Social capital, social media and 'Getting ahead' in life

The idea of social capital was popularized by political scientist Robert Putnam with the publication of his book 'Bowling Alone' (2000). For Putnam, social capital consists of three useful and easy-to-understand ideas: working with others to address public issues (e.g. shramdan), following some acceptable unwritten rules of behavior in a group or society (e.g. kindness towards elderly) and actions taken together by a group of people to achieve common objectives (e.g. fight against climate change). The capital resides in the social ties created by these activities and produces both individual and collective benefits.

At the moment, two forms of social capital are generally accepted - bonding (that links people together with others like them) and bridging (social ties that cut across differences such as caste, class, or religion). Bonding social capital, unlike bridging, connects an individual with family members, close friends and neighbours.

The origin of the differentiation of the present-day concept of social capital, into bonding and bridging types of social capital, is popularly ascribed to Mark Granovetter, an American sociologist at the Stanford University.

In an ideal situation, an individual should be connected to all other individuals or the connections should be random.

However, in the real world this rarely happens. People are more likely to be connected more to their relatives, neighbors, etc. Or, people get together according to their preferences, upbringing, or some other nonrandom factor.

Reality in this sense resembles a number of 'small worlds' consisting of a few key links serving as hubs that keep spokes in the network connected. The extent of small worlds is a reasonable proxy for levels of bonding capital - the larger the number of small world networks, the greater is the bonding social capital.

In 1999, Hungarian-born network scientist Albert-Laszlo Barbasi and colleague Reka Alber counted how many times each web page is linked to other web pages.
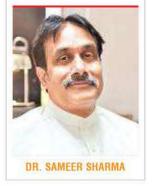
They expected to find a standard bell-shaped curve, similar to the, say, distribution of human heights.

In a bell-shaped curve of human heights, most people are as tall as the average, some are taller and some are shorter. If the World Wide Web (www) was a random network, it would have a bell-shaped distribution for the number of web pages that link to each page.

What they discovered was that "certain nodes that defied explanation, almost as if we had stumbled on a significant number of people who were 100 feet tall".

In short, there were a few nodes with a huge number of connections and most nodes with only a few. Even though done in an entirely different context, this study shows that there are multiple small worlds in online environments. In

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turn, these small worlds promote what is called groupthink.

Groupthink in online environments is stimulated by the lowering of guards. According to American psychologist John Suler, online environments unleash aspects of our personality that we normally keep under guard -- a phenomenon he referred to as the 'online disinhibition effect'.

This effect characterizes the tendency of people to experience a dramatic loosening of inhibitions on the internet and is partially due to the anonymity offered by online environments. The internet's anonymity induces people to share openly in ways they are reluctant to do in real life.

One characteristic of groupthink is high group cohesiveness.

In a cohesive group, members avoid speaking out against decisions, avoid arguing with others, and work towards maintaining friendly relationships in the group.

Moreover, under conditions of high stress, the group members may rationalize their decision by exaggerating the positive consequences and minimizing the possible negative consequences.

Finally, groupthink insulates the group and promotes the development of unique, inaccurate perspectives on issues. All these aspects of groupthink increase bonding social capital.

Thus, online environments affect social capital. They empower people who are unwilling to communicate in the real world (e.g. introverts), are shy and socially phobic to get a chance to express themselves.

However, greater insights emerge when we go deeper and see the differential effects of online environments on the two types of social capital: bonding and bridging.

Online environments consist of a large number of small worlds. These small worlds largely consist of 'People Like Us' (PLUs).

In these small worlds, disinhibition effects operate and accentuate groupthink.

This leads to an increase in bonding social capital, more often than not at the cost of bridging social capital.

Bonding and bridging social capital serve different purposes in life. Bonding social capital provides "social support" and enables individuals to "get by" or just manage daily problems of life.

On the other hand, bridging capital links individuals to more distant acquaintances and co-workers, and provides "social leverage".

As online environments deplete bridging capital over time, the choices available to individuals to "get ahead" in life contract.

(Author has a PhD from USA and a DLitt from Kanchi University. The article is based on his research and practice and views are personal)