

THE STRAITS TIMES INTERACTIVE

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All alone in a crowd

By For The Straits Times, Ivan Png

IN HIS highly acclaimed book, *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam documented a systematic decline in membership of civic, social and fraternal groups in the US.

The former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University famously observed that even as bowling increased in popularity, people were tending to bowl alone rather than in groups.

Mr Putnam used membership in civic, social and fraternal groups to measure social capital. Social capital provides the foundation for society, in the same way that economic and human capital provide the foundation of the economy.

He attributed the reduction in social interaction and consequent decline of social capital to various factors. In particular, he blamed the fall in social interaction on the rise of television and the geographic spread of the population, which in turn reduced the overall density of living.

In recent months, several economists have tested Mr Putnam's arguments with statistical data from the United States and Indonesia. These studies have important implications for the socio-political development of our region.

A study by academic Benjamin Olken has confirmed Mr Putnam's argument that television viewing reduces social interaction.

Mr Olken, a junior fellow at Harvard, was recently featured in the *New York Times*' list of top young economists. He studied the impact of television on social capital in rural Java.

Television reception varies across villages in rural Java. Depending on the terrain and location of transmission towers, some villages receive more channels than others.

Mr Olken found that for each additional television channel received, villagers spent 5 per cent more time on television and radio and attended 11 per cent fewer group meetings. Also, the number of social groups in a village was reduced by 7 per cent for every additional channel that it received.

The 21st-century equivalent of TV is the Internet. Gamers - young and not-so-young - are sequestering themselves to

feed their addictions. We are not only losing social interaction, we are even losing family interaction. In past years, parents and children would gather and watch television as a family. Today, each one is closeted alone with a separate computer.

Another study, by Jan K.Brueckner of the University of California, Irvine, and Ann G.Largey of Dublin City University, contradicted Mr Putnam's argument that social interaction is higher where the population is denser.

The duo studied the impact of population density on various measures of friendship and group involvement. These measures were collected by the Social Capital Benchmark Survey which, ironically, was initiated by Mr Putnam himself.

The survey collected data on social capital from a sample of more than 30,000 Americans. It was found that where population density was higher, various measures of friendship were lower. These measures included the numbers of confidants and close friends, and the rates of socialisation with neighbours and visits of friends to the home.

The study also found that where population density was higher, various measures of involvement in group activities were lower. These measures included membership in hobby-oriented clubs and formal non-church groups, and attendance at club meetings.

While they contradict Mr Putnam's hypothesis, these findings certainly do resonate with recent experience. As Asian societies have urbanised - through migration and economic development - the spirit of gotong royong (mutual help) has clearly diminished. This is quite obvious to anyone who has seen the litter and scrawl that mar our housing estates.

As entertainment becomes ever more 'personalised' and urbanisation proceeds apace, social interaction will continue to diminish across Asia - in rich and poor countries alike. In terms of social capital, the future does look bleak indeed.

The writer is a professor of information systems, business policy, and economics at the National University of Singapore. The opinions expressed here are personal.

INDIVIDUAL PURSUITS

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