion of computer-mediated communication: "[T]hough some unimportant business relationships and casual social relationships will be established and maintained on a purely virtual basis, physical proximity will be needed to cement and reinforce the more im-

portant professional and social encounters." "Dan Huttenlocher, professor of computer science at Cornell, argues that digital technologies are adept at maintaining communities already formed. They are less good at making them."¹⁰⁶ If the primary effect of computer-mediated communication is to reinforce rather than replace face-to-face relationships, however, then the Net is unlikely in itself to reverse the deterioration of our social capital.

Finally, we must not assume that the future of the Internet will be determined by some mindless, external "technological imperative." The most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it. How can we use the enormous potential of computer-mediated communication to make our investments in social capital more productive? How can we harness this promising technology for thickening community ties? How can we develop the technology to enhance social presence, social feedback, and social cues? How can we use the prospect of fast, cheap communication to enhance the now fraying fabric of our real communities, instead of being seduced by the mirage of some otherworldly "virtual community"? In short, how can we make the Internet a part of the solution? As the new century opens, some of the most exciting work in the field of computer-mediated communication is addressing precisely these issues. In the final chapter of this book, I shall say a bit about some of those prospects. For the moment, I conclude that the Internet will not *automatically* offset the decline in more conventional forms of social capital, but that it has that potential. In fact, it is hard to imagine solving our contemporary civic dilemmas without computer-mediated communication.

The evidence on small groups, social movements, and telecommunications is more ambiguous than the evidence in earlier chapters. All things considered, the clearest exceptions to the trend toward civic disengagement are 1) the rise in youth volunteering discussed in chapter 7; 2) the growth of telecommunication, particularly the Internet; 3) the vigorous growth of grassroots activity among evangelical conservatives; and 4) the increase in self-help support groups. These diverse countercurrents are a valuable reminder that society evolves in multiple ways simultaneously. These exceptions to the generally depressing story I have recounted alert us to a heartening potential for civic renewal. Even so, these developments hardly outweigh the many other ways in which most Americans are less connected to our communities than we were two or three decades ago. Before exploring possible avenues for reform, we need to understand the origins of that ebb tide. What can explain the reversal in recent decades of the civic-minded trends that characterized the first two-thirds of the twentieth century? We turn to that conundrum in the next section of this book.