Sports, arts and culture are capable of being defended without any regard to social capital. People often engage in these activities just because they enjoy them. However they can have an impact on connecting people to one another and thereby creating social capital.

Not all connections are the same. There is both bonding and bridging social capital. One is not necessarily better than the other but we need both. If there is only bonding social capital in can result in hermetically sealed communities, like in Belfast or Bosnia.

Bridging social capital is harder to create than bonding social capital, but it is especially important with the increasing social diversity of our communities. Arts and sport are very prominent domains for building bridging social capital. A particularly important quality is that they are non verbal so they can often allow people to begin on a more level playing field.

An example of the creation of bridging social capital took place in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This was the home of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard but the town was divided down the middle by a river with the shipyard side being predominantly conservative and working class and the other side of the river being progressive and mainly middle class. A programme was introduced to try and bring the two sides together. A choreographer was invited in to work with the community for short periods over 2-3 years. The participants told each other their stories through modern dance and a lot of lasting human ties were built.

The important element of this programme was its participatory nature. A small amount of human capital might be created by two people watching a production together, but much more will be generated if they are involved together in creating and performing that production.

Changes in our society and advances in technology mean that this type of participatory involvement has declined. In the past it was not possible to listen to music unless other people in the local community were creating it together. For instance in 1900 in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, which is a very small town, there used to be four town bands. But now if the inhabitants of Jaffrey want to listen to music they can do it in the comfort of their own homes on their stereos or televisions.
Extra curricular activities are an important way of creating social capital among young people. In the US sports and arts in particular have been under-funded in the last ten years because they are thought to be frills but this is misguided. There is good evidence which shows that participation in these activities in high school increases the likelihood of participation in the community later in life. The evidence is stronger for art than for sport, and there is of course a danger of self selection, but there is evidence nonetheless.

There are probably two main mechanisms which allow participation in arts and sports to create social capital. The first is the bonds and connections made between people who participate in an activity together, for instance members of a team or a band. The second is to do with identity. The bonds created between fans of a band or supporters of a local team are unlikely to be as strong as those who meet regularly to participate in an activity together. However it still creates a feeling of belonging and identification with a group which is defined by its support for that particular team. This is particularly strong in sport which tends to be defined by identification with a particular team. Also the success of a local team can generate an enormous sense of civic pride. However compared with the first mechanism the amount of social capital this provides is probably quite small.

League bowling is a good example of an activity which creates social capital, but it is in decline – hence the title of my book Bowling Alone. More Americans are bowling than ever before but not in leagues. This is important because league bowling is a great way of fostering friendship, connections and trust. The way league bowling works is that there are five people in a team and two teams playing against each other. Most of the time the individuals involved are not actually bowling. They are sitting around waiting their turn and talking to each other. Mostly this will be about TV shows etc, but occasionally the conversation will be about politics so there is a little bit of civic deliberation. This is being lost, and cannot be replaced by radio phone-ins or internet chat rooms because these forums do not provide the crucial element of context. If you know somebody you know how to process the information – for instance you might be aware that they are particularly biased about one area or particularly well informed about another. There is therefore a different kind of civic connectedness with those people we know well to those we don’t. This is why, although the ability of cultural and sporting activities to foster a sense of shared identity in the second mechanism I mentioned above are important, it is the first mechanism that has the most to contribute to this debate.

Discussion:
One participant asked how social capital can be rebuilt once it has been lost. Putnam suggested that youth sports and arts might be a good way to start as this provides a much longer period over which to get back the return on the investment. However, there was concern that even when people do participate it can be difficult to sustain their involvement. It was suggested that in Rugby the real challenge is to keep people involved and interested through
the late teen years. There is a tendency for people to be involved as children and then leave, coming back much later in life as volunteers when they have their own children. Life-long participation is difficult to achieve. In the US funding for girls sport is mandatory under federal law. This has had a huge effect on the development of girls sport in high schools and colleges but the evidence suggests that this does not continue at all after school. Soccer [football] in general also has an enormous drop off in participation in later life. This is a massive problem in the States but Putnam argued that it was still worth funding youth sports because those who participate in it are more likely to be involved in community activities when they are older, even if this involvement is in another area. This is set to become an increasingly prominent issue because of obesity trends.

Another possible lever would be to subsidise local arts and sports activities, not just those in schools. It was argued that holistic thinking from the government would help, perhaps allowing schools’ facilities to be used by the public free of charge, even making social capital an objective for schools. Public libraries were suggested as an example of how a public resource could be used to create civil renewal, and the public library in Chicago in particular. Here the public librarian recognised that the function of the library as a repository for information was being eroded and so she reorganised the library from a locus for information to a centre for communication about ideas. There was less stack space and more meeting space. They are also becoming more strategic about where libraries are placed, positioning one at the crossing point between several different communities so it became a place for encounters among people from different backgrounds.

However it was also pointed out that these activities did not only occur in the public sector and that there was a mix of provision between the public and the private sphere. For instance private gyms are competing fiercely with local authority ones, and dance classes are as likely to be provided by the private as the public sector. This threw up some interesting questions about how and whether government ought to intervene. Should government subsidise activity within private enterprise – for instance leagues in bowling or discussion groups after cinema showings.

There was concern that the advantages of social capital tend to accrue to the wealthier sections of society. Putnam agreed that this could be a problem but pointed out that while arts participation in particular was in general upwardly biased this did not apply to all forms. In the US singing is not particularly class stratified and bowling is the least class stratified activity in the US.

There was further discussion about the distinction between participating in a cultural or sports activity and being a spectator of it. It was argued that the latter could be more valuable than had previously been suggested. In the heritage sector for example people often progress from visiting heritage sites to volunteering at them. In football, while being a fan of the same team or club may not provide as high levels of social capital as actually playing in a team it nevertheless provides a commonality which provides both a topic of conversation and a reason to start one between people who are otherwise
strangers. Also, success of a team can draw more people into getting involved with a sport and volunteering. Since the World Cup lots more people are getting involved in Rugby. Of course, there is a danger that this sort of identification can become exclusionary. The cricket test, introduced by Norman Tebbit in the 1980s to assess how “British” people were was given as an example of how divisive issues around identity can be and the importance of trying to create bridging social capital was again reiterated.