



New Media, the Internet, and Social Capital in Peachtree Corners: A Community Case Study

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ABSTRACT

New media, like the Internet and social media, has undoubtedly influenced community participation and social capital. The introduction of the Internet and its potential impacts on community and social capital has been a highly debated topic across the existing literature. Scholars have argued that media consumption has decreased social capital. Other researchers, however, say that the Internet has increased community engagement and, therefore, social capital through its facilitation of information sharing. This paper will analyze how new media might relate to participatory and social capital, specifically in the city of Peachtree Corners in Georgia. Established in 2012, Peachtree Corners is a relatively new city with an innovative and tight-knit community. Various ways in which community members utilize media in this city may contribute to a closely integrated community, including a monthly newsletter, an e-newsletter, and multiple social media platforms. Considering these factors of Peachtree Corners, a study on the diverse relationships between various new media technologies and the city's community capital is valuable to the ongoing debate about internet-based communities and establishes a city-specific case study of how the Internet might impact social capital.

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New media, means of communication through digital technology like the Internet and social media, has undoubtedly influenced community participation and social capital. Social capital – the network of relationships among individuals in a community – has been a topic of research from the early 2000s to recent years (e.g.; Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton, 2001; Hampton, Lee, and Her, 2011; Hampton & Wellman, 2021). The debate across the existing literature about the introduction of the Internet to communities and its potential impacts on social capital has developed into two diverging positions. Some scholars argue that media consumption has hindered social capital due to factors like decreased social support and community commitment (Hampton et al., 2011), while other researchers say that the Internet has increased community engagement and, therefore, social capital (Wellman et al., 2001). However, few researchers disagree that new media – i.e., communication technologies that enable online, digital interactions, has changed the idea of community.

The “traditional community” was smaller, and close relations within it led to similar beliefs and backgrounds among a set number of close individuals. However, with the introduction of new media, such as the Internet and social networking sites, there was increased mobility and contact between various communities as relationships were no longer geographically bound, which changed community structures (Hampton & Wellman, 2021). Following that line of thought is where the diverging perspectives emerge. Some scholars believe that the Internet has decreased social capital, while others believe that it has increased it.

In this article, I explore media use in a mid-sized city in Georgia, using interviews and a comprehensive survey of embedded community members in the city to examine the relationship between the usage of new media and social capital in a community. The city of Peachtree Corners’s diversity and its basis of technology make it an ideal representation of the relationship between new media and social capital. A study on those specific relationships within the city is valuable to the ongoing debate about internet-based communities and establishes a city-specific case study of how the Internet might impact social capital.

Because technology is always evolving, the question of whether or not community relationships have been weakened or even lost due to the introduction of new media is also evolving. The present study demonstrates the effects of new media on an innovative and diverse community, the city of Peachtree Corners, such as the effects on factors like network capital and community commitment. My findings contribute to the debate about the nature of community and how technological innovations have impacted it.

Literature Review

Network Capital in the Age of New Media

Network capital, and particularly *social* capital, has been critically examined within new media and community discussions. Social capital encompasses the relations that provide resources, companionship, and information among an individual’s social network and community. Social capital also involves participatory capital, which is community involvement in politics and organizations that creates ties between individuals. Greater community commitment results in an increase in participatory capital and, therefore, civic engagement. Some scholars argue that the Internet increases participatory capital because it supplements organizational involvement (Wellman et al., 2001). As such, scholars frame these findings as a positive impact of new media because participatory capital creates ties between individuals that can reflect

increases in community resources and social support. However, other researchers assert that the use of social networking services relates to lower social participation in places like neighborhoods (Hampton et al., 2011). They justify these findings by stating how social networking sites allow access to social support outside the community, decreasing reliance on local ties and, therefore, reducing social capital.

Pervasive Awareness and Strength of Social Ties

The introduction of the Internet and new media to communities has created pervasive awareness, the heightened awareness of events due to the visibility provided by the Internet. This concept – that digital communication technologies provide a constant stream of easily accessible knowledge to individuals – has changed the way that communities function. Some scholars argue that pervasive awareness counters the hypothesized loss of social capital observed in recent decades (Putnam, 1995) – creating stronger ties within a community (Hampton & Wellman, 2021). Pervasive awareness stems from the Internet and new media, wherein the relatively new capacity for community members to be in persistent contact with each other may broaden their access to network resources. In the experiment in “Netville,” scholars studied a newly connected neighborhood at the dawn of the internet. Netville is a suburban neighborhood in Toronto, Canada, where most homes have technology and Internet access through a local high-speed network- a difference from the other existing neighborhoods in North America at the time. It was shown that the Internet helps community ties flourish because it allows communication in and between neighborhoods at a low cost and higher speed (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). In contrast to these claims, work has also suggested that more frequent Internet use may relate to a broader decrease in community commitment – or the attitudes that people have towards their community – potentially due to new media’s ability to increase the number of weak ties within community members’ social networks (Wellman et al., 2001).

The Evolution of New Media

Past scholars have studied whether or not community has been lost due to the introduction of the Internet (Hampton & Wellman, 2021) and found that while the effects of the Internet on social capital are not exactly all positive or negative, community has been changed but never lost. Researchers have also concluded that while the Internet can engage people in antisocial activities, like watching television or gaming online, it can build social capital by facilitating communication (Wellman et al., 2001). Additionally, scholars have investigated neighborhoods with Internet, like “Netville,” to see the effects of Internet use on social capital within a community (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). However, technology is always evolving, which means its influences and effects on community are ever-changing. Peachtree Corners is a city that is highly advanced compared to the 2003 study of the neighborhood of “Netville” in Canada. As a city with all homes connected through the Internet, a study in Peachtree Corners explores the effects of the Internet on a community rather than just one neighborhood- a look at a city full of “Netvilles” after twenty years. The present study investigates the city-specific relationships between new media use and social capital within the Peachtree Corners community. In doing so, it reflects the impacts, interrelationships, and influences of innovative new media and the Internet on network capital, i.e., participatory capital, social support, and civic engagement in an innovative, Internet-based city. This paper will demonstrate the dynamic effects of ever-changing new media on a contemporary and diverse city.

To research these relationships, I propose the following research questions, ultimately asking whether new media (e.g., internet/social media) has become the 21st century's public square for communities (i.e., social and participatory capital) to develop. Specifically, I ask how the use of new media relates to community participation and social capital and how those Internet-based interactions may influence community relationships.

RQ1: How does new media (e.g., internet/social media) influence (a) community participation ("participatory capital") and (b) social capital more broadly (i.e., the relationships between community members)?

RQ2: How might Internet-based interactions and communities influence general community engagement, participation, and relationships?

Methods

I investigated media use in a mid-sized city in Georgia to examine the relationship between the usage of new media and social capital in that community. I employed a qualitative method of research that involved interviews and a comprehensive, informal survey of embedded community members in the city. Peachtree Corners, established in 2012, is a relatively new city in a suburb about 45 minutes outside of Atlanta, Georgia, with an innovative and tight-knit community. Peachtree Corners has a population of 42,243 and is diverse, with 47.4% Caucasian, 23.3% African American, 18.1% Hispanic, 9.4% Asian, and 1.9% other. The average family size is 3 people, and the average household income is \$109,062 as of 2020. Along with its diversity, the city focuses heavily on technology and innovation with the development of the Curiosity Lab and Technology Parkway, making it a unique city to investigate new media in. Various media used by community members in this city include a monthly newsletter, an e-newsletter, and multiple social media platforms, which may contribute to a closely integrated but still diverse community.

Procedures for Data Collection

I conducted two structured interviews with the main communications leaders within the city of Peachtree Corners. The first was with "Luke" (pseudonym), the publisher and executive editor of a local magazine. "Luke" is a male who appears to be in his 40s. We met at a local coffee shop. The second was with "John" (pseudonym), a high-ranking communications professional who works for the city of Peachtree Corners. "John" is a male who appears to be in his 30s. We met at the Peachtree Corners City Hall. Both interviews were roughly an hour or more. "Luke" and "John" were both particularly relevant to the present study because of the insight into their current protocols and future goals for media use in Peachtree Corners.

These interviews involved an interview guide with nine main guiding questions to help keep the interviews on track and ensure discussions addressed my research questions. I created the interview guide by developing questions that were related to my main research questions while not explicitly asking them. These questions were designed to provoke thoughtful and detailed answers regarding each individual's experience working in the communications field, specifically with new media like the Internet and social media. The questions were designed to be neutral to prevent any biased answers and to ensure depth and detail from the respondents about their own experiences. To gather key concepts from the interviews, I jotted down important ideas during the interviews and noted wherever the participant was very engaged or excited to talk about a topic (e.g., relevant observations). Following these two interviews, I transcribed and read through each one to further identify ideas and insights related

to my research questions. I highlighted important quotes to use later and developed concept connections that related multiple concepts together.

To measure the effects of new media on participatory capital, I also conducted a qualitative, informal survey of ten community members in the city of Peachtree Corners who were participating in a community event. This took place at a large community event; a summer concert with covers of a famous singer, in the town square area. Over 200 people of all ages, races, and genders attended this event. I asked ten different people questions and chose a diverse selection of people of all ages, races, and genders. Participants were asked how they found out about the event, why they were going to the event, and how many community events they had been to in the past year. I jotted down all the answers on my phone and adjusted them for more detail as needed later to gather key concepts and patterns.

Findings

Review of Proposed Model and Findings

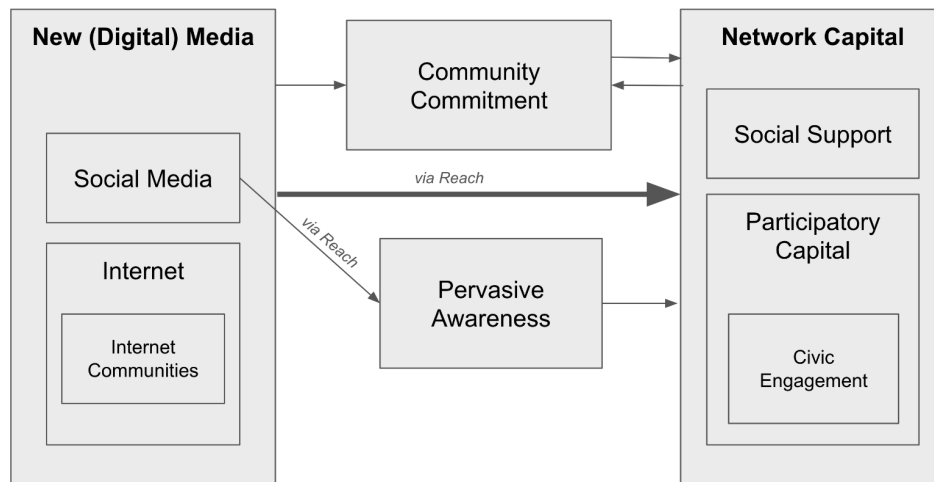


Figure 1. Proposed model highlighting relationships between new media, community commitment, pervasive awareness, and network capital. Arrows signify relationships to and from key variables.

The overall relationship studied is how new media might influence network capital through community commitment and pervasive awareness. When new media, which encompasses social media and the Internet, is introduced to communities, it may influence the level of commitment within the community. This can be observed through the possible strengthening or weakening of ties between community members. Also, as new media is utilized more and its reach is increased, it may contribute to pervasive awareness. Network capital is made up of social support, participatory capital, and civic engagement. All factors may be related to the introduction of new media and pervasive awareness.

Participatory Capital and Pervasive Awareness

As new media, like the Internet and social networking sites, are introduced to communities, a new sense of interconnectedness often arises. This is a result of the pervasive awareness, the heightened awareness of events due to the visibility provided by the Internet,

that comes with posting updates via new media frequently. The facilitation of information sharing undoubtedly has impacted communities, but the question is how. How does new media influence community participation? Findings from the interviews and survey may suggest that new media is employed in Peachtree Corners to increase participation within the community (see Figure 1).

For example, in the second structured interview, John, a high-ranking communications professional in the town of Peachtree Corners, spoke in depth about his strategy for advertising city events through various new media.

“In the city, we have a Twitter account, an Instagram account, a Facebook account, and a LinkedIn account. And then, from a daily basis, there's [...] advertising [and] public notices, we have to put news out on the website. All of that's important.” (John)

He utilizes an e-newsletter to send out information about all community events and new businesses, and almost 7,000 people have registered for it. As Peachtree Corners primarily communicates through new media, it supports the idea that it is an internet-based community. John also described an extremely successful partnership with a large news network based in the Atlanta metropolitan area last year. The partnership involved promoting local concerts and events through online media, reaching over a million engagements on the campaign.

“... more people came out to those concerts last year than had come the year before, the year before that [...] the reach was over a million. [...] So that was a huge success, working and moving more into that online market.” (John)

John also discussed the development of an app for the Peachtree Corners community. He was eager to share the possibilities of the app, which would involve social media posts, news, information, events, a shared calendar, and live-streaming features.

“After the event, if you're a registered user, maybe you can do that review type thing, almost like a Yelp, just on the events and things that are going on in the city. So we're trying to find a way to bring the public in, right? To make them part of it.” (John)

John noted that because of this newly developed app, he expects that the people who do not come to council meetings will watch the live streams. Additionally, John hopes that if information on events is easy to access, more people will be able to participate.

“I'm trying to find ways to reach out to people to get them to be part of the community... building community is hugely important for me.” (John)

As the app is still in development, the results are not 100% accurate, but with his experience in communications and media, John is hopeful for the effects of the new app.

The qualitative survey of community members in the city of Peachtree Corners at a community event showed that 70%, seven out of ten, of the people surveyed found out about the event through new media – either Instagram, Facebook, or the city website. As it was a diverse group of people surveyed, the ages ranged and often reflected which media they found

the event through. John also discussed this diversity by describing the various media his team uses to reach as many individuals as possible.

“Now that everything's gone online, it's a little harder because there's so many options [...] the potential to reach more people is higher because there's more people that do all these different things online.” (John)

“So we're looking for younger families who have younger kids. How do I target them? [...] They are more Instagram. If I want to reach the 40 and 50-somethings, it's more of a Facebook play.” (John)

Four of the seven people who found the event through new media found it through Instagram and were in their 20s or early 30s. Two others were in their late 30s to 50s and found it through Facebook. The last one was in their 60s, and found it through the city website. These findings reflect that different types of new media reach different audiences and that the evolution of media comes with certain challenges in reaching a large number of people due to those differences. Overall, the constant updates and advertisements put out on various social media by the Peachtree Corners Council resulted in an increase in attendance which is in line with the idea of pervasive awareness.

Social Support and Community Commitment

Relationships between individuals in a community are formed through friendships, events, mutual interests, etc. However, the introduction of new media and the Internet has changed the dynamic of ties within communities in the 21st century (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). New factors like the Internet, Google, and social media make it easy for individuals to access information outside of their traditional community network, and many scholars assert that this proves that new media decreases social support and community commitment within communities. However, with the evolution of media and how it can be used, there are new ways that new media can impact community relationships. This brings forward the question: How might Internet-based interactions and communities influence general community engagement, participation, and relationships? Findings from the interviews and survey may portray that community members use forms of new media to foster and strengthen relationships within a community and, therefore, increase social support and community commitment (see Figure 1).

In the first structured interview conducted with Luke, the publisher and executive editor of a local magazine, he discussed his use of the magazine and various social media sites like Instagram and Facebook to advertise events. He also spoke about his sponsorship of events that lack funding within the community, which gets the events free advertising in magazines and on social media and donations. For example, they donated to and advertised for the Gwinnett Asian American Student Association Gala.

“We found the events that we liked that either have no funding or something like that we've stepped in to help them with that [...] I will be a cheerleader for them because they're doing good in the community.” (Luke)

These sponsorships show an increase in social support within the community because of how one group helps another. This finding also relates to how one group can use new media to

help another, strengthening those social ties within the community and, therefore, facilitating network capital.

John, in the second structured interview, continued expanding on the development of a new app and expressed excitement for the idea of user-generated media, like a community calendar, and how it would connect the community in a unique way.

“When you pull up your app, you don’t just have the City of Peachtree Corners, you have anything that a user has submitted, anything that a restaurant has submitted, or a store, if they have any kind of event going on. So now when you go on there, you have everything, hopefully, that’s going on in the city because that doesn’t exist right now.”
(John)

User-generated content would develop connections between community members, strengthening those ties, and John believes individuals will support each other because they have access to information about various events. John hopes that the app and turning that technology into a benefit for society will combat how communication technology has weakened the community.

“So how do we take what we have and what has been a, to some extent, a degradation of communication in society and turn it into a positive and a benefit for society? [...] we have to find a way to do that.” (John).

The qualitative survey of community members in the city of Peachtree Corners at a community event showed that 40% (4/10) of individuals surveyed stated they normally go to similar events and have gone multiple times in the past year. 30% (3/10) stated they have been to a similar event twice in the past year. Out of these three, two found out about the event through social media: Instagram and Facebook. 30% (3/10) stated that it was their first time at a Town Center event, and one out of the three stated that they do not normally come to events like these. Out of the three first-timers, two found out about the event through social media: Instagram and Facebook. The success of the event surveyed reflects the loyalty of community members and the impact of advertising through new media like social media.

Discussion

Concerns have been raised about the possible weakening and even loss of community due to the introduction of new media. As technology is ever-changing, its relationships to factors within the community will evolve as well. The results of this analysis demonstrate the potential influence of new media on an innovative and diverse community, the city of Peachtree Corners.

A major factor in a community's network capital is participation, e.g., participatory capital. The findings of both structured interviews and a comprehensive survey of community members portray that new media may positively influence participatory capital within a community like Peachtree Corners by facilitating information sharing and increasing the reach of advertisements. The city’s partnership with a large news network to promote local events gained over a million engagements and resulted in record-high attendance at the following community events. This finding supports the existing notion that the Internet increases participatory capital because it complements organizational involvement (Wellman et al., 2001). The results also show how the use of new media in Peachtree Corners may reflect how new media leads to

pervasive awareness via accessible communication and access to information, backing the notion that the Internet helps community ties flourish by facilitating communication (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Findings show that communication professionals hope for the development of a city app to bring growing community participation through easy access to information on events with features like a shared calendar. Surveys from a community event also displayed that a majority of people surveyed discovered the event through new media like social media and a city website. Together, these findings challenge the perspective that social capital has been completely lost due to the rise of new media (Putnam, 1995).

Other factors that reflect the interconnectedness of a community are social support and community commitment, both of which are related to general community engagement and relationships based on my findings. The outcomes of the structured interviews and qualitative survey of community members demonstrate how new media can be used by one group to help another, strengthening those social ties within the community and, therefore, increasing social support and network capital. Strong relationships are formed within Peachtree Corners via the assistance of one another, especially through actions like helping an event with free advertising. This was demonstrated through a local magazine providing free online promotions for a community group that lacked funding. This case adds doubt to the argument that new media, specifically Internet use, correlates with decreased social support as a result of weaker and broader community ties (Putnam, 1995). Findings also reflect how social support and community commitment in Peachtree Corners can be developed through new media like Internet-based user-generated media, such as an app with a community calendar. This challenges the idea that new media relates to a broader decrease in community commitment (Wellman et al., 2001) and suggests that there may be a positive relationship between the use of new media, network capital, and community commitment within Peachtree Corners.

These findings are vital to understanding the effects that new media can have on contemporary, Internet-based communities like Peachtree Corners. Technology is constantly evolving and may be of benefit in the formation and facilitation of community relationships. From increasing participation and facilitating communication through pervasive awareness to increasing social support and commitment within a community, new media can be a powerful tool. This city-specific case delves into the relationship between new media and network capital in an innovative and diverse community, which is valuable to the overall study of the effects of rapidly changing technology.

However, because this is a city-specific study, the results of this analysis cannot be extended to all communities around the world – even if it is a diverse city. Peachtree Corners is also a relatively upper-class city with a six-figure average household income, meaning the use of technology and trends described may differ in other lower-income areas. Therefore, future studies should continue to observe areas with differing socio-economic characteristics. Likewise, experiences with and knowledge about digital technologies may also impact the extent to which these new media may benefit communities. As such, future work might benefit from observing differences among communities where digital inequalities are abundant. Technology is continuously evolving and will not stop in the near future. If the results of this study are already different than those of the last decades, the results of future studies will certainly vary. The impacts and influences of new media on communities and community relationships need to be continuously monitored as new methods of using media are developed.



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