Where is the trust? For the good of the people

Abstract: *In an era where the public has greater access to information than ever before, why is it that social capital in many communities is so divided and diminished? Traditionally people have experienced and generated social capital through direct contact with families and social spaces, including neighbourhoods, communities, clubs and the workplace. Nowadays, many relationships and networks operate at a global level and in cyber-space – enabled through technology and screen-mediated interactions. While there are many benefits to contemporary technologies and innovations, including new forms of sociability, these same developments have also resulted in a loss of sociability; a loss of social capital, social cohesion and trust in institutions. Western democratic societies, including Australia, appear to have become open to the exploitation of change and uncertainty in communities, amplified by propagandists and the manipulation of both mainstream and social media; to sow social discord and create fear and uncertainty, including a loss of trust in scientific research originating from universities. It is the trust in knowledge and research that has guided many governments to look beyond political cycles and plan for inclusive, tolerant societies, receptive to population diversity creating unique social assets. It is in this context that the development of new forms of social spaces, including well-designed public buildings, prospectively hold the regeneration of social capital in pursuit of more economically successful and socially cohesive communities. Regional Australia, including the regional city of Townsville, is negotiating this shift.*

Social Space and Social Capital

The relationship between social spaces and social capital has never been more contested or important to our understanding of how we live. 'Few would deny understanding the world is, in the most general sense, a simultaneously historic and social project' (Soja, 1996). The other way of looking at society is to adopt the transformative approach and look toward 'what was', 'what is' and 'what might become'.

When considering social space we can describe what we see around us, the people we interact with, the institutions that guide and support us; utilities and infrastructure that provide services to sustain us and the various non-imperatives such as the arts, sports and recreation that may define who and what we are.

In other words, social space constitutes social relations between the sexes, age groups, families and communities, including the relations of production, i.e the 'division of labour in its organisation in the form of hierarchical social functions' (Lefebvre, 1991). The way Lefebvre unfurls this tangled

mess of the spatial dialectic is through a concept of spatial practice - 'this is not a thing amongst other things, rather it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity' (Lefebvre, 1991). For other scholar's such as Bourdieu (1972, 1984), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), spatial practice has been partially expressed through the lens of social capital. For Bourdieu, social capital held a symbolic purpose, used to empower those in the ruling class through the creation of *Habitus* that ingrained conventions through learned understandings reinforced by marketing, education and culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Coleman acknowledged Bourdieu, but with less focus on power for the elite and rather the interdependence that individuals could apply when using their social capital for themselves as well as others. According to Coleman (1988), the implicit sense of obligation, expectation and trustworthiness was central to social spaces when public good flourished.

Social capital can be enabled by the thoughtful development and use of social spaces. It acts as a lever, both to unify and to extract greater value from the social space even as social capital is co-created or diminished, creating or reinforcing social cohesion. This cohesion may have positive or negative social effects; the latter at the expense of the individual, those groups without power, those who do not form part of the dominant culture (gender, race, and religion, sexuality, elderly, poor, disabled, deviant or displaced) or potentially the natural environment. The context within which contemporary communities are designed, built and operate, particularly in light of the growth of virtual social spaces, can work against the development of social capital.

For Putnam (2000), social capital is expressed through social cohesion where community is unified by common understandings, relationships, trust and reciprocity. He explored outcomes associated with the loss of social capital in his landmark contribution, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000). 'Loss of sociability' refers to the well-documented erosion of social cohesion and the sense of connection to community, in societies like the United States. A similar dynamic exists in Australia too.

Loss of Sociability

In our view, the loss of sociability and our loss of civic health, is playing out in new and damaging ways, particularly through the false promise of screen-mediated sociability. While technology provides many benefits, including new forms of 'community', it is hardly a new idea that social isolation is being amplified by this new form of sociability.

Furthermore, this loss of social capital, expressed as a loss of sociability and social cohesion, is having a devastating effect on trust in institutions, in expert knowledge and in our capacity to chart a better course.

Online communities can disrupt the social fabric and it is important to understand how social capital is arranged in these virtual spaces. From the now antiquated Second Life to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Messenger and the host of other platforms for personal online communication, people seek spaces of comfort and fulfilment, wherever they belong within their *Habitus*. Globalization has led to greater competition, complexity in markets and has challenged the rules-based system across the world. Governments are increasingly being challenged to secure and deploy sufficient resources to meet national needs. Resource scarcity and significant growth in social costs whether related to an ageing population, increasing health costs or a more demanding polity overall, have placed governments under increasing pressure. One reading is that resources are not available to support all those services that governments have traditionally supplied in the manner that they would like to supply them. For instance, greater access to new and effective prescription drugs, greater support for primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as access to and deployment of new technologies, including artificial intelligence.

Despite the global nature of this phenomenon, it is worthwhile examining the interaction between social spaces and social capital through the prism of the local and the familiar.

The Australian Context

This particular exploration centres upon experiences largely based in an Australian context and recognises a shift that is emerging within society, as communities become destabilised by dramatic changes in their social relationships and social contracts. This in turn has the potential to create or limit social capital.

Townsville is the largest city in northern Australia (above the Sunshine Coast) with a population of around 187,000 (ABS, 2016) and has a rich history beyond its Indigenous roots defined by the *Wulgurukaba* and *Bindal* Nations. The region has a population of around 230,000 with almost 8 percent of the population identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2016). This is almost twice the Queensland average. The British explorer Captain James Cook[1] passed the current location of Townsville during his 1770 voyage, where he named Cape Cleveland and Magnetic Island. In the 1860s, Woodstock Station was established and in 1866 Sydney entrepreneur Robert Towns visited the campsite near Ross Creek, pledging funds to establish a new settlement which was subsequently named after him.

Townsville is located just over 1300 km north of the state capital of Brisbane and is home to a diverse population with many subcultures. The city resides in a 'dry tropics' environment, with

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[1] Lieutenant at the time

agricultural roots in sugarcane, horticulture, cattle and is the gateway to the mining and resource industry in northern Australia. Townsville houses Australia's largest military base with over 15,000 defence force personnel and dependents operating out of Lavarack Barracks and the Royal Australian Air Force Base. It is Queensland's third largest port, a railhead and freight distribution centre for supplying materials to northern Australia and a significant regional health hub centred on Townsville Hospital and Health Service (THHS) hosting one of the largest emergency departments in Queensland. THHS features a major teaching hospital working in conjunction with James Cook University (the second oldest university in Queensland), in an impressive health and knowledge precinct that will be known as TropiQ.

Townsville's tropical location makes it a centre for aquatic recreational activities with the city's close proximity to the Great Barrier Reef a tourist draw card. The region is susceptible to cyclones and natural disasters including localised seasonal occurrences such as the 2019 monsoonal event which caused flood inundation to over 3000 Townsville homes. Increasingly, economic downturns, fluctuations in the mining industry and the effects of climatic change have had a great impact on the population.

James Cook University is highly ranked as a research centre, focusing on creating 'a brighter future for life in the tropics worldwide, through graduates and discoveries that make a difference'. The University is a world leader in marine science, tropical health; hosts the Australian Cyclone Testing Station and offers a comprehensive suite of courses that contribute to the community of northern Queensland and to public policy for almost 60 years.

Despite growing at around 1.5 percent per annum (ABS, 2016) Townsville has suffered regional decline; it has an unemployment rate of 7.5 percent (ABS 2019) and a central business district (CBD) with a vacancy rate for retail properties of over 30 percent. Here we see a large regional centre under pressure with contemporary factors influencing the social space of groups, associations and communities that in turn influence the shape of the city.

 In many ways, Townsville is emblematic of regional Australia.

The Regional Experience

The majority of Australians live in large cities clinging to the coast. Remnant rural communities across Australia, including in the area surrounding Townsville, are in further decline with some pushed to the point of extinction. Those that are left are ageing and becoming destinations by virtue of their rarity. In a national population of 25.2 million, more than 15.8 million live in the five capital

cities[2] (ABS 2019) with only one in five Australians living in a low-density city under 85,000. Outward migration is skewing regional populations towards becoming communities of the very young or those aged over 50 (Stanley et al., 2019).

Historically strong social capital has been a feature of these regional areas explained in part by trust in relationships, consistent with Putnam's observation of uniformity and cohesive communities (Sander and Putnam, 2010). Whilst small rural and regional communities may have strong social capital, what they may be lacking is a sustainable population base. With outward migration of the young towards the capital cities where greater work and education opportunities exist, small regional centres lose their lifeblood and lose the ability to innovate. The effect of the loss of youth and their promise is hard to overcome with a view to revitalising these communities, regardless of social capital renewal through sport or shared community activity (Stanley et al., 2019).

The point where a community tips from being a productive, commercially sustainable entity into an ageing rural centre, dominated by retirees and an older population, heralds a new phase for any rural town or regional city. Here the social space is no longer dominated by potential for the growth in economic capital. Instead these communities focus on strategies to preserve the community and the social space and social capital that has developed in a previous era. In this context, regional income is no longer generated by production, but rather from service industries largely built around health and welfare (Stanley et al., 2019).

The challenge for regional areas to meet the expectations of the community in terms of education, has been a constant challenge for government agencies.

For most reasonably sized Australian regional centres, the community expects to have state-supplied primary and secondary education. Where critical mass exists, some private schools may serve to supplement the state education system. But it is only larger regional centres with populations of 500,000 (Bradley et al., 2008) that provide sufficient scale for traditional bricks and mortar universities to survive. Despite this, there are fourteen Australian universities established in regional Australia with populations between 80,000-300,000, with many of them seeking resources and working outside of their region in order to survive. Higher education can provide economic stability to large regional centres, but with the decline in university base funding some of these regional institutions are being challenged by larger, better resourced institutions from outside the region. The regions have become the hunting grounds for large metropolitan tertiary institutions to extract

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[2] Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide

talent, robbing the regions of future young professionals and seeing the ever-increasing use of online course offerings continuing to reduce on-campus numbers.

Regional youth share the same popular culture and cyberspace as their urban counterparts and should have no less aspiration to attend university and gain a fulfilling professional career. Good career advice built into the school curriculum in regional education institutions can have a major impact on building capacity to assist students to move beyond post-secondary education (Alloway and Dalley-Trim, 2010). This being said, there is a 'lack of focus on unequal access to resources' (Cuervo et al., 2019) that disadvantages many regional students. The desire to raise aspirations is currently being contested by neo-liberal political entities, as they realise the cost of providing tertiary education outside of the metropolitan centres places greater pressure on the public purse. This is despite the potential to increase social capital in the regions.

Cultural Cohesion

Cultural capital is increasingly dispersed within the Australian context as our population becomes more multi-cultural, providing a rich tapestry of languages, a fusion of different foods, appreciation of different art forms, ranges of different religions and other social mores. Even in northern Queensland, cultural festivals abound, particularly celebrating music, dance, arts and crafts and especially food culture. The unifying effect of individual cultural groups, plus respect and reciprocity between various cultural groups, provides the basis for stronger social capital within any location while those whose culture is not acknowledged or respected are placed under enormous strain within the social space of cities and regional centres. This can be seen in both urban and regional Indigenous communities and the recent political attacks on African migrants in Australia. Mobility between cultural groups is difficult, as such belonging is not a lifestyle choice but rather a deeply ingrained aspect of *Habitus.* Whilst it is not possible to be mobile between various cultural groups, it is possible to be linked through bridges of interest, understanding and appreciation, and these features can be largely achieved within a context that allows communities to share rather than be divided (Putnam, 2000).

Economic Drivers

Economic capital provides a different set of circumstances which can drive communities towards a common goal as in the case of working towards major projects (like a sporting stadium) or bringing the community together after a disaster (such as the recent floods in Townsville in February 2019). For some communities, the strength of social capital may vary depending on the conditions facing a community, particularly when a community is confronted by adversity, natural disaster or a

cataclysmic event. Research conducted with the community at Mission Beach, two hours north of Townsville, following two major tropical cyclones, *Larry* 2006 and *Yasi* 2011, indicated that many communities have their own sense of preservation and do not rely on institutional leadership in the time of natural adversity. This work also demonstrated that greater social cohesion and social capital can become evident in the moment of crisis, with this response being less observable when the threat had passed. It also identified that self-determination within communities could be a massive benefit when dealing with natural disasters, holding in prospect the potential to harness these capabilities in more predictable disasters, including the compounding effects of climate change, population drift and economic downturns (Sandanam et al., 2018)

Capital associated with financial and commercial activities is intertwined with industry and business and creates its own networks, largely for the benefit of owners or corporations. The risk is that this may not deliver social capital, but rather deliver individual benefits for the few, although some of these benefits may yield short term gains for communities. The deployment of government 'stimulus' in the form of the construction of public utilities and infrastructure to leverage political outcomes is a case in point.

Where short-term gain trumps effective policy and planning, the long-term effects may reduce opportunities for certain marginalised members of society. The reverse is true too. In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1959-1965-1990) sought to unify the social space through developing both economic and cultural capital in order to create a unified Singapore, one that was free of corruption, had strong national security and featured social policies that sought to minimise disunity. In a small island nation where borders are controlled through highly regulated customs authorities, the nation has been able to create a social safety net without becoming a welfare state. However, increasingly the success of Singapore as an exemplar social project is being challenged by its ageing population and the reliance on its young highly educated population to provide for its 'pioneering generation'.

For Coleman (1988) social capital can be used to motivate individuals to maximise benefits for themselves, but he also recognised that behaviour by many individuals was a result of social contracts and normative behaviours (Coleman, 1988). Where a community recognises a need, with benefits flowing to individuals through advancing their economic capital, projects advance along with society. However, if the opportunities of the few are determined by reducing or ignoring particular social groups, then social capital can be diminished.

City Spaces

Retail was once the focus of urban spaces, capitalising on the centrality of the Market Square and becoming a hive of activity associated with recreation, commerce, transportation, social activities and cultural public utilities. Its loss can be seen playing out in many Central Business District's (CBD), particularly in regional areas, where retail is no longer the mainstay in creating social capital.

In Townsville, the CBD occupancy rates have fallen dramatically (McMullen, 2016) with many smaller retail outlets either moving to plaza locations or going out of business as a result of the decline in the economy, effects of unemployment of 7.5 percent (ABS, 2019) and e-commerce. The rise of online marketing, dispatch and delivery retail industry, including eBay, Amazon and other online outlets has seen physical retail spaces die, leaving their skeletal remains in dormant, impoverished CBD spaces.

The hollowing out of activity in Townsville's main arterial retail section of Flinders Street, over the last decade has created a double negative effect. Buildings have become rundown and dishevelled and the lack of customers for food and beverage and other service areas has led to little desire to spend time in the CBD. Increasingly local government has attempted to revitalise the CBD through utilising its public space for food festivals, arts events and weekend markets. Cultural urban renewal is seen as a potential tourniquet that can be applied over haemorrhaging vacant spaces in many of our urban centres. However, the bespoke nature of many of these cultural/artistic outlets means they often lack a strong business structure and they cannot leverage off economies of scale, resulting in enterprises that function as extensions of lifestyle creating a new 'Bohemia' within CBDs (Florida, 2005). It is not until a critical mass or 'Soho Effect' is reached, through artistic and cultural entities, that a city centre can be revitalised and develop a new pulse beyond retail and related commercial activity. This can be the interim step before gentrification takes place and downtown property prices rise again. We see this taking place in Townsville through the occupation of some CBD buildings by arts organisations such as 'Umbrella Studios' and Pop-Up gallery spaces, attempting to draw the community back into the CBD.

In addition to the short-term cultural activities, the city has embarked on a massive building campaign in the production of a North Queensland Stadium (NQS). It will have a 25,000 seat capacity and is due to open in February 2020. This $250M project is located 500 metres from the centre of Flinders Street and a newly developed public transport hub. Perhaps one of the greatest insights into the power of North Queensland social capital was the passionate speech by the captain of the North Queensland Cowboys, Jonathan Thurston, as he accepted the premiership cup for the Cowboys first National Rugby League (NRL) grand final win. Thurston claimed victory and in that moment proclaimed on national television, that Townsville needed a new world-class stadium. This

galvanising moment created a platform for lobbying by the National Rugby League, the North Queensland Cowboys and local government resulting in both state and federal governments committing funds during their respective election cycles. The building programme, plus commitment of funding to additional infrastructure, has subsequently provided a 'sugar hit' to the Townsville economy.

Questions remain whether the stadium will have the desired effect as a catalyst to revitalise the CBD area, however, this initiative has prompted the community to consider the opportunities this massive infrastructure, to be utilised periodically for sporting major events, will bring to the city. What the Townsville City Council is hoping for is the 'bonding and bridging' (Putnam, 2000) of particular social groups to create a stronger sense of social capital within CBD.

Rethinking Social Space

One of the outcomes of this thinking has seen James Cook University's Sports and Exercise Science department commit to working more closely with the North Queensland Cowboys, with a plan to utilise the new stadium and associated facilities to assist in their research and broader community work. Whilst the synergies between a research university and the Club follow the model of bridging social capital, the University also utilises its research to raise concerns, provide models and enter public discourse; providing society with informed knowledge on issues affecting spatial practice. In a data-rich era, university researchers have ever greater capability to model future trends and provide potential solutions for both environmental and social challenges. Unfortunately, as social groups are exposed to more information than ever before, there is a potential for overload and confusion where groups resort to simplistic ideologies advanced by populist media commentators and at times adopted by political orthodoxy.

While social spaces can be compelling, and social capital can be generated and lost by means of a variety of developments and circumstances, it is worth considering the loss of sociability with the growth of virtual social spaces. There are many benefits to the emergence of these new social spaces. For example, information and the ability to connect with groups of interest is at our fingertips. Even older people have significantly increased their use of information communication technologies (ICTs) to make connections with family and friends, although the segment of the older population who have exploited this new technology are 'generally from a higher socio-economic background with good local social capital and in reasonable health' (Russell et al., 2008).

Cultural Cognition and Contested Spaces

However, as indicated earlier, these benefits are not the full story. These powerful means of creating more connections, commenting on matters and displaying views more than ever before, not bound by geography, physical contact or even prescribed social rules, are having devastating consequences. What accompanies this is a malaise associated with growing isolation, supported by anonymity and a lack of a filter to test truth and veracity and entrenching polarised views on matters of social significance (Harding and Harrison, 2019).

It is in this context of increasing social isolation, disassociation and the polarisation of views that the insights of researchers like Yale's Daniel Kahan and the Cultural Cognition Project particularly resonate, exploring and explaining the dynamics of this aspect of contemporary social capital.

In their work, Kahan and others note that 'ideologically motivated reasoning' helps explain the positions adopted in respect of highly contested ideas (think climate change, attitudes towards genetically modified food and the prospect of greater gun control or creationism/human evolution in the United States) and both the left- and right-leaning alike are prone to it (Kahan et al., 2017). What may be surprising is that these researchers find that this type of reasoning isn't deficient. It isn't biased and it isn't stupid. Instead, it is highly rational.

Kahan and others have shown that ideologically motivated reasoning serves as a means of conveying membership of and loyalty to a particular group that is critical to that individual's well-being. In this way, particular views are sustained over time because of the importance of the social connections they create. Faced with the same evidence, subjects in various studies assigned different levels of significance to factors consistent with their views on these highly contested ideas and they show that such significance is applied with greater determination and consistency by those who look more deeply into any given highly contested matter. In short, this sort of 'affinity' reasoning is highly rational and drives a type of sociability that is important to that person and to their membership of a particular social group. It serves as a means of creating a sense of belonging and sociability and is very difficult to dislodge.

The lack of trust amongst particular social groups leads to a lack of capacity to use social capital to forge improvements in social space, whilst loud voices argue, the quiet majority become frustrated and disillusioned in political leadership. Positions will harden - informed by ideologically motivated reasoning that protects individuals' sense of self, with little likelihood of convergence towards on solutions acceptable to all (Kahan et al., 2017).

Conclusion

In sum, while there are many benefits in our capacity to engage in this way, we risk losing something powerful and sustaining, potentially threatening our social fabric.

Communities under pressure exposed to major economic, technological and social change are susceptible to disillusionment and may seek simplistic solutions to complex problems. Regardless of their merit, such simple solutions are often amplified by support drawn to them through social media. Without clearly articulated public policy, the rise in populist, often nationalistic fervour by politicians; and wilful conspiracy theories in the heated arena of social and some mainstream media, has led to a break down in trust, social cohesion and diminished social capital.

So, what can be done?

As far as the loss of trust is concerned, Kahan and others point to the development of 'science curiosity' as a way out. Those who tend not to yield to the seduction of ideologically motivated reasoning are those who experience genuine pleasure from the unexpected. Instead of looking at data or information, and ascribing significance with the intent of bulwarking their current view, these people delight in being wrong; in finding out more, in being challenged and changed. It is the job of our education systems to create critical thinkers who are unafraid of being wrong and who can embrace uncertainty with a creative zeal.

However, new social spaces have the capacity to drive greater social cohesion and social capital. It is the realisation of the potential, in our contemporary world, that must be our aim. While social capital is under threat by means of the isolation and divisiveness driven by virtual social spaces, it is possible to rebuild social cohesion 'on the ground' through thoughtful, enabling design of physical social spaces. Designers, builders and whole communities can do this, enabled by enlightened governments that seek to build a better life for their communities through a culture of inclusiveness.

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