# Going Offline: How Online Initiatives Revive Offline Civic Engagement

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## Summary

*Departing from the concept of the new identity and acknowledging a growing concern about disengaged citizenry, soundly expressed in the accounts of eroding social capital and the crisis of public communication thesis, this paper will develop two assumptions. First, it will argue that online interactions in virtual communities have the potential to create group identity hence providing a source of content that has the capacity to transform virtual into physical communities. Second, it will assume that these virtually created and physical consumed communities have the capacity to induce public action and positively contribute to civic engagement.*
*In order to explore aspects of virtual communities as local e-engagement spaces, this paper will present two case studies – the MoveOn and the Meetup Initiatives.*

**Key words:** collective identity, online communication, social capital, crisis of public communication, civic engagement

## Introduction
The process of "modernization", characterized by "increasing social complexity" (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 9) led to a break with the traditional social ties. The political order that was once organized around social institutions – po-

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litical parties, trade unions and church in particular – and rooted in ideological commitments and group loyalties, has now been replaced by a more fragmented and individualistic society. Along with some other developments (trends in economy, emergence of television etc.) this has led to dissolution of traditional communities and consequently to erosion of social capital. Contemporary trends in political communication have contributed to deterioration of public sphere and further alienated citizens from politics. Internet emerges as a potential solution to reinvigorate citizens' engagement which is considered to be a "building block of successful democracy" (Rensohn, 2000: 200).

Building on the assumption that identity is a source of cohesion in any community and that online interactions are often characterized by elaborate identity construction, proponents of e-engagement argue that it is possible for Internet to provide space where new collective identities are built. These new identities have the capacity to affect collective action in both instrumental and symbolic terms.

In the first chapter we explain the notions of individual and collective identity. We argue that collective identities developed online evolve group cohesion which may encourage collective action. In the second chapter we look at the two concepts concerned with perceived decline of civic engagement – erosion of social capital and the crisis of public communication. In the third chapter we argue that Internet may have the potential to encourage public participation thus providing solution to rebuild broken social ties and reconnect citizens with politics. In the fourth chapter we present some of the most salient concerns addressing the idea of Internet as a new space of citizens' engagement. Finally, we briefly present two virtually created communities that managed to induce off-line public action and apparently positively contribute to both Putnam's and Habermasian notion of civic engagement.

## New collective identities

The discussion about *identity* has two perspectives: the "I" and the "we" perspective. According to Tanno and Gonzales (1998, in Zhong, 2000: 38), "I" is concerned with an identity of an individual while "we" is concerned with collective identity. Researches of individual identity focus on psychological constructs and the influences of social interaction (Erikson 1956; Mead, 1934; Slugoski and Ginsburg 1989, in Zhong, 2000: 38). Although this perspective strongly penetrates Internet studies, the issue of collective identity still seems to be more salient (Zhong, 2000).

Turkle (1996, in Kennedy, 2006: 860) argues that the key features of individual virtual identities are that they are anonymous, fluid and fragmented. Turkle bases her arguments on the findings from a research conducted on a group of students who participated in a MUD (Multi User Domain) games and witnessed fragmentation of their own identities in an anonymous setting: "part of me, a very important part of me, only exists inside PernMUD" (ibid: 862).

Haraway (1998, in Kennedy, 2006: 863) argues that this fragmentation is a necessary precondition to understand the other side: "the split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positioning and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversation and fantastic imaginings that change history". However, other authors argue that online identities are often continuous with offline selves, not reconfigured versions of subjectivities in real life (Kennedy, 2006: 863). Kendall (1999, in Kennedy, 2006:863) likewise argues that members of the Internet community "continually work to reincorporate their experience of themselves and of others' selves into integrated, consistent wholes". Consequently, presumption of an offline identity which continues to live online is a necessary precondition to take our discussion one step further: a person moves back and forth from online to real world to pursue his/her interests and causes which continue to exist both in virtual and physical worlds.

Individuals engage in online communication thus creating virtual communities which Rheingold (1994 in Vedel 2006: 229) defines as "the social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Members of the same virtual community share the same collective identity which fosters group cohesion. Smith and Kollock (1999, in Chadwick, 2006: 27) argue that identity is a source of cohesion in any community. Some researches have demonstrated that online interactions are often characterized by elaborate identity construction: rituals, rule writing, and reinforcement.

According to Mellucci (1989, in Wall, 2007: 261) collective identity is a "shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their actions as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their actions take place". Collective identity "takes place via three similar dimensions: (1) the production of cognitive definitions that establish movement goals; (2) the establishment of network of relationships (particularly evident in forms of organization, technologies of communication, etc.) among actors to communicate and negotiate; and (3) creating emotional investments in which movement members feel as if they belong to the movement, allowing them to recognize themselves in each other" (ibid: 262).

Although nature, structure and dynamics of collective identities in online communities still seem to be underinvestigated, Rheingold (1993, in Wall 2007:263) contends that new communication technologies "appear to have opened up new spaces for public and private participation as well as broadened public participation in political matters". Denning (2001, in Wall 2007:262) identifies five general models of Internet communication within social movement activism: "(1) collection of information (2) publication of information (3) dialogue (4) coordinating action and (5) lobbying decision makers. So, all these accounts assert that online communication may affect collective action in both instrumental

and symbolic terms, by improving the effectiveness of communication and creating collective identities and solidarity.

In the next chapter we look how these developments may encourage civic engagement and alleviate consequences of the perceived erosion of social capital and the crisis of public communication.

## The troubles of disengaged citizenry

Putnam's (2000) highly influential "bowling alone" thesis contends that developed states have witnessed a decline in social capital during the last thirty years. Social capital theory locates the foundations of democracy not primarily in citizens' beliefs nor in their institutions, but in *relationships* of each to the other. Putnam argues that the decline of social capital in America is visible in the decline in membership of social groups and voluntary associations, and in many forms of collective political participation such as attending public town meetings or working for political parties (Putnam, 1995). Such development is to be blamed on several factors: trends in the structure of the US economy, changes in the family, growth of the welfare state and, perhaps decisively, emergence of television which, according to Putnam, alienates people from each other and the political process and diminishes their sense of citizenship (Norris, 1996: 474).

The argument about increasing public alienation from political process has been equally soundly expressed in the accounts of the proponents of the *crisis of public communication thesis* (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Rosen, 1996, 1999). Their arguments, to rephrase Pippa Norris (2000: 2), basically come down to one: common practices in political communications as deployed by the news media and by party campaigns hinder civic engagement, meaning learning about public affairs, trust in government and political activism. Media with its predominant focus on candidates instead on issues, strategic election game, tabloid scandals and down-market sensationalism, trivialize politics and turn political communication into just another branch of show business (Street, 2003: 86). Party spin doctors and campaign strategists, on the other hand, blur real political substance, praise image over issues and "packaged" personalities over programs thereby contributing to growing public distrust and cynicism. Blumler argues (1997: 396) that if we agree that there has been clear deterioration in the capacity of political communication to serve citizens more than politicians and journalists; offer meaningful choices between governing teams and agendas; promote a broad sense of participation in government; satisfy our symbolic commitment to the notion of democracy, than we must also agree that we are facing a crisis.

So underlying both concepts is the assumption that citizens are increasingly reluctant to engage in any form of public action. If we agree that "it is the engagement of citizens that provides the building blocks of successful democracy" (Rensohn, 2000: 200), then the concern so soundly expressed by the authors like Putnam, Blumler or Rosen is hardly surprising.

## Citizens reconnect

The growth of the Internet and its rapid expansion led to extensive researches on possible (positive) implications it might have for democracy. The bulk of literature has been addressing interactivity as the key element to change the nature of citizens' participation in politics and public life in general. Proponents of "electronic democracy" (for instance, Coleman, 2004; Street, 2001) believe that Internet has the potential to restore deteriorating *public sphere*[2] providing a forum in which citizens debate issues of public concern, hold those in power accountable and improve the existing form of democracy or – in a more fundamental form – revive the ancient form of a direct democracy. Summarizing arguments in favour of electronic democracy, Street (2001: 217) argues that Internet may offer solutions for problems that have been obstructing political participation – "time, size, knowledge and access". Internet has overcome boundaries of time and space and it is no longer necessary for citizens to be physically present to contribute to discussion. Limited political knowledge of ordinary citizens and unequal distribution of resources, which has been hampering their capacity to enrol in the process of deliberation may no longer be a problem (ibid.: 217).

Curran refers to Negroponte (1996, in Curran, 2000: 137) who thinks of cyberspace as generating a new world order based on international communication and popular empowerment. Keane (2000: 67) suggests that 'Internet stimulates the growth of macro public spheres' since one segment of the world population uses Internet to 'generate controversies' (ibid: 67) about matters of common concern with other members of the virtual community. It is the forum for discussion or interaction between the members of special interest groups, *ad hoc* pressure groups or cyber protesters. Websites provide infrastructure for deliberation, which may end up in real actions. In that, sense, Internet opens solutions for development of the international civil society. All these arguments basically lead to one conclusion: reinvent community in cyberspace and political participation will follow (Chadwick, 2006: 26)

In short, arguments advocating the role of Internet in reconnecting fellow citizens and invigorating civic engagement are two-folded: first, Internet is seen to have the potential to engage people into public discussion about matters of common concern thus bringing politics back to the people and restoring public sphere; second, Internet is believed to have the capacity to restore broken social ties. In Chadwick's words it emerges as "a medication for the perceived ills of modern society: isolation, fragmentation, competitive individualism, the erosion

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[2] *Public sphere* is in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1974; 1989) conceived as a neutral social space for critical debate among private persons who gather to discuss matters of common concern in a free, rational and in principle disinterested way. Criticized as a working model, the concept of the public sphere triggered many controversies. However, it remains widely praised as a normative ideal, especially by the advocates of participatory democracy.

of local identities, the decline of traditional religious and family structures, and the downplaying of emotional forms of attachment and communication" (ibid: 26).

## The criticism

These enthusiastic conceptions of the Internet face several problems. "Perhaps the biggest one", argues Chadwick (ibid: 26), "is that life online exhibits many of the social pathologies communitarians wish to transcend". It has been argued that the ties that bind members of virtual community are not as strong as the old ties of family, locality, religion, or even political structures like local party and lobby group associations. The Internet, in this view, takes the impersonality of modern society to a new level, substituting a diluted form of community and social capital for the real things (Doheny-Farina, 1996, in Chadwick, 2006: 27). The argument basically comes down to Putnam (1994, 1995): the only functional community is the one based on a face-to-face communication; the more we connect with other people on a face-to-face basis, the more we trust them. Besides, face-to-face interaction usually imposes the well-known demands of basic civility. Chadwick (2006: 27) argues that "removal of such discipline from the online environment makes it much easier to express all manner of other prejudices flourish online, where individuals can hide behind the cloak of anonymity or pseudonym, both widely accepted practises in cyberspace". Face to face connections remain important. Failing to focus on human contacts in favour of technology may mean diverting precious resources from other areas (Carlsson, 1995; Danitz and Strobel, 1999, in Wall 2007:264).

The potential of the Internet to create free public spheres of political deliberation – a kind of a "civic commons" in cyberspace – celebrated by many (for instance, Blumler and Coleman, 2001) has simultaneously been criticized for the poor quality of interaction between individuals, as well as their tendency to produce a plurality of deeply segmented political associations. "Democracy involves deliberation and dialogue in the formation of collective goals, rather than the aggregation of individual preferences" argues Street (2001: 219). And Internet is all about registering *individual* preferences. This concern has been probably best articulated in Berry Wellman's (2003, in Chadwick, 2006:27) conception of the Internet as a "hybrid form of networked individualism".

Besides classical digital-divide objection, the bulk of literature addressing the civic potential of the Internet has been concerned with problem of power distribution. Mc Chesney (1999, in Chadwick, 2006) argues that the patterns of Internet control suggest that the dominance by a handful of companies over much of the world's communication system is merely replicated on the Internet. Communication on the Internet only reinforces set balance of power and reliance on the Internet may mean privileging certain groups to the exclusion of others. Curran (2000: 137) similarly argues that the fastest-growing branch of

the Internet is e-commerce which only reveals that relations of power shape new technologies and not the other way around.

Although scepticism expressed in these accounts may be justified, it doesn't entirely annul the hypothesis that Internet may provide a way around the practical problems posed by modern democracies, at least to a certain degree. In the next chapter we support this assumption by sketching two online initiatives which mobilised "real life" civic action.

## See You Offline

Chadwick (2006: 115) differentiates between three types of e-mobilisation: the first type encompasses traditional groups who went online to argument their offline strategies; in the second type e-mobilization takes a transnational form; and in the third type, groups' and movements' online activities sometimes take a form of direct action.

In this chapter we briefly present two online initiatives which both fall into Chadwick's third category. MoveOn and Meetup both started as a form of online activism and soon after transformed into civic mobilisation movements which continued to love in both virtual and physical worlds. For the reasons of space we won't examine specific features of these movements. Instead, we'll treat both examples as illustrations to support the arguments we have laid so far.

### Move on

MoveOn.org Civic Action was started by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who launched the initiative out of deep frustration with the partisan warfare in Washington D.C. and the endless attention media were devoting to Clinton-Lewinski tittle-tattle which almost led to Clinton's impeachment. In 1998 they first launched an online petition (at a total cost of $89) to "Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation." Within days they had hundreds of thousands of individuals signed up.

In about a month time, the number of volunteers supporting the initiative mounted to 2000 while by the end of the year the number of petitioners reached 4.150,000 (Clausing, 1999 in Chadwick 2006: 122). Later in 1998 the founders launched MoveOn.org Political Action "so that like-minded, concerned citizens could influence the outcome of congressional elections, and in turn, the balance of power in Washington".[3] The movement focused on combining Internet fundraising, online mobilisation and "real life" activities to support Democratic candidates, often with stunning results. For instance, upon the announcement of its support for Kerry, MoveOn.org sent out e-mails to its 2.1 million supporters asking for donations. Simultaneously, MoveOn actions took place in the "real" world. For instance, mass bake sale (known as the "Bake Back the White

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[3] http://www.moveon.org/about.html

House") saw half a million Americans raise over $750 000 on a single Saturday in May 2004 (Chadwick 2006:123). Besides canvassing and fund-rising, some of their most prominent "real life" actions include a massive visit to the opening of Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 (which was preceded by an online pledge launched and circulated by 100 000 members) and series of concerts called "Vote for Change Tour" which brought together some of the world famous rock starts such as Bruce Springsteen or Dixie Chicks.[4]

The "original" MoveOn initiative, MoveOn.org Civic Action, uses the same pattern. For, instance in 2002 and 2003 it launched online campaign to stop the war in Iraq which were later translated into "real life" demonstrations, such as a huge marches in hundreds of cities in February 2003 (Hickey, 2004; Kahn and Kellner 2004, in Chadwick 2006:123).

Thus, all MoveOn.org activities basically seek to combine online mobilisation campaigns with the "real life" action. It is hardly surprising that scholars have been facing difficulties trying to classify it into any of the "traditional" organisation categories. Chadwick (2006:124) for instance calls it a "hybrid institution" because it doesn't follow any known interest group organisation pattern; it is neither a social movement nor a progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Besides, it employs only a small number of people: until 2003 it had only four officially registered employees (Von Drehle, 2003 in Chadwick 2006:123). It is interesting that just until recently, some authors insisted on a difference between interest groups, which deliberately work within established political institutions and social movements which mobilize for collective action remote from policy elites. Yet, the utility of this distinction has declined (Chadwick 2006:115-116) in terms of groups' and movements' goals, constituencies of support, tactics and policy impact.

The founders of the organization call themselves "a service". They argue they provide "a way for busy but concerned citizens to find their political voice in a system dominated by big money and big media.""[5] Their main goal is to bring real people back into democratic process, engaging them either into some sort of political or civic action which will eventually affects the decision making process or the course of the country politics.

**Meetup**
Contrary to MoveOn which has a clear civic and political mission, Meetup's main concern is to revive local community life in the USA. It is a non-partisan, private initiative started in 2002 by Scott Heiferman who read Putnam's "Bowling Alone," and vowed to use technology to revive heydays of American community. The main goal of the Meetup.com is to match people who share

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[4] http://www.moveon.org/about.html

[5] http://www.moveon.org/about.html

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same "interest or cause, and form lasting, influential, local community groups that regularly meet face-to-face".[6] So the underlying idea of the site is to encourage people to go online in order to *meet* offline. Heiferman says that Meetup is all "about offline"[7].

The founder believes that people spend too much time staring in their television and computer screens so his initiative was set to encourage face-to-face interaction based on shared interests and causes. Heiferman believes that people are actually not interested in creating online contents but in solving real life problems. In this context, Internet provides just a successful vehicle.

Meetings are being organized in bars, parks, bowling places, restaurants, even living rooms. The project has transcendent the borders of America and today is present in 55 countries of the world[8].

Their programmatic *Bill of Rights*[9] stipulates The Right to Meet, The Right to Privacy, The Right to Not Get Annoying Ads, The Right to Meet About Almost Anything, The Right to Choose Where to Meet.

The site is backed by investors such as eBay, Omidyar Network, Draper Fisher Jurvetson, Esther Dyson, Allen & Company, and Senator Bill Bradley.[10]

## Conclusion

Departing from the concept of the *new collective identity* and growing concern about disengaged citizenry, soundly expressed in the accounts of social capitalists and the proponents of the *crisis of public communication* thesis, this paper developed two assumptions. First, we argued that online interactions in virtual communities have the potential to create group identity hence providing a source of content that has the capacity to transform *virtual* into *physical* communities. Second, we assumed that these virtually created and physical consumed communities have the capacity to induce public action and positively contribute to civic engagement.

Internet's biggest asset is interactivity which enables it to engage its audiences into *mutual communication,* which is a prerequisite for construction of group identities. This potential is recognized by many as a possible remedy to the perceived ills of contemporary democracies: growing social fragmentation, dissolution of traditional communities and public alienation from politics which all are all mirrored increasingly disengaged citizenry.

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[6] http://www.meetup.com/

[7] Newsweek, May 29, 2006

[8] http://www.meetup.com/about/ (20/08/2007)

[9] http://www.meetup.com/about/ (20/08/2007)

[10] http://press.meetup.com/pdfs/onesheet.pdf (18/08/2007)

Despite loudly expressed scepticism, there are more and more initiatives which prove Internet's potential to reengage citizens into public life. To illustrate our case we have briefly presented two initiatives: MoveOn and Meetup. Both initiatives have clearly demonstrated capacity to a) provide a platform to elaborate the cause people can identify with; b) build group cohesion strong enough to encourage c) "real action". For the reason of space, we had to restrict ourselves to basic facts. Yet, a fruitful avenue of future research would be to closely examine the nature and the dynamics of these virtually created and physically consumed communities (and their respective collective identities) and compare them to traditional "real life" groups and communities. This might help isolate their unique propositions which may prove enriching in terms of civic engagement and democratic ideals.

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