From the editor

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I recently shared an automobile with five other passengers to travel to a meeting in a neighboring city. During the drive we had an opportunity to talk about a variety of subjects, one of which was Facebook. Of the six passengers in the car, two did not have a Facebook account, and the other four who did use the service did so only sparingly (so they said). Everyone agreed that youth spend too much time on Facebook, although our evidence was only anecdotal of course. We also talked about email, instant messaging and other Internet-based social networking services. One passenger, whom I will call Bob (not his real name), told an interesting, although I suspect not unusual, story that recently happened to him. Bob met an acquaintance who asked if he IMed (used instant messaging). Bob said that he had the capability to IM but didn't do it often. The acquaintance asked when Bob would be online so that they could IM. Bob's reply was that if the acquaintance wanted to talk, he could just call him on the telephone. The acquaintance pressed about the use of IM rather than the telephone, somewhat miffed that Bob would not do it his way. They parted company, but the acquaintance never called. When Bob called and left a voice message, he received a text message from the acquaintance saying he was busy and would call later. He never did. The story reminded me of how frequently I email colleagues whose offices are only a few doors from mine, instead of walking to their offices if I have something to say.

I mention this because of a discussion I participated in with students in a community food systems course I

co-teach with Mary Hendrickson (a rural sociologist at the University of Missouri and former president of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society). (In the interest of full disclosure, it is Mary's course; I contribute to about a third of the lectures.) We assigned the class to read Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* and then held a 2 day colloquium about it. The class covered a lot of subjects in the two-day discussion, including the fairness of the meat processing industry, the health differences of cane sugar and high fructose corn syrup, and the advantages and disadvantages of mass produced, standardized foods obtained from franchised fast food outlets. A student brought up the idea that perhaps one implication of having a fast food industry where one could obtain the same meal anywhere in the country (or, in the case of multinational fast food chains, such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Dairy Queen, anywhere on the planet) is that there is no longer the need to ask local citizens for directions to a good place to eat. Instead of talking to locals, getting recommendations from former travelers, or simply taking a chance with the first restaurant one finds (something I often do when I travel for business), we can purchase consistency thanks to the fast food industry. I guess you can say that physical capital, in the form of buildings, ovens and other food preparation facilities, substitutes for social capital. In fact, we can travel from one end of the United States to the other without ever having to speak to a human being. For example, if I am driving and need to purchase gasoline for my automobile, I can do so without speaking to a living soul because virtually all gas stations in the US have pumps that automatically process credit card payments. With fast food, I can also buy my meals without speaking to a person, except to place a food order at a drive-thru intercom system. I know what to expect the hamburger and fries will be like when I eat them, so there is no need for me to

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consult with anyone about them. Come to think of it, I wonder if I could drive from Los Angeles to New York City without having to talk to anyone at all ...

In a world of Facebook, Twitter, cell phones and the Internet, where electronic social networking should be making the world smaller and more interconnected, is technology instead making us more disconnected? With Facebook, I could have friends galore without ever having to speak to them.

Because of my scholarly interest in social capital, I wanted to know how use of social networking affects measures of social capital. My hypothesis is that the more frequently a person uses social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, the lower will be their reported measures of trust in others. There is not a lot of research currently on the subject, but what studies exist suggests that use of social networking services might slightly increase, or at least does not diminish, generalized trust (Valenzuela et al. 2009).

Frankly, I don't buy this. For me there is something about a personal connection rather than an electronic one that makes all the difference in building social capital. It might be very easy for me to increase my social network by "friending" a lot of people online, but if there is ever a crisis or a need for me to draw on that stock of social capital, how easy would it be for my "friends" to electronically send their regrets? Easy on, easy off does not bode well for the development of social capital, in my opinion.

A few days following the drive to the neighboring city mentioned above, Bob told me how much he enjoyed the drive. The meeting we attended was nice, he said, but the drive was more memorable. I can understand what he means. Although I knew all of my driving companions, I got to know them even better simply by talking with them. Not a bad way of increasing the stock of social capital.

Speaking of capital, this issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* aims to increase the stock of human capital through a collection of outstanding research papers and book reviews. In the lead article, Jaffee and Howard use case studies to document how corporate interests co-opted third

party organic and fair trade certification initiatives. Kerton and Sinclair report on the learning experiences of a group of organic food consumers along the Atlantic coast of Canada as they interacted with farmers at local farms and farmers markets. Hunt interviews a group of kiwifruit orchardists in New Zealand and correlates views they have about themselves and their orchards with specific land management practices. Lehrer charts the role of biofuels in the development of the 2008 US farm policy legislation. Dressler and Pulhin show how farmers practicing swidden agriculture (cutting and burning forest vegetation to create cultivatable land) in the Philippines adapted to government policies designed to limit its practice and promote a more conventional, intensive agrarian climate. Swindal, Gillespie, and Walsh study the interests of New York dairy farmers to participate in a community digester operation that converts manure into energy, highlighting the importance of farm size in the participation decision. Torgensen documents how a group of banana growers in the Caribbean adopted fair trade production practices as a survival strategy following rulings by the World Trade Organization that eliminated a preferential supply relationship between them and the UK. Whiting and Ward examine the relative impact of different food provisioning strategies of Cheyenne Indians of Montana (USA) on levels of stress. Finally, Kinchy critiques the tactics of anti-biotechnology activists responding to reports of contaminated maize in Mexico by acknowledging the difficulty of confronting politicized scientific authority. In addition, we include Block's residential address, delivered at the 2010 meetings of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society. Four book reviews follow to round out this, the final issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* in 2010.

Reference

- Valenzuela, S., N. Park, and K.F. Kee. 2009. Is there social capital in a social network site?: Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14(4): 875–901.