

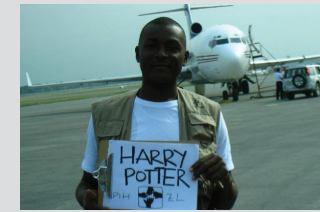


social media activism

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# Clicktivism

There's a growth industry in trying to measure social media's impact on our lives — and politics. Many argue that online political activism is superficial engagement, lacking the personal ties of community that once drove social change. Social media's evangelists demur, declaring that a new code of politics is being written online, altering the political commons but making us more socially connected than ever before. The articles here ask whether the phenomenon of disintegrating social connections Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam described as "bowling alone" still prevails in the digital age, or whether social media activism — call it "bowling online" — harbours the power to strengthen democracy.



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# WE ARE NOT BOWLING ALONE

NEIL SEEMAN AND ADALSTEINN D. BROWN

Robert Putnam used the metaphor of “bowling alone” to describe diminishing social capital in America. So influential was Putnam’s work around the world that observers habitually question whether the notion of a “good neighbour” still exists, and whether the public’s faith in institutions is frayed beyond repair. A dozen years after the release of Putnam’s groundbreaking book, Seeman and Brown investigated whether Putnam’s thesis of dwindling social capital applies to Canada. They found that Canadians, especially younger Canadians, show a strong willingness to reach out to their neighbour in times of need. They find that thanks in part to new technologies, which Putnam saw as threatening to social capital, young Canadians show greater neighbourliness than their elders.

Pour illustrer la dégradation du capital social aux États-Unis, Robert Putnam a évoqué dans son best-seller *Bowling Alone* le déclin des ligues de quilles du pays et l’explosion du nombre de joueurs individuels. L’influence du livre a été telle que maints observateurs doutent aujourd’hui de la notion même de « bon voisinage » et de la possibilité de rétablir la confiance du public à l’égard des institutions. Plus de 10 ans après la parution de l’ouvrage, qu’en est-il de cette thèse de l’érosion du capital social au Canada ? L’enquête des auteurs révèle plutôt une forte volonté des Canadiens, surtout des jeunes, d’aider leurs voisins par temps difficiles. En partie grâce aux nouvelles technologies, que Putnam jugeait menaçantes pour les liens sociaux, la jeunesse canadienne se montrerait plus solidaire que ses aînés.

A dozen years after the publication of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, it is time for a reappraisal of the book’s somber vision: an increasingly disengaged, inward-looking society. Putnam saw an erosion of social capital in America, a dissembling sense of neighbourliness and community.

Even though Putnam’s book, the culmination of a five-year study, focused on the United States, researchers and opinion leaders around the world latched on to the idea of social capital as a driving force for equity, tolerance and trust in institutions. Today, the seminal 1995 paper on which the book is based has been cited in almost 8,000 separate academic articles. Without neighbourliness and community, researchers argued, we risk losing our social equilibrium. For example, Canadian sociologist Jean Kunz

pointed to Putnam’s idea of social connectedness as a key predictor of how successfully new immigrants would integrate into Canadian society.

When Putnam published *Bowling Alone* in 2000, events buttressed his hypothesis. The technology investment bubble had burst, yet, paradoxically, we were all suddenly lassoed at the hip to our cellphones and other gadgetry. Putnam blamed Americans’ new restiveness on urban sprawl, on the cultural malaise caused by mass media and on the demise of the nuclear family. Trust in institutions was fraying. Would it continue along this path?

To answer this question, we set forth to investigate Canadians’ attitudes toward their neighbours. For Canadians, we found, Putnam’s warnings missed the mark. We discovered that people under 30 today are more empathic and willing to volunteer and “give back” than baby boomers. The millennial generation, those aged 13 to 29, express a strong desire to help the elderly, the sick and their frail neighbours with simple chores such as laundry and making food. They are willing to give much more of their free time than their parents are to volunteer activity. Our findings contradict a pervasive Putnam-esque media storyline that presents the young as self-absorbed. Younger Canadians are bowling together.

A much-reported 2006 study, lending credence to Putnam’s thesis, argued that since 1985 Americans had be-

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Occupying Toronto, 2011: the “sit-ins” of the 60s have become online “meet-ups”

PHOTO: ARINDAMBANERJEE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

come more socially isolated, the size of their discussion networks had declined and the diversity of people with whom they discuss important matters had decreased. In that study, sociologists Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew Brashears found that Americans had fewer close ties to people in their neighbourhoods. But this study’s sample, from the US General Social Survey, ended in 2004, just as new online networks such as Facebook were thriving. Today, millennials on Facebook routinely discuss important matters with a wide circle

of “friends” or “connections”; the concept of “confidant” seems inapposite. Notably, these researchers gained media attention for speculating, as did Putnam, that new technologies like the Internet and mobile phones would accelerate the drive toward social isolation. Yet by 2009 Keith Hampton and colleagues of the Pew Research Center had shown the positive impact of new technologies. Use of the mobile phone, social networks and the Internet was associated with more robust, more diverse discussion networks.

Two important books published in recent years grapple head on with Putnam’s theory of diminishing social capital. Don Tapscott’s 2008 *Growing up Digital* took umbrage with the idea that young people growing up in the brave new world of ubiquitous technology are selfish and indifferent about civic issues. Tapscott referred to what he called the “net generation,” those under 32 but older than 12, as “the first global generation ever.” He considered them “smarter, quicker, and more tolerant of diversity than their predecessors.” They care



and twenty-somethings stigmatized as self-absorbed in *Bowling Alone* had now grown up, started families and pursued careers — careers that whisked them from “Relo[cation]” town to “Relo” town. Kilborn showed that these “Relos” suffer buyer’s remorse for having chased the post-Reagan American dream. “With the father on the road most weekdays and another move always looming, Relos have neither the time nor the need to sit on town boards or run in local elections, or join

To be sure, anti-neighbour sentiment exists in Canada, with occasional flare-ups. Yet, at interpersonal touch points — on the street, in the workplace — we show good faith toward our neighbours. According to research by Marcus Hollander and colleagues, informal caregiving in Canada — middle-aged and older unpaid caregivers providing care to the elderly — accounts for up to 80 percent of all caregiving. Translating this to market labour rates, these re-

## On the street and at work, we show good faith toward our neighbours.

the church vestry or the Rotary Club.” Now trapped in the fog of middle management, Relos seek to repair their broken marriages and to forge better relationships with their children. They are making the choice to give up the nightmare of shepherding their families from Relo town to Relo town.

During the boom prior to the 2008 financial meltdown, Canadians were just as nomadic in their careers as were Americans. Yet for Canadians, change has always been less about relocating from city to city in exchange for a higher pay grade or illustrious job title than it has been about migration to the larger cities — where there is some employment opportunity — and away from rural Canada — where there is increasingly little. Today’s urban centres are bustling and Canada’s small towns are smaller than in the past several generations. But whether in the city or the country, Canadians have always been inclined to social connectedness. Our cultural touch points, such as medicare or Supreme Court of Canada decisions, are often the subject of heated debate and reflect the historic challenges Canadians have willingly faced in building, and rebuilding, a mosaic of trust.

searchers found that in 2007 Canadians spent \$31.3 billion in free labour caring for the elderly.

Inspired by these findings, we were curious to see whether different age groups, and different parts of the country, looked upon their neighbours differently. When we asked Canadians to anonymously answer how much free time they would personally sacrifice to help a neighbour in need, the results show Canadians to be remarkably civic-minded. In the 2009 study of more than 12,000 Canadians conducted for the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, and powered by the RIWI Corporation’s patented data capture technology, almost 28 percent of Canadians said they would spend more than five hours each week doing simple chores for a sick neighbour. Another 42 percent said they would pitch in between one and five hours. There are no significant variations across provinces or territories, or in urban versus rural Canada. We learned that our findings put a much-reported 2005 Statistics Canada study in context: that study found that between 52 and 61 percent of rural residents reported that they knew their neighbours, three times the proportion of urbanites in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa who

passionately about social justice and typically are engaged in some kind of civic activity at school, at work or in their community. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the net generation emerged as more engaged in civic issues as compared to other age groups. Three years later — in a reversal of previous trends — they voted more than people over 65 in the US presidential election.

Peter Kilborn also surveyed social connectedness in *Next Stop, Reloville: Life Inside America’s New Rootless Professional Class*. The same teenagers

reported the same. Yet knowing one's neighbour is less germane to social connectedness than giving up one's time to help a neighbour.

When we dug deeper into the attitudes shown by Canadians of varying ages toward their neighbours, we found differences. Among those who would give one or more hours of

Young people across the industrialized world congregate on Facebook and on other online social platforms to advocate for social causes. The sit-ins of the 1960s have given way to today's online, socially aware meet-ups.

Communities such as Facebook offer young people the opportunity to reach out to others different from

could not revitalize America's waning social capital.

Putnam's argument was compelling for a time, up until the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and professionals' recalibration of their priorities between work and family — a recalibration reflected in Kilborn's interviews. It was compelling up until the rapid ascendance of social platforms online such as Facebook — a phenomenon to which Don Tapscott attributes a new era of social empathy among the young. In a 2002 edited volume written in response to Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, David Schultz noted that Putnam relied too heavily on declining membership in voluntary organizations as a gauge of fractured social capital. Schultz also argued that "Putnam lacks a theory of the state and the role it plays in fostering the conditions that make it possible for voluntary associations to form, exist, and interact." According to scientific research conducted since 2005 by the nonprofit World Values Survey Association, Canadians and Americans consistently fare very well on the "interpersonal trust index," far ahead of Great Britain, in reporting to surveyors that most of their fellow citizens can be trusted.

Voluntary associations can now emerge online at an astonishing rate. Many online participants, to be sure, are solitary observers, yet most interact and connect. Although many interactive sites may be considered the Internet equivalent of singles bars, many more of these sites bring together physically disparate communities that are interested in contributing positively to social or health care causes. For a quick test of this observation, review the content of Web sites that append .org to many health conditions (such as diabetes.org).

Whatever the limitations of its predictions, *Bowling Alone* remains one of the most important works of social science of the last 25 years. It provoked the world to consider the fragility of a neighbour's goodwill. Fortunately, "love-thy-neighbour" remains sacrosanct. ■

## Many online participants are solitary observers, yet most interact and connect.

their time to help a neighbour, more than 60 percent were under 44. Gen-Xers (who are now aged 30 to 45) and the millennials (whose eldest members are now approaching 30) are significantly *more willing* to help their neighbours than people between the ages of 46 and 64 (boomers), and still more so than those who are above 65.

There are tens of thousands of children and teenagers in caregiving roles across Canada. According to a 2001 estimate by Saul Becker, cited by Young Carers Canada ([youngcarers.ca](http://youngcarers.ca)), there are at least 108,000 young caregivers who "sacrifice part of their childhood in order to lend a helping hand to their families." This number does not include children who serve as translators for their immigrant families. A 2010 study by Grant Charles and colleagues at the University of British Columbia shows that 12 percent of Vancouver high school students are acting in a caregiving capacity. While the boomers may be bowling alone, the gen-Xers and millennials score impressively on the empathy meter.

Putnam himself may have provided the reason for why his hypothesis today seems off course. Putnam explained that "the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value." What Putnam did not, and could not, anticipate is that today's social networks are increasingly online.

themselves. Millennials are more supportive of interracial dating than prior generations, and it has flourished thanks to online dating services. Yes, the young do show habits of self-absorption, yet it has always been thus. Meanwhile, empathy is blossoming. Witness the rise in popularity in online "time-banks," where people register how much, and what kind, of free neighbourly services they are willing to provide to others. See the helpful tone of social communities online, where the most active collaborative forums address chronic illness, notably hidden illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS and depression — not sport or celebrity gossip.

For Putnam, a major indicator of social connectedness was what he saw as a receding bond of trust among neighbours. Putnam offered data showing the steady decline of nonprofit and chapter-based organizations, church and religious attendance, the vitality of labour unions, the penchant for altruism and philanthropy, and even the frequency of family dinners. He served up attention-grabbing statistics on the sharp increase in television consumption, crime and the insatiable demand for professionals in law enforcement. Putnam noted that there had sprung up a "plethora of encounter groups, reading groups, support groups, self-help groups" within prior decades, yet these social groups alone, he said,