Local groups are an important component in democratic societies. Through group activities and discussion, group members are linked to citizens with common attributes or interests and advance collective concerns. As information technology and high speed Internet access have become cheaper and easier to use, citizens have been turning to the Internet to communicate with fellow citizens and to access information. As part of this trend, people have also been sharing information at the local community group level. We have been examining the use and impact of these technologies by local community groups as part of a larger study of public deliberation. We used content analysis and interview data to investigate web-based communication and information exchange among members of local community groups in Blacksburg, Virginia. As part of the larger analysis, we investigated new web technologies such as blogs, e-forums, and RSS feeds to understand current state-of-the-art media that affect group communication, online public discussion and civic participation as mediated by local community groups. The content analysis and interview data showed areas of convergence and divergence. There is a downside to the optimistic views toward the potential of the Internet to build up a strong civil society. We explore both sides of these arguments. We link the findings to prior research on civil society and information technology.

Keywords: Internet, Participation, Local Community Groups, Blog, Empirical Research, Web Contents Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Local voluntary associations and community groups play a vital role in civil society. They aggregate collective interests and link individuals to larger society. Local groups include various types of organizations involved in a range of activities. It could be a sport club for recreational activities, a church for religious activities and services, or a neighborhood association or council for influencing the local government’s agenda. In these groups, individuals can accomplish what they cannot achieve alone. In other words, local community groups can help people create and maintain a strong civil society (Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004, 132). Thus, many neo-Tocquevilleans emphasize that “the
associations [local groups] of civil society are thought to play a major role … in building citizenship skills and attitudes crucial for motivating citizens to use these skills” (Edwards and Foley, 2001, 5).

In *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, Robert Putnam chronicles an apparent decline in U.S. community groups and argues forcefully that a weak civil society leads to a lack of “civic engagement” and “social trust” (Carothers & Barndt, 2000). Also, the nonprofit sector in the U.S. has increasingly adopted the approaches and values of the private market (Weisbrod, 1998, cited in Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004, 132). Thus, outcomes are the potential deterioration of the distinctive contributions that nonprofit organizations make to creating and maintaining a strong civil society (Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004, 138).

Critics of Putnam and optimists about the privatization of the nonprofit sector in the U.S. have seized on the rise of the Internet to rebut the pessimistic view of the decline of associational life in the U.S. In one of the earliest national studies on local community groups and information technology use, Katz and Aspden (1997) found that long time Internet users (three or more years) reported belonging to the most community organizations – 27% to one organization and a further 22% to two or more.1

In addition, the Internet is a meaningful medium in terms of supporting a strong civil society and building up social capital because of its relational network features. Walzer broadly defines civil society as “the space of uncoerced human association and also a set of relational networks-formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology-that fill this space” (in Barber, 1998, 4). Elshtain describes civil society as “a sphere of our communal life in which we answer together the most important question: what is our purpose, what is the right way to act, and what is the common good. In short, it is the sphere of society that is concerned with moral formation and with ends, not simply administration or the maximizing of means” (1999, 21).

Local community groups may depend on the medium’s ability to generate “social capital” – what Putnam identifies as the “features of social organization such as a networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” among citizens (Carothers and Barndt, 2000, 22). Noveck “posits an alternative: a model of consociational democracy premised on the collective action of small groups working on a scale enabled by technology” (2005, 15). It is based on the understanding that visual and social interactive technology makes it possible for people to see the local community groups to which they belong and participate in them more effectively by sharing tasks over a computer network such as the Internet and to make decisions and solve complex problems collectively. As a result, the Internet not only becomes a strong civic place where people associate with others who have similar interests but also a place where social capital is generated by rapidly changing information technologies.

It is not enough, however, to understand the crucial role of the Internet and more broadly, information technology when one looks only at possible impact of the Internet on civil society and social capital. It also is important to examine how groups use the Internet, looking at questions such as what types of information technologies (media) have been utilized on local community groups’ websites. In previous studies of the relationship between Internet use and the health of civil society, the main argument has focused on the individual-level production of social capital. According to Shan, Kwak, and Holbert (2001, 141):

1 They found that Internet users were affiliated with more leisure organizations than non users.