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UP FRONT

Now There's Proof. TV Is Bad

In his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam argues that excessive TV watching frays social ties. Benjamin Olken, a Harvard economics researcher, says he may have proved Putnam's case against TV, using data from the Indonesian island of Java.

Because TV reception varies within Java's rural eastern and central provinces, people watch more TV in some villages than in others. The result: less civic-mindedness in the good-reception areas. Olken found that the availability of one extra channel was linked to a 7% decline in the number of a village's social groups and an 11% decline in the number of school, neighborhood, or savings circle meetings the average adult attended.

The shriveling social capital didn't seem to worsen village governance, though. A road project was managed just as well in the villages with good TV reception as in the bad-reception communities, Olken says, perhaps because a drop in social trust "encourages citizens to monitor government more."

By Peter Coy

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