

Rural Internet Use and the Strengthening of Weak Ties

by

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ABSTRACT

'Social capital' and 'the digital divide' live double lives; in popular media they are buzzwords, and in academia they are debated theoretical constructs. Literature on both of these topics has proliferated from social theorists to The World Bank to new academic research to public policy initiatives to reportage and back again. Digital divide researchers wishing to study the intersections of social capital and internet use find themselves faced with an increasingly muddy field of enquiry. A significant part of this muddiness is the promulgation of ill-defined conceptions of social capital which seem to lack any context-sensitivity. To help clear this up and advance the field of inquiry, this dissertation offers: 1) a redefinition of social capital and 2) a new case study. After a critical evaluation of past literature, social capital is redefined as an individual asset related to normative behaviour, social networking across various communication media, and positive and negative products of localized social interactions. Using a qualitative methodology tailored to relevant fieldwork, individual practices and perceptions of the aspects of social capital and internet use were studied in the rural town of Alston in Cumbria, which enjoys an unusually high level of broadband internet access. The results of this case study are presented as evidence of the need to fundamentally understand community-specific social relations through individuals' networks and norms. The research supports a thesis of the 'social shaping of technology', which explains differentiated adoption and use of the available information and communications technology. In the conclusion, community informatics, a promisingly context-sensitive approach to researching and deploying technologies, is recommended for future study. However, community informatics like any other research and practice approach needs to realize the distinct advantages of a bottom-up method of technology deployment should be complemented by a bottom-up approach to studying contextually-specific phenomena like social capital.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction and Overview

Between 1995 and 2001, James Katz and Ronald Rice conducted ‘the first national survey based on a random sample of the American population focusing specifically on internet use and its social implications’ (Hargittai 2004, 138). They summarized their preliminary results for a chapter in the edited volume *The Internet in Everyday Life*. However, for one reason or another, the edited volume did not come out until a few months after the full analysis of the survey data had been published in their book *Social Consequences of Internet Use*. From the preliminary analysis in the book chapter, Katz and Rice’s last sentence concludes: ‘we view the Internet as an important and multiplicative social capital resource for US society’ (2002b, 135). Whereas in the full book treatment, they write: ‘the internet neither directly creates nor diminishes social capital’ (2002a, 199). The possibility that significant problems might exist in researching the connection between internet use and so-called ‘social capital’ seems starkly evident in Katz and Rice’s contradictory statements. What made them change their mind?

The most noticeable difference between the preliminary book chapter and the full book is the time and resources dedicated to defining social capital. In the book chapter, Katz and Rice offer no definition for social capital; the concept is simply used as a commonly understood metric having something to do with the ‘utopian view’ of the internet’s social potential (2002b, 117). In the full book, however, they manage to offer a brief synopsis of the most prominent social capital theories and then offer a framework of their own, tailored for use in studying social capital online (2002a, 338, Table 14.1). The more careful attention paid to defining social capital apparently had a profound effect on the conclusions drawn from their data analysis. But if there is the possibility of definitional problems when using social capital, then there also must exist the possibility of methodological problems. And it turns out that Katz and Rice illustrate such a problem. Even though they go through the process of redefining social capital, they rely on the same quantitative methods and even the same source data of the most popular of the social capital theorists, Robert

Putnam. Their failure to re-coordinate their methodology with the re-conceptualization of social capital calls into question the validity of their findings. Social capital appears to be used in a way that is most convenient and most conducive to the social scientists' purposes—and this is by no means the only example of this in the literature. In an attempt to address these problems, this dissertation begins by offering a redefinition of social capital and a tailored qualitative methodology. Then, hoping to advance the field of inquiry connected to digital divide research, the results of a new case study, using a custom approach to studying internet use and social capital, are presented.

Why study social capital?

Increasing attention is being paid, in the World Bank and elsewhere, to the social aspects of development. [...] But social phenomena are so all-pervasive, and often so vaguely defined, that taking them into account in a systematic way is actually very difficult. One approach to untangling and analyzing some of the social forces at work in development is through the concept of social capital. (Narayan 1999, 1)

In this introductory excerpt from a World Bank policy paper, Deepa Narayan refers to Joe Stiglitz's 'post-Washington consensus': the revelation that development involves important but inconveniently vague 'social aspects'. According to Narayan, the concept of 'social capital' is available to help solve 'a number of puzzles' (1999, 1). However, Narayan and The World Bank's (in)famous source of inspiration—Robert Putnam's brand of social capital (1993a; 2000)—has come under sustained criticism, resulting in what Ben Fine's terms a *benchkin*¹. And the criticism is in many ways warranted, considering the potential theoretical and practical issues raised in the way social capital has been appropriated in the above

¹ According to Fine, 'a benchkin begins with a contribution, or a number of contributions, which are not necessarily novel in thinking [...] What is lacking in originality [...] is made up for both in dramatically denying conventional wisdom [...] and in straddling both academia and popular consciousness. [...] And most important, benchkins generate a voluminous literature that prospers by devastatingly criticising the initial contributions as point of departure' (2001, 82).

policy paper excerpt. For one, the assumption that social phenomena should be ‘defined’ like economic variables, rather than observed, seems to be indicative of what delayed The World Bank from taking notice of ‘the social’ in the first place.

To be fair to Narayan, he does cite several common criticisms of Putnam’s theories in an attempt to construct a new analytical framework for social capital—though these still fall short of offering much needed contextual-specificity. More importantly though, Narayan cites, as well as seems to channel, Amartya Sen and his conclusion about the similarly popular and problematic concept of ‘social exclusion’ that had become vogue in academic and policy debates:

Rather than trying to see social exclusion as a brand new concept, which it is not, the basic idea has to be assessed in terms of the particular focus of attention it helps to generate and the contribution it makes to the understanding of relational aspects of deprivation by adopting a somewhat more specialized perspective. (1999, 46)

In swapping ‘social capital’ for ‘social exclusion’ in this excerpt from Sen, there is a pragmatic argument for continuing to *reflexively* engage with social capital. Thus despite the paradox raised by Fine’s benchkin label, this dissertation views the task of refining the idea, and studying the aspects, of social capital as a both a valuable theoretical and pragmatic exercise, which benefits from the vast and expanding pool of literature and level of popularity that is helping to refocus a wide range of academic disciplines and policymaking bodies on fundamental social issues.

How about the social side of the digital divide?

The other popular yet academic obsession that is involved at the heart of this dissertation, which rose throughout the 1990s alongside social capital, is the transformative promise of the internet. Many ‘early adopters’ of the internet extolled its virtues as an enhancer of interaction and community (Rheingold 2000; Negroponte 1995). In particular, Rheingold’s enthusiastic and widely-cited reflection on the San Francisco-based virtual community ‘The WELL’ suggested to readers in 1993 that there really was a bit of utopia available online: ‘the WELL felt like an authentic

community to me from the start because it was grounded in my everyday physical world' (2000, 2).

In the US at least, the internet's extolled virtues were augmented by studies indicating the educational advantages of computer use in schools; this raised the concern about the possibility of a national 'digital divide' (Gore and Clinton 1996; NTIA 1999). As opposed to the social theory origins of social capital, the digital divide was a rhetorical device before it became a focus of academic analysis. Thus, the digital divide concept can be and is swiftly deployed to describe nearly any local, national, and international context where unequal access to electronic communication can be suggested—The World Bank included as an early adopter. This has inspired considerable academic argument over the simplistic definition of 'the digital divide' as a resource-based binary descriptor (Dimaggio and Hargittai 2001; Graeff 2008). However, the basic thesis that individuals with access to computers and/or the internet are substantially better off socio-economically than people without such access has at the very least, according to Mark Warschauer, 'helped focus attention on an important social issue' (2003, 8). This serves to complement the earlier argument for social capital research extended from Sen's advocacy of social exclusion literature. And while this dissertation could try to problematize the definition of the 'digital divide' as it attempts to study rural internet use's affects on social capital, the history of the digital divide serves as a firm-enough frame, unlike the history of social capital as will be discussed in Chapter II, to enable it to discuss the relevance of this community-specific study with similar academic studies and future policy initiatives.

Previous studies and initiatives. A number of North American studies have already been conducted attempting to assess the relationship between (Putnamian) social capital and internet use in specific 'community networks'². The studies of the Blacksburg Electronic Village

² Harrison and Stephen define community networking projects as 'sites or services offered through [...] the Internet that individuals using computers and modems can consult for information, resources, and/or interaction relevant to life in their local geographically based community' (1999, 222–223).

(BEV) in Montgomery County, Virginia (Kavanaugh et al. 2002; 2005), Grand Rapids' GrandNet in Minnesota (Sullivan et al. 2002), and Netville in Toronto (Hampton and Wellman 2003) have shown that there is some correlation of Putnamian indicators of social capital with internet use, despite the political scientist's initial misgivings about 'the net' (Putnam 2000, 169–180). However, what remains unclear is exactly what has changed about the social behavior and which aspects of community-relevant social capital can be directly linked to the presence of community networks and internet use more generally; this latter point being often further confused by the definition and measurement of Putnamian social capital forming tautologies and logical circles (see Chapter II). These are critical issues to address when studying the 'social aspects' at the heart of what would constitute social exclusion versus social inclusion by way of digital divide.

In terms of worrying about the socio-economic ramifications of a digital divide or a nation-wide dearth of social capital, the United Kingdom has been no exception. Surveys and academic studies of national social capital were widely advocated and executed in Britain under New Labour (Harper 2001; Hall 2002). Addressing potential intra-national digital divides in 2000, the UK Government devised the Wired Up Communities (WUC) program 'to test the transformational outcomes of supported and largely free access to challenge rhetoric of the inclusive information society' (Halcyon Consultants 2003). One of the seven pilot projects was based in the rural, Northern England town of Alston in Cumbria. For the purposes of this dissertation, Alston represented an excellent opportunity to study social capital in an isolated context, 'enjoying' obvious access to the internet as a result of a publicly funded community network project called 'Cybermoor', from which a meaningful extrapolation could be made to the social contexts of other digital divide studies and initiatives.

What is a Cybermoor?

The name Cybermoor derives from 'cyber', the colloquial truncation of cybernetics, plus 'Alston Moor' which is the general location of the WUC-

sponsored computer network project. Alston Moor is a civil parish in Cumbria. The parish comprises the main town of Alston, home to the Alston Moor Parish Council, as well as the villages of Nenthead, Garrigill, and a handful of smaller hamlets spread out across the Moor and nestled between wide tracts of farmland and abandoned mining sites. According to the 2001 UK census³, Alston Moor's population was 2,156 with a population density of 0.14 persons per hectare.

The main town of Alston is 20 miles from the next nearest, and properly large, town centre. Access to public services is generally an issue for residents. But since October 2002, in an effort to combat digital isolation, two-thirds of all residents have enjoyed computers and Internet access at a reduced service cost, as well as community-based training and technical service (Lake 2004). Now, broadband Internet service reaches 25 square miles across Alston Moor via a custom-built wireless network. Although this is technically only half of the parish's land area, the location of the wireless towers offer access to a majority of the population living in the town of Alston, the major villages of Nenthead and Garrigill, and many of the intervening farms. Thus, the 'potential' for Internet penetration approaches 100 percent. The current number of households subscribing to Internet access is unclear because Cybermoor (whose records were accessed for this dissertation) only maintains about 300 user accounts out of over 900 homes, with the remaining 600 or so either not using Internet or, as fieldwork indicated, subscribing to other currently available dial-up and broadband services from companies like British Telecom.

The founders of Cybermoor made a strong case for funding in 2000 because the only available internet access for Alston was offered by dial-up services priced beyond the reach of average local incomes. The cost of internet access was only one barrier however; most residents of Alston did not even own a computer and could not afford to purchase one. When a few workers at the rural Community Council charity Voluntary Action Cumbria (VAC) learned about the UK Government's Wired Up Communities (WUC) program, they decided to submit a proposal for

³ Statistics from the 2001 UK census can be accessed through www.statistics.gov.uk.

Alston to be one of the pilot projects. Under the project management of Daniel Heery, VAC won their bid to join the WUC program, having marketed themselves as one of the most remote, and thereby digitally disadvantaged, communities in the UK. This was the birth of Cybermoor, which still exists as a co-operative, managing the Cybermoor wireless broadband service and community website Cybermoor.org.

One of the key aims of the Alston Cybermoor project ‘was to develop ICT skills associated with broadband access to generate employment opportunities for local people and to promote economic inclusion’ (Devins et al. 2003, 17). However, in a 2004 commissioned study of Cybermoor’s impact on the Alston Moor community, the positive effects of Internet access were found to transcend the original economic goals. Two of the ‘social benefits’ claimed by the study were based on survey results, where ‘online communications and the Cybermoor website [had] encouraged [...] or supported’ participation in local activities for 12% of respondents, and the helping of neighbors for 8% of respondents (Lake 2004, 27). Unfortunately, these indicators of positive civic engagement were only measured as to whether computers were being used in the action of participating or helping, not whether there was a marked increase, i.e. a marked benefit from having internet access. One could easily interpret this data as not showing any effect on levels of participation: perhaps a few organizers of community events were now thinking of adding posts to the Cybermoor website on top of their usual methods of advertising, but the study fails to indicate if community members were learning about such opportunities or being persuaded to get involved through information and communication facilitated by the new medium. A qualitative deconstruction of such scenarios is missing. Where do Alstonians get the majority of their information about community events and opportunities for civic engagement? Even if they are aware of the information being provided on Cybermoor.org, why do they choose to use, not use, or perhaps even avoid that source? Fundamentally, how do the residents of Alston Moor use the internet, or think about internet use, for social interactions that might relate to social capital more broadly?

The earlier argument for Alston Moor as an ideal case study is reinforced by the considerable potential for trying to understand reasons why there still may be an obvious and differentiated internet access in the town—perhaps a yet un- or under-addressed social/digital divide. That is why this dissertation, through its redefinition of social capital, proposes studying the connections between internet use and social capital as personally defined and qualitatively articulated in order to more effectively understand a community's contextually-specific aspects of social capital.

Overview of remaining chapters

The main goal of the remainder of this dissertation is to outline a cohesive theoretical and methodological framework which, when applied to the case of Alston Moor, reveals that the promises of internet use for social capital and civic engagement are generally exaggerated and highly context-specific. On this basis, this dissertation argues that future research in this area by academics and practitioners needs to be similarly sensitive to the specific social and historical trajectories of a given community.

Chapters II and III construct the necessary theoretical and methodological framework called for in this introduction. Chapter II offers a brief analysis of social capital's various definitions and their major criticisms, suggesting a redefinition and refinement of the concept, considering it an individual asset related to normative behaviour, social networking across various communication media, and positive and negative products of localized social interactions. Chapter III proposes a qualitative methodology to complement Chapter II's definition of social capital, emphasizing the need for ethnographic interviews and thematic coding.

Chapters IV, V, and VI layout the argument for context-specificity in researching social capital, as well as for researching internet use. Chapter IV presents a narrative account of the results of fieldwork in Alston, focusing on demographic profiles of informants: their sense of social behaviour and norms, and the varying degrees of internet use which underlie the complex fabric of social capital in the town. Chapter V distills

the results of the fieldwork into relevant norms and networks, which indicate how a given individual in Alston maintains social capital and how they may or may not be benefiting from the community network depending on their personal evolution in a 'social shaping of technology' interpretation. Chapter VI concludes the dissertation, urging future social capital and digital divide research and policy initiatives to be context-specific if they intend to cultivate realistic benefits through ICT deployment. Community informatics is offered as an approach that could have the potential and motivation for furthering the research of this dissertation with an even closer analysis of the nature of contextually-specific social capital, but only if bottom-up methods of technology deployment are complemented by bottom-up approaches to evaluating social capital.

CHAPTER II: Redefining Social Capital

As Putnam himself indicates in his literature review, the term ‘social capital’ has been independently invented or reinvented numerous times since its initial invocation by L. J. Hanifan in order to discuss ‘community involvement for successful schools’ in 1916 (Putnam 2000, 19). But it has also been argued that ‘theoretical precursors’ highlighting ‘the important role that community plays in individual well-being’ can be found in works from Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Émile Durkheim, or even as early as Aristotle and the *I Ching* (Halpern 2005, 3–4). In terms of developing a comprehensive theoretical framework for social capital though, the literature truly starts in the 1980s with articles by two prominent sociologists, divided by an ocean: Pierre Bourdieu in France and James S. Coleman in the US. The last of the early and most influential theorists to enter the fray was American political scientist Robert Putnam with the publication of two works in 1993: a book-length study connecting what he called ‘social capital’ to the success of regional governments in Italy (1993a), followed up by an article on the potential implications of his Italian findings for US communities (1993b), cementing social capital as a policy imperative.

Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam each offer a different definition of social capital, which is firmly rooted in their particular empirical evidence, (sub-)disciplinary backgrounds or theoretical traditions, and personal agendas. This means that each definition has distinct advantages and disadvantages in terms of theoretical depth, intended level(s) of analysis, and appropriate research methodologies. The problem, noticeable in several critiques⁴, is that these limitations are too often overlooked in the application of social capital.

In his book on The World Bank and social capital, John Harriss argues that the misapplication of Putnam’s version of social capital has

⁴ Other than the example that follows in this chapter from Harriss (2001), see also Halpern (2005, 14, Box 1.1) and the example made of Katz and Rice (2002a; 2002b) from the beginning of Chapter I.

been a kind of ‘Trojan Horse’, allowing ‘individualist economists’ to further ‘depoliticize’ development policy by ‘dumbing down’ critical social science and exploiting its rhetoric (2001, 82–96). Harriss’ account is partial to be sure; however, he offers a keen criticism of the legacy of Putnamian social capital and what can be seen as its swift and uncritical adoption by policymakers, suggesting that rather than adopting the capitalist language of economics to forward research into other developmentally-relevant social aspects, it has allowed for economics to subsume these aspects in a new conveniently quantifiable way.

Ben Fine, another partial critic, who Harriss cites at length, sees the problem of economization as fundamentally undermining social capital as a valid field of inquiry. He argues, ‘capital is an economic category and, in reality, is itself social, thereby creating an oxymoron for the mirror image of social capital, the notion that some other type of capital is not social’ (Fine 2001, 15). If we see economics and capital as inherently social, then according to Fine the myriad conditions of underlying social relations might all be labeled as various forms of ‘capital’; and thereby, ‘the failure to specify capital properly in its social and historical context allows it to roam freely over any number of non-economic or social characteristics, whether attached to capitalism or not’ (ibid., 16).

Contrary to Fine, Harriss sees the potential of social capital to be properly ‘put to work’ as a Trojan Horse, particularly through reinserting Bourdieu’s concepts of power into the discussion. Similarly, Craig Calhoun seems to echo Fine’s criticism when he asserts that Bourdieu’s ‘analysis of [social capital] as one form of capital related to others, and of all forms of capital as intrinsically social [is] a recognition that has not yet been taken up in, say, the World Bank’ (2006, 1411, footnote 16). Otherwise, it would seem that Putnam’s legacy of social capital is just ‘a capacious bag allowing for different understandings and different interpretations’, which The World Bank is attracted to because it ‘often makes for successful ideas in the development discourse’ (Harriss 2001, 96).

Acknowledgement of the varieties of social capital and the ever-growing volume of critical literature such as Harriss’ and Fine’s

necessitates that academics and policymakers alike be aware of the theoretical and practical implications of engaging with a particular conception of social capital. Thus, the rest of this chapter is dedicated to developing a critical awareness of the trajectory of social capital theory, describing the formation of a problematic mainstream from Coleman's to Putnam's theory, which has dropped any vestige of Bourdieu's theory. Contemporary criticism is inserted to illuminate problems and possibilities, including an analysis of what insights offered by Coleman and Bourdieu should be reinserted into the mainstream legacy of Putnam. The end result is the formulation of what is hoped to be a better (re)definition of social capital, which accounts for recent contributions to the academic literature and demands that social scientists and policymakers specify historical and social context in order to conduct meaningful research.

The attenuating trajectory of social capital theory

One of the earliest uses of social capital, albeit half a century after Hanifan's coinage, was Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—possibly the original inspiration for Putnam's later appropriation (Lemann 1996; Putnam 2000, 19). In her assessment of city planning practices, Jacobs writes,

To be sure, a good city neighbourhood can absorb newcomers into itself, both newcomers by choice and immigrants settling by expediency, and it can protect a reasonable amount of transient population too. But these increments or displacements have to be gradual. If self-government in the place is to work, underlying any float of population must be a continuity of people who have forged neighbourhood networks. These networks are a city's irreplaceable social capital. (1961, 148)

Whereas Hanifan was concerned with education⁵, Jacobs' use of 'social capital' involves what would later become two mainstream currents in

⁵ Education as a current of social capital theory inspired both Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988). These emphasized interrelationships with education capitalized as 'cultural' and 'human', respectively. Coleman's adoption of human capital from economics is an example of Fine's pet-peeve about the economization of social science (2001).

social capital theory: the connection to civic life for Putnam and the ubiquitously acknowledged importance of its socially ‘networked’ existence.

Bourdieu, symbolic capital, and reducibility. Instead of building on Jacob’s community-based conception, Bourdieu offers a functionally individualistic, tripartite definition of personal capitals—economic, cultural (or informational), and social—as a way of conceptualizing different resources which constitute ‘symbolic power’ and ‘distinguish’ members of particular social classes. With this aim, he defines social capital as ‘the 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 or recognition’ (1983, 102–103). Here, Bourdieu mentions the significance of networks for describing an individual’s range of social contacts, but his usage is focused on the valuation of ‘membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” that entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word’ (ibid., 103).

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Fine is particularly concerned with problems for social theory that arise from what he sees as an all-consuming encroachment of economism via the language of capital, passively accepted as benign rhetoric. Contrary to Coleman’s adoption of economics, and Putnam’s by proxy, Craig Calhoun argues that Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital is inspired by critical response to the same concern over economization of social science:

‘Economism is a form of ethnocentrism’ Bourdieu wrote. It removes the elements of time and uncertainty from symbolically organized exchange; it desocializes transactions leaving, as Bourdieu follows Marx (and Carlyle) in saying, no other nexus between man and man than ‘callous cash payment’. It treats pre-capitalist economies through the categories and concepts proper to capitalism. (Calhoun 2006, 1410, citing Bourdieu 1990, 112–113)

In the introduction to ‘Forms of Capital’, Bourdieu explicitly cites his concern about the subjugation of noneconomic forms of exchange by ‘reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange’ (1983, 97).

Bourdieu's reinsertion of the social is its own 'Trojan horse' by way of the clever predication of his argument on the irreducibility of 'the social world' as an 'accumulated history', which requires the 'reintroduction' of 'the notion of capital and, with it, accumulation and all its effects' (ibid., 96).

The reducibility and irreducibility of capitals is a staple of Bourdieu's argument. Even though 'economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital', they are 'never entirely reducible to that definition' (ibid., 106). This solidifies the interdependency of plural forms of capital for Bourdieu:

There are some goods and services to which economic capital gives immediate access, [...] others can be obtained only by virtue of a social capital of relationships (or social obligations) that cannot act instantaneously, [...] unless they have been established and maintained for a long time. (1983, 106)

This also indicates that the ability to use social capital forged between two individuals need not be a symmetric equation, depending on relative volumes of the other forms of capital as well as the specific social and temporal context of access. This is based in part on Bourdieu's assertion that 'social capital is never completely independent of [the whole set of agents to whom he is connected] because the exchanges instituting mutual acknowledgement presuppose the reacknowledgement of a minimum of objective homogeneity' (ibid., 103). Bourdieu clarifies 'objective homogeneity' through defining the process of investment in a social capital:

The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term, such as those of neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt or institutionally guaranteed. (1983, 103)

These varied 'durable obligations' represent parallel constructs to social norms—like reciprocity—which Coleman will find integral to his theory of social capital.

Coleman, rational action, and norms. Although chronologically Bourdieu precedes Coleman in terms of both publication date and in his use of the network metaphor to describe an individual's social circles, the remaining Coleman-Putnam legacy of social capital almost completely disregards the French sociologist⁶. Thus consistent with what appears to be a neologistic tradition in social capital literature, in 1988, Coleman offers a framework for social capital that stems from his background in 'mathematical' sociology—particularly his advocacies of the theory of rational action and graphable social structures like network theory. In terms of methodology and level of analysis, Coleman differs from Bourdieu on the former, focusing his empirics of social capital on quantitative analysis at the individual or micro-level.

Careful to define the foundational elements of his theoretical framework, Coleman begins with the theory of rational action 'in which each actor has control over certain resources and interests in certain resources and events' (1988, S98). Social capital is, thus, simply 'a particular kind of resource available to an actor' (ibid.). Then, Coleman places this 'resource' within a structural framework inspired by network theory, where:

'Social capital is defined by its function, it is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having characteristics in common: they all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure' (1990, 302).

Within the structure, social capital can take on three forms defined by function—this is how Coleman attempts to marry 'socio-' with 'economics'. First, 'obligations and expectations' function as the normative institution of social capital, typified by 'the level of trustworthiness of the social environment [...] and the actual extent of obligations held' (1990, 306). Second, 'the potential for information' to flow through the social

⁶ In his article 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', Coleman fails to mention Bourdieu (1988); and in *Foundations of Social Theory*, Bourdieu receives only the briefest of academic nods: 'see also Bourdieu' (1990, 300). Similarly, Putnam barely mentions the 'French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu' in his literature review (2000, 19).

structure, requiring at a minimum social contact and ‘attention’ (ibid., 310). Third and last, ‘norms and effective sanctions’ can constitute ‘powerful, but sometimes fragile’ forms of social capital (ibid.); here Coleman is relying on an argument made earlier in the same book, where ‘a norm concerning a specific action exists when the socially defined right to control the action is held not by the actor but by others’ (ibid., 243).

Foreseeing the potential for positive as well as negative uses or outcomes from certain forms of social capital, Coleman maintains that a powerful presence of any form of social capital ‘not only facilitates certain actions but also constrains others’ (ibid., 311). Nevertheless, Coleman argues that sanctions should be reinforced by ‘closure’, whereby an individual’s social network is completely closed in order to most effectively embody the network’s social capital through cultivation of strong common norms and trust (1988, S99; 1990, 318). This results, firstly, in an implicit invocation of the network theory concept of strong and weak ties—an important distinction in Putnamian social capital, citing Mark S. Granovetter’s seminal article ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’ (1979). Secondly, closure is the procedural precursor to how strong ties (or what Putnam will call ‘bonding social capital’) can turn into ‘bad social capital’ through the propagation and reinforcement of norms like racism.

Ron Burt, the next network theorist to get involved in social capital discourse, is the first to resist Coleman’s theory of ‘closure’ and instead advocates for the strength of ‘structural holes’ in networks. (1992). By not having closure, the gaps represent connections of individuals to external information sources (relationships) that are additive in nature as opposed to the redundancy of information loops in a closed structure. In many ways, this is simply a critical reapplication of Granovetter’s aforementioned ‘strength of weak ties’ thesis. In network theory, Granovetter defines the strength of an ‘interpersonal tie’ as a ‘combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize that tie’ (1979, 1361). In order to reduce the complexity of this relationship, he defines the interpersonal ties as symmetric in character and in strength for each

individual (called a ‘node’); though he does admit the likelihood of asymmetry (*ibid.*, footnote 2). This serves the all-important function of simplifying the nature of reciprocity—the critical norm for fostering and exploiting social capital. While the practicality of this decision is obvious, failing to account for asymmetry illustrates one way in which questions of ‘power’ have been neglected by mainstream social capital theory.

Another problem with Coleman’s theory that continues into Putnam’s work is his insistence that it is a ‘public good’ because it is ‘an attribute of the social structure in which a person is embedded’ and therefore not ‘easily exchanged’ like a private good could be (1990, 315). Yet, Coleman already introduced his main definition of social capital by first stating that he conceives of Granovetter’s social ties—‘these social-structural resources’—‘as a capital asset for the individual’ (Coleman 1990, 302). This seems to confuse the fundamental economics analogies at work. Coleman says that the consumption or use of a public good involves and can be defined by the presence of ‘externalities’—‘inseparable consequences for more than the one actor’ (*ibid.*, 34). Public goods also lack the ‘property of conservation’ or ‘fixed quantity of the resource’ (*ibid.*, 34–35). This seems reasonable enough given the vagueness inherent to the quality of social relationships constituting social capital as a public good. However, at the same time, Coleman wants to talk about social capital as a measurable good: ‘one of those forms of capital which depreciate over time [...] if it is not renewed’ (*ibid.*, 321). Alejandro Portes argues that the vagueness in Coleman’s definition led to many of the problems faced when adopting the mainstream theory of social capital via the potential for ‘relabeling a number of different and even contradictory processes as social capital’ (1998, 5).

Burt, mentioned earlier for his argument about structural holes, offered a redefinition of social capital in 1992 that seems to confirm Portes’ last argument by outmatching Coleman’s vagueness: social capital as ‘friends, colleagues, and more general contacts through whom you receive opportunities to use your financial and human capital’ (Burt 1992, 9). What Burt does forward in his usage of ‘friends, colleagues, and more

general contacts' is the process of popularizing the language of social capital literature—a rhetorical strategy which would be wholly embraced by Putnam in his accounts of associational and civic life—exemplified by his infamously misleading title *Bowling Alone*⁷.

Putnam, generalized reciprocity, and civic engagement. As was previously mentioned, the true proliferation of academic wrangling over social capital did not come until 1993 when Robert Putnam published his first essay regarding social capital, appropriating the term to represent a 'level of civiness' that could be embodied by communities and mobilized into mutual benefit for connected parties (Portes 1998, 19). Putnam's focus is on civic life at a community or meso-level of analysis—an obsession stemming, in part, from his academic interests as a political scientist, as well as his involvement in the 'communitarianism' movement⁸.

Not surprisingly, the first example of an uncritical appropriation of social capital theory is by Putnam himself. In *Making Democracy Work*, he essentially imports Coleman's definitions of: action-based social capital; norms, trust, and reciprocity; networks of strong and weak ties; and public goods with externalities (1993a, 167–176). Putnam pads this bulk of economics-tinged social theory with insights directly from economics on managing community resources—particularly 'generalized reciprocity' and 'personal trust' versus 'social trust'. Here, generalized reciprocity is defined as 'a continuing relationship of exchange that is at any given time unrequited or imbalanced, but that involves mutual expectations that a benefit granted now should be repaid in the future' (ibid., 172). 'Personal trust' is based 'intimated familiarity with *this* individual', whereas 'social trust' is 'a more impersonal or indirect form' (ibid., 171, emphasis original). Putnam then proceeds to substantiate the legitimate presence of social capital by drawing parallels to his own primary and secondary sources of

⁷ Putnam admits, 'strictly speaking, only poetic license authorizes my description of non-league bowling as "bowling alone." Any observant visitor to her local bowling alley can confirm that informal groups outnumber solo bowlers' (2000, 113).

⁸ Listen to *What's Communitarianism* (2001) for a discussion of the movement, and for Putnam, as a guest on the radio program, self-professing his advocacy.

empirical data. Because his studies are about civic engagement, Putnam's social capital becomes about civic engagement. Thus Coleman's grand foundations of social theory have been dragged out of their vagueness and put to work. But does it work?

Putnam situates the norm of generalized reciprocity at the heart of what constitutes 'highly productive social capital' and communities that 'can more efficiently restrain opportunism and resolve problems of collective action' (1993a, 171). He labels these communities 'networks of civic engagement' and makes them synonymous with all forms of associational life: 'neighborhood associations, choral societies, cooperatives, sports clubs, mass-based parties, and the like' compiled by his study of the societies that seem to support successful regional governments in Italy (ibid., 173). They virtuously: 'increase the potential costs to a defector in any individual transaction'; 'foster robust norms of reciprocity'; 'facilitate communication and improved flow of information about the trustworthiness of individuals'; and 'embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a culturally-defined template for future collaboration' (ibid., 173–174).

Putnam's basis for his claims relies on his reading of Italian history and comparative analysis of civic life in the North and South of Italy. Unfortunately, *Making Democracy Work* has been 'comprehensively trashed [...] by the author's fellow specialists' (Harriss 2001, 30).

According to Harriss, the criticisms span all theory and methodology:

In the book itself there are problems of method (in the construction of measures, selection of data, and the like); problems of logic (notably in the apparent equation of interpersonal trust generated in face-to-face relationship with generalized trust); and questions of historical substance. (2001, 30)

Yet Putnamian social capital seems unscathed in its widespread influence—the epitome of Fine's term 'benchkin'.

Regardless, Putnam presses on with his analysis of social capital and associational life in the US. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam barely cites any other social capital theories—even Coleman—relying on the (not so) firm establishment of the concept outlined in *Making Democracy Work*. His

definitions have been elegantly simplified in language and, unfortunately, theoretical depth. Social capital is now defined as the ‘connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (2000, 19).

Using this synonymy of capital with network, reciprocity and trust, Putnam sets out to rename those concepts for his own rhetorical purposes. Strong and weak ties, as two forms of social capital, are now bonding and bridging, respectively. Bonding social capital is ‘exclusive’ and ‘constitutes a kind of sociological superglue’, whereas bridging social capital is ‘inclusive’ and ‘provides a sociological WD-40’ (ibid., 22–23). Generalized reciprocity, ‘the touchstone of social capital’, is now simply the principle of ‘I’ll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without ever knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor’ (ibid., 134). Putnam redefines types of trust: ‘specific trust’ is now ‘thick trust’, ‘embedded in personal relations that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks’, and ‘generalized trust’ is now ‘thin trust’ regarding ‘the generalized other’—like trusting your acquaintance from the coffee shop’ (ibid., 136). In this framework, all trust is good for social capital, generalized reciprocity is good for social capital, and both bonding and bridging social capital are, mostly, good for civic engagement—which, it turns out, is itself a form of social capital. But what happened to norms outside of reciprocity and trust? Where are the power asymmetries in relationships? What happened to the rigor and contextuality offered by Coleman and Bourdieu?

What has been lost from Coleman?

The oversimplification of Putnam’s social capital to include only one norm, reciprocity, alongside trust(worthiness), and associational networks undermines a researcher’s ability to assess the variety of norms that are context-specific to a targeted group. Thus, the particular characteristics that shape a community or a network’s social capital are left hidden. This has ramifications for important policy issues which could hinge on the understanding of what types of associational activities and concordant

social obligations or norms are most important to a particular community for building and maintaining social capital between its members.

Putnam has also misplaced his level of analysis. In his examination of civic engagement, Putnam is supremely focused on the community level as a political scientist and communitarian; however, he is still employing a crude adaptation of a network theory of social capital, revolving around the individual. This is problematic from the point of view of validating the results of his data analysis. While measuring the membership levels of groups and organizations is appropriate to a community or meso- level of analysis, the presence of an individual's name on a list of members fails to indicate the level of participation characterizing that membership. This latter concern, the characterization of participation, would represent a more accurate indicator of social capital potential from the routines of contact-based trust formation or noting the actual instances of civic engagement, but this would require measurement also at the individual level as advocated by Coleman.

What has been overlooked from Bourdieu?

‘The process of excising Bourdieu from social capital has had the effect of endowing social capital with an unlimited scope of application both in terms of what it is and in what effects it has.’ (Fine 2001, 97)

Putnam and Coleman both lack an explicit separation between the resources accessible by social capital and the social processes that are involved in forging that access. Portes argues that this can lead to a tautological definition of social capital (1998, 20–21). To paraphrase Portes' example, in *Making Democracy Work* Putnam argues that the success of northern Italian cities relies on the importance of civic engagement, which is supported by high levels of social capital driving such engagement; and in order to develop that community resource, Putnam identifies associational activity, like civic engagement, to be one of the most important sources of social capital (ibid.).

In contrast, Portes suggests that Bourdieu's definition avoids tautology when it ‘makes clear that social capital is decomposable into two

elements: first, the social relationship itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and quality of those resources' (Portes 1998, 3). Instead of seeing the outcomes of associational life in the forms of trust or secondary contacts also representing social capital, Bourdieu frames the resources or outcomes of activating social capital in one's personal network in terms of instrumentality, whereby such assets can, by virtue of fungibility, be invested in the development of other forms of capital: economic and cultural, or reinvested in social capital.

Similarly, Foley and Edwards have illustrated that Bourdieu's conception may be the solution to the problem of context-specificity in social capital theory:

Neither resources in general, attitudes and norms such as trust and reciprocity, nor social infrastructures such as networks and associations can be understood as social capital by themselves [...] the key to understanding how social relations facilitate individual and collective actions lies in a conception of social capital that recognizes the dependence of its "use value" and "liquidity" on the specific social contexts in which it is found. The context-dependent nature of social capital, moreover, means that access to social resources is neither brokered equitably nor distributed evenly, as Bourdieu's conception, alone among those canvassed here, explicitly recognizes. The access required to convert social resources (the "raw materials" of social capital) into social capital has two distinct, but necessary, components—the perception that a specific resource exists and some form of social relationship that brokers individual or group access to those particular social resources [...] The specific social context in which social capital is embedded not only influences its "use value"; it also shapes the means by which access to specific resources is distributed and managed. (Foley and Edwards 1999, 146, as quoted in Fine 2001, 104)

Following his quoting of this passage, Ben Fine challenges the interpretation of 'context'. He asserts that the theoretical and methodological power of Bourdieu is in his relativization of social capital to strong respect for context versus a weaker postmodern relativization of context against social capital:

There are two different meanings to be associated with context. One [...] is an understanding that the very meaning of social capital itself is dependent upon the social and historical circumstances in which it is located. Indeed, such is the inescapable content of social and other forms of capital to be derived from any serious reading of Bourdieu. Whilst there may be presumed to be fungibility or liquidity between different types of capital in given circumstances, as one form can be converted into another; what those capitals are is determined by the circumstances themselves [...] In this light, the other meaning of context is differently oriented and is considerably weaker for it considers that meaning (of social capital) as unproblematic but that its use, distribution or whatever depends upon a whole range of accompanying conditions and circumstances that need to be specified [...] and that there is no omission of relevant variables.' (Fine 2001, 104)

Toward a better definition

The insights offered by reflecting on Bourdieu and Coleman through the critical mirrors of Portes, Foley and Edwards, and Fine, create an agenda of theoretical and methodological issues that need to be addressed by any new definition of social capital. In this light, the following definition of social capital seeks to correct for the problems of contextual-specificity, tautological metrics, and appropriate levels of analysis. Furthermore, the definition aims to provide a relevant framework which can be used to study social capital and internet use, without trying to impose prior contextualization on the fieldwork and data analysis.

The redefinition. Social capital is an individual's ability to exploit his or her relationships as a personal resource, where such relationships are defined by a norm of reciprocity founded upon a precedence of personal contact and the observance of systemic or network-based social norms. Using this definition of social capital, the only way to directly measure the presence of social capital is to observe the instances of its utilization in context: when an individual initiates contact with a member of their social network and is rendered a desired 'service' according to a norm of reciprocity—as opposed to a purely economic exchange. While it

may be possible to longitudinally enumerate instances of social capital exploitation in order to determine individuals' levels of social capital in a particular context ((sub-)system/network), estimations of potential social capital could be made by assessing the indicators of social capital: personal contacts and the observance of particular social norms. This requires knowledge of the contextual elements of personal social relations like norms within a network or community under study.

Some researchers have argued for a need to differentiated between forms of social capital, such as bonding, bridging, or even linking⁹, which are dependent on the specific function of social capital. Based on recent empirical work correlating the forms of social capital, Halpern concludes,

While the bonding-bridging distinction may be important in some cases, maybe we don't need to worry quite so much about always measuring both bonding and bridging social capital—if an individual is rich in one, then they will probably be rich in the other too. (2005, 21)

And given the nature of context-dependency, it is not difficult to argue that all three forms are present in any social capital-bearing relationship—having 'an intimate causal relationship with one another (Halpern 2005, 28). Thus, these specific functions can be seen as simply context-dependent exploitations of any social contact, rather than forms. Even a detailed process of documenting instances of social capital exploitation can only suggest what functions might be available at any given time.

Contextuality and level of analysis. The context defined will be the networks and subnetworks identified by respondents as relevant to them, contributing to a community 'super-network' in which respondents reside geographically and are capable of contacting one another via available modes of communication. However, in this dissertation's intended application of social capital research, there will be a particular sensitivity to access to and ability to use electronic forms of communication like the internet (a.k.a. contemporary ICTs), with awareness of available community networks as defined in Chapter I.

⁹ Michael Woolcock coined a third form of social capital *linking*, in order to account for functional connections between individuals of different social status or power (1998).

For the above definition and framework, the appropriate level of analysis is the individual, or the ‘micro-level’. And while the use of networks and the concept of a community suggest possible meso-levels of analysis, these will always be based on documenting how respondents perceive their contacts and ‘memberships’—which will remain a micro-level exercise. Furthermore, network theory suggests that community, as an abstract concept, can prove to be a dependent variable itself, constituted by the personally-defined phenomena of social networking, wherein the nature of social relations can differ (Wellman et al. 1988).

Social norms and fieldwork. Determining localized social norms is a qualitative exercise, not only in the methodological sense. And whereas the calculation of personal network size is an apt quantitative exercise, the strength and means of establishing and maintaining contacts might be more fully researched through the anecdotal evidence generated by a qualitative ethnographic approach. Such a strategy has the potential to illuminate a more nuanced spectrum of personal dispositions and social relations, which could be matched against the anecdotal evidence of remembered instances of social capital exploitation. The next chapter outlines a qualitative methodology that was used for this dissertation’s case study in Alston, based on reflexively operationalizing such a contextually-sensitive definition of social capital.

CHAPTER III: Notes on Methodology

Effectively summarizing the major shortfall of the previous studies of social capital and community networks that were mentioned in Chapter I, John Field writes:

Most of the quantitative evidence [...] seems to support the view that online interaction complements face-to-face engagement, and may even supplement it. However, this needs to be qualified [...] [T]ell us *why* online interaction and face-to-face community are associated. (2003, 104, emphasis original)

To elaborate upon Field's observation, there are two key arguments that indicate why quantitative methods might be incapable of studying social capital as it relates to internet usage: the need to comprehend 'process' and the complexity of social capital indicators. According to Dudwick et al., 'quantitative techniques are, in general, less effective in understanding context and process. That is, they are not as adept at depicting the process, or series of events, instigated by a particular intervention. And it is this process that ultimately results in observed impacts' (2006, 5).

Because of its position as a potentially intervening factor/ technology, the internet's role in a community network's social capital must be seen in light of process—indicating the need for qualitative methods. Reflecting on how metaphorical proxies are required in order to encapsulate the indicators of social capital as quantitative variables, Grootaert et al. admits:

The number of determinants of the creation of social capital that can actually be captured in a quantitative model [...] is likely to be a small subset of the total set of relevant variables. At the very least any such model would be subject to significant specification bias. It is likely that the process of creation (and destruction) of social capital will be understood better by means of a variety of qualitative in-depth studies. (2004, 17)

Dudwick et al. affirms this sentiment in writing, 'social capital, which is something at once intimately familiar and possibly subconscious to the insider and foreign to the outsider, is [...] eminently suited to detailed qualitative data analysis' (2006, 36).

While the argument could be made for adding value to a study by combining both qualitative and quantitative methods (Dudwick et al. 2006; Grootaert & Van Bastelaer 2002), the needs of this particular dissertation are strongly qualitative. To respond to Field's quote at the beginning of this chapter: without the ability to discuss how and why individuals choose to seek out information and develop social contacts and particular social relations—whether that be online, face-to-face, over the phone, etc.—there is little chance of understanding the development and maintenance of (or Bourdieuan investment in) social capital. Given the imperative to at least try to understand these factors, this chapter describes a qualitative methodology that was deemed most appropriate for the Alston case study.

'Understanding' and choosing ethnographic interviews

Considering the importance of the insights gained from Bourdieu's empirically-derived¹⁰ theories about symbolic capital, it follows that his views on methodology might offer an appropriate starting point for designing a good methodology. And although he is professedly 'loath to engage too insistently [...] in reflections on theory or method' (1996, 17), Bourdieu's article 'Understanding' does offer a window into his particular brand of qualitative research. He advocates a highly reflexive form of interviewing, which he calls 'active and methodical listening':

It combines the display of total attention to the person questioned, submission to the singularity of her own life history—which may lead, by a kind of more or less controlled imitation, to adopting her language and espousing her views, feelings and thoughts—with methodical construction, founded on the knowledge of objective conditions common to an entire social category. (1996, 19)

While Bourdieu ardently disavows the phenomenological bracketing of ethnomethodology (1990), his methodology can be

¹⁰ In 'Pierre Bourdieu and Social Transformation: Lessons from Algeria', Calhoun discusses how Bourdieu's theories of exchange were based on his early observations of Algerian social behavior (Calhoun 2006).

categorized under the umbrella of approaches known as ‘ethnographic interviewing’. Quoting James Spradley, Barbara Heyl offers a functional definition of ethnographic interviewing:

‘The essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand’ (1979: 5), and the researcher’s job in the ethnographic interview, then, is to communicate genuinely, in both subtle and direct ways that ‘I want to know what you know *in the way that you know it* [...]’ (p. 34; emphasis added). (Heyl 2007, 369, citing Spradley 1979)

Heyl later reflects that ‘ethnographic interviewing has long been utilized in sociology as a way of shedding light on the personal experiences, interpersonal dynamics and cultural meanings of participants in their social worlds’ (2007, 372). Tasked with eliciting ‘the meaning of actions and events’, which could potentially represent norms of ICT use and indicate the contextually-specific generation of social capital, ethnographic interviewing seemed well-suited to form the centrepiece in this dissertation’s methodology.

Data collection and reflexivity

Using a semi-structured interview approach, an ‘advisory’ guide of predetermined questions was generated, before ethnographic interviewing commenced, meant to help the interviewer ‘engage the respondent and designate the narrative terrain’ (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 76). Starting from the goal of uniting this research with other current efforts, questions on the interview guide were loosely based on suggestions for qualitative social capital research from The World Bank (Dudwick et al. 2006), with additional contextualized questions inspired by the survey used for the HOP Associates’ evaluation of Cybermoor (Lake 2004). General topics covered by the questions might be grouped as being about: basic internet usage, informal and family-based social activities, perceptions of the community (including several structural questions¹¹), formal groups and

¹¹ Spradley argues that ‘[Structural questions] enable the ethnographer to discover information about *domains*, the basic units in an informant’s cultural knowledge. They

networks, information access and modes of communication, collective action and cooperation, and trust.

Each question was expressed in a way that would hopefully encourage informants to recall examples of actions and perceptions in an anecdotal fashion. For instance, one question on the HOP Associates survey asked ‘On average, how long do you spend each day using a computer?’ (ibid., 14). This question was originally designed to deliver quantitative data in terms of the number of hours of computer use; but this could indicate business use, schoolwork, playing solitaire, etc. A more useful construction for assessing norms of computer usage and sociality is ‘Has anyone ever accused you of spending too much time online? [...] Why?’ If a question failed to elicit an anecdotal response, it could be rephrased or repeated later in connection with a memory or narratively-expressed opinion inspired by an entirely different question. While most of the questions on the guide were asked in each interview, the order, omission, and addition of questions varied for each informant; thus, each interview could be ‘viewed as a dynamic, meaning-making occasion’ (ibid., 9), embodying the necessary contextual-specificity for social capital research. Part of this process involved the evolution or on-site adaptation of many questions after conducting the earliest interviews; the most notable being the ‘key-informant interviews’¹² conducted with members of the Cybermoor project team, which significantly helped shape questions about interactions through and with the community network.

The one question that was asked of all informants, and left unchanged from its source, was the ‘social trust’ question from the World Values Survey: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’

allow us to find out *how* informants have organized their knowledge’ (1979, 60, emphasis original). An example of structural question used in the case study is: ‘What do you see as the distinct communities or sub-communities of Alston Moor?’

¹² Dudwick et al. defines a key-informant interview as one ‘with someone who is a formal or informal community leader or who has a particular perspective relevant to the study’ (2006, 11).

(www.worldvaluessurvey.org). This question has been the source of much speculation in social capital research since Fukuyama wedded 'social trust' with a kind of macrolevel 'social capital' in order to ascertain political and economic causal relationships (1995). Putnam's use of social, 'generalized', or 'thin' trust has kept this notion alive in the literature, with plenty of data analysis correlating it with social capital and civic engagement (2000). The purpose of this question was mainly as a prompt for a discussion of trust in the community of Alston. But by conserving the phraseology of the survey question, it offered a standardized question for potential comparison against other studies (quantitative and qualitative), as well as between the informants in the case study.

Access and interview conditions. While initial contact was made with the project manager of Cybermoor, who offered suggestions to help the research as well as answered practical questions about the town of Alston, due to unforeseen circumstances, he was unavailable during the week of fieldwork in mid-April 2008. This meant that all interviews, including those with the Cybermoor employees, were arranged through cold contact and networking after arrival in Alston. The discovery of potential informants was largely dependent on referral (or the 'snowball' method).

Interviews were conducted wherever informant's decided it would be most convenient for them; however, every effort was made to try and arrange interviews in their homes. Locating the interview at an informant's home provided a number of distinct advantages, such as: 1) placing the informant in a comfortable environment for conversation; 2) creating the opportunity to take note of an informant's social spaces, such as the relative distance from community meeting places to a particular home and the location of the computer in the house; and 3) observing complementary contextualized practices such as needing to check e-mail on a home computer or responding to a landline phone call.

All interviews were recorded using an Olympus digital voice recorder. Informants were asked if they would mind being recorded before the voice recorder was turned on. All informants did agree to be recorded.

The first thing recorded in each interview was a prior consent statement, which ensured confidentiality of all interview information as well as anonymity when the results would be later published.

Biases and Reflexivity. Given the use of snowballing as the method for locating subjects, selection bias was possible. However, making several initial cold contacts allowed for some diversity in the pattern of networking. In the course of interviewing, there was a potential for response error in the form of social desirability responding, defined by Wilson as, ‘when answers are altered to show the respondent in a desirable light with respect to the interviewer, including the views that the respondent ascribes to the interviewer on the basis of external characteristics such as social class or gender’ (1996, 99). This was possible in two ways: 1) my identity as a Cambridge student and an American creates a social class and cultural divide which affects the subject’s responses, or 2) the subject’s natural desire to present oneself in the most favorable light, especially when referring to questions of community activism and volunteerism. To mitigate the first risk, I deemphasized my educational background while emphasizing my own rural upbringing to build rapport. This self-awareness in the interview context, or ‘participant objectivation’ as Bourdieu calls it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 67–68), also formed part of the formulation of questions used to interrogate my own assumptions about rural communities and computer use. In reference to the second risk, the goal of framing questions in order to elicit anecdotes was hoped to reveal a truer picture of a respondent’s actual participation. There is always the risk of false reporting when asking retrospective questions, but this is an issue faced by any data collection method without a longitudinal component.

Data analysis and validity

While initial categories were used to develop the guide of questions for the ethnographic interviews, these were not used as predetermined ‘codes’ in analysis. Wilson’s sentiments about uncoded questions suggest their suitability for studying individualized social capital in context:

Uncoded questions allow the researcher to search the full range of responses obtained before reducing replies to a set of categories [...]. This means that open-ended questions do not constrain the respondent's beliefs or opinions to predetermined categories as fully standardized methods of data collection must do. (1996, 101)

Avoiding preexistent meaning categories was the first among efforts undertaken to avoid the possibility of imposing supposed indicators into categories that can quickly entangle themselves—a problem identified in one of the previous quantitative studies (Kavanaugh et al. 2005), contributing to tautological conclusions about social capital. Thus, the more inductive, iterative process of 'thematic coding' was adopted to analyze the data (Flick 2006, 307).

Using thematic coding was ideal for social capital research because it seeks to preserve the contextual individuality of each interview: starting from the generation of 'a system of categories for the analysis for the single case', and then generalizing into group comparisons later by cross-checking 'the developed categories and thematic domains linked to the single cases' (ibid., 308). The secondary comparative process offers a kind of internal check on the validity of findings, where the researcher is forced to rethink his perspective when switching from a focus on how each informant's testimony exemplifies certain individualized behaviors to a focus on each noted behavior and how it is exemplified through the patterns among individual informants. Solidifying the justification for this method of analysis, Flick explicitly states that thematic coding 'is above all suitable for studies in which theoretically based group comparisons are to be conducted in relation to a specific issue' (ibid., 312); in this case the specific issue being social capital.

The process of writing forms the final analytical element in what Bourdieu called the *spiritual exercise* of interviewing. He used the term spiritual exercise because he conceived of its aim as being 'to obtain, through *forgetfulness of self*, a true *transformation of the view* we take of others in the ordinary circumstances of life' (1996, 24). The rigorous yet hermeneutical yet reflexive enterprise for Bourdieu was an attempt to capture a complete account of his subject; and to this end, he would even

allow his researchers to *role-play* when respondents ‘occupying a specific social position’ could not be accounted for through the limitations of snowballing (ibid., 20). While this an extremely dubious data collection method—particularly in terms of ensuring contextual validity—the spiritual model that this provides can be used to integrate role-play at the opposite end of the methodological process, the analysis and writing of fieldwork, specifically when anonymity for the data sources is of utmost concern. And considering Alston’s small size and expectedly high level of familiarity among residents, there is a strong need for anonymizing the data sources.

Holstein and Gubrium argue, ‘analyst’s reports do not summarize and organize what interview participants have said as much as they “deconstruct” participants’ talk, showing the reader the *hows* of the *whats* of the narrative dramas of lived experience’ (1995, 80). To uphold these goals as well as honor the anonymizing promise in the informants’ prior consent statements, Chapter IV reports on the results of the Alston case study through a narrative recontextualization of the data, which merges personal field notes with a series of constructed interview scenarios featuring *hybridized* informants. Based on the overlapping of roles and demographic attributes, each *hybridized* informant helps to anonymize the data from the treacherously close-knit town of Alston by carefully collating related quotes and analysis, from complementary sources found among the 19 interviews conducted, in order to construct an individualized, theoretical *stakeholder*—similar to Weber’s ideal type, representing a particular demographic profile and social context in the community. Using this method, stakeholders can be specifically cited and juxtaposed in agreement and disagreement to cover the full gamut of informants. Particular relevance for the construction of stakeholders in studying technology use comes from the common design practice of conceptualizing target users of technology with specific individual needs (Preece, Rogers, and Sharp 2002). Being able to refer to hybridized individuals as having individual contexts allows the data to be anonymized, while preserving the

importance of context to the case analysis and comparative analysis used in the thematic coding method for evaluating social capital.

CHAPTER IV: The Stories from Alston

It was a Monday when I finally arrived to a chilly April evening at Henderson's Garage near the *town foot* of Alston. I had ridden the train to Newcastle-upon-Tyne and then boarded the Wright Bros. 888 Coach from Newcastle to Alston, which I would later learn—due to reallocation of county council subsidisation for the disused route—might no longer be in service by the end of 2008. I was lucky to be able to check into the Alston YHA (Youth Hostel Association) Hostel, considering this stopover on Northern England's Pennine Way was recently saved from closure by a couple of veteran YHA staffers from Yorkshire.

With my laptop strapped to my back, I began exploring the town: peeking into antique, used book, and knickknack shops dotted along the quaintly cobbled Front Street. There were two local butchers barely three doors apart—a miraculously surviving vestige of Alston's 'better days'. I bought some groceries at the only 'supermarket' in town, one of The Co-operative Group's chain stores (*the co-op*)—there was also a small, specialty whole foods store. The newsagent, my other would-be option, had recently closed shortly after the co-op began to sell newspapers. I wanted to check my e-mail before it became too late; I was awaiting an e-mail from Cybermoor's project manager. I assumed, thanks to Cybermoor's prodigious injection of wireless broadband in Alston, that I would have no trouble *piggybacking*¹³ a wireless internet connection off of one of the local shops or pubs—surely one of the six pubs dispensing pints to the town's dwindling population would have an open network.

That was when *I was found* by my first true Alstonian contact. I was walking down Front Street with my laptop open, refreshing the wireless network list in a vain attempt to find a signal. A matriarchal woman on the sidewalk across from Town Hall called me over. She mistook me for the speaker she was expecting for a function in the Masonic Hall. I explained

¹³ An *International Herald Tribune* article defines 'piggybacking' to be 'when someone—a next-door neighbor or a stranger parked across the street—finds an open [wireless] network and logs on' (Lee 2006).

to her the research that I was hoping to undertake in Alston that week, and we laughed about the irony of my situation. She suggested a number of potential wireless hotspots in town (none of which actually existed), but then thought to call a friend who lived at *the top of town* and ask if I could *pop in* and use his internet access. And this was how my first true contact introduced me to my first true informant. This demonstration of the ease of navigating Alston's dense social network, aided by quick-to-help informants, set the tone for my fieldwork, from my data collecting through to my understanding of local residents' social capital.

Back at the hostel, I met Jym, a resident of one of the other towns on the moor. He was working on a major report for his career and wanted to concentrate on writing it outside of the distractions of his house. Jym and I became fast friends; and he was an important informal key informant. Jym's familiarity with the Alston community, in many ways, served as the tightly packed center of my snowball approach to interviewing. And talking to him at night about what I was learning about Alston became the first stage in my analysis. Moreover, Jym was the first person to indicate that the discussion board, the centrepiece of my conception of Cybermoor as a community network, was a source of more negative community sentiment than positive.

The Cybermoor Team

The morning after I first arrived in Alston I set out to interview my formal key informants, the members of the Cybermoor project team. I met them in their small office in the Town Hall building. In all, I managed to talk to four members of the staff during my time in Alston, learning about the history of the project, its current status, and its uncertain future.

On the more technical side, I learned that many of the current (and growing number of former) users 'want something faster'. A good indicator of use came when they mentioned that 'the network can get bogged down around 4pm when the kids come home from school and get online.' I also found out that the Cybermoor cooperative was not financially sustainable—it relied on charitable organizations and government agencies

to which Cybermoor was continually applying to in order to get funding. This funding was often tied to conditions that Cybermoor had to fulfil. One of them being the idea of the community network itself and Cybermoor's discussion board, as I learned when I asked about recent problems regarding anonymous posts.

In the early days we had anonymous postings and it created problems. We then went through a phase where we had registered posting and virtually nobody used the discussion board. We then restructured the whole website and we went back to anonymous postings. But if people are using the Cybermoor network to put the postings up we can actually find out who they are. So therefore if we get people taking a malicious attitude [...] we can identify who they are and go in and give them a rap across the knuckles. If they put a posting up from a non-Cybermoor [network] we can't track it. So we are in the midst of how we deal with that again. I mean, once we set the board up, we had a number of sensitive issues. We had a posting went up about girl who was coming up to [...] sixteen. So a number of postings went from boys about what they would like to do to her once she was sixteen. Now, we were able to track from which computers they were being done. I ended up being the person who had to contact more than a number of teenage boys/girls, whoever it was, who just put things up for a laugh [...] I had to talk to some father and say look your lad's put this up. He was astonished and said, 'No it's not him; it's one of his mates—he's a bloody idiot. He comes over here and uses his computer.' So you have to kind of manage this. And in a tiny community people get very polarized or very vocal about what they do or don't support. And sometimes they choose to put that up on the [discussion] board. *But it is the very existence of the [discussion] board which does provide a mechanism for us to be part of some of these funded projects.*

Similar to the small number of posters claimed by the HOP Associates survey (Lake 2004), Cybermoor knows from its user records that, in terms of the number of individuals posting malicious gossip, the problem seems relatively small.

I think it would probably work if it wasn't for a handful of people who abused it. A lot of people want to post anonymous. To be honest, *if I was posting I wouldn't want to put my name to things, but that wouldn't be*

because I was ashamed of what I was saying, I just wouldn't particularly want to get involved at that sort of level. But that wouldn't be because I was posting something that was inappropriate. Some people are just more private than others.

But as I found out later, everyone hears about certain posts through traditional gossip channels and what is a small act becomes a heavy community burden.

Chris, fifth-form student

Armed with my new awareness of Cybermoor's less than sparkling record as the conduit of Alston's 'community network' but with no interviews lined up, I decided to investigate the historic railway station past Alston town foot. Feeling hungry, I entered the small café sitting directly on the station platform. After buying a couple cakes from the owner, I take up her suggestion to check out 'The Hub', a kind of museum housing old motorbikes, signs, and photographs collected from Alston residents. This is where I met Chris.

Chris is a fifth form student at Samuel King's School (SKS) in Alston. When he is off from school, Chris works part-time at The Hub. I browsed some of the items before starting up a conversation with Chris about the museum. When I found out he was a local student, I asked if I could interview him. We started by talking about his job because I was interested in how he got it.

There was a shop over the way, and I had applied for a job there because [a relative] worked there [...] I had another job at the time but a job came up here and the people at the shop suggested it. Yeah, they just suggested my name here and I started working really.

Chris's dress and hairstyle are not mainstream, certainly not the mainstream for SKS according to him. He tries to avoid the common hangout spots for other teenagers in town because of the strong possibility of abuse from other SKS students, particularly the students he identifies as being 'chavs'. When I ask him about generalized trust, Chris responds

I generally do trust people when I'm out and about, but that might be because I live in Alston. But you've kinda got to be careful because

especially here everyone knows everyone else's business. If you say one thing that can be led on, like knocking over dominoes, one person might know and then another person might know. [...] If it's late on a Saturday night, it's not a matter of trust; it's just a matter of how much abuse you might get thrown at you.

Even though he says he there is much to do in Alston. He does to the pubs occasionally for open mic night, even though he is underage, and plays guitar with number of regulars. Being a part of the music scene, he has friends that are all ages. But he says a lot of his friends don't live in Alston.

My best friend lives in Garrigill, which is 3–4 miles away. I've got friends over in Weardale. I've got friends in Carlisle. And friends like in Northumberland. It's just a question of finding, if on a weekend I'm not working, I'll try and find a bus to go visit them. Otherwise I'll just have to talk to them on the phone or on MSN or something."

Chris uses social networking sites like MSN, MySpace, and Bebo, and checks his accounts daily. He says a 'majority' of his friends are on a network and 'the few that don't, don't have internet'. As for keeping in touch with these other friends, he says 'I do occasionally ring them, but probably not as much as people I'm talking to online'. He relies on the networks 'quite a lot', explaining 'If I'm going to a friend's house I'll try to contact her through [Bebo] first as opposed to ringing her [...] It works'.

At home, he's been accused of spending too much time online. As for the Cybermoor website, he is very familiar with it and likes that they have sponsored the 'Ammy Awards', a new annual music and spoken word competition with multimedia hosted on the website. He goes on the discussion boards occasionally, but never posts anything—mostly just to read the gossip.

Lara, university student on break

I wanted to get more data from younger members of the Alston community. A friend of Jym's daughter was home from university. We arranged an interview at her house before she had to return to the northern city where she was studying. And so I met Lara, an

undergraduate student who was born and raised in Alston Moor. She considered herself a *local*, as opposed to an *incomer*, even though her parents were a part of the substantial influx of *hippies* that settled in the area during the 1960s and 70s.

Unlike Chris, she went to secondary school *off the moor* yet felt that most of her good friends were in Alston. I was interested in how and when she got together with her friends from home, and so I asked her what her schedule was like on break from university.

Usually, meet up with friends quite quickly. People just come around; they just pop in. Because most of my good friends' mums and dads are best friends with my parents, and they all seemed to have children around the same time. So we all seem to have that same connection. We [...] have always been welcome in each other's houses our whole lives. People just pop in anytime really, which is quite nice.

She says that she rarely e-mails anyone in Alston, even when she is at university. And while some of her friends have complained about her not being on Myspace or Facebook, she says she is just not interested. She prefers 'face-to-face over anything else'. But if she does use text messages from her mobile, she said in Alston 'instead of texting back, they'll phone me to talk to reply', whereas in the city, at university, 'it might be easier just to text the whole conversation'.

She admits that she might be a bit spoiled in terms of richness of her social experience of Alston. I asked her how she would describe her town if a friend at university asked, 'What is Alston like?'

I think of it as a little sort of hippy town, where everyone is just really open-minded and still just got that great mentality to kind of welcome anyone and accept any walk of life. But that's because that's the kind of group I'm in and I know from working in the pub and things that not everyone is like that. And other people have completely different views of the same town but that will all be on their friends and their experiences here. It would be the same everywhere I'm sure.

Not all of her experiences have been rosy though. One bad experience she recalled was actually in response to my question about her using the discussion boards on Cybermoor. Earlier she had said the site

could be really useful for posting announcements, but she confirms Chris' view on gossip in Alston by describing an incident that occurred after a friend had a brain seizure:

People wrote on [Cybermoor] that he was a druggie and stuff, and his parents read it and that was quite horrible. I think because people do that, because this is a small community and people do gossip, if there was a way that people could spread gossip in a way that could never be traced back to them they would. So I used to check it then. That's a really bad reason to check it [...] And the administrator's were really good, if you said 'this was really not appropriate, can you take it off', and they always did. But it was the fact that people could get on there in the first place, and do the damage.

In terms of generalized trust, Lara followed Chris in suggesting, 'it depends what you're trusting them with'. 'In Alston?' I ask. 'People don't lock their doors around here [...] you trust people not to do bad things to you [...] I think as a whole everyone is quite trusting of one another; it's kinda deservedly so.' She said it seemed so safe in Alston, and that made you trust people more.

You can stop and talk to people you don't know without having to worry that—well [...] maybe in a city you might be more careful about how you interact with people and what kind of messages you send out, you know—smile and eye contact. Here it's fine. [...] If the snow is bad or something you offer to go and do a person's shopping or something, they would trust you—even if they didn't know you very well—to give you the money and that you'll come back [and let yourself] into their house.

Lucy, mother and self-employer

I took recommendations for potential informants from everyone, even the people at Cybermoor. They suggested I interview Lucy, and Chris recommended her as well. Her house was conveniently located in town; it was not too much trouble to pop in after arranging an interview with her over the phone. We sat in her home office, my voice recorder placed next to her large desktop computer monitor.

Lucy had been involved early on with the Cybermoor project through the skills training program instituted alongside the distribution of

free computers. She remembers that interest in computers was definitely split:

I think probably 50 percent took off with it [...] There were all kinds of stories with the computer being in the corner with the dust cover over it [...] I would bump into the people on the street and, 'How are you getting on, are you using your computer?' 'Oh no, sorry. I'm afraid it's in the corner of the room. It never gets switched on.' [...] It's maybe the case where you just cannot force people to do something. You make something available, but you maybe cannot expect 100 percent take up on it.

I asked her about her home business; how did she get clients?

It's word of mouth here. I've never advertised. Never. Even my first [client...] they were renovating the Town Hall and the [work] got a bit out of hand and they just asked me if I would lend a hand, and I did. That was probably like 12 years ago or something. And I've kind of been involved ever since [...] One thing leads to another. [...] There's a lot of small businesses in Alston [...] In a community like this, word gets around.

Similar to her estimate on computer adopters, when I asked her about how her clients contact her, she responded, 'Phone. [...] A lot of people still will not use e-mail. [...] It is maybe [...] 50 percent will use e-mail'. She uses the internet for business supplies and gets stationary delivered.

Lucy has a couple of kids, one in college and the other looking for a job in the south. She remembers making a lot of friends with other parents when her kids were growing. She describes the community playgroup and how parents would often stay and help out instead of just dropping their kids off like they do now. However, she received a lot of abuse from community members when she sent her son to secondary school off the moor. She argues that he was sporty and wanted a bigger school to compete in. However her connection to Town Hall and, at the time, the Board of Governors of the primary school, resulted in a perceived affront to the community.

She still has some good friends that she sees from the playgroup days. They get together and go swimming occasionally, organizing activities by phone. Other than that, she meets people on the street in

Alston or they just pop in, often she sees people in the co-op, and she occasionally goes down to the pub. She reflects that the pub is really an all ages thing in Alston.

She keeps ‘an eye on the discussion forums’ on Cybermoor because occasionally something comes up that she can address. She understands the desire to be anonymous even though the results have made Alston look bad in her opinion (Chris and Sally). And she felt firmly that, ‘Most people can be trusted’. She elaborated by reflecting on Alston, generally,

This is a nice place to live. I lived in London for awhile, you know. When you live in the city, people are quite paranoid. But if you walk around here everybody looks at you and smiles even if they don’t know you. You meet someone on an isolated footpath and they’ll go ‘Oh, Hello!’ even though they don’t know you. In London, you can’t look at anybody in the eye.

Kristen, 24/7 mom

I found Kristen’s number in one of the local newsletters because she did some volunteer work for the Parish Council. She had some time free Sunday morning when she wasn’t completely preoccupied with taking care of her young kids. Kristen first came to Alston to set up a business. She had a knickknack shop on Front Street that was open for a couple of years but she sold it because it was more trouble than it was worth and she wanted to focus on raising her kids. The shop was the ultimate pop in generator. It also put her on the front lines of the gossip network. ‘Everybody knows everybody and everybody knows your business’. However, she thought that she ‘wouldn’t know anybody without the shop’.

While she still has some interaction with her neighbors, her only real connection to Alston is the volunteer work she does very occasionally with the Parish Council and her husband who works at a local factory and is thus still supremely connected to the Alston gossip network. ‘I know a lot of the people that go to the pub. But I rarely go. I just see them on the street and chat and that’s it’. She takes her kids off the moor for school and stays out of Alston all day for shopping. She shops at Tesco, ‘there just isn’t good selection at the co-op and Tesco is cheaper anyway’.

She uses e-mail but is not very computer-savvy, and never checks the Cybermoor website. To contact friends she says 'usually, we use the phone. Not internet, because it's local.' The internet is for her kids she says. She feels that in Alston, you can trust people, because 'it's different'.

Ben, ex-hippie farmer

I had met Ben earlier in the week at one of Alston's pubs. He was a friend of Jym, although at this point it was hard for me to find anyone in Alston that was not friends with Jym. He was one of a large contingent of hippies that arrived in Alston in during the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, Ben fancied himself as a writer and thought the rural setting would be a perfect place to find his muse away from the city life of Newcastle. After floating around as a handyman for a while, he took up farming on a small plot of land. It was the middle of lambing season, so he was quite busy during the day; however, he still made time for the pub a night or two out of the week. He recommended that we meet up at a different pub later in the week and I could conduct an interview then. It was early in the evening and the din of patrons was quite low.

While we started in on our pints, an intense dart game began a couple meters away. Three people were playing: a muscular twentysomething in a t-shirt, a midlifer sporting a collared shirt and quaffed hair, and a retiree who kept his overcoat on and wore glasses. They played an elimination game known as 'High', in which they each had three 'lives' and took turns trying to get the highest score with three darts. You had to better the score of the person before you or you would lose a life. They each had their own set of darts; and the quiet understanding between them suggested regularity of this social interaction.

Perhaps it was the inspiration of the atmosphere or my persistent line of questions, but the topic of pub culture dominated the conversation of our interview. Ben noticed a significant drop in pub culture over the years, for two reasons in his mind: a crackdown on drunk driving and the recent smoking ban.

Ben has a computer, which his wife uses for business purposes and to communicate with friends and relatives over e-mail, but he rarely if ever uses the internet. He knows about the Cybermoor discussion boards because gossip travels; he is fairly appalled at the idea that people would post such trash anonymously. But social life for him is in the pubs. ‘There is really nothing else to do.’ He relies on face-to-face contact with friends, seeing them in town, at the co-op, or down at the pub. Pub life wasn’t always so friendly to Ben though. Early in his time in Alston there was a strong anti-hippie sentiment from the locals, which has apparently only recently ceased to be a major division. He reports being beaten up pretty badly on more than one occasion for being a hippie. He feels you can generally trust people though.

Sam, local plumber

One night, Jym and I were walking through town and he offered to introduce me to a few people he thought it might be good to talk to. I told him I was interested in getting the perspective of a local. ‘Well let’s pop in and see if Sam is home.’ We walk over to a house and knock on the back door. ‘Sam?’ Jym peers in through the window and then tries the door—it gives way. ‘Sam, are you home? It’s Jym.’ Sam saunters to the door with a big smile and in his strong accent beckons us insides. Sam was a bit apprehensive at first about my project but he warmed up to me quickly and showed me his new laptop sitting on its own special table in his living room. After I showed him where I lived on Google Earth, he agreed to an interview and so I came back the next morning for long session.

Sam was self-employed as a plumber and made a good income, which allowed him to buy his own computer wares. He has owned a computer and had broadband access for a long time. However, he does not perceive it as a social medium. He looks up a lot of information and will read the Cybermoor website, but never posts on the discussion boards. He doesn’t e-mail anyone really. In fact, he had promised to burn me a DVD of a BBC documentary about Alston. I gave him my address via e-mail. He

printed off the e-mail, wrote a response, and included it in his package sent to me—never once replying electronically.

He used to play for the local football club, but all the sport teams in Alston have been gone for several years. He gets out to the pubs still and catches up with people that way. Everybody knows Sam, he never has to advertise to get work, referrals are automatic. A couple of years ago, Sam was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor. It was treatable but it didn't allow him to work. A number of friends came by to help him out, offer him money, etc. They just heard about his plight and came.

Kevin, retired drama teacher

One of the first people I met in Alston was Kevin. He was at a play at the Town Hall that I went to and we started talking about music and theatre and my research. I met with Kevin at his house for an interview later in the week. Before we even discussed it, I knew Kevin was from the South because of his accent. He did not sound like an Alstonian, he sounded like who he was: a Londoner. After some time teaching drama in the city, he was looking to go somewhere new and found Alston.

He keeps links with his drama friends online via e-mail, sending communiqués to contacts around the world sometimes. And is active in the arts scene in Alston, promoting a rebirth of Alston's pantomime tradition. He is active with the Church in Alston, one of the only ones who I interviewed.

He posts regularly on Cybermoor about organizing new groups, meetings, church gatherings, etc. Kevin is very computer-savvy and enthusiastically promotes the internet, e-mail, Cybermoor, all of it. Kevin sent me numerous e-mails while I was in Alston and afterwards.

Kevin doesn't go out to the pubs in Alston, but tries to buy as much food as he can from the co-op and the local butchers and bakers. He keeps up friendly relationships with mostly the older community. Some of the other townspeople think he is a nice guy, if a bit too enthusiastic at times. He definitely trusts people.

CHAPTER V: Norms and Networks of the Cyber-moor

Making contacts in Alston was easy. The community seemed well on its way to attaining the coveted status of ‘where everyone knows your name’. However the surface of generalized trust and open displays of friendliness mask the underlying subnetworks that fractionalize the Alston community. This is not to be taken as a unique or generally negative phenomenon, even for a rural town. And yet, there is a disruption, in what is an otherwise perfectly functional community, coming from a little-used online discussion board.

For the purposes of assessing the nature of social capital, it is important to realize the real differences in social relations in a specific context. Based on the empirical research, these can be expressed in terms of subnetworks, their normative loci of sociality, and coincident norms of acceptable communication media for maintaining contact. An overview of the demographics culled from the hybridized informants in Chapter IV is first offered to introduce Alston’s social history with local terminology, used throughout the analysis. At the end of the chapter, the results are condensed into one particularly salient point, using a reading of the social shaping of technology, which should provoke future contextually-specific research in the field of study being explored by this dissertation.

Demographic profiling

The first and most prominent social dimension in Alston involves ‘term of residency’, which using the residents’ own terminology breaks down into *locals*, *incomers*, *newcomers*, and *farmers*. Locals, like Sam, are individuals who have lived their entire lives¹⁴ in Alston. Usually, this correlates with multiple generations having lived *on the Moor*. Incomers, like Lucy and Kristen, are individuals who have lived a substantial portion of their lives on the Moor and/or are very well integrated. A significant number of incomers are *hippies*, like Ben, or those self-identifying as

¹⁴ Whenever I asked if someone was local, instead of hearing ‘yes’, the response was always ‘born and bred’.

having once been hippies, who moved to Alston in the 1960s–70s in search of alternative lifestyles outside of the more urbanised parts of England. Newcomers, like Kevin, refer to the most recent settlers in Alston, who have moved in after the surge in housing prices. Many so-called newcomers only reside in Alston seasonally and are often poorly integrated in the community—Kevin is an exception to this. Finally, I include the farmers around Alston Moor as a separate class because their socio-economic status and physical separation from the townspeople involve a complex set of factors that can greatly differentiate them from the other classes living in the major towns of Alston, Nenthead and Garrigill. My lack of adequate transportation and the coincidence of lambing season, meant that I was only able to interview one farming couple. For the purposes of my analysis, their level of integration was encompassed by the still remaining distinction between locals and incomers without risking oversimplification of the data.

In terms of young adults fitting into the various categories above, this largely depends on the integration with friends at school. As seen with Chris, this might be based on style and attitude. Thus, while Chris may have one side of his family with a long history of residence in Alston, his particular network might be better described as incomer. In contrast, Lara has strong roots as an incomer with hippie parents; however, through integration of her parents and what seems like her ability to float more easily as a member or partial member of various subnetworks, Lara identifies herself as a local and appropriately so.

The other important social dimension, transecting the given term-of-residency/social-integration classifications, is age. Because of my limited sample size, I cannot delineate specific age ranges to bound my analysis. However, age groupings based on vocational or educational status of interviewees—though not necessarily reflective of specific educational attainment—have been used to create an efficient yet descriptive scale: *teenagers* (secondary school age like Chris), *twentysomethings* (university and postgraduate age like Lara), *midlifers*

(careered like Ben, Sam, Lucy, and Kristen), and *retirees* (at or past the age of retirement who might still be working like Kevin).

Subnetworks and normative loci of sociality

Each of the hybridized informants in Chapter IV belonged to one or more subnetworks in the Alston community. Alston's small population made it difficult to distinguish these subnetworks immediately, as was indicated earlier. In fact, many of the subnetworks overlap as is immediately obvious from the dart game anecdote and frequent mention of the pub as a common *locus of sociality*.

Pub culture is a good subnetwork to start with. This may represent one of the largest subnetworks if taken as a whole, however because there are six different pubs in Alston the culture may have yet unknown differentiation. Sam, Ben, Lucy, Chris, and Lara all mention the pub at some point as a place to go to get out and meet people.

Before pubs, the logical first degree of subnetworks connects immediate family and then other relations. These represent very strong and bounded subnetworks for locals, illustrated by Sam. The 'pop-in' appeared to be a common feature of this kind of network—something also seen noted by Lara, as she described a family-like connection to her closest friends. Thus, a common locus of sociality was the home.

Another very practical subnetwork was that of business owners, the self-employed, and Town Hall workers. These seemingly distinct categories coalesce because their work tends to rely very heavily on one another through interrelations in terms of governance or service needs and also simply proximity of location in Alston. In the case of proximity, Lucy will occasionally get a pop-in during working hours. When Kristen owned her business, the pop-ins were constant because of the ease of entry from the main street. However, business is often conducted via e-mail and thus the internet offers another locus of sociality, besides what can be seen as the businesses or home-businesses, and the intervening streets.

A similarly practical set of subnetworks is the local schools. While no interviews were conducted with primary school pupils, Chris

represented membership as a pupil of Samuel King's School. This membership is more formalized because there is not necessarily a choice involved in membership at the school level. It is more useful to look at the subnetworks that exist underneath this catchall, such as the chavs distinguishing themselves from everyone else. These subnetworks would have multiple loci of sociality in terms of hangouts, outside of the locus of the school. Some that came up in interviews were: the market cross, the town foot, and the cemetery.

A much looser organization is the regulars at the co-op. The obvious locus of sociality for this subnetwork is the co-op or the main street where it is located. While the contacts may seem fleeting at times, Ben and Lucy both suggested that this was an important social port of call.

Finally, the virtual subnetworks of social networking websites enjoyed by members in Alston. The virtuality of these subnetworks makes it hard to separate the subnetwork from the locus of sociality, they definitionally exist on top of one another. Alston has its own local social networking site in the form of the Cybermoor website's discussion board, comprising the people who post like Kevin and occasionally Lucy. Then there are the larger sites like Facebook, Myspace, Bebo, etc., which attract younger Alstonians like Chris. What is important to note is that uptake by Alston youth is not 100 percent as shown by Lara's lack of interest. This differentiation might be considered a product of other norms of communication media that are not bound within generations.

Communication media as norms

By not having pre-coded ideas about what norms would be relevant to social capital, I was able to notice that the strongest norms related to behavior and internet use were those involving choice of communication media. This is not to say that the abstract or concrete communication technologies were the norms, rather the shared acknowledgement that a particular medium was preferred or allowed served to distinguish many of the subnetworks and illustrate the interrelation between norms and loci of sociality.

Face to face. Everyone interviewed by me prized personal, immediate contact. There is a general preference to meet up in person, whether that is at home, at the pub, on the street, or any of the other previously mentioned loci of sociality. This seems natural. However, the differentiation comes about through elevating face to face contact to the exclusion of other means of communication. Sam expresses some sign of this sentiment in his view of phone usage. Word of mouth was also continually lauded as the preferred and best means of organizing an event.

Phone. In most of my interviews, the phone being referred to was a landline telephone. The landline telephone was heavily used for both social and business purposes. However, the mobile phone had a different acknowledgement as an appropriate means of contact, again expressed strongly by Sam. Lara's description of differentiated mobile phone use depending on friends from Alston versus from university was telling of how the social usage of the same piece of technology by the same user was context-specific.

The internet. Despite all of the informants having computers and internet access, there was a wide range of variation in usage—particularly with respect to social usage. Then again, the internet is a poor descriptor because it must represent a wide array of options for communication: e-mail, social networking sites, and MSN instant messenger just to name a few prominent examples. Yet, just examining e-mail allows a quick means of assessing whether an individual shares a norm for internet as a social medium. Kevin may use e-mail extensively for social purposes, but he would not conceive of using Bebo. Chris and his teenage friends insist on using social network sites and MSN, even more than e-mail perhaps. This is in contrast with Lucy who sees e-mail predominantly as a medium for business not informal socializing. But Lucy is in the same age category as Ben's wife, he uses the e-mail to keep up their family contacts. While we can point to subnetworks like school teenagers and retired churchgoers as acknowledging the norm required to enable social exchanges on the internet—there is not a clear cause or set of factors that is revealed by data at hand.

Social shaping of technology

With Chris and Lara being so close in age and yet having very different predilections for social technology usage, there is need to penetrate underneath the social norms elicited by this case study to better understand how Chris' and Kevin's internet-enabled subnetworks seem to be generation and maintain social capital, while the other Alstonians with similar access to the internet are not enjoying the same additional locus of sociality. An explanation for this individualized usage of technology is the social shaping of technology (SST) concept.

The premise of SST reached a level of academic prominence with the publication of the 1985 first edition of an edited volume of the same name by MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999). Appropriate to this dissertation's repudiation of techno-utopists, 'SST emerged through a critique of [...] "technological determinism"' (Williams and Edge 1996, 866). Based on a new re-interpretation of empirical studies of technology use:

SST studies show that technology does not develop according to an inner technical logic but is instead a social product, patterned by the conditions of its creation and use. Every stage in the generation and implementation of new technologies involves a set of choices between different technical options. Along-side narrowly 'technical' considerations, a range of 'social' factors affect which options are selected—thus influencing the content of technologies, and their social implications. (Williams and Edge 1996, 866).

These options are not necessarily chosen between consciously when developing a personalized use of technology. Furthermore, it is a continuous process, an evolution of innovation in use. Williams and Edge describe this as 'a garden of forking paths' (1996, 866). Most importantly though, SST encourages the problematization of 'the character of technologies, as well as their social implications' (ibid.).

As a phenomenon that produces unique outcomes depending on a wide range of social factors, SST requires an individual level of analysis. This fits appropriately with the approach to studying social capital and internet use outlined by this dissertation. When we filter the results from

the Alston case study through this paradigm, we find evidence that supports such differentiated outcomes of use within and across generational categories. This chapter has already established that means of communication have a normative basis regarding their use. What is left unknown by this preliminary ethnographic work is what are the specific factors that may predispose individuals or networks of individuals, like teenagers or churchgoers, toward a social computing norm. Likewise, what might predispose or contemporarily influence individuals toward not adopting the internet as a social medium.

Further research is definitely needed into this topic, particularly because of its potential ramifications for new sources of social capital. While Putnamian indicators might be able to correlate their way toward similar findings about networks and norms in Alston, it would be well beyond the scope of Putnam's generalized trust, generalized reciprocity, and generational change theorems, meant to function at community-level and with universalistic application, to elicit any of the factors of nuanced individual social technology usage and its varied applications to social relations. This reaffirms the need for a contextually-specific definition of social capital and an appropriation, ethnographic approach capable of studying complex cultural phenomena that underlie an evolving pattern of normative communication use in social relations.

CHAPTER VI: Recommendations for Future Work

In sum, ICT networks may have great potential to boost local social capital, provided they are geographically ‘intelligent’, that is, are smart enough to connect you selectively to your near neighbours; are built around natural communities; and facilitate the accumulation of collective knowledge, including of reputation. (Halpern 2005, 309)

With this quote from Halpern, the dissertation returns to the practical research and policy questions posed by the digital divide. Specifically referring to boosting social capital, Halpern enumerates a set of conditions for the deployment of community networks like Cybermoor, whereby the approach and design must be contextually-specific in order to be effective—just as this dissertation has so ardently argued social capital research must be.

The Alston case study indicates that there is a distinct need for a research approach capable of foreseeing and reacting to issues like anonymous trolling on discussion boards and predisposed exclusion from norms of social computer use. Keeping with the theme of reinserting ‘the social’, Community Informatics appears to offer a particularly promising approach to the deployment and evaluation of technologies intended to offer social benefits. However, a close examination of this burgeoning field reveals the possibility that the well-intentioned focus could end up being distorted by relying on Putnamian social capital.

What is community informatics?

Michael Gurstein, who brought the Community Informatics (CI) to prominence, defines the movement as:

The application of information and communications technology (ICT) to enable and empower community processes [...] to use ICT to enable the achievement of community objectives including overcoming ‘digital divides’ both within and between communities [...] but also to examine how and under what conditions ICT access can be made usable and useful to the range of excluded populations and communities. (2007, 11)

In his reading of CI, Warschauer suggests that a focus on ‘online communication’ is only one part of the approach; it also requires an understanding of ‘more traditional forms of communication, organization, mobilization, and coalition building’ (2003, 163). This is connected to the analysis of what he calls the ‘social embeddedness of technology’ (Warschauer 2003, 202), which problematizes the deterministic and neutral theses of technological use similar to SST, as discussed in Chapter V. What emerges from this framework is a contextually-specific reading of technology use and social benefits centred on practical issues, such as the aforementioned concern with how to best deploy a community network.

Community informatics and social capital properly done

As its name implies, community informatics is focused on community as the context of study and practice. With its interest in generally benefiting ‘the community’, it was natural for many in this field of inquiry to co-opt the idea of ‘social capital’, as conceived of by Robert Putnam. As was noted in literature from the World Bank, CI literature has similarly begun to problematize the idea of social capital, citing critics such as Portes (Pigg and Crank 2004).

However, like Katz and Rice’s problematic studies of social capital and internet use, criticised at the beginning of Chapter I, CI is still relying on indicators of social capital that are Putnamian in origin. The literature cites the earlier studies by Wellman et al and Kavanaugh et al that impose Putnamian indicators to their community network data *post hoc*, with or without a superficial attempt to more carefully define social capital (Pigg and Crank 2004). Thus, once again, the problems of contextual-specificity and valid levels of analysis are propagated through the uncritical appropriation of Putnamian social capital.

Perhaps the definition reached in this dissertation, and the model of research provided by the included case study can offer a more valid alternative for studying social capital, which can serve to solidify CI’s ideals in terms of an appropriate evaluative methodology. The case study in Alston illustrates a bottom-up approach to looking at contextually-

specific behavior and norms that contribute to social capital and to the understanding of how internet use may be involved in the creation maintenance of it. Qualitative ethnographic work is seen to be essential in order to understand cultural properties like the complex factors underlying norms and social relations in a specific context (community).

The most important point for future research coming out of the case study in Alston is the need to better understand the norm of social computer use. Using an SST reading of evolving individualistic technology use, the factors that predispose a particular individual or subnetwork of individuals to adopting the norm should be better understood. This seems like the ideal research agenda for CI. However, this is only possible if the evaluation of context before and after technology deployment can accommodate a level of nuance in social relations that elicits these cultural and historical factors. A bottom-up design approach needs to be complemented by a bottom-up evaluation approach.

Throughout its analysis, this dissertation has attempted to indicate how a contextually-sensitive and critically valid approach to studying social capital might achieve a necessary nuance in understanding underlying social relations. Rather than seeking to completely undermine the contentious social capital and digital divide fields of study, a continued effort to discover the best possible definitions and methodologies, in order to reinforce their fundamental promise—to reassert ‘the social’ in research and practice—is called for. Regardless of whether internet use and social capital is studied from a purely academic or a practically-focused perspective, hopefully this field of inquiry will benefit from recognizing that the first weak tie needing to be strengthened may well be the definition of social capital itself!

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