Social capital and Internet usage: A study in Lisbon

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between social capital and Internet usage. Despite its polysemic nature, social capital can be a central concept in the debate around the Internet's effects on society: Is the Internet reinforcing and complementing social capital? Or is it isolating people, and diminishing their social capital? This study examines this relationship through three dimensions of social capital, namely bonding, bridging, and resources. I analyze these dimensions separately and then combine them to create the variable social capital. My main hypothesis is that the individuals' perceived social capital is positively associated with Internet usage. This research is based on a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research. In a first phase, I surveyed a stratified random sample of 417 participants who lived in Lisbon, Portugal. In a second phase, I conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with 14 participants. Results show that social capital and Internet usage are positively related: heavy Internet users are more likely to have a high level of bonding, bridging, and of social capital than non-users, light users, and moderate users. Age is also a significant predictor, although negatively: per each year of age, there is a lower probability of having a high level of bonding, bridging, resources, and of social capital.