Are Regional Communities Communicating, Developing Social Capital and Tapping Into the Network Society? Reflections and Considerations from a Qualitative Community Study

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Abstract

When organisations communicate and engage with their communities they have an opportunity to connect, develop relationships and networks important to their social capital development. This paper focuses on a qualitative researcher’s perspective where regional communities tap into online networks and develop some new relationships, primarily at the local level, as face-to-face networking continues to be valued and important to their social capital. A qualitative study of three regional communities suggests that regional communities localise communication; social media plays a role in initial or transitory connections. This paper argues that as regional communities tap into social media and develop online networks these networks supplement their social capital primarily at a local level, thereby strengthening existing networks; there is little evidence of regional communities connecting and networking outside of their communities.

Keywords: social capital, community, networks, social media, communication
Introduction

In this paper a focus on networks that are important to sustaining social capital is explored from a regional community perspective, where a community is defined in terms of three geographic regions served by their local council and shires. Findings of a regional community study, to be discussed later, suggest that social media such as Facebook and Twitter provides one component of localized, rather than globalized community networks; the study does not support the notion of globally expanded networks developing through social media and the internet as suggested by scholars such as Seitel (2011) and Tampere (2011).

To gain context and perspective of the place of networks within social capital and their importance to community relationships, an understanding of these concepts needs some explication. Social capital has been researched and explored in many disciplines (Batt, 2008) encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue, developing a body of knowledge from many perspectives such as the sociological, political and anthropological. Theorists such as Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) have been at the forefront of social theory development focusing on the macro and micro components of social capital where bonding capital develops relationships and networks within organisations, as bridging capital does so externally when organisations collaborate, liaise with their communities, other organisations and key stakeholders. Social capital includes the relationships, networks, or the intangible exchanges that take place between community members, or between organisations and the community, or between different community groups and stakeholders. From a public relations perspective understanding social capital and developing social theory extends the body of knowledge around the contribution of social capital to the ‘bottom line of an organization’ (Ihlen, van Ruler & Fredriksson, 2009, p. 74) and develops understanding about the relational context and the networks important to the profession and to community engagement (Hazleton, Harrison-Rexrode, & Kennan, 2007; Chia, 2011). Public relations as a relational profession is likely to be more successful when social capital, or connections, networks and relationships, create expectations around reciprocity and exchange that assist in realizing the goals of organisations and their communities (Hazleton, Harrison-Rexrode, & Kennan, 2007).

Social capital: networks and communities

Putnam’s (1995) work is central to this paper as his contribution to the theory and practice of social capital focuses on the communal versus the individual context of social capital. Putnam asserts that social capital is a complex concept in terms of the relational context, the relationships that
develop and the community engagement that is possible when networks thrive. For Putnam, trust is important to the connections that individuals have with each other and networks are the ‘embodiment of past success at collaboration’ (Luoma-aho, 2009, p. 35); they contribute to ongoing strong relationships. Putnam also alludes to a declining sense of community associated with declining social capital (Luoma-aho, 2009) as he points to twenty five years of diminishing confidence related to the ‘erosion of social capital’ (Pharr, Putnam, & Dalton, 2000, p. 22); there is often a greater focus on individualism than on community and networking for communal benefit. If this is so, the study to be reported later in this paper gives us insight and understanding concerning the sense of community and how it can be developed, and how social capital growth is sustained when new forms of communication such as social media complement traditional face-to-face forums, networks and connections.

Before the advent of social media Bourdieu (1986) proposed that the more networks individuals have the more successful they will be developing social and human capital. Taking this into the current environment where multiple networks online are dynamic and complex, it is valuable to gain an understanding of the relational context of these networks, their value, benefit and the types of communication that make networks ‘work’. Networks are often dense (Granovetter, 2005) where trust is important to the relationships, but those in the network may also have weak ties with other members thereby, also, developing less trusting relationships. This is especially evident when there are many online encounters and less face-to-face networking takes place. Dense networks that Coleman (1988) suggests are important to trusting relationships seem to be more effective when they are underpinned by shared values (Nahapet & Ghoshal 1998), and they are easier to sustain in face-to-face, rather than electronic mediated networks and forums.

A diversity of networks that might be developed in the network society according to some scholars (Tampere, 2011; Macnamara, 2012) with reference to the work of Manuel Castells and his emphasis on global media and the ‘global civil society’ (Macnamara, 2012, p. 236), proposes technological networks where communication dialogue and exchange takes place on mass. In the network society many players contribute to the way networks are established and thrive, or begin to falter. However, the premise of these scholars and others such as Tampere that espouse that the ‘interactive space of communication, centered on mass media and the internet’ (2011, p. 56) is critical to the network society, does not resonate with the research reported in this paper; an empirical study of three regional communities reflects a localized communication paradigm. The notion that the network society might empower citizens and their communities to ‘promote democracy’ (Broom, 2009, p. 268) is recognised, but new
technology including social media may not be central to developing existing, strong relational ties and networks that legitimise egalitarian, regional communities. Much of the discussion about social media suggests that ubiquitous social media forums and the ever increasing online presence of many consumers (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2012) may not provide the social capital important to regional communities where relationships are valued, shared values are important and community members have very strong, long term, local social ties.

Online networks allow considerable mobility and flexibility, ‘by linking virtual communities of interest to the physical communities, new public spaces are created’ (Blanchard, Horan, 1998); they also create new contacts and extend connections. This would be even more so since the introduction of social media as the proliferation of networks is constantly opening up new online opportunities that expand networks. A study that explored how the internet might increase, or decrease social capital and social networks, (Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001) suggests that the internet contributes to non-local networks as it complements face-to-face networking. These scholars also found that extensive networks reflected weak ties and ‘distasteful interaction with some of these ties’ (p. 449). They located networks that were diverse, catering to different needs and constantly changing; this might also explain Putnam’s concerns about social capital erosion when individuals move from one network to another primarily for their own benefit as they glean and take what they want through their participation across many networks. This suggests transient connections that could lead to a decline in social capital, or it might give an indication of the ongoing emphasis in regional communities (Richards, Chia, & Bowd, 2011) of their need to continue to engage face-to-face to sustain effective, valued networks.

Sander and Putnam (2010) speculate that the internet and social media are changing the way we engage and communicate with each other but their focus is on the importance of traditional forms of communication sustaining social capital through trusting relationships. From a community perspective these scholars posit that communicating on the internet, or through social media such as Facebook results in individuals and groups moving in and out of conversations online. As such virtual and social ties that form do so primarily through face-to-face connections complemented by virtual connections. Likewise scholars such as Junghee Lee and Hyunjoo Lee (2010) found that face-to-face communication ‘in the traditional community is still essential to ensure the quality of community as a whole’ (p. 711) as they observed deep and lasting affection between community members. The same quality and depth of affection seemed to be difficult to establish online. These scholars refer to community in terms of being together where ‘group members last long enough to form a set of
habits and convention’ (p. 712) and where trusting relationships frame the network. Networks become vibrant in the physical spaces of community life as face-to-face exchanges cultivate confidence between community members.

**Qualitative research: a regional perspective**

A qualitative, pilot study of three regional communities was chosen for this study. The three communities reflected varied stages of community development from a recently, developed community where community ties were strong, to a community in the midst of change and new relationships, and a third community with established community networks. With a focus on these three communities at varied stages of development the research explored the way that each of the communities developed sustained relationships, or where they found it challenging to develop relationships, thereby gaining an understanding of social capital development across a wide spectrum of community life. The three communities as such included Roxby Downs, a mining town located in northern South Australia. It has a population of 5000 and is owned by BHP Billiton. The mine produces copper, uranium, silver and gold. The town was purpose built to service the Olympic Dam mine that holds one of the largest known ore bodies in the world today. It has a newly established community council.

The second community situated in Mount Gambier, the largest city in regional South Australia, 436 kilometers from Adelaide, the South Australian capital. It is one of the fastest growing cities in South Australia with a population of 30,000 including many newcomers and migrants who have settled into the community. The local council has community communication specialists, a strong regional media presence, a local university that works with the community, and a strong community network where public relations professionals and community leaders work together with their community. The third regional community included thriving, engaged Canadian communities on Vancouver Island, surrounded and supported by the capital, Victoria with a population of 80,000. Research by Chia and Peters (2008, 2009) indicated that Canadian models observed in Halifax and Toronto provided benchmarks for community engagement throughout Canada. As such these models give some insight into the way social capital could be sustained in Victoria and its surrounding regional communities.

As social capital is about relationships and networks, a qualitative study was considered important as it allowed the researcher to understand from the inside, what networks mean to individuals, how relationships are formed, and the communication that sustains them. If there are weak ties and trust is being eroded, scholars (Patulny & Svendsen, 2007) suggest that qualitative research is more effective to determine bridging capital, or the capital that results from organisations’ connections with the community,
and the connections of community members. Qualitative research ‘aims at understanding the phenomenon or event under study from the interior’ (Flick, 2006, p. 74), or as I would put it, from the inside, the inner feelings and viewpoints. As part of a construction of reality qualitative study also provides a richer context (Stacks, 2011) than quantitative study as there is opportunity to unpack meanings, probe and view social capital through the lens of organisations and their communities.

The key research question – what communication is effective or ineffective in engaging community members and developing social capital? – framed the research focus ‘Building capacity for community centred solutions; the role of public relations practitioners and journalists in promoting regional sustainability and social capital’. In this paper, the primary focus is on communication in terms of networks and social capital—see Richards (2013) for regional media reflections and discussion.

Focus groups (conducted in the two Australian regional communities) and semi-structured interviews in each of the three communities were the key methods for the qualitative study. The interviews and focus group (coded as FRD) of the eight Roxby Downs participants included representatives of the local newspaper (The Monitor) and community radio station (RoxFM) as well as the local council and local businesses, the local community board and the regional development authority. Two telephone interviews were also conducted with representatives of the mining company BHP Billiton (RDP,), Olympic Dam, and print media who support the Roxby Downs community (RDM), and a follow up interview, after the focus group, with the Community Board Director (RDD). 11 Mount Gambier participants (two focus groups of four members each (Coded as MGF1, MGF2), with four separate interviews with community advocate (MGA,) business leader-councillor,(MGB), University Director (MGU), local media director (MGM). There were 12 Canadian interviews. In collaboration with the University of Victoria, Canadian interviews included members of their Office of Community Based Research, (CRes1, CRes2), representatives with community responsibilities in corporate organisations (CBus1, CBus2,) Credit Unions Public relations and Community Managers (Cr1,Cr2, Cr3), community council (Ccon), local media and communication (Cloc), a social media specialist, (Csm), community radio staff, (Crm), and a public relations director-community activist (CPr). All interviews and focus group responses were transcribed and coded (open coding) according to the dominant themes that emerged. Through axial coding, the frames, or sub headings of the broader themes were identified (Weerakkody, 2009).

Field notes were prepared in the additional interviews with community project staff and in the meetings with a regional mayor and other support staff, and field visits provided an ethnographic perspective to the
research. The qualitative interviews and the field visits to local communities proved invaluable to the researchers’ community engagement (Weerakkody, 2009) as the researchers could experience and gain a sense of community. At one stage Mount Gambier regional media began an impromptu interview with a research team member about the research and its relevance to the community, simultaneously, as community members passed by providing comment. These encounters contribute to reflections of the everyday settings vital to communities. No doubt Denscombe (2003) cautions that such encounters can lead to an over-simplification of meaning, and they may not give a sound understanding of what is happening. Nevertheless, in the Mt Gambier community they provided ways to construct meaning about their community social capital and engagement.

In each of the communities sampling was initially purposive as local media managers, community council members, community public relations managers and coordinators were selected by community leaders for the research; snowball sampling expanded the interviews to include communication managers, community coordinators and leaders.

**Findings and field reflections: developing social capital, communicating and networking**

In this paper the primary purpose is to explore and reflect on communication forms relevant to the networks integral to social capital and connectivity, and to explore whether social media and online communication were changing the way regional, community networks were connecting and developing social capital. It is acknowledged that social media and online media can include many different forms of communication – in the study reported here online communication is primarily through the Web such as a Credit Union's websites; social media includes Facebook and Twitter as these were the primary forms of social media evident in the three regional communities.

Data analysis of the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews pointed to the increasing use of social media and online communication in the three communities as organisations such as local councils, Credit Unions and a mining corporation provided opportunities through Facebook and email to communicate and engage with their community members. Research questions that explored the way social media were used to communicate resulted in responses about the place of social media within other forms of communication. As such, when most study participants in the Roxby Downs focus group (RDF) talked about social media they were enthusiastic about it but they also gave examples of diverse communication forms and networks. When (RDD, RDP, RDM) were interviewed they gave examples of some network and relational success in communication...
through Facebook, but they also gave examples of online abusive responses, or only receiving a few responses when they had hoped for more.

In each of the regions the importance of telephone conversations to welcome newcomers and refugees, organising meetings in a community cafe to extend the conversations important to a community, developing newsletters about sustainability, and engaging regional newspapers to tell the stories and give visual context to community events, were given prominence. Focus group respondents (RDF, MGF2), and in individual media interviews in each of the regions, respondents gave many examples of their newspapers, radio and television creating community interest in youth programs and community projects – once interest was activated social media played a role in further discussion and exchange about how a café for youth could be developed (refered to in interviews Cr3, CBus1, CBus2, CRes1, CRes2), or how a Jazz program, such as the one developed in Mt Gambier (MGF1) for local musicians, might begin.

Networks important to each of the regional communities were developing and growing in many different ways. One of the Roxby Downs council members (RDD) said that they did not do enough networking and talking about community issues; he particularly liked regional radio and regional newspapers as these forms of communication set up channels of communication that began new networks of interest. The success of two regional newspapers in a small mining town suggests that they were very important to the community. In Roxby Downs, (RDF) members indicated that there was also some evidence of the importance of Facebook and Twitter to communicate with community members who had left the community – findings point to the primary goal for this communication outside of the community, as keeping in contact with friends and family.

Interviews that allowed for further probing of matters raised in the (RDF) focus group also gave insight into the way social media were changing networks and proving to be challenging. A good example was that given by the public relations director (RDP) of the mining company that services Roxby Downs. The Director indicated that it was important to consider a range of ways to communicate and present the reasons for her organisation’s response to the community. The director described social media and online communication at times being risky and difficult to manage as she referred to the time that her company received a barrage of online responses when there was a threat that company doctors who served the town, would leave. She referred to the response on Facebook as:
Facebook just went bonkers and someone started the Save the Roxby Downs Family Practice page and there were just pages and pages and pages of comments from people and hundreds of people joined this site.

There was an expectation that BHP in partnership with the local council would rescue the town and deal with the situation. One could say in this situation that the community felt empowered as social media provided a place to communicate. In terms of networking, the online communication reflected the public voice of concerned community members about a critical community service — a network formed for a specific purpose around a local issue. The public relations practitioner of the mining corporation found that it was more effective to have a town meeting rather than continue to communicate on Facebook and also on Twitter. Community goals could then be considered face-to-face to allow in-depth discussion necessary in such an emotive situation. Further, in other sensitive areas such as Indigenous land rights, communication specific to cultural needs was almost always face-to-face with the mining company and Indigenous elders; it took place where the elders felt that it was most appropriate. Indigenous concerns, issues about community health care and other concerns about youth programs were discussed on social media (Facebook and sometimes on Twitter), but the networks and relationships important to the community’s management of these issues were always stronger when likeminded, community members met to share their concerns and their areas of common interest.

In the focus group (MGF1) Mt Gambier’s local council’s community manager said that she was pleased about social media developments in her community as she referred to the ‘Youth advisory committee — they are all into social networking and texting and that sort of thing’. When the council posted their local needs survey on Facebook they had the best response from regional youth in seven years. Their letterbox drop also included details about Facebook so that traditional communication complemented new media communication. During Mt Gambier focus group discussions (MGF1, MGF2) there was considerable discussion about connections that were developing through Facebook and Twitter, with organisations such as schools, the local university, council and not-for-profit support services. This was supported in interviews (MGU, MGB, MGA, MGM) where examples given pointed to social media increasing local networks — there was no mention of global networks, or interest in setting up networks with communities outside of their region. These participants revealed that social media was the point of introduction to community events, initially through Twitter and then Facebook. Sharing stories and pictures after an event also proved to be the catalyst for ongoing community ideas about future events such as the local jazz festival that
became a major regional attraction – jazz enthusiasts formed networks online between festivals and then met face-to-face at special music events (MGF1, MGF2).

In focus groups, (MGF1, MGF2) and interviews (MGM, MGA, MGB, MGU) and in the Canadian interviews (CrM, CRes1, Cr2, Cr3,CPr, CBus2) study responses indicated that organisations were engaging with their communities through social media simultaneously as they facilitated face-to-face networks for newcomers and the youth of their respective regions.

Canadian Credit Unions (Cr1, Cr2, Cr3), encouraged social media communication as their public relations and community managers revealed that they preferred Twitter and Facebook to actively engage youth online. They indicated that the isolation of Vancouver Island communities (Vancouver Island is connected by ferry and plane to the mainland, but many people on the island rarely move beyond their communities) makes it especially important to use social media to connect and strengthen local communities to maintain open and active communication exchange and continue community conversations. Credit Unions were also embarking on story-telling initiatives through social media, community radio and regional media about Credit Union support programs, such as housing affordability programs. This was supported through the interviews (CBus1, CBus2, Ccon, Cmloc, Csm, Crm, CPr) with business, media and public relations specialists as they engaged with Credit Unions. They posted pictures and accounts online about recent projects, set up online support networks and, also, provided the opportunity for face-to-face meetings at projects sites. Volunteers formed a group online and then met to participate in projects. Credit Union community managers indicated that there were 60–70 groups in and around Victoria, Canada, that supported, or were part of community projects and special events – they functioned primarily in their respective communities but were connected online through social media. These accounts, and those in the two Australian regional communities provided some interesting perspectives about the way community networks localise and how the online and traditional forms of communication complement local engagement. However, not all aspects of communication and networking led to positive outcomes.

Canadian Credit Union public relations and community managers (Cr1, Cr2, Cr3), and the regional university’s social media manager (Csm), indicated that regional youth wanted to engage through social media but there were barriers, as some needed assistance to interact and engage with others in the virtual community. Some regional youth used the online forum inappropriately as they became abusive online (Roxby Downs Community had a similar experience, RDF, RDM, RDD). There were issues of access as those in the community who were disadvantaged and/or
unemployed often found it difficult to participate in social media networks. Organisations such as Canadian Credit Unions set up additional community support groups to provide community support to make networks ‘work’ online and face-to-face as they. Canadian researchers (CRes1, CRes2) are currently undertaking further study to explore these youth support programs and how effective they can be.

Interviews (CBus1, CPR, Csm, Cmloc, Ccon), revealed that sometimes networks develop because of unexpected community incidents. A fascinating and prevalent story about deers charging people was posted on Twitter and Facebook generating a barrage of stories in the Canadian regional community that was part of the study. Community members shared their response to this rather bizarre situation. Those interviewed suggested that online exchanges played a key role to localise knowledge and develop community understanding about an issue, but these events quickly passed as others emerged. In terms of community engagement one could say that networks were established to give community support concerning a particular situation and, no doubt, those communicating online about their ‘charging deer experience’ may not continue to network once that problem, or issue disappears. Indeed a barrage of exchanges began about brown bears moving into the local town (Victoria) at the time the research team was leaving Vancouver Island – the ‘brown bear networks’ began. The transient nature of online communication indicates that it would be difficult to form strong, value-based networks that regional communities appreciate face-to-face (reported in the focus groups and most of the interviews) but there was ‘transient value’ in short term, networking. This seems to be important to community members suggesting that temporary networks supplement long-term networks as they add value to the overall connections of individuals in their communities. It was also apparent that in each of the communities, regional communities deep, lasting relationships were developed over time, as trust built and relational partners collaborated. The regional community’s social capital was a valuable and valued asset.

**The regional network context: discussion and conclusion**

In this paper tapping into the network society suggests a local, regional context for communication exchange where social media primarily localizes conversations. It is one of many forms of regional communication that builds relationships and networks. In each of the communities community members were communicating through social media and contributing to community dialogue, but they also wanted to communicate face-to-face in meetings, and through events, in order to participate in special
celebrations. Social media and online exchange became a starting point for dialogue, or attempting to have a voice in the community; it was a catalyst for further conversation. Long-term connections began with participation in special events such as jazz festivals (MGF1, MGF2) and participating in community projects for youth and the disadvantaged (Ccon, Cmloc, Cr1, Cr2, Cr3, CrRes1).

This exploratory study indicates that network development can be fostered when social media is one platform for community engagement but, traditional communication, through meetings and community events connects and sustains communities. Sander and Putnam’s (2010) doubts about online connectedness and how effective, or ineffective it can be to social capital development, has relevance; as I heard how local networks and relationships were valued and developed, primarily through face-to-face exchanges, I observed and understood the role of social media as a contributor to overall regional community connections. Tampere’s (2011) perspective of the wider global network society sharing and connecting on mass was not shared by the regional communities in the study reported here. Rather, the notion that the virtual and physical places together increase opportunities to interact within communities (Blanchard & Horan, 1998), or I would say enhance relational possibilities, reflects the experience of regional communities in this study as they strengthened their social capital and valued their local exchanges. Regional communities developed trust with organisations that supported them and communicated with them online and face-to-face, such as the Canadian Credit Unions that supported the marginalised and newcomers.

Weak ties that result from extensive networks (Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001) have a place for aspects of regional life, such as unexpected events where community members want to network and share a matter of common concern on a temporary basis. Transient connections that are more likely to be taking place through social media, add value to overall networking. As such I would argue that weak ties be considered ‘transient points of connection’ for specific purposes that are valuable at times of specific need. Granovetter’s (2005) notion of dense and cohesive networks seems more applicable to long-term networks.

Connections that social capital scholars (Putnam, 1995; Coleman, 1988) contend are critical to community sustainability and integral to the quality of regional networks, sometimes work well, and at other times break down when communication through social media, for example, is used inappropriately. Face-to-face communication seems to be important when issues need to be followed up, or there is a misunderstanding online. The examples of Roxby Downs and Canadian regional communities (outlined earlier) give us some insight into the challenges for communication
specialists and community coordinators when social media tends to disconnect, thus distancing participants.

The study here indicates that online communication can begin community conversations but physical relationships and face-to-face communication creates the communication paradigm for engaged communities to sustain social capital; ie networks and relationships. This regional study contributes to the body of knowledge concerning community networks and social capital development as it suggests that tapping into the network society is not a global, but a local meaningful experience for regional communities. The findings also indicate that the concerns of Putnam (1995) that the lost sense of community is taking hold, as individualism becomes the norm, is not so in regional communities that are working hard to connect, paying attention to community changes as new forms of communication bring new members to their attention. When the Mt Gambier council (MGF1) had its best response to a survey for seven years because they used Facebook and traditional communication, they were suddenly dealing with many new voices, new ideas and challenges. This proved to be both encouraging and confronting as they used online networking and face-to-face forums to deal with many of the matters brought to their attention.

This pilot study provides understanding about the strength of face-to-face networks, and the place of online transient connections in overall networking. Follow-up research, currently taking place, is considering the context of regional networking and communication. More needs to be understood about the varied forms of regional community communication and what works well to strengthen networks. Regional communities value local connections and develop social capital for local benefit and they want to communicate to engage, consolidate and sustain relationships.
References


