

## CHAPTER I

# Online Social Capital as Social

Let's start with an example: The Fossil Forum ([www.thefossilforum.com](http://www.thefossilforum.com)) is a discussion board-based global forum that specialises in the collection, study, and appreciation of fossils. With nearly 25,000 members from around the world, the forum serves the function of uniting an otherwise disparate group according to a passion for palaeontology – professional and avocational. Registered members will have varying degrees of expertise, from amateurs to established researchers. The forum does not rely on advertising revenue, and instead funds its operations through direct donations and member-created auctions. The forum also prohibits the posting of commercial links, and does not provide commercial appraisal of fossils. Members have the opportunity to post their finds for the community to assist in proper identification, engage in a wide range of fossil-related topics, exchange advice on preparation and collecting, share open access documents, and allows members to post personal galleries. In terms of online social capital, the only visible metric is the accumulation of 'informative points' awarded by the community when a member posts content that is considered informative. The non-metric forms of online social capital in this community can be considered the shared assets of expertise, experience, and informative resources. In addition, members who initially met on this forum have organised collecting trips offline. Members can be awarded forum badges for being 'member of the month' (decided by staff), 'fossil of the month' (chosen among several competitors by community voting), and 'paleo partner' (awarded to any member who has contributed meaningfully to palaeontology, such as publishing an article, volunteering at a museum or donating a specimen of scientific significance).

Like many social media sites, The Fossil Forum is a high-trust network. Its narrow focus affords greater consensus on vision, mission, and values. New members are not granted immediate access to some features until a number of posts of substance have been made. The community is moderated by a team of volunteers to prevent spammers, provide positive encouragement to new members and ensure that the forum's policies are enforced. A forum such as

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this serves as an example of an ideal form of social capital whereby it is the development and sharing of social assets for community benefit.

In adopting a critical stance with respect to online social capital, it would be folly to simply focus on the negative, as there are several examples like the one discussed above where online social capital does align with individual and community empowerment. Of note would be groups that have been unfairly marginalised who can congregate in a virtual space to organise, mobilise, and provide mutual support. In addition, if we consider the Autonomist Marxist tradition, social media can function as a tool for breaking down barriers between otherwise disparate groups to form new alliances along shared lines. However, even before considering the matter of online social capital as part of – or as a possible resistance to – the circuits of capitalism, it will prove beneficial to backtrack and consider the core concept of social capital. This chapter explores the foundations of social capital and moves toward identifying some of the more problematic aspects that arise in its migration to an online context.

### Social Capital and Cultural Capital

The word ‘social’ is liable to conjure up many associations that speak to our condition as ‘social beings,’ the collaborative benefits of community, and potential for self-expression. However, when left on its own, the term may leave one gasping for more precision; namely, when we use the word social are we referring to sociality? Social interaction? Media in general (as all media is a form of social exchange and are techno-social systems)? It may serve us better to adopt a neutral understanding of what is considered social exchange rather than assume one that is positive or negative given that social interactions have the potential to be constructive or non-constructive.

We can credit Pierre Bourdieu (1997) with identifying four types of capital: economic, cultural, symbolic, and social. By separating these forms of capital, it is not as though Bourdieu was setting up a cordon between them, for he understood that there were interrelated dynamics that would influence the abilities and opportunities of social agents to gain and distribute different forms of capital. Bourdieu defines social capital as:

[T]he aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (51)

Bourdieu further explains that the volume of social capital is dependent upon some conditions, such as network size, effective use of connections, and the

volume of other forms of capital each of the individuals in the network possesses (1997, 51). In other words, social capital does not generate itself independently of its relations with other forms of capital: the economic, symbolic and cultural are entwined. Moreover, maintaining or increasing one's social capital requires considerable and perpetual effort as it has a tendency to devalue over time. What Bourdieu's definition implies is that other forms of capital have the potential to be converted into social capital, but what may be missing here is how the relation of labour features in the production of social capital in the first place and the effort required to convert one form into another. We might here consider an illustrative example of energy and effort required to convert one form of capital into another, a form of exchange where there is some form of investment to make this conversion possible. For instance, assuming some individual of financial means (economic capital) wished to create name recognition in a bid to run for a city council position, that person would need to leverage his or her standing in the community as well as invest in political campaign specialists. The candidate would likely 'press the flesh' at various events, canvass voters, launch a social media campaign, schedule media appearances and so forth to create more awareness of the candidate and her or his viability for office. In this process, the candidate may have to leverage other human assets to obtain endorsements from those whose standing in the community is respected. In this instance, economic capital is used to gain political capital.

Instead of providing an optimistic definition of social capital, Bourdieu includes it as part of a worldview where capital is the totality of all social existence that plays a role in reproducing inequality while preserving dominance and class hierarchies. Social capital has little to do with open inclusion: it is an instrument of exclusion, to build walls not bridges. For example, a country club may use membership fees to exclude those without significant wealth from joining, excluding certain people that are statistically less likely to possess the financial means; a political party's anti-immigrant message may function as a barrier to entry by those who may wish to dispute those values; stakeholder influence in a community may be negatively impacted for those whose precarious employment situations may mean frequent job-changes and uprooting to new communities for employment, if not also the lack of financial security to afford home ownership; and even specialist language by technical professionals and academics can be an insurmountable obstacle for those not specifically trained in those disciplines. Bourdieu claims that these are the given facts of our social reality that govern who can join particular networks.

Bourdieu's view is more aligned with that of cultural capital; namely, that capitalisation is a process of social reproduction, with the most institutionalised form being education whereby 'objective' culture is internalised and reproduced by social actors. What appears to emerge as consensus, such as norms and values, are the product of social training via respected institutions. If there is 'profit' to be gained by this form of cultural capital participation, it is a measure of how well an individual conforms to the established norms and

values of a society in order to obtain its opportunities and benefits. If we were to map this on to social media, there are implicit values and norms there as well; for instance, proper forms of netiquette that allow for the use of web-specific acronyms, the value of reciprocity in liking and following, the ‘taboo’ of using all capital letters as akin to shouting, and so forth. What may be considered socially reproduced also results in the creation of divisions on the basis of age, class, and even language.

It is worth remarking that Bourdieu’s valuable contributions to our understanding of social capital were written prior to the rise of mainstream social media. Although the internet at the time did possess affordances for some online for and email, arguably a great deal of social networking and the accumulation of social capital was still being done in more traditional, analogue ways. The exploitation of distinctly digital social networks had yet to become a more viable option, and the eventual arrival of such networked forms of communication would have an appreciable effect on social relations. In some cases, the emergence of popular social media served to break down barriers of distance and class, yet at the same time social media would serve to exacerbate differences of class, ethnicity, ideology, gender and income. I do not view Bourdieu’s conception of social capital as no longer viable, but that instead there are several aspects of his analysis that can be retained or modified in what would otherwise be considered a new social situation of network effects that are tied to acceleration and scale.

A contemporary of Bourdieu, James Coleman (1988), provides a definition of social capital that is less conditioned by economics and class structure, and instead provides potential for empowerment – particularly for marginalised, disenfranchised groups. For Coleman, we ought not to consider social existence simply one of economic conditioning whereby we are selfish beings of instrumental rationality, but that social aspects on their own merit much more focus. Coleman critiques the purely economic understanding of social capital:

The economic stream [...] flies in the face of empirical reality: persons’ actions are shaped, redirected, constrained by the social context; norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organization are important in the functioning not only of the society but also of the economy. (96)

It is not that Coleman entirely disregards the importance of economic considerations in social organisation, but that over-emphasis on this point would imply that human beings are but passive beings whose agency is determined exclusively by economic capital. This might be the case under particular conditions, but I take the slightly more pessimistic view that the digital network structures themselves cater more to the creation of passive consumers and producers of content on these platforms, implicitly encouraged by the broader ideological apparatus of social media to simply accept its affordances as ‘good’

without question. That so much social interaction becomes more dependent on valuing through actual metrics as a kind of ‘reward’, or that interaction is prompted by a series of incessant notifications, speaks more to a kind of reactive and passive form of social activity that is based on digital stimulus and pseudo-economic reward.

In Coleman’s interpretation, social capital is not something that is privately owned like property, but is instead an available resource that emerges as the by-product of social relationships. Coleman’s understanding of social capital opened the way to viewing it as something not unlike a property held in common by a community, akin to other forms such as heritage assets and the idea of the tightly knit neighbourhood community. Under this view, the ideal for maximising the volume of social capital as a shared asset might be a small town given the closer and long-standing ties the community may possess.<sup>4</sup> In sociology, the term *Gemeinschaft* refers to this kind of kinship structure and unity that arises from such a scenario, as opposed to *Gesellschaft*, which refers to individuals tied to larger structures in a more vertical, less horizontal, model. What engaged thinkers such as Ferdinand Tönnies (2002 [1887]) – who adopted the terms of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* in his pioneering work, – resonates ever more strongly today with the decline of rural communities at the expense of increased (sub)urbanisation, the ideological emphasis on the individual as an economic rather than social actor, and the rise of social media. The net result of these changes in the way community-mindedness has given way to an increase in individualisation is a view advanced by Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone*.

With this newer focus on social capital as a community asset, we find Robert Putnam taking up the baton in exploring this in more detail. For him, social capital involves trust, reciprocity, information, the possibilities for collective action and the transition from individualist identity to a community identity. In his most influential work, *Bowling Alone* (2001), Putnam identifies the threats to social capital and community engagement – be it the stealthy hijacking of social capital by financial capital, indifference to community and civic engagement, a decline in volunteer service group memberships, and changes in the techno-social systems of media. Although Putnam does seem to sound a note of optimism that computer-mediated communication may somehow renew the value of social capital, this is in no way guaranteed. Phenomena such as slacktivism (Christensen 2011, Morozov 2012), for example, may only provide the token appearance of deeper engagement. And, although some barriers to entry have been lowered for many in the formation of communities and access, class divisions are in many ways still reproduced in a digital form: the urban-rural split with respect to reliable access to digital networks and the heavy representation of those with wealth and status still dominate the social web.

Putnam’s view suggests the growth of online social networks may better facilitate more bridging social capital, and that these digital networks will increase our exposure – and possibly create more incentive – in developing

social relations with those who hold very different views. Bonding social capital relies more on homophily and preferential attachment: our tendency to group with those who are like us. Being exposed to a multiple variety of viewpoints and perspectives seems to present a very real benefit, but this is jeopardised by selective exposure to content, algorithmic sorting at the network end, and the ability for users to customise their relations according to homophily.

## The Dark Side of Social Capital

There are unintended negative consequences in the application of social capital. For example, Putnam references the Oklahoma City Bomber, Timothy McVeigh, who actively networked in discussing tactics with other radical right-wing conspirators (2001, 21–2). For Putnam, the concept of social capital itself is benign (and can be beneficial), but there is a possibility that others may use their cooperative social linkages for malevolent purposes – which may include strengthening hate groups, engaging in astroturfing campaigns or in committing crimes. Furthermore, the use of social capital among certain groups can exacerbate cliquish behaviours, marginalise or exclude outsiders, and thus promote rather than eliminate inequalities. Unscrupulous corporations or politicians, hate groups, and so forth are just as capable of leveraging social capital in their networks for their own collective gain at the expense of – or the explicit goal of harming – the interests of others.

Francis Fukuyama (1995) also acknowledges the potential abuse of social capital in producing these kinds of negative externalities, but he introduces the notion of broadening the radius of trust among all actors: the wider the radius, the more others will gain access to the benefits of those social capital resources. However, we might ask what happens in the event of there being a large reserve of trust among several actors, while surreptitious forms of covert surveillance, exploitation, and a ‘profit over people’ model is still in place. A corporately run digital social network like Facebook would be a prime example of a high-trust culture that engages in practices that may not be in the best interests of its users.<sup>5</sup> And, just as social capital has the capacity to increase trust as per Putnam and Fukuyama’s respective understanding, it has the capacity to increase distrust – particularly of out-groups or in networks where internal competitive values can foster suspicion or sabotage in an effort to gain advantage.

The one clear way bridging social capital is endangered in online social networks is precisely what is made visible by the algorithm used by the platform to deliver content. This ‘filter bubble’ – a term coined by Eli Pariser (2012) – speaks to how our use of the web delivers ever more ‘personalised’ experiences that will conform to our interests and values while limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints. And it is not just on social media where this occurs. In five experiments conducted by Epstein and Robertson (2014) to track how voting preferences can be manipulated by the use of search engines. SEME – search

engine manipulation effect – was shown to have an appreciable impact on how internet users' opinions are shaped by what the search engine results produce, and that a higher value is attributed by these users overall to those search results that are higher ranked. When we contrast this against Putnam's view of increased bridging social capital, it would appear that there are significant obstacles thrown up by the very platforms we use. Already, there has been a profusion of fake news outlets who are able to capitalise on narrowcasting to niche groups. For instance, the rise of Breitbart and Alex Jones' Infowars have been able to unify various far-right extremist groups in the proliferation of conspiracy theories such as claiming the tragic Sandy Hook shootings were a staged false flag event orchestrated by the Obama administration to take away citizens' guns, and Pizzagate which claimed that the Clinton campaign was engaged in running a paedophile ring out of a pizzeria. As more people would click on these stories, the more similar stories would appear in their newsfeeds.

As concern has mounted over the impact of filter bubbles in creating a warped world scenario in manipulating our perceptions through algorithmic sorting, more studies have been done to trace the causes and implications of social media content filtration. Such filters on visible content may be said to contribute to a kind of digital tribalism, hostile divisiveness, and an outright 'balkanization' of the social web. In his farewell address, then-President Barack Obama pointed to the threat these filter bubbles presented to democracy when people retreat into these polarising bubbles:

[...] especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste — all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there (Obama 2017)

We may turn to other more recent examples of how the impact of social media can increase social capital for malevolent purposes. The terrorist organisation ISIS has been remarkably effective in their use of social media for the use of recruitment and branding:

The Islamic State maximized its reach by exploiting a variety of platforms: social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, peer-to-peer messaging apps like Telegram and Surespot, and content sharing systems like JustPaste.it. More important, it decentralized its media operations, keeping its feeds flush with content made by autonomous production units from West Africa to the Caucasus—a geographical



range that illustrates why it is no longer accurate to refer to the group merely as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a moniker that undersells its current breadth (Koerner 2016).

As much as Western media has focused on how ISIS has broadcast its atrocities on social media, this only makes up a small part of its social media branding activity. Propagandistic content indexed on infrastructure improvement and economic development are used to portray the positive benefits of ISIS' activities. Moreover, ISIS' use of social media is quick to capitalise on current events to target marginalised groups for recruitment.

A second example originates largely from the uncensored social media platform, 4Chan, a successor to Something Awful. The causes of the rise of the alt-right is still a matter of speculation but we might credit 4Chan and various subreddits in essentially playing a prank with its long history of the community's sometimes cynical or controversial embrace of various movements such as Occupy, Anonymous and as the origin of the infamous Gamergate scandal. It would only be later adopted by various far-right groups as a symbol of unity against political correctness, globalisation, and multiculturalism. Sparked, in part, by economic conditions and a surge of refugees, the alt-right movement, which focuses on a kind of retrograde nationalism, protectionism and xenophobia, surged. But it was 4Chan and the co-opting of a cartoon frog, Pepe – created by Matt Furie in his *Boy's Club* and never intended as a symbol of hate – that precipitated the spread of a now recognisable meme (memes being one of the preferred methods of 4Chan). As Dale Beran writes,

Pepe symbolizes embracing your loserdom, owning it. That is to say, it is what all the millions of forum-goers of 4chan met to commune about. It is, in other words, a value system, one revelling in deplorableness and being pridefully dispossessed. It is a culture of hopelessness, of knowing 'the system is rigged'. But instead of fight the response is flight, knowing you're trapped in your circumstances is cause to celebrate. For these young men, voting Trump is not a solution, but a new spiteful prank (Beran, 2017).

Subsequent memes circulated throughout the 2016 US presidential campaign. In one instance, Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton denounced Trump supporters as 'deplorable,' which then resulted in the creation and proliferation of memes by alt-right supporters embracing the term as a badge of honour. Memes making use of Pepe and the term 'deplorables' became a rallying point for alt-right, neo-Nazi and other white nationalist groups, being used in a variety of contexts, including supporters of UKIP, the Dutch Party for Freedom under Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen's National Front, and the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. It has also been brandished in response to any criticisms of extremist nationalist views, and against political moderates. This has been



joined by other associated epithets such as ‘librul tears,’ ‘deep state,’ ‘cultural Marxism,’ and ‘cuck’ (short for cuckold, and in reference to the cuckold pornographic genre where the narrative clearly defines ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ males – terms employed frequently by the alt-right and originating on 4Chan).

On the other side of the political divide would be the efforts of #Resist, a proliferation of Twitter accounts functioning as subversive alt-government agency operatives, and antifa. The result has been an increasing polarisation along the ideological axis of far left and far right. Examples such as these underscore the negative forms of online social capital.

Such efforts at extreme polarisation seek to escalate discord and instability. What is needed is to re-appropriate the tools of social media to insist on civil discourse, dialling down hostilities.

### Online Social Capital: Measurement

As social capital can be considered a resource that is generated, accumulated and distributed in a social network, it is important to keep in mind the networked environment in which the exchange of social capital occurs. Given the networked communicative capitalist aspects of social media, with its goals of extracting surplus value, exploiting free labour, and in automating social functions for data and profit with the smokescreen of ‘customisation,’ these characteristics will have serious implications for the prospect of what social capital means in a digitally networked environment.

Operating behind the social aspects of social networks is the ongoing engine of generating profit from user sharing and participation, and this through advertising (John 2013). The appearance of the social functions as a kind of shell around a mechanistic, almost cybernetic process by merging the technical with the social, creating a form of social engineering (van Dijck 2013). Moreover, various theorists have found evidence and made compelling arguments that the real outcome of online social activity tends toward extracting the surplus value from creative activities (Fuchs 2008), and to thus perpetuate a cycle of exploitation of free labour (Terranova 2000, 2004). These acts of exploitation by large, corporately owned and controlled social media render moot many of the supposed empowering benefits of social media usage.

There is no shortage of those, such as Clay Shirky (2008) or danah boyd (2007) who will sing the praises of social media as being an empowering force for those who might not otherwise have as many social opportunities in offline life.<sup>6</sup> What unites many of these ideas in their more optimistic portrayal of social media in terms of its affordances, opportunities and benefits is an emphasis on its social character, largely at the exclusion of a critical political economy perspective. Yet at the same time, it will not serve to be dismissive of the empowering effects of social media. As the example of The Fossil Forum at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, it is possible to create and participate in digital

spaces that are community-centred and empowering rather than exploitative and alienating.

In smaller networks that do not make use of social buttons for the purpose of accumulating likes, online social capital may operate differently. Rather than numeric markers, social capital may be gained in a more narrative form such as repeated demonstration of expertise about a subject, kindness, reciprocity and sharing. In such cases it is difficult to apply a numeric measurement to the online social capital that is generated in communicative interactions.

When it comes to online social capital, some industries and organisations prefer to have something more tangible they can measure, and possibly exploit for the purposes of manipulation. Those who seek to invest in strategies and tactics to optimise online social capital growth as linked with human capital (particularly in management studies) may prefer to have an empirical basis upon which to base their decisions. The relational perspective in social scientific research attempts to bridge the gap between understanding the social dynamics of a community and in having usable and rigorous empirical tools to map, measure and apply predictions to any changes in social structure and develop new mechanisms or methods to improve connectedness, and enhance trust within a community. However, even a more empirical approach still banks on several assumptions, not least of which being if social capital is itself amenable to measurement at all. What needs to be asked at every instance is how online social capital is measured, and why. If online social capital can be measured, then there is a basis upon which it might be managed. The use of metrics provides a tool for optimising strategies for the accumulation of online social capital.

If social capital is a resource embedded in our social relations that can be mobilised, the ease and speed by which developing connections and sharing information occurs in these networks may very well result in a larger volume of social capital resources from which to draw upon and mobilise. A greater return on temporal investment can potentially be realised due to the viral nature of some forms of content sharing.

### Online Social Capital: Ownership

Who has ownership of online social capital as a resource? Is it held by individuals, in the relations between individuals, or collectively held in common? Is online social capital simply a synonym for the influence one can exert as a function of one's status, and thus aligned with a discourse on class and power? If so, we are back at the foot of the circle whereby social capital's economic power subsumes that of the social, and that the social is purely an instrumentalist means of preserving or increasing power.

The social is precisely what it pretends to be: a calculated opportunity in times of distributed communication. In the end, the social turns out to

be a graph, a more or less random collection of contacts on your screen that blabber on and on—until you intervene and put your own statement out there. (Lovink 2012, n.p)

Geert Lovink castigates those who have propped up an overly idealistic definition of the social in social media when it has simply been an effort to inject some humanistic notions in something that is properly cybernetic. The challenge he presents us is not to expand the number of digital humanities programs, multiply the number of tools or fall back into a nostalgic form of soft deconstruction, but to place critical theorists at the helm of enormous technological programs. Lovink's bold proposal has considerable merit as it would make it possible to address ethical issues right at the design stage, but the realities seem to mitigate against this as it would mean a relinquishing of control by those whose pecuniary interests govern the creation and maintenance of our social media network platforms.

In order to better address these questions, it will be necessary to consider the other side of the term: social capital from an economic standpoint. From there, we will be able to view social capital as part of a nuanced economic and social system as social capitalism.

### A Social Tool or Numbers Game?

Bourdieu's definition of social capital is indexed on the social reproduction of inequality, set in the broader context of all other forms of capital, whereas for Coleman social capital is an available non-financial resource that empowers individual agency. Operating between the two definitions would be Putnam, who also notes some of the unintended consequences of social capital, particularly among those who have malevolent designs.

As Bourdieu argues, social capital exists in a broader context of other forms of capital, but there is now the additional aspect of how *online* social capital operates differently due to the affordances of a digital network structure owned and operated by corporate interests. The nature of the online environment does seem to allow for a more accelerated accumulation of social capital resources due to wider audience reach and the way online social capital can be facilitated by social buttons, and in being able to measure our online 'performance'.

Social media sites have an appreciable impact on what types of online social capital we accumulate, and how much. Through algorithms that deliver content on the basis of a proprietary formula, there is cause for concern that we are being served with a very selective worldview based on our interactions in these spaces, a form of selective exposure that narrows and filters our perspectives. Moreover, where the accumulation of online social capital becomes an end in itself through the pursuit of more friends, followers, retweets, and likes, it seems to be less about the social aspects and more about playing a numbers

game, competing with others to obtain a high score as proof of popularity and social value.

The use of visible metrics obscures the more substantive value of online social capital as a truly cooperative and collaborative shared social asset. By ignoring – or insisting – on removing the numeric bias, focus might be restored to the truly social benefits of interaction and participation by shifting the importance away from individuals and back unto a community.

### Main Points

- Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of social capital is closely aligned with cultural capital, and its function is as an instrument of exclusion given its connection to economics, and an agent of social reproduction through education and broader cultural forces.
- James Coleman's definition of social capital places less emphasis on economics, and more on the prospects for community empowerment.
- Both Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama indicate where social capital can have negative aspects due particularly to groups who disseminate hate and exclusion.
- The algorithmic sorting of our online information on social media sites would appear to exacerbate the creation of cliques, as well as produce the conditions for selective exposure.
- Online social capital seems to tend toward quantizing our social relations while social media sites continue to extract surplus value from these exchanges. This presents a parallel series of economic circuits: the online social interactions resembling a model of capitalist accumulation, while the social media sites that own user content are able to capitalise on these user interactions.
- Although some traditional theories of social capital focus on non-economic forms of capital, such as trust and reciprocity, online social capital makes those secondary to economic relations.