

# Do ICTs Help To Maintain Social Capital In The Disaster Recovery Phase? A Case Study Of The L'Aquila Earthquake

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The use of new interactive communication tools, particularly social networking sites (SNSs), has grown considerably in the last couple of decades. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNSs are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and make visible their social networks.

New Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are changing the way in which we communicate and interact with each other (Hu, Johnston & Hemphill, 2013). These communication tools allow for a switch from one-directional communication (from the issuers to the receivers) to multi-directional communication where everyone can spread and exchange information. In addition, with this new form of communication, networks are no longer related to a specific space and the people who live there - they are now outspread networks (Sutton, 2010).

This study examines the role played by ICTs in re-creating places of socialization and maintaining social capital in a post-disaster reconstruction scenario after the disruption of the physical environment that was once important for the creation and maintenance of these relationships. It aims to investigate whether (and how) ICTs can work as communication tools by allowing people that are dislocated post-disaster to maintain contacts with their previous social network and, therefore, to "virtually" restore the broken offline social fabric. First, we will analyze the literature on the role of ICTs, paying particular attention to SNSs for community building and maintenance of social capital. We will then briefly describe how new media have changed the concept of place and social relationships, and why the maintenance of social capital is crucial for disaster recovery. Our preliminary task is to introduce the case of L'Aquila before and after the earthquake of 2009, and the methodology and results of our research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The role of ICTs for community development and maintenance of social capital

Social capital refers to the "resources embedded in one's social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the network" (Lin, 2008, p. 51). Some authors (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004, Putnam, 2000) have identified three kinds of social capital: bonding (which refers to the bonds between people who are similar in terms of social identity), bridging (namely the connections between those who are unlike each other yet are 'more or less equal in terms of their status and power) and linking (relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal, or institutionalized power). The resources embedded in these networks can work either at the individual or the collective level (Kawachi, Kim, Coutts & Subramaniam, 2004). They are useful in an individual's personal life, reducing personal stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985), whilst they can also be used to mobilize collective actions and foster civic engagement (Putnam, 1993, 2000). We are interested here in analyzing the first function of social capital, particularly how new media such as social networking sites can support the creation and maintenance of the ties and resources that constitute social capital.

Social networking sites are becoming popular all over the world as they are able to produce instant communication and help people to connect, keep in touch, and exchange information quickly. These tools allow people to create "portable communities" (Chavko, 2009), in the form of groups whose members

