Foreword

As you open this book you might question if this reading weighs against joining social talk. "Small talk" is usually easy-going and promises to lead you efficiently to what others already found out. Well, after reading this book, I can assure you that reading its content is worth your time and efforts. This book builds upon the long roads its author walked before, but also has the guts to write it down bluntly. Its underlying goal is to understand how social networks work both via direct and indirect routes through the presentation of social capital. Neither the connections, nor the social protocols nor decision rules are fixed in any community.

We know that social trust includes sentiments, seasonal affections and pragmatic needs; they all work in parallel in order to overcome fixation and blind corners. This book provides you with clear-cut answers as to why societies rest upon gossip, conspiracies and blind trust. Societal capital, even more than financial trust, rests upon a dynamic process of "induced reputation"; its actors serve as sources and are subject to induced criteria as well. Except in certain stages of Maslow's 'hierarchy of human needs', reputation and trust are not the end goals in themselves; but rather serve as social exchange currency necessary to enable us cope with deep doubts and risks. 'Social capital' can easily be treated as "trust"; it is not only the outcome; it is an input resource as well. This book makes the various and critical components of social capital fundamentally clear, more so than any other book has ever made.

The Bayesian mechanism presented in the book is a wise choice to cope with the capricious and chaotic nature of social structures in any forms of communities. The author makes it clear that there is typically not a priori rational for assuming one model to be more adequate than another. In this sense the Bayesian analysis method is congruent to the evolution itself: The observer embodies a part of the object domain itself. Understanding social capital is instrumental to effective analysis of social issues in virtual communities. For many years researchers and scientists,

especially in the Social Sciences and the Humanities have established it without any doubt the power inherent in social relations and in establishing social capital as an important framework for understanding social issues in communities. Today, leveraging social issues to overcome many social and economic dilemmas in communities is becoming increasingly necessary.

For the most important question of the 21st century is not so much *what* you know; more decisive is *who* you know. Even one step further is the acceptance that expertise manifests *between* rather than *inside* persons. The increasing thrust towards Web 2.0 has lead to the emergency of important terms such as "social software", which in turn inspired the coinage of the term "social networking" and subsequently, brought us productive software (Facebook, MySpace, Youtube, LinkedIn etc.) These technologies allow robust and seamless ways of sharing content, engaging groups online and drastically increasing the presence of virtual communities. They strengthen and extend existing social network of trusted contacts to new terrains and enable people to social network with each other, helping them to discover inside connections in virtual communities.

However, the added value of virtual communities to the many faculties of our lives is still underestimated. Virtual (as opposed to local or geographical) communities are increasingly deployed for education, health, job training and creative activities. They are social systems and platforms aimed to go beyond information access and cooperation to more deeper, long lasting social relationships. Steadily the web-based or virtual communities for that matter touch the more delicate aspects of our lives such as existential reorientation, ambiance, mental support etc.

They even widen our apprehension of professionalism or identity. Ego's, temperament and altruism become more tangible and submissive to specialized virtual communities such as gaming and role play.

For the last decade many organizations have been practicing effective interactions and transactions through virtual communities in order to supplement day-to-day activities. Higher education started accepting virtuality and mobility making learning more dynamic and realistic. We may expect that no media attribute will be omitted from the learning arena; the only scruple is that we do not like to admit that our envisioning of learning has stayed far behind.

Learning in its feudal and industrial roles can no longer serve knowledge- and network societies. We may even soon arrive at the point that "learning" loses its exquisite position of 'ultimate survival'. Seen from an evolutionary point of view, the human mind has evolved in order to adapt; not so much to learn from the past. It may be clear that social assets like trust and commitment are much more essential than the typical intellectual values that we typically target in regular education. We may expect that virtual- and vicarious learning will play an essential role to

make education reflect upon itself. The notion of 'social capital' may help in that process.

Both web-based and local communities aspire to reach maximum effects. For many years researchers tried to increase productivity in many fictitious situations with increasing degrees of successes and failures. A typical failure negating productivity in virtual communities is the absence of a robust analytical framework.

This book provides you with a robust analytical framework for analysing social capital in the context of virtual communities. The approach presented in the book is extensible to the understanding of other social systems. This is a 'must' for any organisation that lets people engage in virtual communities. The possibilities of using virtual communities with the increasing support of technologies such as Web 2.0 are endless, justifying why research into these communities has increased. This is the first book that provides a comprehensive analysis of social capital in geographical communities and extrapolating its approach towards virtual communities. The book also provides researchers, students, managers and co-workers to imagine the societal changes to come.

Part I of the book makes a thorough theoretical analysis and synthesis of social capital. Part II discusses various types of virtual communities together with the needed new technologies.

Its two sections are invaluable to researchers, students and practitioners interested in exploring the potential of social software and virtual communities for enhancing social engagement and community.

Part III gently confronts the reader with computational modelling and procedures for building a Bayesian Belief Network. It is a research tool for understanding complex social systems. This part of the book would be of interests to those who are interested in building complex and dynamic models. The most typical value of the book is its careful- and elegant presentation of the model of social capital and the procedures to validate it. You will find it in Part IV of this book.

Wishing you as a reader as well as the book's authors a productive role in the future now that social benchmarks are needed to supplant the harm of financial distrust of our modern times.

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on Educational Technology. Currently, he lectures in the fields of media, technology, communication and education. Dr. Kommers' early research focused on conceptual representations for learning and exploration of virtual reality environments to support learning. He developed several techniques including cognitive style effects that could be derived back to differences in students' short term memory capacity. For more than twenty years, Professor Kommers has worked on various large-scale European research projects. He has organized numerous conferences, initiated new scientific journals covering a variety of areas on virtual presence, explorative learning environments and web-based communities. His work appears in many European and International Scientific Conferences, book chapters, and journal articles. In addition, he has published six books and was awarded as Honorary Doctorate by Capital Normal University in Beijing in 2000.