

# Mobile communication and social capital in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction and data

Based on material gathered within the EU *e-living* project, this paper examines one's integration into their social network and the relationship between Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use and social integration. The data was gathered via questionnaire in Norway, the UK, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria and Israel. A total of 10,534 persons were interviewed, approximately 1,750 in each country. The interviews took place in December of 2001. In order to examine this issue we will first look at the current discussion on social capital and social capital with reference to the Internet and mobile telephony. It seems that one of the contributions of this analysis is the combination of these two technologies to the examination of social capital. Where previous analyses have generally examined Internet's contribution to one's interaction with various social spheres, there have been few analyses of mobile telephony's effect on this part of life.<sup>2</sup>

## Social capital

Before examining the interaction between, we turn to a short discussion of the concept of social capital. According to Putnam, social capital describes the social networks of the individual along with the various webs of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense, social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.<sup>4</sup>

There is the sense here that as one interacts with others in their local milieu that they develop forms of interaction and a sense of identity based on the type and extent of the interactions. One can, in turn, rely on these relationships in other contexts. In this way, it facilitates the functioning of society.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the concept is not a new one. Rather it has been a point of discussion since the early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Putnam, in particular has examined social capital and its fate in modern society. His general finding is that there are both cohort and life phase effects that are conspiring to reduce social capital in the US. When looking at the age cohort issue, the replacement of the “depression” children's generation with the more “me” oriented post war, and X generations is having a deleterious effect. While the cohort effect is one impact on social capital, Putnam also examines the effects of various other developments in society. He places particular significance on the effects of suburbanization and the television.

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<sup>2</sup> Mante-Meijer, E. , and al., et. 2001. "Checking it out with the people - ICT markets and users in Europe." Heidelberg: EURESCOM

<sup>3</sup> Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone.

<sup>4</sup> Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone. Pp.19

<sup>5</sup> Kavanaugh, A.L., and Patterson, S.J. 2001. "The impact of community computer networks on social capital and community involvement." *American behavioral scientist* 45, 3:496-509. Pp. 497

## Social capital and the Internet

At the most utopian levels, and in the earlier days of its diffusion, some suggested that the Internet will have virtually unlimited effect on our ability to develop not only social capital, but to address a panoply of social ills. The open nature of the system suggested that communities of interest will allow individuals to seek out like minded individuals and via these connections to develop a stronger sense of inclusion than is allowed given traditional physical constraints. Some have gone so far as to suggest that it will give rise to a new form of consciousness, will eliminate the need for war, expand resources, eliminate illiteracy, solve the energy crisis, achieve disarmament, topple dictators save the environment, provide us with an endless life span, eliminate the need for factories, crystallize participatory democracy and result ins a rich symbiosis of god and man, without the compulsion of power or law but by the voluntary co-operation of citizens.<sup>6</sup> Back here on earth the estimation is a bit more sober.

Putnam examines the potential impact of the Internet in the light of social capital. In this analysis, he is less sure about its general effect.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, it can function to isolate people in the same way that TV does. On the other hand, it can assist persons in their development of communities of interest. Other work that really started the discussion of this issue was contributed by Kraut et al.<sup>8</sup> By way of contrast Katz, Rice and Aspden examined Internet use and social participation. They found that the social dimension is an important glue that holds together the task-oriented aspects of various computer-mediated interaction.<sup>9</sup>

An analysis that echoes some of the findings of Katz et al is Kavanaugh and Patterson's analysis of the Blacksburg Electronic Village. They found that the longer people involved in the Blacksburg Electronic Village, the more likely they were to use the Internet for various types of social capital building.<sup>10</sup> However, there is also the strong suggestion that computer networks such as that in Blacksburg thrive in communities where there is already extensive social commitment beforehand. This is the "the rich get richer" argument. That is, net in itself does not generate social capital; it only facilitates already existing tendencies.

Looking into the distinction between using the net for interpersonal correspondence (e-mail, chat) and for information retrieval (surfing), Franzen suggests that surfing on the web results in small but significant reductions in the degree to which an individual engages in social activities with friends. By way of contrast, more use of e-mail increases the number of close friends.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Anderson and Tracey followed a group of individuals in a panel design. According to their data, and particularly in the case of new users, the use of e-mail increased from T1 to T2. Thus, the more experienced one was on the net, the more likely they were to use e-mail, the most firmly established social channel on the Internet in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

The assertion that e-mail covaries with greater sociability does not go unchallenged. Like Kavanaugh and Patterson, Nie suggests that the Internet does not cause greater sociability, rather, those who are already sociable, i.e. those who are better educated, more financially at ease and those who are in the more active phases of their lives, are the most likely to also adopt the Internet. Nie reports similar findings.

## Social capital and the mobile telephone

The mobile telephone shares many characteristics with the Internet. First, it is an artifact of the broader development of ICTs that has arisen in the past decades. Where traditional telephony and TV have been a part of the culture for longer periods, mobile telephony and the Internet have only become popularized recently.

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<sup>6</sup> Kumar, K. 1995. *From post-industrial to post modern society: New theories of the contemporary world*. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. 15

<sup>7</sup> Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone. P.170 – 180

<sup>8</sup> Kraut, R., et al. 1998. "Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well being?" *American psychologist* 53, 9:1017-1031.

<sup>9</sup> Katz, J. E., et al. 2001. "The internet, 1995 - 2000 Access, civil involvement , and social interaction." *American behavioral scientist* 45, 3:405-419.

<sup>10</sup> Kavanaugh, A.L., and Patterson, S.J. 2001. "The impact of community computer networks on social capital and community involvement." *American behavioral scientist* 45, 3:496-509. Pp. 505

<sup>11</sup> Franzen, A. 2000. "Does the Internet make us lonely?" *European Sociological Review* 16:427-438.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, B., and Tracey, K. 2001. "Digital Living: The impact (or otherwise) of the Internet on everyday life." *American behavioral scientist* 45, 3:456-475. Nie, N.H. 2001. "Sociability, interpersonal relations, and the Internet: Reconciling conflicting findings." *American behavioral scientist* 45, 3:420-435.

Perhaps because of this, only certain groups have adopted these technologies while others are more cautious in their use of the device. In addition, they both allow for asynchronous text based interaction.

When looking at the traditional telephone, there is little doubt in the literature that the device has assisted in the *maintenance* of social connections.<sup>13</sup> It is worth underscoring maintenance since the device does not generally allow one to expand their social sphere in the same way that the relatively open Internet.

When comparing mobile telephony to the Internet there are, however many basic differences. These include the cost of becoming a user of the two systems. Whereas the cost of adopting the Internet usually includes the purchase of a PC, the subscription to an Internet provider and the installation of software and hardware components, the adoption of a mobile telephone is a far less expensive undertaking. One can obtain an inexpensive telephone for as little as 50 – 100 Euros.<sup>14</sup> Another difference is the degree to which the mobile telephone is more a point of personal display than is the equipment associated with the Internet. In addition, the mobile telephone allows of ubiquitous access where, at least up to now, using the Internet has been more fixed geographically. Finally, as noted above, many portions of the Internet are open systems wherein one can encounter others who were previously unknown. By contrast, mobile telephony allows one, in many cases to limit access.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, mobile telephone numbers are rarely provided in telephone catalogues and the users of pre-paid subscriptions are, in some cases, completely anonymous.

Much of the comment regarding the social consequences of the mobile telephone has focused on its capacity to facilitate co-ordination,<sup>16</sup> and its role as a disturbing influence in society.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this there has been some work done describing its potential as a social instrument among teens. Unlike the Internet, the mobile telephone's potential to assist in the broader project of developing social capital is relatively untouched. This is likely because whereas the Internet is an open system, i.e. one can interact with other, unknown, persons via functions such as chat and Usenet, the mobile telephone requires that one seek out a specific person as with the traditional telephone.

At the same time, engagement in the telephone call closes one off from other, co-present activities.<sup>18</sup> This can have a chilling effect on the ability to create face-to-face social relationships. In addition, the ease with which one calls, via both the fixed and the mobile telephone, might cheapen the total meaning of a phone call when compared with a visit.

Thus, while the relatively open and unwieldy nature of the Internet is new and worthy of comment, the traditional nature of the mobile telephone means that this issue is not as relevant. Still, the fact that mobile telephony means that one can interact when ever and wherever one is, then there is the potential to cultivate friendships regardless of time and place. This leads one to suggest that the mobile telephone can be seen as a tool to assist in the nurturing of social capital.

## Method and data

Turning now to the perhaps contrasting element of social relationships there were, several measures of sociability that were applied. These range from the least intimate, i.e. membership in formal organizations, through leisure interaction, the number of acquaintances, number of friends and finally the frequency of interactions with one's most trusted friends.

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<sup>13</sup> Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone. Pp.166 – 169; Wellman, B. 1996. "Are personal communities local? A Durkheimian reconsideration." *Social Networks* 18:347 – 354; Wellman, B., and Tindall, D. 1993. "Reach out and touch some bodies: How social networks connect telephone networks" in *Progress in communication sciences. Vol 12*, edited by Richards, W. and Barnett, G. Norwood N.J: Ablex, Pp. 63 - 93.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, during subscription campaigns one could get a handset and be paid 2-3 Euros. This of course assumes that one sign a contract wherein

<sup>15</sup> Fortunati, L (Ed.). 2002. *Italy, Stereotypes, true and false*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

<sup>16</sup> Ling, R., and Yttri, B. 2002. "Hyper-coordination via mobile phones in Norway" in *Perpetual contact: Mobile communication, private talk, public performance*, edited by Katz, J. E. and Aakhus, M. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Pp. 139 – 169; Ling, R., and Haddon, L. 2001. "Mobile telephony and the coordination of mobility in everyday life." in *Machines that become use*. 18th and 19th April 2001, Rutgers University.

<sup>17</sup> Ling, R. 1997. "'One can talk about common manners!': the use of mobile telephones in inappropriate situations." in *Themes in mobile telephony Final Report of the COST 248 Home and Work group*, edited by Haddon, L. Stockholm: Telia; Ling, R. 2002. "The social juxtaposition of mobile telephone conversations and public spaces." in *The social consequences of mobile telephones*, edited by Kim, S. D. July 2002, Chunchon, Korea.

<sup>18</sup> de Gournay, C. (Ed.). 2002. *Pretense of intimacy in France*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Specifically we looked into the respondents' membership in formal clubs and organizations and their participation in socially focused leisure activities. In addition, we asked the respondents about their close friendships. Thus, we gathered information on formal and informal social interaction as well as interaction with one's inner circle of friends.

In terms of informal interaction, we asked about the frequency that one participated activities such as exercise, attendance of cinema, theatre or sports activities, eating meals out or going to a bar, meeting with friends etc. An index of active leisure use was developed from these variables. When examining the data describing one's participation in active leisure activities, one sees that it is the young males are the most likely to report this type of activity. Indeed, it is only in this case that a two way ANOVA results in a significant score.<sup>19</sup> This indicates that it is this group that most often reports the various types of unorganized leisure activities noted above. This finding underscores the notion that it is young adults are in a nomadic phase of life wherein social contact is not generally associated with formal groups, but rather spontaneous.

The material also included a battery of questions asking about membership in formal organizations including sports and social clubs, resident, school and local groups, environmental groups, trade unions and other political or campaigning organizations. These items were formed into an index of proclivity to join formal organizations. When considering the age distribution of membership the material indicates that formal organizations are primarily the realm of middle-aged persons. Mature adults reported about 20% more formal membership activity than teens and young adults. Mature adults were between 25 and 50% more likely to join formal organizations than those who were in their elderly years. Interestingly, men were more likely to report membership than women.<sup>20</sup>

The final measure of social integration is the number of persons that the respondent considered close friends. In order to examine this we asked respondents to tell the number of persons outside their family they felt that they could "really count on to listen to you when you need to talk." Thus, we have focused on an extreme aspect of this phenomenon. Clearly, we would have found other results given other definitions of the concept. Given the definition that is used here, the data does not seem to indicate that there are any strong age based differences concerning close friendship. However, men reported a larger number of these close friends than did the women in the sample. It may be, however, the women have a higher standard here. Thus to be considered a close friend by a woman one must really demonstrate their willingness to be available.

## ICTs and social capital

Now we have set the scene and have come to the core of the analysis. Up to this point, we have discussed the various dimensions of social capital and examined the types of ICTs that were included in the analysis. In this section, we will look at the interaction between ICTS and the different forms of social interaction.

In general, we see that ICT contributes to the organization of informal social interaction. To a lesser degree it is has a connection to one's participation in formal social groups. The data here shows literally no interaction between ICTs and close friendships.

We have used the data collected in the first wave of the e-living project to examine the degree to which ICT use interacts with social interaction. In order to do this we have created a multiple regression analysis of the three social interaction indices described above. In the specification of the regression model, these form the dependent variable. The independent variables include variables describing ICT use as well as demographic variables.

### Leisure activity and ICTs

The strongest model was that used to describe leisure social activity. In this case, almost 20% of the variance was explained.<sup>21</sup> Education (0,16\*\*\*), "maleness" (0,08\*\*\*) and income (0,07\*\*), have a positive correlation with one's penchant for participating in active leisure activities. By contrast, age has a negative relationship (-0,1\*\*\*).

When looking at ICT use, there is a positive relationship between those who the highest use of SMS (0,14\*\*\*), e-mail (0,08\*\*\*), mobile voice telephony (0,07\*\*) and traditional fixed line telephony (0,04\*) and participating

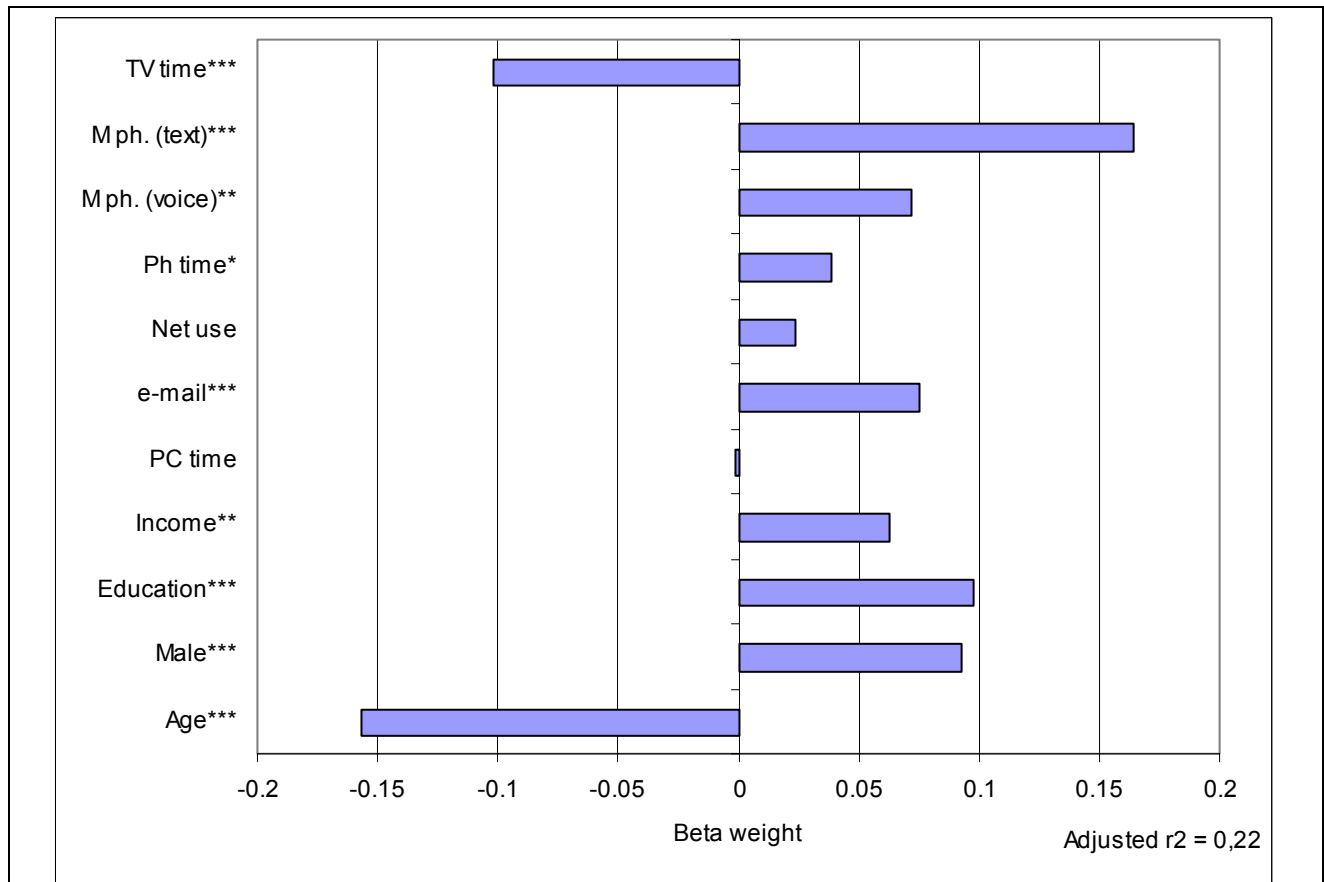
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<sup>19</sup> F (75, 9952) = 1,609, sig. = 0,001.

<sup>20</sup> F (1, 4483) = 67,652, sig < 0,001.

<sup>21</sup> Adjusted  $r^2$  = 0,22

in an active leisure. Not surprisingly, there is a negative relationship between the time used to watch TV and reporting high levels of active leisure (-0.10)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. This is a finding that Putnam also reports (see figure 5).



**Figure 1: Graphical representation of significant predictors of active leisure (countries pooled, population weighted)**

Thus, younger men, who are better educated and who have a higher income, who are active users of mobile telephony and e-mail but not TV seem to be the most likely to report participating in active leisure activities. This is the loosest form of socializing that we have examined. These gatherings are not associated with formal groups, rigid timetables, deep emotional commitment or strong rituals. There is flexibility in the way it is organized and in the commitment of the individuals. Granted, for example, once the tickets to the concert have been purchased there is a commitment to show up. None-the-less, there is not the same routinized interaction that one might find when examining the index describing joining behavior nor is there is the same intimacy one finds when looking at the interaction between close friends.

This type of socializing describes the situation of young adults, particularly those who have better education, well paying jobs. It is a period of life wherein one has yet to establish the major commitments of home and family. Thus, one is available to for the type of informal socializing described by this variable. However, beyond simply having the capacity to participate in this type of lifestyle its cultivation can become a type of culture in itself. Thus, the young adult period goes beyond simply being something to experience. Rather it is a goal in itself.<sup>22</sup> The culture of youth and the culture of young adulthood are in themselves older than the Internet and the mobile telephone. The Yuppie culture of the mid 80's, coffee bars and young adult oriented networking pre-date the mass acceptance of both of these technologies. None-the-less, the spontaneity allowed by, in particular, by the mobile phone is a useful tool in these situations. Thus, while at this point we cannot assert causality, the likely direction is that the demographic situation of the young adult men described here supports an active, but informally organized, leisure. In addition, the same demographic variables support the adoption and

<sup>22</sup> Frønes, I. , and Brusdal, R. 2000. På sporet av den nye tid: Kulturelle varsler for en nær fremtid. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

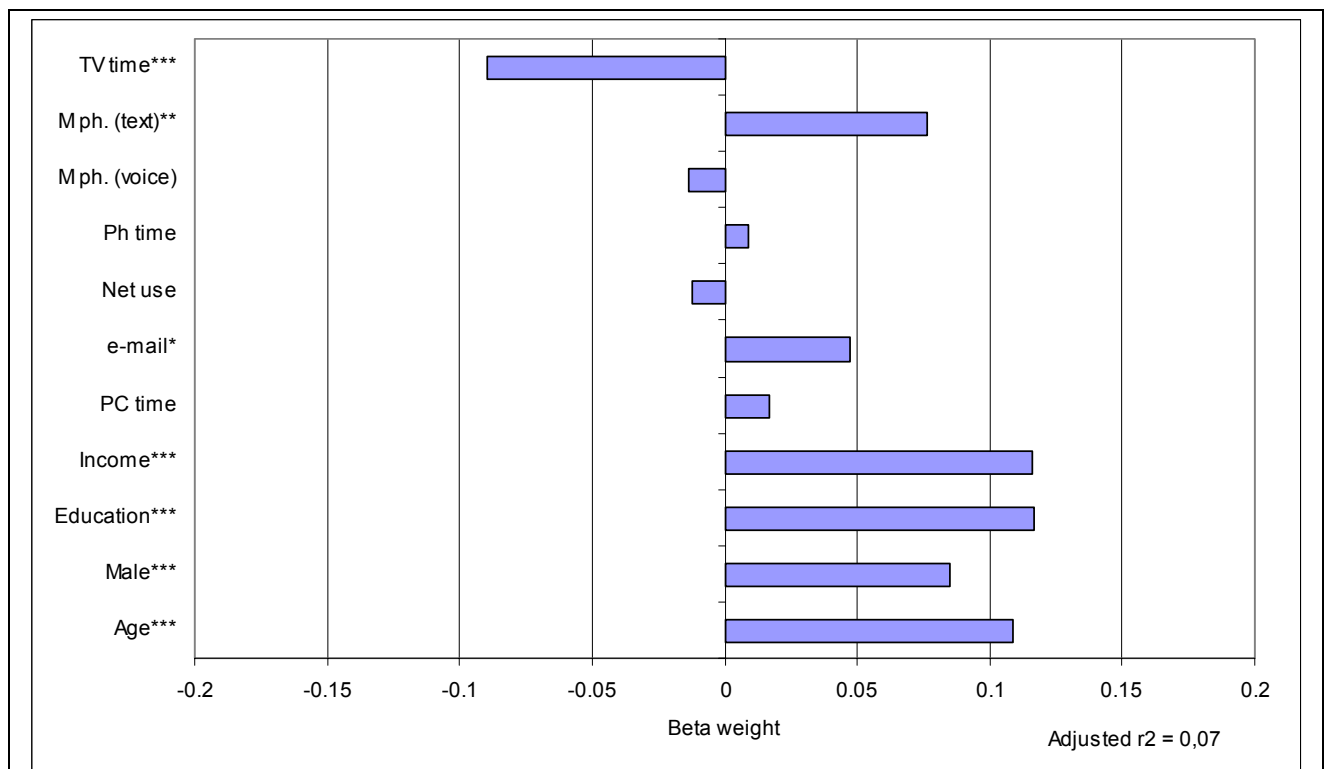
use of ICTs (excluding extensive TV use). The “social” ICTs, in turn contribute to the ability of these persons to participate in an active but informal leisure. This line of reasoning has been called “The rich get richer” approach to explaining the effect of ICTs on social interaction. That is, some persons who already enjoy an active leisure also are able to shape the use of various tools in a way that further supports a pre-existing inclination. Using the thinking suggested by the so-called domestication theorists, a technology is observed and evaluated in terms of a pre-existing social context.<sup>23</sup> Once the technology is procured, it, as well as the users of the technology, are progressively altered such that the technology and the user become house broken. Put into the context of the analysis here, the pre-existing social situation of young well-educated persons who commanded high incomes.

### Formal organizations and ICTs

The attempt to model participation in formal organizations was at best only moderately successful.<sup>24</sup> When looking at the demographic variables the analysis shows that education (0.12\*\*\*), income (0.12\*\*\*), age (0.11\*\*\*) and “maleness” (0.09\*\*\*) had a positive relationship to joining formal organizations.

When looking at ICT use there were only weak connections. SMS (0.08\*\*), e-mail (0.05\*) showed a positive but weak relationship to joining formal organizations. Television viewing had a negative relationship to joining (-0.09\*\*\*) (see figure

6).



**Figure 2: Graphical representation of significant predictors of participation in formal organisations (countries pooled, population weighted)**

As noted above, participation in formal organizations is a middle-aged phenomenon. In addition, the analysis shows upper income and educated males are also relevant variables. The only “ICT” variables that produced a significant relationship were e-mail and TV viewing. While the latter is perhaps an obvious finding, the latter is interesting. It perhaps reflects the degree to which e-mail has begun to find its place as a mundane part of organizing formal groups. Not surprisingly, excessive use of the TV has a negative relationship to joining organizations. However, there seems to be some positive, albeit weak, interaction between text-based interaction (SMS and e-mail) and participation in formal organizations.

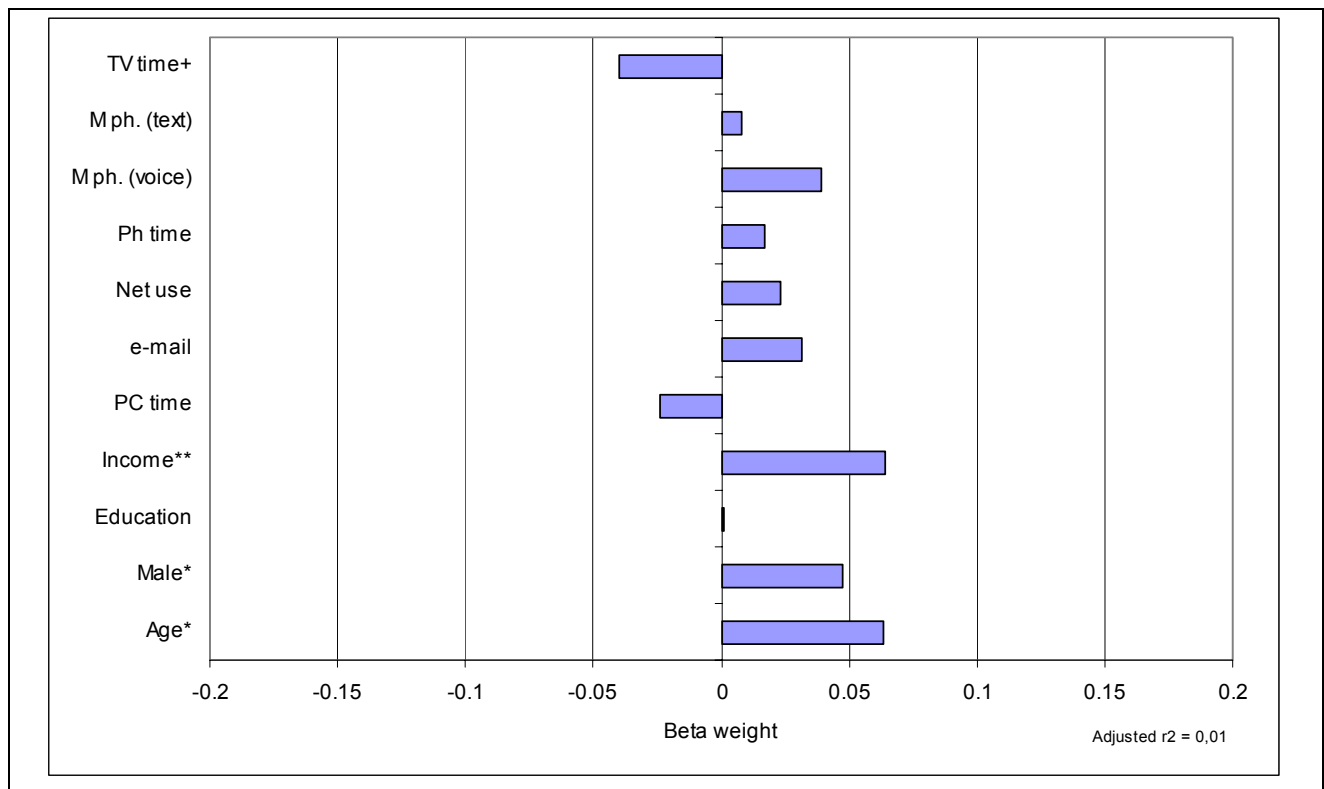
<sup>23</sup> Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley 1992; Silverstone 1995; Silverstone and Haddon 1996

<sup>24</sup> Adjusted r<sup>2</sup> = 0,07

This latter finding might be a weak indication that the electronic age is slowly moving out of the commercial world and has become common enough that voluntary and leisure organization can begin to use the efficiencies associated with this technology.

### Close friendship and ICTs

The analysis of close friendship was the poorest model of the three social capital indicators.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, it was only the demographic variables that showed any significant effect on the number of close friends reported by the informants. One's income (0.06\*\*), Age (0.06\*), and "maleness" (0.05\*) were the only variables wherein the analysis showed a significant interaction. When looking at the ICT variables there was little if any significant covariance. The only variable that was significant was the time used viewing TV (0.04+). Here the level of significance was narrowly outside the 0.05 level at 0.059 (see figure 7).



**Figure 3: Graphical representation of predictors of the number of close friends (countries pooled)**

In some respects, this finding speaks to the basic nature of intimate friendships. Given the extremely tight definition of friendship, i.e. trust in individuals in moments of crisis, all individuals reported that they had some of these relationships. In addition, the intense nature of the relationships, to some degree excludes mediated interaction. Thus, the number of persons one considers close friends does not covary with interactive ICT use. Social interaction friends at the most in elemental level has not been brought into the world of mediated interaction according to this analysis. At the same time, an overuse of TV has a slightly negative effect on one's ability to develop and maintain these types of friendships.

### Social integration and ICT use

The material here indicates that one can observe the greatest covariance between ICT and informal social interaction. Mobile telephony has a particularly strong role here. Obviously, this type of social interaction is also characteristic of a life phase. Thus, it is likely that the demographic dimensions of informal social interaction were in place before the advent of Internet and mobile telephone mediated contact. None-the-less, these technologies have further facilitated the intensity of the social interaction. As noted above, this suggests that ICTs facilitate social interaction where there is already a core upon which to build. ICT is not the edifice in itself.

<sup>25</sup> Adjusted r<sup>2</sup> = 0,013

The material only marginally supports the suggestion that formal organizations can be more functional via the use of new ICTs. Finally, close friendships seem to be quite resistant to the rise of ICTs.

Thus, the suggestions of the more euphoric commentators that, for example, the Internet would flower into a self-sustaining social center in itself seem to be quite off base. Rather, well functioning social groups that also use ICT to facilitate their interactions will potentially enjoy better co-ordinated and flexible informal social interaction.

It is easy to interpret this in a positive direction, i.e. people will be able to seek out friends for informal social interaction at times that better suit them and in ways that are easier to accommodate. An intriguing additional assertion here is that ICTs can potentially also strengthen counter social tendencies in communities. Thus, mobile telephony among gangs and drug dealers strengthens their ability to communicate and makes the problem more.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand there is that part of society that is well educated, affluent and thus they supplement their connectivity with new technologies that take it to higher levels of interactivity. In addition, there is another sector of society that is also well connected, but illicit. This can include gang of youths, drug pushers, prostitutes or terrorists.<sup>27</sup> The important thing here is that in both groups there are well developed bases upon which the technology can build.

Finally, the material here seems to indicate that ICTs are irrelevant for those who do not have a well-developed network from before. If this is not in place, that is if one lives in an anomic situation without an established social network, or if one lives in a well routinized locally based social situation, then there is little need to use resources to streamline one's broader social interactions. Quite simply, they do not exist and thus there is not need to bother with them. This comes through in William Gibson's comments concerning the Riots in Los Angeles. In an interview he said:

A Radio Shack shop (ed. a chain of shops selling consumer electronics gear) was being looted. Next to that there was an Apple shop, and it was untouched. People wanted to steal portable TVs and CD players, not computers. I think this clearly indicated the gaps of culture, or simply the gaps of chances, in our society.<sup>28</sup>

While ICTs represent a powerful opportunity to connect socially, the network and secondarily the understanding of the technology's potential have to be in place before one can conceive of adopting the technology.

Thus, it is beyond the role of ICTs to create social networks. While certain types of sociability can be developed and even elaborated via mediated interaction, these are marginal in our society. The "chat" friendship that blooms into romance and marriage is the exception. It is far more common that social interaction is founded on various forms of physically co-present contact.<sup>29</sup> The Internet, e-mail, mobile telephony and SMS can all enhance these interactions once they are established, but one must establish them in the first place. This is not to say that relationships that are established via other channels cannot flourish and be as multifaceted as other types of relationships, only that these types of social interactions as in the minority.

Further, in situations where social institutions are only precariously in place, one does not often find the support for the development of firm local sociability. Where middle-class and upper middle class parents can encourage their children to play soccer and visit the library while they network with other firmly implanted parents via various media, lower class, and impoverished parents do not have the same possibilities.

If one shifts to Durkheimian turn of mind here, one can suggest that that which characterizes "nomic" societies is, to one degree or another, the presence of a common sentiment.

If the communication established between [individuals] is to become real communion, that is to say a fusion of all particular sentiments into one common sentiment, the signs expressing them must themselves be fused into one single and unique resultant. It is the appearance of this that informs individuals that they are in harmony and makes them conscious of their moral unity. It is by uttering

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<sup>26</sup> Lien, I.L., and Haaland, T. 1998. "Vold og gjengatferd: En pilotstudie av et ungdomsmiljø." Oslo: NIBR.

<sup>27</sup> Ronfeldt, D., and Arquilla, J. 2001. "Networks, netwars and the fight for the future." *First monday* 6, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Salza, G. 2002. "Interview with William Gibsen." <http://services.worldnet.fr/~giusal/gibson.html>. 6 June, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Ling, R. 1998. "'She calls, [but] it's for both of us you know': The use of traditional fixed and mobile telephony for social networking among Norwegian parents." Kjeller: Telenor R&D. Report 33/98; Ling, R. 2000. "Direct and mediated interaction in the maintenance of social relationships" in *Home informatics and telematics: Information, technology and society*, edited by Sloane, A. and van Rijn, F. Kluwer: Boston, Pp. 61 – 86.

the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison.<sup>30</sup>

According to Durkheim, it is through these common rituals that the community becomes conscious of itself, and the individuals are aware of their membership in the broader community. Collins suggests that there are several component elements in the essential version of the Durkheimian ritual. Collins, who was writing before the widespread use of Internet, noted the elements of 1) face-to-face presence of the group, 2) a common focus of attention, 3) shared emotions and 4) non-practical actions carried out for symbolic ends.<sup>31</sup>

There are two points to be made here. The first is the assertion that these types of binding rituals are missing in some social situations. In the case that these basic building blocks of social capital are not in place, social groups are neither able to further elaborate the social forms that characterize the more “nomic” societies nor are they able to employ the potential advantages provided by ICTs in the further leveraging of this type of access.

The second point is the degree to which these types of social ritual can be shorn from their physical basis and taken into the exclusively virtual world. The findings here indicate that a concrete, here and now orientation is essential in first establishing social contacts and second in maintaining the group. This does not mean that parts of both the establishment and the maintenance of group interaction can be carried out via mediated channels.<sup>32</sup> However, it seems that one has to confer occasionally. Without the shared and focused experience of a common meeting, the impulse to maintain the social relationship runs out in the sand.

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<sup>30</sup> Durkheim, E. 1954. *The elementary forms of religious life*. Glencoe, IL: The free press. Pp. 230

<sup>31</sup> Collins, R. 1994. *Four sociological traditions*. New York: Oxford. Pp. 206

<sup>32</sup> Ling, R. 2000. "Direct and mediated interaction in the maintenance of social relationships" in *Home informatics and telematics: Information, technology and society*, edited by Sloane, A. and van Rijn, F. Kluwer: Boston, Pp. 61 - 86