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No More Bowling Alone: When Social Capital Goes Digital

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Abstract

It has been acknowledged the importance of associations, political as well as non-political, for the foundation of democracy. In the last three-four decades the number of associations in Western countries have decreased rapidly and there is a fear of negative implications for the future of democracy. Putnam suggests the importance of associations to be their production of social capital, that is, reciprocal trust between people involved in such networks. This article argues for a shift from this focus of social capital to the communicative, relational and cognitive aspects suggested by Nahapiet & Ghoshal. This makes conversation and achieving common goals playing a significant role in associations’ positive effects on democracy. Today people increasingly build their relations and perform communicative action on the Internet, to achieve the same common goals they used to strive for in real life associations. Taking off from Schudsons model, distinguishing social and democratic talk, the communicative and democratic implications of participating in an online discussion performed by a fan culture, is investigated. The conclusion is, something Putnam hints at in his broad investigation into the decreasing activity in American associations, that the production of social capital might today also be digital.

Key words: Democracy, associations, social capital, participation, culture, conversation.

Introduction

When Alexis de Tocqueville (1969) in the 1830’s traveled in the young American nation, it was his impression that Americans of whatever age, class or line of thought, constantly formed associations:

“The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminars, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes… If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society.” (1969: 149)

He underlined the importance of taking into consideration not only the political and industrial associations but even more the intellectual and moral. Furthermore, he included any associations, be they serious or futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. He noticed that it was easy to elude this kind of associations, or understand them imperfectly, “because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind.” (1969: 151).
Tocqueville divined a connection between associations and equality. In equal nations, he wrote, all people are independent and at the same time weak. To achieve something they must assist each other and associate. In democratic countries, he wrote, the knowledge of forming associations is the primary condition to all other knowledge. The custom to associate and the knowledge how to do this, are parts of a civic spirit.

150 years later, Putnam (1993) did similar observations in Italy. He came to the conclusion that the flourishing life of associations explained the democratic capacity in north in contrast to the southern regions of the country. He also elaborated Tocqueville’s analysis of the outcomes for democracy in general. Putnam’s concept, social capital, involved trust as the significant element. People venture cooperating because they trust other people to cooperate in return. This develops the explanation of the custom, namely that it generates strong social norms of trust and reciprocity that facilitate the kind of cooperation that is the foundation of democracy.

When Putnam (2000) put America under the pocket lens much was different from that nation so enthusiastically described by Tocqueville. The lonesome bowler became the metaphor of the decreasing associate life of America and, consequently, the vanishing of social capital in the contemporary American society. The lonesome bowler even functions as metaphor of a similar decrease of organizational activities in many Western countries. The resulting lack of social capital is perceived a threat for the maintenance of democracy.

Social capital

The concept of social capital was not invented by Putnam. It is, with Putnam’s own words, “to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles” (2000: 24), about the strong or weak society versus individualism. Nevertheless, social capital was highlighted and put at the agenda by Putnam and his research team when reporting the findings from their extensive investigations of Italian democracy (1993). In his early definition, Putnam puts trust and participation as the core elements of social capital. Participation creates social capital involving that the citizens’ accounts can be based in confidence in other people in the society. One of the criticisms against this definition is that social capital can be conceived to be both formal and informal networks on one hand, and psychological factors as trust and interhuman reliance on the other.

The Swedish political scientists Petersson & Rothstein (2000) find this two-fold definition problematic in a Swedish context. In Sweden participation in parties and popular movements is decreasing and so is confidence in politics and politicians. But survey data displays no weakening of social networks and no decrease in interhuman reliance in the society (Petersson et al.: 1998; Rothstein: 2001). Another objection towards the early Putnams conceptualization is delivered by Stolle (1998), Uslaner (2001) and Whiteley (1999). They argue for the idea that participation in associations do not produce increased trust in other people. Instead it is people who in their families have been socialized to trust other people, who actively join associations. Furthermore, Rothstein & Kumlien (2001) question the positive effects of participation on social capital at all. They suggest as a more likely positive cause, the absence of corruption and abuse of power within a society’s political institutions and public administration.
The late Putnam (2000) acknowledges not only trust and the ability of people to work together, but also communication and positive collective action as core elements of social capital. Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) goes further by dividing social capital into three clusters: the structural, relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital. In the structural dimension the network is in focus. The relational dimension holds trust, norms and identity as some of the most central factors. Finally, the cognitive dimension focuses on shared meaning and common values, as well as collective goals and shared vision among community members.

Departing from the late Putnam and Nahapiet & Ghoshal, we can now move the focus from principally networking and trust, to communication of shared meaning and vision, and collective action for achieving common goals, and regard these qualities important elements manifesting the concept of social capital. By investigating to what extent and how these elements are dealt with within associations of different kinds we can establish the occurrence of social capital in contemporary democracy. In the following we will examine the two core elements of social capital, communication and collective action, in a community on the Internet. By investigating a web community we can comment on if such digital associations can complement or even succeed physical associations as possible reproductive spaces of social capital. We will use an analytical model based on Schudson (1997) that distinguishes social conversation from democratic problem-solving conversation. Social conversation belongs to the private sphere and democratic problem-solving conversation to the public sphere. When people form associations they enter the public sphere with the purpose to communicate and act to achieve common goals. Consequently, we should expect conversation within associations, analogue as well as digital, to be of a predominantly problem-solving character.

**Social conversation versus democratic problem-solving conversation**

When Schudson (1997) differs between social and democratic conversation, he points at the different functions. Social conversation, first and foremost, belongs to peoples every-day lives as an informal tool for creating relations, gaining local information and for accomplishing the ordinary practices for living. Democratic conversation, first and foremost, belongs to peoples public life as a formal tool for solving problems. A more explicit comparison gives at hand that problem-solving conversation is characterized:

“not by egalitarianism but by norm-governedness and public-ness, not by spontaneity but by civility, and not by its priority or superiority to print and broadcast media but by its necessary dependence on them.” (1997: 297).

From statement this we can discern three antitheses one of each poles defines the characteristics of social conversation and democratic problem-solving conversation respectively. We now can order Schudson’s antitheses in the following way (Svensson: 2008):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social conversation</th>
<th>Problem-solving conversation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Norm-governed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
<td>Civilized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media independent</td>
<td>Media dependent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why does not Schudson simply oppose egalitarian to non-egalitarian? Most likely Schudson does not mean egalitarian in general, but in relation to different qualifications people participating in problem-solving conversations ought to possess. This kind of conversation demands knowledge of specific norms, a knowledge that might be differently distributed among the participants. This is not presumed in social companies where no, or less and informal, norms of conversation might be expected.

The next antithesis could be related to the structure and aim of the conversation. In social conversation addressing and replying are spontaneous. The partners simply try to understand each other but else the interaction is quite unbiased. The function is to create and maintain social relations. In problem-solving conversation addressing and replying are governed by specific rules of etiquette and order. Schudson might even have had in mind the political union meeting with its agenda and order of speaking. The aim of problem-solving conversation accordingly is to promote action and produce results.

Social conversation, according to Schudson, is not dependent on media since it spontaneously and unbiased takes place in the everyday life world. Of course it might be transmitted by means of media like telephone or by e-mail. It might even give rise to texts in print and electronic media. But it is not per definition public but private and exists independently of the media. Social conversation therefore could be conceived superior to media. Problem-solving conversation on the contrary is dependent on media. It builds on documents and is being documented since it concerns many people and is of public interest. Because of this it often takes place in the media and is also dependent on being transmitted afterwards by different media. When so is the case, it might give rise to new public conversations.

**Material and method**

The materials examined are, first and foremost, messages posted to the online discussion at the website [hvfantasten.com](http://hvfantasten.com). (The web site [hvfantasten.com](http://hvfantasten.com) is a central meeting place for supporters of the Swedish top ice hockey club HV71 (Swedish Champions in 1995, 2004 and 2008) and people interested in the sport. The site, independent from both HV71 and the supporters association North Bank Supporters, was opened in April 1997 and contains today a well informed blog with news about the club and the sport, and a well frequented discussion forum, both regarded a high standard within the Swedish ice hockey public.) The data collection comprises three seasons of the Swedish National Hockey League. The final selection contains three strategically chosen samples per season, at the start of the league and during times when the team is on a winning strike as well as times when the team has lost many games. In total, the selection comprises 3993 contributions, published during 149 days. Besides the content analysis of the web site, official Internet statistics have been analyzed and complementary facts have been collected by more or less structured interviews with the web master (Svensson, 2007).

In the following we will discuss possible indicators in the data of the three antitheses derived from the distinction made by Schudson (1997) to separate social conversation from democratic problem-solving conversation.

Whether the discussion tends to be egalitarian or norm-governed, and consequently
requires knowledge of specific norms of conversation, will be analyzed from two aspects. Firstly, by establishing if any norms are published on the web site and, if so, what these norms might signify. Secondly, by establishing to what extent the participants comment on others handling of norms that eventually might put demands on the participation in the discussion. The participants might not just comment on others violation of norms but their own violation as well. The general netiquette prescribes namely that participants in online discussions should correct their own mistakes if possible, instead of wasting other peoples time by being corrected of them (McLaughlin, et al, 1995).

Whether the discussion tends to be spontaneous or civilized, and aimed at producing effects, will also be analyzed from two aspects. Firstly, by establishing if any agenda, explicitly pronounced or implicitly imposed, topically structures the discussion, and to what extent the participants make comments that might indicate the existence of an agenda and eventual digression from such an agenda. Secondly, by establishing to what extent the participants make propositions or demand action to solve problems they experience important in making the team successful or could be improving for the sport in general.

Whether the discussion is media independent or media dependent, will finally be analyzed from two aspects. The dependency of the Internet for the existence of the discussion goes, so to say, without saying. At the same time the discussion would be possible without the Internet, but not with the same scope of participation and range in space. The first aspect, consequently, involves examining the scope, the proportion between those participating in and those just visiting the discussion, and the range, from what servers participants and visitors log in to hvfantasten.com. The second aspect, involves establishing to what extent the mass media might explicitly be used as sources referred to and in this respect be the foundation for the discussion.

**Egalitarian versus norm-governed**

The introductory analyses have examined whether participation in the discussion is egalitarian or if participation requires knowledge of any specific norms and consequently is conditioned by unequal qualifications. Two aspects have been examined: the first aims at establishing if there are any guidelines for the discussion published on the web site and, if so, what these mean. The second aims at establishing if any conversation norms are at issue in the contributions to the discussion.

**Explicitly expressed conversation norms**

When entering the discussion at the web site hvfantasten.com visitors are met with the appeal, “Try to keep a serious tune.” To find out what is accepted as a “serious tune” demands some experience of taking part of online discussions. An interpretation on a general level suggests that “serious” is related to the content of the message, and “tune” to the form. The participants are expected to have something to say and to say it in a decent way.

What more, visitors are also met with the more demanding notification that “mischievous contributions violating the unwritten rules of the net will be deleted”. Most people should agree on that messages of this kind intend to sabotage the discussion. On the contrary, many people would be unsure of what is meant with “the unwritten rules of the net”. Once again, experience
of taking part in and of online discussions obviously is an important requirement for participating in the discussion at *hvfantasten.com*.

“The unwritten rules of the net”, experienced net surfers probably conceive as similar to “the etiquette of the net”, that is, the netiquette. The less experienced a net surfer, the less familiar with the netiquette and other normative requirements on the net. Several explicitly expressed norms at *hvfantasten.com* imply previous knowledge of what exactly these mean and, consequently, create non-egalitarian conditions for participating in the discussion.

**Comments and self-corrections**

According to MacLaughlin et al (1995) there are seven types of errors that violate the standard of online discussions. The first half are less severe errors, like technical mistakes, waste of other participants time or boosting for products. The second half are more severe errors, like violation of ethics, language and facts. This type of errors challenge the mutual understanding between participants (Svensson: 2009).

**Comments**

More than ten percent of the messages at *hvfantasten.com* in different respects concern subjects that are related to netiquette and norms. Two thirds are commenting other participants handling of these matters. Just a few of these comments concern the less severe types of errors. The very majority of the comments instead concern the severe types of errors:

**Table 1. Messages commenting other participants violation of the norms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical violation</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation of language</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation of facts</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>315</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A little more than half of the comments concern violation of facts. If we relate factual errors to Habermas (1996) universal pragmatics and the validity claims of conversations, the claim of truth, that is, the foundation of the discussion in a factual reality, is the most engaging claim in the discussion at *hvfantasten.com*. Thereafter follows the claim of comprehensibility, and finally the claim of veracity. Keeping to facts, in a tolerably proper language, and mean what one says, simply spoken, are the most important general and overarching norms in the just mentioned order.

Rarely claims occur of throwing some violator out from the forum. The web master neither erase many messages. When asked he confirms that he erase “just a few messages in a year”, either on his own initiative or as a result of urgings from participants. One reason to the low frequency of repressive actions might be that the participants sometimes just ignore violators by meeting them with silence. This is perhaps a more efficient way to cope with violators, at least consciously violating people.
Self-corrections

The participants not only comment each other but also correct own mistakes and violation of the norms. From this we can draw the conclusion that several participants, firstly, are familiar with the etiquette of the net and, secondly, are urgent to avoid being publicly criticized and rebuked of such things an experienced net debater should know about how to behave in an online discussion.

Table 2. Self-corrections of own mistakes and violation of the norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double postings</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>115</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Language errors seem not to be considered the most serious violation. Wrong spelling not least is mostly accepted. When the discussion is intensive it is easy to miss a letter or two on the keyboard. This explains to some degree the linguistic level of the discussion. After all the content is the most important and this is reflected in the great share of corrections of wrong facts.

The norms do not make the prerequisites for participation egalitarian but, on the other hand, do not call too much attention. The reason for this might be that the mere existence of norms makes those not understanding them to seldom post any messages to the discussion. If so, it further underlines that the conversation at hvfantasten.com is not egalitarian but norm-governed.

Spontaneous versus civilized

The next step in the analysis concerns whether the discussion is ordered and aimed at effects or spontaneous and unconditional. This is undertaken by establishing if there is any agenda guiding the discussion and to what extent the participants stick to any agenda, along with the existence of initiatives aiming at action in view to solve problems with the team and things related to hockey.

Agenda

When entering the discussion forum, we find the text: “Participate in the discussion about HV71 and hockey in general.”. At a first glance the limitation of this explicit and open agenda seem rather narrow. What else could such a discussion concern than figures and results? Of course supporters of different kinds love to ponder before the games and perform analyses afterwards, but it does far from stop with this. The team and the hockey in general can be discussed from several points of view.

Obviously there are several subject matters beyond HV71 and hockey in general. A great deal of the discussion concerns the supporter culture, from behavior, loyalty and engagement to activities performed by the supporter’s association. A second area of concern is the reporting, analyses and inquiry of the team and the sport in general undertaken by the media. A third area of concern, that goes beyond the open agenda, deals with the standard of the discussion itself.
Apart from these three implicit subject areas, under certain circumstances, it might be possible even to write about subject matters ranging from betting on the net to 9/11. The topical limitations of the open agenda thus become transcended by means of this complementing hidden agenda.

**Table 3. Discussed areas of topics at hvfantasten.com (percent)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of topic</th>
<th>Share</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HV71 and hockey</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The supporter culture</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netiquette and norms</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other topics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>4956</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The quantity exceeds the number of examined messages, 3993, because each message may contain more than one topical area.*

Thus the discussion at hvfantasten.com both have an open agenda, decided by the web master, and a hidden one, decided and accepted by the participants. Yet, newcomers can only relate to the open agenda before entering the debate. The hidden agenda is only possible to relate to by taking part of the discussion and learn what topics that goes or not. So, the guidelines that were not exactly precise concerning the norms governing the discussion are not more precise concerning what topics that are accepted to bring up on the agenda.

**Discussing the relevance of subject matters**

The relevance of subject matters sometimes is at issue. One fundamental principal is that there are better suited discussions online for topics not related to ice hockey. This does not mean that the participants find other topics less important than hockey. When 9/11 in 2001 caused several messages during a couple of hours some participants after a while argued that such a tremendously important subject matter should not be at issue in a discussion on such a comparatively less important subject like hockey.

It is considered relevant discussing general facts and feature related to the team, but when i.e. the discussion concerning the match dress becomes too train spotting, it is considered irrelevant. The supporter culture is relevant, but when i.e. the discussion becomes too internal, it is considered irrelevant. Discussing the impartiality of the media is relevant, but i.e. initiating a discussion concerning the Stockholm focus of the national television repeatedly in a short time, is considered irrelevant. The same goes for debates turning into personal vendettas. Personal messages yet, are seldom criticized, although they are irrelevant with regard to the netiquette. In relation to how often they show up the number of objections towards them still are negligible. When, in some rare moments, they cause objections the reason seems to be that someone has gone too far in being irrelevant. Perhaps remarks become extra obvious if they occur rarely. They become reminders also for the rest of the participants to stick to the agenda and be careful with regard to the norms. In that way the order and civility of the discussion primarily are founded on the self-discipline of the participants.
Proposals and claims for change

The civility of the discussion has also to do with its aim at reaching obvious effects by the solution of problems. The supporters might experience problems as obstacles for the team to be successful. They might also be obstacles for a good supporter culture. Another problem area is the media reporting. Finally, as we just have dealt with, there might be obstacles for a good debating atmosphere and a pertinent and constructive discussion. Let us first find out to what extent the participants experience problems on each of the topical areas in the discussion. This is founded on the assumption that negatively formed messages indicate a critical attitude which in turn indicates experienced problems of some kind:

Table 4. Negative messages on each topical area (percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Sum of percent</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HV71 and hockey</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The supporter culture</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netiquette and norms</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other topics</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The supporters have good reasons to be more positive than negative to the team. The positive opinions, in the first room, concern the players with whom the supporters experience a kind of us-relation. The negative opinions concern the administration and management of the club. Here are problems to be solved. Regarding the supporter culture the supporters have predominantly positive experiences of their own community, even when the team has backdrops. Still as many as a third of the messages, concern problems to be solved. When it comes to the media the participants are less positive and experience more problems than with the earlier two cases. The positive reactions predominantly regard other supporter media on the net, and web media independent of the traditional mass media. Consequently, these latter media are subjected most of the negative opinions. In the fourth topical area, netiquette and norms, we find predominantly negative opinions. The reason for this might be that this area becomes subjected to discussion when participants tend to violate the norms and consequently are critically treated. Otherwise there is no need to comment the netiquette and norms.

The critical messages not only express dissatisfaction but also suggest how to come to terms with the problems. Indications of this are initiatives for action, such as proposals or demands for measures creating some kind of positive change. It is important to underline that we here deal with explicitly pronounced demands or undoubted proposals for measures.

Table 5. Explicitly pronounced demands and proposals (percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Demands</th>
<th>Proposals</th>
<th>Implicit/none</th>
<th>Sum of percent</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HV71 and hockey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The supporter culture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netiquette and norms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other topics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The share of demands or proposals are most numerous in areas of topics where persons that can be addressed are most likely to be present online. For instance, there are other supporters present online to address with initiatives of action regarding the supporter culture. There are other participants present to address with demands to improve their net culture. This is far from the case regarding the initiatives of action addressed to HV71 or the media. The participants do not know to what extent representatives of these actors visit the discussion to read the messages. Of course there are less explicitly pronounced messages that could be interpreted as demands and proposals. However, these are to be found in the category ‘implicit/none’ with messages not aiming at solving problems at all.

**Media independency versus media dependency**

The relation to media can be two-folded. Firstly, the discussion is mediated by means of ICT-media. Secondly, the participants read, watch and listen to other media and may use this information for founding the discussion upon.

**The mediation of the discussion**

Long before Internet was introduced HV71 was, and still is, subjected to discussions among the supporters at working places, schools, pubs and other public meeting places. However, in these physical spaces the discussion is public only for those being present. If more people should be able to take part of the discussion it must be mediated. The initial question then is, what scope the discussion at the Internet web site hvfantasten.com has in the respect if more people than those posting messages can take part of the discussion?

1250 unique pen names have written the almost 4000 examined messages. These are the active participants. There are also plenty of passive participants in online discussions, just reading messages. These are called lurkers in Internet terminology. In order to establish the number of lurkers a comparison has been made between the average number of daily messages, with the average number of daily visits at two different points of time. The first point consists of the 16 days just before the opening of the season, the second point consists of one week after the League has started. The statistics is gained from a script measuring the visits on the web site.

**Table 6. Average number of daily messages and daily visits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Messages</th>
<th>Visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point 1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point 2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the relation between how many visits that result in a message to the discussion. The reason why there are more visits and messages at the second point is that the League has started at this time. These circumstances influence on the proportional relation between active and passive visits to some degree. Two percent of the visits result in messages during the first point in time and three percent during the second. In other words, in 97–98 percent of the cases the visitors just read and do not post any messages. In these cases the discussion functions as a traditional mass medium where few people speak to many.
The script measuring the visits also shows from what host servers visitors log in to hvfantasten.com. If we rank the 50 most frequent host servers we get a picture of the range of the discussion:

1. On top we find servers at telecom companies providing private Internet subscriptions. Most of the participants consequently log in from their homes.
2. Next are servers at almost all Swedish universities. We also find universities in Finland and Norway.
3. The next category includes host servers at Jönköpings municipality, along with several of the most important employees in the south lake Vättern district. They are followed by most of the municipalities and administrations in southern Sweden.
4. Finally there are servers at all the local and plenty national media companies and the municipality of Stockholm. On a similar visiting frequency we even find host servers at the Swedish government and parliament. It is obvious that politicians from Jönköping, engaged in the governing center of Sweden, are interested in the discussions concerning the team representing their local region in the Swedish Premier League of ice hockey.

If the discussion had been performed only in the physical world, most of the people visiting and posting today via Internet had not been able to participate. The Internet medium is a requirement for the discussion to be conceived a public conversation. The local mass media do not offer the same possibilities for immediate interaction and are limited in time and space. Nevertheless the mass media play an important role as the foundation for the public debate. The discussion at hvfantasten.com should not constitute an exception from this fact.

The use of media as sources

By way of introduction references to media in general are examined depending on what topical area that is discussed.

Table 7. References to media sources on each area of topics (percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of topics</th>
<th>Share</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HV71 and hockey</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>3082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The supporter culture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netiquette and norms</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other topics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>3993</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The share of explicitly pronounced references to media as sources reaches the highest level when the discussion concern HV71 and hockey in general along with the media. HV71 and hockey must be considered of a high public interest and is covered regularly in the media. Regarding media it is logical that the participants refer to these when discussing them. When it comes to the supporter culture along with the netiquette and norms, references to media occur to a much lower degree. These areas of topics are covered in the media far from to the same degree as the hockey sport. They are neither of the same public interest as the hockey. Rather
they are special interests for the supporters and participants in the discussion. As long as supporters behave well and online discussions are properly performed, media do not pay them any attention. On the other hand, as soon as supporters show too much passion and online debaters become verbally violent, they become of public interest and media find them important to cover.

The use of media as sources can be differed into three categories depending on who is the sender. The media have somewhat different functions and motives for covering certain issues and topics. Three different sender categories occur; traditional mass media, hockey institutional media and supporter media. The latter category includes organized as well as non-organized supporters and private persons, in other words, the public.

Table 8. References to mass media, hockey institutional media or supporter media on each area of topics (percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Topics</th>
<th>Mass media</th>
<th>Institutional media</th>
<th>Supporter</th>
<th>Sum of percent</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HV71 and hockey</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The media</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The supporter culture</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netiquette and norms</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other topics</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is the mass media that is the source for the discussion regarding HV71 and hockey along with the media itself. The mass media are less useful for information about the supporter culture along with the netiquette and norms. In this respect the institutional media seem more useful, not least regarding the netiquette and norms. It might be so that institutional media are found useful as sources when participants correct errors related to facts. The only media paying much attention to issues that the supporters have very much at heart, is the supporter administrated media. In this respect the supporter media must be regarded an alternative public sphere.

Barely ten percent of the messages contain explicitly pronounced references to media as sources. Could the discussion consequently be regarded as independent of media to a figure of 90 percent? This should presuppose that none of the messages founded on information from media give rise to any comments at all. This does not seem reasonable. It is also likely that a big part of the messages not referring to media still are based on information from media. The media might be the source for most of the supporters to take part of HV71. Only 7000 can see the team in the arena at the home games. If we furthermore consider that most likely some hundreds of thousand people are supporters of HV71, this does strengthen the assumption that the media must be the basis for the discussion, least to a higher degree than ten percent.

Conclusion

The conversation at hvfantasten.com tend to be norm-governed rather than egalitarian. There are some explicit norms published, but not very clearly defined. Consequently, participants are presumed to understand the norms and know the netiquette well. Experience of participation in online discussions is demanded. The norms are dealt with by commenting other participants
errors, along with self-corrections of own mistakes. About ten percent of the postings regard mistakes, errors or violation of the netiquette and norms. The standard is maintained by this self-regulation and repressive measures are consequently rare. The very existence of norms might have a selecting function and keep less experienced people from participating. The fact that there are norms and, furthermore, these are subjected to interpretation, creates unequal conditions for participating in the discussion.

The conversation is based on a highly limited pronounced topical agenda. The participants, however, interpret the meaning in a broader sense than what is explicitly noticed. This does not mean that the conversation is spontaneous, rather it is structured by both an open and a hidden agenda. When someone diverges too far or repeatedly from the accepted topical areas, the topical relevance is subjected to comments. This establishes order and structure of the performance of the discussion. The participants are not only supporting the favorite team but are rather critical as well. This suggests that problems are at issue in the discussion, both regarding the team as well as the discussion as such. The critical ambitions mostly aims at coming to terms with and solve the problems. A great part of these postings present proposals or demands for change by constructive solutions.

Finally, the conversation is dependent on different media. Firstly, ICT-media for its mediation to more people than those just participating. Hardly three percent of all visits to the web site, end up with a message being posted to the discussion. Since the discussion comprises both other topics and point of views than the mass media, different opinions reach out to a wide audience around the clock. In this respect the discussion might be considered an alternative public sphere. Secondly, the conversation to a great part is dependent on other media as sources for the foundation of the discussion. Such media are explicitly referred to in ten percent of the postings to the discussion and they quite likely give rise to comments. Most likely even messages not containing explicit references could be founded on media information. Quite few people are able to see HV71 live, but far more people support the team and are dependent on media for this relation. Without the existence of the Internet and the mass media, there had not been any discussion involving more than those visiting the arena.

In summary, the findings derived from our data, by means of the analytical concepts based on Schudsons (1997) qualities distinguishing social from democratic conversation, quite obviously show that the online discussion within the examined community of interest, rather than a social chat, tends to be a democratic problem-solving conversation. If we now re-introduce the two qualities derived from Putnam (2000) and Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998), communication and collective action, what are the implications of our findings for hvfantasten.com as a space for reproduction and reinforcement of social capital?

To start with communication, the conversation is governed by specific conditional factors. The participants join the discussion in their every-day contexts, such as the home, the school or the working-place. When entering the digital conversation they enter a certain discourse demanding a certain discursive knowledge. These are qualities not always necessary or even negotiable in every-day life, except from occasions when the same discourse is performed in physical
conversational situations. To master the discourse can be regarded a social capital, useful in all kinds of team sport communities.

When entering the conversation at hyfantasten.com the participants also must be familiar with a general behavior on the Internet. This is governed by a global regulation of behavior, the so called netiquette (McLaughlin, et al: 1995). These qualities can be acquired theoretically. Quite likely most participants learn them by first ‘watching’ and later by ‘doing’. To master the netiquette can be regarded a social capital, useful in all kinds of online communities providing space for participation and interaction.

Closely related to the netiquette is the standard of the conversation. The standard is partly covered in the netiquette but is also dependent on local discussion cultures and supervision from individual participants observant of the discursive level of the discussion. The standard takes on the communicative and deliberative aspects and consequently the democratic outcomes for the participants, such as a communicative conversation style and more general civic cultural qualities (Svensson: 2009). To master the standard can be regarded a social capital, useful in all kind of civic conversation, online as well in real life.

If we move on to the second quality of social capital, collective action, the very fact that we could designate the examined discussion a democratic problem-solving conversation, points at the discussion at hyfantasten.com being a space for collective action. This action ranges from efficient information gathering on the Internet, able to pick up and publish news hours and days before several mass media; via mobilization of nationwide supporter actions to influence the televisions covering and representation of the sport; to analyses and following demands affecting the club to take measures to improve their capabilities within the management of the club, composition of the team and strategies in the rink. To participate in and gain experience from such collective actions can be regarded a social capital, useful in all kind of civic conversation, online as well in real life.

All the mentioned examples of social capital – discursive, behavioral, communicative and collective – are derived from an associate space for people interested in and finding important the sport of ice hockey. Some would disagree on that ice hockey has something to do with social capital or democratic problem-solving conversation. Ice hockey as such has nothing to do with these qualities, but associations and discussions have. The subject matter is secondary to the fact that people unite as a cause of their interest in or dependence of different subjects, be they political or not. Tocqueville (1969) put attention to the fact that intellectual and moral associations, no matter how “serious or futile”, were perhaps more crucial for early American democracy than political and industrial associations. Putnam (1993) stated that most important for the efficiency of democracy in northern Italy was people’s engagement in voluntary associations like choral societies, literary guilds, hunting parties, service groups or sports clubs. What these communities are organized for are all different, how they are organized are all the same: they are associations voluntary formed by people in their everyday civic lives. They all together compose a grassroots democracy that functions as the hotbed for democracy in entire nations and states.

The final question is that of whether digital communities can complement and even succeed physical associations as possible productive spaces of social capital. Part of the participants at hyfantasten.com, are active in the supporters association in the physical world. This is an ordinary
democratic association and as such it may be expected to produce social capital, quite likely of the mentioned qualities. In comparison to hyfantasten.com, however, the supporters association have much less participants and also less variety regarding age, education and location. The online HV-community seems to reach out with more social capital than the analogue community; to more people, to more different people, to more geographical places and, finally, the social capital can be distributed anytime around the clock. The case with our examined association clearly is that the digital community do not produce less social capital than the physical community. It is an illustrative example of how the vanishing social capital in the physical world as a matter of fact might be revived in the digital world. In that way we could say that social capital in part has gone digital.

References

Svensson, Anders (2008): “Solving problems and then socializing: the character of conversation within a non-political online discussion” paper presented at Participatory Communication Section of IAMCR, Stockholm.


