



# Bourdieu, Social Capital and Online Interaction

Sociology  
2015, Vol. 49(2) 356–373  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0038038514535862  
soc.sagepub.com



**Chris Julien**

Independent Sociologist, USA

## Abstract

While there has been much discussion in recent decades on the nature of social capital and its importance in online interactions, it is my contention that these discussions have been dominated by the American Communitarian tradition. In this article, I begin with an overview of American Communitarianism to identify the key elements therein that are found in contemporary theories of social capital. Following this, I expose some of the weaknesses of this tradition and apply Bourdieu's distinctive theoretical framework to online interactions to demonstrate the fecundity of Bourdieu's sociological perspective when applied to contemporary online interactions. To do this, I examine interactions online that involve 'internet memes', as digital inhabitants themselves colloquially define them. It is my contention that an agonistic model, rather than a communitarian one, best describes the online interactions of digital inhabitants.

## Keywords

American Communitarianism, habitus, internet, internet meme, online interaction, Pierre Bourdieu, social capital

## Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of social capital and its implications for the internet age have received much attention and produced many discussions. There is often disagreement on the precise definition of social capital, as well as the ways in which it can be measured in research, how specific people attain it online, and its effects (Portes, 2000; Skocpol, 1996). Yet, despite these disagreements, all of the prevalent contemporary theories of social capital can be described as *neo-capitalist theories* (Lin, 1999, 2001). Within neo-capitalism, there are two major theoretical positions. The first harks back to Marx, and sees social capital as class goods that are used as another element in providing exclusion and conserving resources. The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1998, 2000) has followed this first path. The second position finds its roots in what has

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### Corresponding author:

Chris Julien, Independent Sociologist, 1509-11 West Girard Avenue, Unit 17, Philadelphia, PA 19130, USA.  
Email: julienm22@gmail.com

been described as integrative or a Durkheimian view of social relations (Lin, 1999, 2001) and as the tradition of American Communitarianism (Huysman and Wulf, 2004; Siisiäinen, 2000). American Communitarianism sees social capital as primarily a public good, rather than a class good (Daly and Silver, 2008; Huysman and Wulf, 2004; Lin, 1999, 2000). It is my contention that the American Communitarian tradition has dominated recent discussions of social capital. Because of this, the elements of exclusion, distinction, and restriction, which are inherent in social capital and social interactions, have been ignored and overlooked (Daly and Silver, 2008; Qi, 2013). Specifically, the interactions of digital inhabitants, who invest themselves online and subsequently have a stock of social capital that exists and is exchanged online, have been overlooked and misunderstood. This is not to say that individuals inhabit *either* the offline *or* online world; I merely wish to identify those individuals who are so invested online that they go far beyond *mere access* of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to possession of digital social capital. I aim to shift the focus from whether or not individuals have access to ICTs to the ways in which individuals exist and interact online (Helsper, 2012). However, to better understand online interactions, there must be a change in our understanding of social capital and the nature of social interactions online.

Because their work practically denies the existence of classes and instead focuses on social capital as a public good, in the final analysis American Communitarians deny 'the existence of differences and of principles of differentiation' (Bourdieu, 1998: 12). I seek to uncover the principles of differentiation of digital inhabitants, those who invest time online and are subsequently invested online, by showing how Bourdieu's theory of social capital and his distinctive sociological framework lead to a holistic view of social capital and greater understanding of contemporary online trends. These trends involve official languages, imposed structures, and organized behaviors which all coalesce and contribute to a high level of exclusion and an identifiable culture; these emphases are contrasted with those of American Communitarians: shared knowledge and civic engagement. But before appropriating Bourdieu's theory to online interactions, we first must understand American Communitarianism.

## **American Communitarianism: The Influence of Granovetter and Coleman**

The main emphasis of American Communitarianism is the role of shared knowledge, norms, and values in the development and implementation of successful communal action for civic engagement (Daly and Silver, 2008; Huysman and Wulf, 2004; Lin, 1999). This tradition is community-centered and therefore stresses social capital as a public good. As a public good, social capital depends on the good will of specific individuals who invest in and sustain the collective resources. Therefore, norms, shared values, and trust are necessary in sustaining social capital. From this perspective, members of a group or organization who are invested in social capital will inherently be motivated to engage in public action and share knowledge (Helsper, 2012; Huysman and Wulf, 2004; Lin, 1999). I aim to trace the roots of American Communitarianism to explore the similarities among contemporary theorists of social capital.

The heritage of many of the major tenets of American Communitarianism can be traced to the works of Granovetter (1973) and Coleman (1988). From Granovetter, the main

contribution was the role and strength of weak ties in disseminating information and ideas that are effectual for action, particularly through what he described as bridging ties. It is through bridging ties that information can most effectively reach a large number of people (Granovetter, 1973). His analysis of bridging and bonding ties has had a great influence on the way in which the capabilities of online interactions have been perceived and evaluated. The concept of the ability for knowledge and ideas to be transferred through bridging ties in online interactions stems from Granovetter's work on bridging and bonding ties. Contemporary authors evidence their indebtedness to Granovetter when they write that, with high levels of social capital, individuals are motivated and able to share knowledge in an online network (Cummings et al., 2006); that the distinction between bridging and bonding capital is an important one for electronic communities (Hopkins and Thomas, 2002); and that social capital refers to the norms and networks which people draw on primarily in order to share knowledge (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Huysman, 2004). Nahapiet and Ghoshal draw an extensive amount from Granovetter as they analyse the role of social capital in the creation of intellectual capital, which is defined specifically as 'the knowledge and knowing capability of a social collectivity' (1998: 245). In their estimation, social capital encourages and facilitates cooperative behavior. Nahapiet and Ghoshal also heavily rely on Coleman (1988), to whom we now turn.

Several conclusions from Coleman (1988) have contributed to the work of American Communitarians. Coleman conceived of social capital as a unique resource for action (Coleman, 1988; Marsden, 2005). All of the forms of social capital are productive, in that they make possible certain ends which otherwise would be unattainable. Coleman's first contribution to American Communitarianism is that, in all its forms, social capital operates as a public good which contributes to the formation of human capital (1988, 1990; Qi, 2013). Yet, this public good aspect of social capital contains a core problem: individuals need a motivation or reason to contribute their own personal resources to the collectivity. Because of this, norms, sanctions, and authority become powerful and effective motivators in creating and sustaining social capital (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999). Therefore, an important norm within a collectivity is that the individual should act out of interest for the collectivity, rather than self-interest. This norm of the selflessness of the individual for the sake of the collectivity is the second major contribution from Coleman. His final contribution is the potential for information exchange that resides in social relations. These relationships operate as information channels and are valuable because of the potential information that they can provide. This information facilitates action (Coleman, 1988).

Coleman conceived of social capital as a unique resource that provides information and contributes to the acquisition of specific skills. Likewise, in American Communitarianism, social capital is the resource which leads to shared knowledge, beneficial civic engagement, and the acquisition of skills that are required to solve particular problems. These emphases are seen in the works of Adler and Kwon (2002), Cummings et al. (2006), Hopkins and Thomas (2002), Huysman (2004), and Lin (1999). Particularly, in their discussion of collectivism and the norm of reciprocity, Hooff et al. (2004) are indebted to Coleman's description of the norm of selfless individual action (1988). Additionally, instead of using Coleman's own term, human capital, Nahapiet and Ghoshal use the term intellectual capital 'to refer to the knowledge and knowing capability of a social collectivity ...' (1998: 245). Just as, for Coleman, social capital led to the creation

of human capital, so too for Nahapiet and Ghoshal social capital leads to intellectual capital, through which there is a potential for action.

## **American Communitarianism: The Theories of Putnam, Jenkins, and Wellman**

Any discussion of the major features of American Communitarianism would be incomplete without mention of the work of Putnam, Jenkins, and Wellman, all of whom have contributed much to the current understanding of social capital and online interactions. The scope of their work far exceeds what I mention here; I only seek to highlight those major concepts that pertain to and have contributed toward the American Communitarians' collective understanding of social capital and online interactions. It is Putnam, Jenkins, and Wellman to whom I now turn before I examine the weaknesses and oversights of American Communitarianism and the distinctive elements of Bourdieu's work.

Putnam describes social capital as the networks, norms, and trust that exist in a social organization that enable coordination and cooperation toward shared objectives (1993, 1995, 2000; Putnam et al., 2003). The results of social capital are mutually beneficial goods. If a community has a large stock of social capital, working together becomes easier for them. This is because one of the ways which social capital enables better coordination is through the successful and effective use of both the physical and human capital that a community possesses (Putnam, 1993). Because individuals in a social organization work together for the common good, an important aspect of Putnam's theory of social capital is that of reciprocity: there is an expectation that anything done by a person will be repaid in the future either by another individual or through group membership (1993, 2000). Putnam's dependence on Coleman (1988) on this point is apparent. Finally, social capital is not the private property of any one individual, but rather is a collective, public good (Putnam, 1993; Qi, 2013).

Jenkins, who focuses on online interactions more than Putnam, discusses social capital and online interaction as evidence of a new convergence culture (2006). Convergence culture does not take place in any structure, but rather it occurs within the minds of individual consumers and through their social interactions with other people. As individuals sift through the overabundance of information that is present on the web and interact with others, the information is transformed into the resources through which people make sense of their lives. The reason that people interact is due to the sheer volume of information, and so by necessity intelligence becomes communal. Following Lévy (1997), Jenkins calls this *collective intelligence* (2004, 2006). A collective intelligence represents the community that contains a specific body of knowledge for the purpose of a collective goal or objective; members of the collective intelligence can access this knowledge at any time (2004, 2007). These communities are defined through 'voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments' (2006: 27). The knowledge of a collective intelligence does not hold it together; rather, the dynamic, participatory social process of acquiring knowledge continually tests and reaffirms the social ties within the group (2006). In Jenkins' estimation, consumption has become a collective process. Therefore, convergence culture represents the shift toward a collective consumption in which the main resource consumed and shared is information, for the purpose of the common good (2006).

Wellman seeks to describe the main ways in which individuals now connect and interact in the digital age. No longer do people interact and mobilize in groups that are densely knit and tightly bound. Instead, there has been a shift to networks that are sparsely knit and loosely bound (Wellman et al., 2003). Wellman calls this *networked individualism* (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001). The person becomes the focus in networked individualism, rather than the family, the work unit, or any other collective social group (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Networked individualism is oriented around loose, fragmented networks of individuals who meet their social, emotional, and economic needs by accessing the multiple networks of which they are a part. People no longer act as embedded group members but rather as unique, connected individuals. All networks provide social capital, which Wellman defines as the interpersonal resources that provide opportunities for changing a personal social situation, such as a job, or for acting in a civic manner, toward a public good (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Networked individuals are also constantly creating online content with other individuals to expand collective knowledge, communicate, and solve problems (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2002).

In summation, the influence of Granovetter and Coleman on American Communitarianism should be apparent. An emphasis on shared knowledge paved the way for collective intelligence; the focus on civic engagement and the norm of reciprocity emboldened the notion of social capital as a public good; and the strength of weak ties supported the idea of the potential for vast-spreading knowledge and networked individualism. American Communitarianism has dominated the discussion surrounding social capital during the past four decades. However, there are several weaknesses and deficiencies in this theoretical framework.

## American Communitarianism: A Critique

Portes lamented the dearth of Bourdieu's influence on American sociology, since he regarded Bourdieu as having one of the most theoretically refined analyses (1998). One critique of the American Communitarian conception of social capital is the inability to distinguish and identify the resources or benefits obtained through social capital from the ability to obtain or enact them because of an individual's position in various social structures (Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Woolcock, 1998). This distinction is explicit in Bourdieu, but is lacking in Coleman (Portes, 1998, 2000). Secondly, when social capital is made equivalent with the resources or benefits acquired through social capital, certain tautological statements can result (Daly and Silver, 2008; Lin, 1999, 2001; Marsden, 2005; Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996). Because American Communitarians have focused on social capital as a *public good*, as a positive property of communities and nations rather than individuals, social capital becomes incorrectly and simultaneously a cause and an effect which is only determined by first observing positive effects (Daly and Silver, 2008; Lin, 1999, 2001; Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996; Woolcock, 1998). In a functional definition such as this one, social capital is identified as present only when and if it has worked (Lin, 1999, 2001; Marsden, 2005). Because of the way in which the existence of social capital is inferred from positive outcomes *ex post facto*, what is achieved is logical circularity (Portes, 1998, 2000; Portes and Landolt, 1996). Opposed to this, a holistic treatment of the concept of social capital must distinguish between the individuals who possess social capital, the sources of social

capital, and the resources themselves; these three elements have been mixed and confused in the works of those who have followed Coleman, whereas Bourdieu's analysis gives due weight to each one (Portes, 1998).

Furthermore, the emphasis on social capital as a public good has skewed its discussion such that normative statements are unreflectively read into analyses that should remain ethically neutral (Bierstedt, 1981; Portes, 1998; Portes and Landolt, 1996). Because of these moral statements, the elements of exclusion and contention, which are not primarily *negative* (a moral claim), but rather *inherent* (a neutral claim) in social capital, have received relatively little attention in proportion to 'positive' attributions of social capital. As Portes writes, social phenomena that are perceived as negative 'do not reflect the *absence* of the same forces giving rise to social capital but rather their other, presumably less desirable, manifestations' (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1338; italics in original). Since American Communitarians have thought of social capital as a public *good*, they have brought to their analyses their own conception of *the bad*, and subsequently have labeled what they perceive as negative effects of social capital as 'the dark side of social capital' or 'risks of social capital' (Adler and Kwon, 2000, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Instead of these normative statements that implicate a moral character in the analysis of social capital, the first goal for sociological writing should be ethical neutrality: categorical and descriptive propositions rather than prescriptive propositions (Bierstedt, 1981).

Turning now to digital relationships, American Communitarians misunderstand the nature of many interactions online. Rainie and Wellman claim that interactions online are informal, lacking specific rules and hierarchies (2012). While Lin identifies the tautology that results from Coleman's understanding of social capital and distinguishes social capital from collective assets and goods, such as norms and trust, nevertheless he estimates that networks online represent 'a new era of democratic and entrepreneur networks and relations where resources flow and are shared by a large number of participants with new rules and practices, many of which are devoid of colonial intent or capability' (1999: 45, 2001). In such a situation, information is freer than ever before because there is no longer any authoritarian control over access to information and resources (Lin, 1999). Wellman et al. claim that in online communities there is less social control, as people can easily leave communities that have confining restrictions (2003).

Yet, in light of the current online interactions of digital inhabitants, these emphases and conclusions are incorrect. What we find in many online interactions is exclusion and conflict. As Bourdieu wrote, '... in the United States, every day some new piece of research appears showing diversity where one *expected to see* homogeneity, conflict where one expected to see consensus, reproduction and conservation where one expected to see mobility' (1998: 12; italics in original). Participation and exclusion in online interactions do not primarily refer merely to access or inaccess to ICTs, but rather to the ability or inability to act in particular ways online; in other words, to be able to differentiate and achieve distinction within online culture (Helsper, 2012). While Wellman (2001; Rainie and Wellman, 2012) may have asserted that networked societies contain permeable boundaries, this is proven false by the boundaries and rules that digital inhabitants have created online. Lin assumed a bottom-up globalization process would foster groups that exist without the dominance of any class of actors, but what has actually happened is the bottom-up, grassroots movement of those who invest

themselves online has been the one to create a unique culture that contains elements of dominance and exclusion (1999). What has not developed is an online society in which information moves freely as individuals interact in multiple, unconstraining networks. Instead, individuals online have created specific and effective ways for concealing information and for excluding others from specific groups. The opposite of a collective intelligence has been created; as individuals online interact, they do not freely share their information with any sort of general populace, but, instead, knowledge is concealed from those who do not have the distinguishing capabilities necessary to perceive specific knowledge. Neither do they interact and share knowledge to work toward a common goal or solve a problem. Instead, they interact online merely in order to interact with one another as they exist in social space. All of this is explained by Bourdieu's sociological theory and evidenced by the way digital inhabitants create and share 'internet memes'.

Individuals who invest themselves online have created certain parameters, rules, and structures that include some people and exclude others from understanding and participating in what may be called a clearly identifiable culture. This culture is that of the digital inhabitants: individuals who invest time not only in the internet in general but in online communities specifically, such as Reddit, 4chan, and Imgur. Individuals have voluntarily developed these structures and rules because, existing in social space, they are not indifferent, but rather they make differentiating judgments about their interactions (Bourdieu, 1998). In other words, individuals online make judgments of distinction online. This is because individuals who invest time online develop skills and a way of interacting that is unique to online culture; individuals online inculcate a unique habitus, which is engendered because the internet constitutes a new field. Out of this digitally oriented habitus, individuals create content and share what they perceive in the world. This is seen in the internet meme, to which we now turn.

## The Internet Meme: Initial Observations and Basic Understanding

Before applying Bourdieu's sociological framework to online interactions, we first must have a basic grasp of internet memes as internet users (who simply call them 'memes') themselves colloquially understand them. This phenomenon does not directly relate to the study of memetics or Dawkins' use of the term in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Internet memes are a recent internet phenomenon in which users create and share images that have text superimposed on the image. Users know these images and texts and share them through a multitude of websites such as 4chan and Reddit. There are also websites that are exclusively dedicated to the creation and sharing of memes, such as Memebase and Memegenerator.

A brief typology, the characteristics of which have arisen not from any top-down executive decisions but rather from the grassroots level of the internet users, will help to explain and clarify the parameters necessary for the existence of an internet meme. For any given meme, certain characteristics must be present. The text must appear on the top and bottom of the image and should be in the font 'Impact'. There are many different kinds of memes, but the most frequently occurring are those that are 'typecast'; in other words, their image is recurring and known by all viewers. Some examples will suffice in order to solidify the understanding of what memes are:





Figure 1. Socially Awkward Penguin 1.



Figure 2. Socially Awkward Penguin 2.



Figure 3. Success Kid 1.





**Figure 4.** Success Kid 2.

The first two memes are the ‘Socially Awkward Penguin Meme’ (Figures 1 and 2). This meme describes socially awkward situations. The second set of memes are the ‘Success Kid Meme’ (Figures 3 and 4), in which a successful social interaction or occurrence is described. The most frequently occurring memes are typecast memes, of which there are hundreds, if not thousands, of different images.

The second most frequently occurring memes I call current event memes. However, these will be examined later because they can only be understood in light of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field, and distinction. Now that we have a basic understanding of what memes are, we can begin to apply Bourdieu’s sociological theory to online interactions and show why an agonistic interpretation of online interactions, rather than that of the American Communitarians, more holistically and accurately describes the current patterns of online relations and the ways in which digital inhabitants communicate online.

## **Bourdieu on Social Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu wrote about different forms of capital in the late 20th century. Economic capital, which is directly convertible to wealth, is primary (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition to economic capital, Bourdieu describes two other forms of capital: cultural and social capital. These secondary types of capital hold value only to the extent in which they are convertible to economic capital (1986). Cultural capital includes visible and physical distinctions, such as educational degrees and books, as well as the subjective disposition of a person, i.e. their personality, which has been shaped by their upbringing. Social capital exists in the realm of social relationships and consists of the social obligations that come with those relationships. More specifically, social capital is the aggregate of the resources that are tied to membership in a specific group. The group itself provides these resources, and they serve as credentials, sources of leverage, status, or worth (Bourdieu, 1986). These resources are exchanged, and as they are exchanged, they reinforce the relationships that exist in the group. Therefore, the social interactions that occur maintain and reinforce social relationships and social standing through the exchange of social

capital. Departing from the late 20th century, we venture into contemporary times in which the internet age has dawned. But before examining the digital age in light of Bourdieu's concepts of distinction, field, and habitus, I make several general observations about Bourdieu's understanding of social capital and its application to online social interactions.

## **Bourdieu, Social Capital and Online Interactions**

It is my contention that online interactions affect an individual's stock of social capital. Social capital exhibits itself in new ways online. It does not remain unchanged in its adaptation to internet culture and communication. Because of the current ubiquitous accessibility of the internet, online interactions themselves contain and extend social capital. As social capital is the aggregate of resources that are connected to membership in a specific group, this resource can proliferate on the internet and through the ties and memberships that individuals have there (Bourdieu, 1986). Through online social interactions, individuals make expressions of social capital that specifically affect and extend their relationships. A new form of social capital arises in online interactions: *digital* social capital. Internet memes are one such expression of this new form of digital social capital. But because of the digital nature of this form of social capital, it deviates in several ways from Bourdieu's work on social capital. We now turn to these general applications and expansions.

First, Bourdieu thought the exchange of social capital was justified only if it developed some sort of competence in the user. He writes:

The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability ... This work ... is not profitable or even conceivable unless one invests in it a specific competence ... and an acquired disposition to acquire and maintain this competence, which are themselves integral parts of this capital. (1986: 250)

Contra the American Communitarians, who posit that individuals interact online in order to share knowledge and solve problems, the competency that is developed through the sharing of digital social capital is the reiteration of the individual's stake or possession of digital social capital and the ability to remain an inhabitant of internet culture. This is only convertible to social and economic capital in physical, offline interactions if those people the agent knows in the physical world are also those who know online culture and who see the accumulation of digital social capital as a positive capability. This impact of digital social capital on the individual's physical relationships and perception of the world is explored later when we examine the habitus of digital inhabitants.

The second general insight from Bourdieu is his comments concerning the exchange itself. Social exchanges that reinforce relationships are interactions that have mutual knowledge and recognition. Bourdieu writes, '[e]xchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through the mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, reproduces the group' (1986: 249). The exchanges that take place cement the things exchanged as permanent tokens of group membership, and the exchanges also reproduce the group. Internet memes have become such tokens and signs of recognition of group membership. Internet memes are one

example of a new form of digital social capital that exists online and is exchanged in online interactions. These new forms of digital social capital must arise in online interactions for agents to gain distinction, validity, and hierarchy in the digital world, because the internet comprises a new field into which agents enter, in which they exist, and out of which is generated a new digitally oriented habitus. We now look specifically at Bourdieu's concepts of distinction, field, and habitus and their appropriation to the digital age in which we live.

## Bourdieu and Distinction: The Distinction of Memes as Digital Social Capital

But the essential point is that, when perceived through these social categories of perception, these principles of vision and division, the differences in practices, in the good possessed, or in the opinions expressed become symbolic differences and constitute a veritable *language*. Differences associated with different positions, that is, goods, practices, and especially *manners*, function, in each society, in the same way as differences which constitute symbolic systems, such as the set of phonemes of a language or the set of distinctive features ... that constitute a mythical system, that is, as *distinctive signs*. (Bourdieu, 1998: 8–9; italics in original)

Internet memes not only possess a unique language, but they also in themselves are tokens of a distinctive language; they are *distinctive signs*. They point unswervingly to membership in the group of digital inhabitants. In a moment of Bourdieusian reflexivity, it is important to note that the only reason I was able to investigate the presence and prevalent use of memes is because I perceived memes *as memes*. I did not think they were 'merely' or 'simply' images and text; I *recognized* their unique role online. When I see a meme, I 'know and recognize it on the basis of cognitive structures able and inclined to grant it recognition' because I am attuned to what it truly is (Bourdieu, 2000: 242). Internet memes are distinctive signs that are understood and perceived by digital inhabitants and that are *misunderstood* or *passed over* by others; it is here that we find the hierarchy and exclusion for which American Communitarianism has no explanation.

What is Bourdieu's concept of distinction? He notes that the *search* for distinction as the motivation for all human behavior is a common misreading of his work (1998). Individuals do not self-consciously obtain resources in an effort to maintain their social standing or in order to reproduce their group; individuals are not necessarily part of a specific class that is mobilized against another class (1990; 1998). Rather, all individual humans are confronted with the reality of their own existence and seek to find the legitimacy or justification for that existence. This justification must be sought for in the judgment and recognition of others (2000). On existing in a social space and making differentiating judgments, Bourdieu writes:

[The] main idea is that to exist within a social space, to occupy a point or to be an individual within a social space, is to differ, to be different ... [A] difference, a distinctive property ... only becomes a visible, perceptible, non-indifferent, socially *pertinent* difference if it is perceived by someone who is capable of *making the distinction* – because, being inscribed in the space in question, he or she is not *indifferent* and is endowed with categories of perception, with

classificatory schemata, with a certain *taste*, which permits her to make differences, to discern, to distinguish ... (1998: 9; italics in original)

Because digital inhabitants derive part of their total stake of social capital *online*, they are invested in online relations and are not 'indifferent' to making distinguishing judgments about what will indicate membership in the digital, online community. One mechanism for the expression of this membership and unique online knowledge is internet memes. Therefore, digital social capital exists online because online users are able and have a vested interest to distinguish it as such while they exist online.

What are the other distinctions that memes bear? Bourdieu writes, 'Manners (bearing, pronunciation, etc.) may be included in social capital insofar as, through the mode of acquisition they point to, they indicate initial membership of a more or less prestigious group' (1986: 256). Memes have their own distinctive vocabulary that consists of, but is not limited to, the following words and phrases: 'le', 'le me', 'le [object]', 'herp derp', 'derping around'. These words, which connote stupidity, represent a unique vocabulary that memes possess and which give distinction to memes as digital social capital. This vocabulary indicates distinction and grants inclusion into a group. Because group participation online is not a physical, embodied reality in which a person could discern *manners*, accents or dialect in the way that Bourdieu thought about them, one way that membership and good standing in online groups are reaffirmed is through each creation or reposting of a meme which contains this *vocabulary*, which has the same function online as that of physical manners and patterns of speech in person.

Finally, the desire of individuals for recognition motivates their distinguishing actions as they exist in social space and interact in various fields. Creating or sharing memes sets one user apart from others unless they too 'share' the meme online. With each posting of a meme there is recognition and the granting of 'a name, a place, a function, within a group or institution' which is the individual's hope, so that he can 'escape the contingency, finitude, and ultimate absurdity of existence' (Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2008: 264). The distinguishing judgment of others is implied in the sharing of memes, and this judgment leads to differences in social existence. This in turn 'sets off the endless dialectic of distinction and pretention, recognition and misrecognition, arbitrariness and necessity', all of which are necessary parts of the hierarchy, struggle, and contention that are fundamental in social existence (Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2008: 264). It is not civic duty or the spread of knowledge that is present in the actions of digital inhabitants, but conflict and contention. This agonistic conflict extends to the internet and the social interactions therein because the internet is a new field.

## **Bourdieu and Fields: The Internet as a Field**

An essential concept in Bourdieu's framework is what he calls the field. It is one half of the dialectical relationship of habitus and field. In Bourdieu's estimation, to focus exclusively on either habitus or field would be to sunder what is logically united and to create a false dichotomy, emphasizing either the subjective action of the agent or the formative power of the structure to the exclusion of the other. In Bourdieu's framework, the habitus constitutes the dispositions of an agent through which he judges and acts in the world,

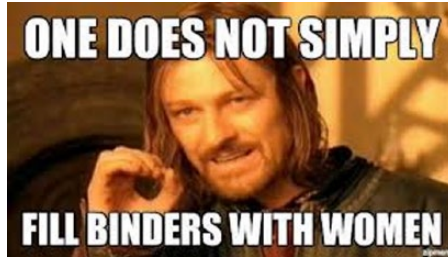
and the fields are the social structures in which the agent finds himself. These fields have their own sets of rules and regulations that influence those who enter into them, but they do not unconsciously or deterministically shape the agent.

In general, a field is a microcosm that appears within society that has its own rules, regulations, and hierarchical authority (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Wacquant, 2008). A field is the social space wherein the justification for existence and the identity of individuals are endlessly disputed over (Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2008). A field is the social arena into which individuals enter of their own volition, which nevertheless has both specific rules and is the location of an ongoing struggle between those agents. One main indication that the internet is a new field is found in what Bourdieu writes concerning fields and interest: every field, 'in producing itself, produces a form of interest ...' (1998: 85). This is precisely what is observed when looking at the competencies developed through online interaction; by entering online, agents become more proficient at interacting successfully and gaining distinction online. Bourdieu continues, noticing that the interest a field generates may seem like disinterestedness, or even absurdity or foolishness from the perspective of those who are outside of the field (1998). For those who do not invest time online, the skills, abilities, and lingo that are gained from online interactions seem like a waste of time or unnecessary; but, in reality, the internet is a field which generates its own interest. This interest and the skills that accompany online interaction are valuable to those who enter the online world, and agents are themselves shaped as they spend more time online. In other words, the internet is a field that creates a new habitus.

## **Bourdieu and Habitus: The Habitus of the Digital Inhabitant**

The field of the internet gives rise to a new digitally oriented habitus. The habitus is the set of dispositions that is developed by the existence of an agent in a given field. The habitus structures the agent's perception of and action in the world. The habitus also acts as a differentiating tool, out of which the agent makes distinctions and judgments in the world (Bourdieu, 1990). This is because different habitus are themselves based on specific fields and therefore differentiated (1984). In addition to this, the habitus can be seen as the embodiment of the structures of a given field that then generates actions that produce or reproduce the conditions of that field (1977, 1998). In summary, Bourdieu writes, 'As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others' (1977: 95).

Is the field of the internet producing a digitally oriented habitus? This new habitus not only is *structured* by the field or social forces that produced it, but it is also *structuring* (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2008). The system of practices that is generated by a specific habitus 'arises from the necessary yet unpredictable confrontation between the *habitus* and an event that can exercise a pertinent incitement on the *habitus* only if the latter snatches it from the contingency of the accidental ...' (Bourdieu, 1990: 55; italics



**Figure 5.** Boromir.

in original). This describes what I call the current event meme, and with these empirical examples I close my appropriation of Bourdieu's sociological theory to online interactions. The clearest indication of a digital habitus is the prevalence of the current event meme. In this type of meme, recent events in the world are interpreted through the creation of memes and the particular language of the internet; in other words, the digital habitus, which was engendered by digital social capital in the field of the internet, leads to a particular perception of the physical world. Two examples of current event memes follow, with a detailed analysis of how they incorporate digital social capital and the habitus that is created by the field of the internet (see Figures 5 and 6).

The first example concerns Mitt Romney's odd phrase 'binders full of women' (Figure 5), which he said during a presidential debate in October of 2012. This current event meme is an example of an event that is fit into an already-existing typecast meme. The typecast meme is Boromir, from *Lord of the Rings*, who says, 'One does not simply walk into Mordor.' The variant of this typecast meme consists in changing the lower half of the text; in this instance, Romney's phrase is substituted so the meme reads, 'One does not simply fill binders with women.' Again, this is evidence of the habitus which is created due to interaction with digital social capital in the field of the internet; this habitus structures the judgments of agents and their perceptions of the world in such a way that on these occasions agents interpret current events through memes and through the use of distinctive phrases which are themselves digital social capital.

The second example weaves together two separate distinctive elements with a situation involving Pope Benedict XVI (Figure 6). In this meme, the Pope's seemingly hypocritical behavior is mocked; this is readily seen by all. But what is misunderstood, passed over, or misrecognized in this meme by those who do not have a digitally oriented habitus are the two elements of distinction, of digital social capital, which it bears. The first involves the text itself; it is not a random sentence, but instead is patterned after another typecast meme called 'The Most Interesting Man in the World'. In this typecast meme, the text always follows a particular pattern, in the same way that the text of the Boromir meme always follows the same pattern. Here, the pattern is simply, 'I don't always \_\_\_\_, but when I do I \_\_\_\_.' This phrase bears distinction online. The second distinctive feature which this meme bears is observed in the Pope's mitre, which has been altered. Here, the pattern of the mitre comes from another meme, called Scumbag Steve, in which Steve always behaves in a way that is socially deplorable; he does things only 'scumbags' do. This meme of Pope Benedict XVI should now be fully understood. Far from being



**Figure 6.** Pope Benedict XVI.

merely or simply an image and statement in which an individual shares frustration with the behavior of the Pope, this meme actually communicates on several levels which are hidden, concealed, or passed over by those who do not bear the habitus necessary to distinguish the elements of distinction which are borne by this meme. This is the case for all current event memes; agents gain distinction online by cleverly implementing well-known phrases and symbols in their interpretation of current events as they create memes. The current event meme is the result of the conjunction of the habitus, which employs distinctive phrases of digital social capital in the field of the internet, and current events that happen in the physical world.

## Conclusion

Only individuals who have been in the field of the internet and who have interacted with digital social capital could bear the distinguishing habitus necessary to recognize, give distinction to, and create the memes above. The importance of the agonistic theory of Bourdieu should be clear; the ways in which digital inhabitants interact is far from what was predicted and what is claimed by many of the American Communitarian tradition. Digital inhabitants do not share memes merely to transfer information or share knowledge to solve a problem, as American Communitarians have posited about the effects of social capital and the motivation or reasons for which agents interact online. Rather, memes are one of the ways in which digital inhabitants have voluntarily created requirements, standards, and structures that must be fulfilled for a successful interaction and the granting of a place among the digital inhabitants to occur. Anyone who wants to examine seriously the interactions of digital inhabitants cannot afford to ignore elements of exclusion, which are inherent in online communication and interaction.

There is more from Bourdieu to appropriate to online interactions. It is impossible in one article to do justice to the full breadth and nuance of Bourdieu's distinctive sociological theory. In particular, his concepts of doxa, symbolic capital, and symbolic violence must be appropriated to online interactions. But my hope is that this article will be



a starting point from which we can evaluate our sociological methods and theories in order to describe and explain more accurately the interactions and phenomena that we find in online communication. Several specific questions pertaining to Bourdieu's theory and online interactions must also be examined: what is the strength of digital social capital as compared to other forms of capital? How does the nature of *digital* social capital affect the frequency with which individuals online must renew and reaffirm their standing in social communities? These, and many other questions, remain to be answered. While the specific phenomenon of the internet meme will assuredly fade, the insights gleaned from Bourdieu that pertain to the nature of interactions and exchanges online are invaluable.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Steven Jones and Jennifer Scott of Grove City College for the initial recommendation to explore Bourdieu and for their continued assistance and support throughout the writing of this article. I also acknowledge the helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Chris Julien is a graduate of Grove City College where he attained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biblical and Religious Studies with a minor in Sociology. He intends to pursue a PhD in Sociology and his interests include Bourdieu, social capital, online interaction, cultural sociology, social psychology, and social theory.

**Date submitted** August 2013

**Date accepted** April 2014