

## **Sense of Community and Political Mobilization in Virtual Communities: *The Role of Dispositional and Situational Variables***

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the psychological processes that connect virtual communities to political behavior. Drawing on previous findings in political psychology, I argue that the psychological sense of community may be an important mechanism that dictates people's behavioral responses toward incoming information or mobilization pressure in the online environment. I then discuss the role of different *dispositional* and *situational* variables in: a) contributing to the formation of sense of community in the virtual world, and b) serving as potential moderators to influence the strength of virtual sense of community and its subsequent impact on individuals' political behavior. Finally, I consider the methodological approaches that may be used as well as the theoretical implications for future research in this area.

**Keywords:** Virtual community, Sense of community, Political participation

### **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid diffusion of information communication technologies (ICTs) during the last decade has brought significant changes to the political landscape. Increasingly, people rely on the Web to find out political information and to engage in political activities. According to a recent survey, a record number of 26 million Americans used the Internet to gather news about politics and the 2006 mid-term elections. This number represents a five million increase from 2004 and is nearly two-and-a-half times larger than the 2002 figure (Pew Internet, 2006). In response to the Internet's growing political significance, a steady stream of research has emerged in recent years (cf. Kurland & Egan, 1996; Agre, 2002) to explore the different ways that the Internet might influence political participation – one of which is through the formation of virtual communities.

In the popular domain, "virtual community" is a term that can be used loosely to describe a variety of social groups interacting on the Internet, ranging from Usenet, multi-user domains (MUDs), online forums, blogs, or a variety of social networking sites. Following the success story of the Howard Dean campaign, which managed to assemble a large number of "Deaniacs" through the use of blogs and networking sites such as Meetup.com, a number of scholars (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2006; Davis, 2005) have examined the political meanings of virtual communities. Yet, while these studies provide us with empirical evidence on the political implication of these online groups, they are often conducted in a piecemeal, case-by-case fashion.

Consequently, our knowledge of virtual communities remains limited to the technicalities and the contextual factors surrounding these individual cases.

As Bargh (2002) had rightfully noted, the ongoing debate between scholars who celebrate the Internet's transformative potential and those who embrace the more pessimistic social-determinism point of view can turn into dangerous self-fulfilling prophecies that do not necessarily help to advance our theoretical understanding of the Internet. A more fruitful approach may be one that moves away from the dichotomous discourse and arrive at a middle ground that allows us to tease out the conditions in which virtual communities *may* or *may not* influence political action. As such, the purpose of this research is to examine the psychological processes that connect individuals to various virtual groups, and from these virtual communities to different political behaviors online and offline.

In this essay, I first review the changing conception of community and argue that the psychological "sense of community" will be an important mechanism that drives people's social behaviors in today's technological environment. Drawing on literatures from social psychology and political science, I then discuss the role of different dispositional and situational variables that may contribute to the *formation* of sense of community, or to moderate the *effect* of this sense of community on political behavior. The broader research questions for this paper are therefore as follows:

1. Where does sense of community come from?
2. What consequences might this sense of community have on political behavior, both online and offline?

Finally, I consider the theoretical implications and methodological challenges and outline an agenda for future research in the area of virtual community.

## **THE CHANGING CONCEPTION OF COMMUNITY:**

### *From Pastoral Village to Metropolis*

While the existence of a community is typically defined by the types of social ties formed by its members (e.g., family or work) and by the physical boundaries that it occupies (e.g., neighborhoods or towns), the idea of community can be traced back ancient social and political thoughts, ranging from the five fundamental relationships in Confucianism to Plato's ideal republic. More recently during the Enlightenment period, philosophers such as Hobbes (1668), Locke (1689), and Rousseau (1762) have written extensively about the ways in which individuals enter the abstract covenant of community (or society) and its implications for freedom and democratic governance. These philosophical conceptions not only signify the sociological nature of community, that is, members are socially bounded together by common interests, but

also carried a normative claim that asserts community life, particularly a cohesive and interconnected one, as essential to the healthy functioning of human civilization.

Early studies of community in sociology and anthropology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have reflected such normative concern in the face of rapid social change. For example, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) described two kinds of social life: *Gemeinschaft* (community) that is simple, intimate and familial, and *Gesellschaft* (society) that is sustained by instrumental goals of self interests and competitiveness. As the Industry Revolution began to transform cities across Europe, Tönnies feared that the effect of rapid urbanization would lead to the loss of *Gemeinschaft* (Bruhn, 2004).

In Simmel's (1905) classic work, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, he also observed that the effects of urbanization and capitalist economy may force individuals to become more rational, calculating, and in some instances, develop antisocial behaviors. In the words of Simmel, "punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence...these traits must also color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without" (1964 [1905]: 414). As industrialization spread to the United States, American sociologist Louis Wirth also noted that the division of labor and the new economic structure has attenuated communal ties. Relationships in the city are "impersonal, transitory and segmental" (Wirth, 1938: 12). As a result, urbanites are only bounded by weak and narrow "secondary" affiliations and that their kind of densely knit and interdependent community life has been "lost."

#### *The Rise of Information Society and Virtual Community*

The "lost" argument persisted throughout much of the early sociological studies of communities (cf. Nisbet, 1969; Gusfield, 1975; Wellman, 1979) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as scholars were concerned with the impact of urbanization on traditional community life. The dominant conceptualization of community during this time was one that is intimate, fixed, stable, and most importantly, geographically bound. However, as the hierarchical and class-based power structures of industrial society began to give way to service and information-based global economy, the concept of community was also transformed. With innovations in transportation and communication technologies re-organizing commercial and social activities into hubs and peripherals across physical time and space, individuals enjoy a greater geographic and social mobility as well as higher degrees of freedom to pursue personal interests and goals. As such, many scholars (e.g., Breiger, 1974; Walker, 1977) have argued that in this socio-economic environment, social

ties tend to form "sparsely knit, spatially dispersed, ramifying structures instead of being bound up within a single densely knit solidarity" (Wellman, 1979: 1207).

The emergence of computer networks, and more recently the Internet, has led scholars to pronounce the arrival of "information society" or "network society" (e.g., Steinfield & Salvaggio, 1989; Webster, 1995) that pushes the process of social change and globalization to a different level. As Van Dijk (1999) observed, the environment that we experience today is one "in which social and media networks are shaping its prime mode of organization and most important structures" (p. 248). Whether or not and the extent to which this new technological environment may re-shape community life remains an issue of contention. For example, in his treatise on the information society, Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) pointed out that while these information networks may connect individuals and organizations at the global scale, "people, in the multiple space of places, made of locales increasingly segregated and disconnected from each other" (1996: 476). Similarly, psychological studies have also provided evidence that increasing computer and Internet usage is associated with greater loneliness, depression, and the decline of family and community ties (Kraut, 1998). Nevertheless, as social media (e.g., social networking Web sites and software applications) gains popularity, studies have also indicated that in many instances, individuals, organizations, and communities are utilizing these technologies as ways to stay in touch with one another, and thus, strengthening their social ties in ways that are not possible before. For example, scholars have concluded that the interpersonal interactions that occur in cyberspace are authentic, and online social groups can be treated just as *real* communities (e.g., Turkle, 1997; Jones, 1997; Baym, 1995, 1997). While it is too early to suggest conclusively that the Internet and other digital communication technologies could strengthen community life, longitudinal data seems to indicate that the erosion hypothesis that dominated the 1990s may not be true. As Benkler (2006) pointed out, we are seeing two long term effects of the Internet on social ties. First is the "thickening of pre-existing relations with friends, family, and neighbors, particularly with those who were not easily reachable in the pre-Internet-mediated environment" (p. 357). In addition, the decentralized nature of the network enables the loosening of existing social hierarchy and the mobility of social relations, creating what Benkler characterized as the "looser and more fluid, but still meaningful social networks" (p. 357).

#### *Towards Networked Individualism*

This shift from the geographically-bounded and stable social relationships to a more flexible one that crosses through different boundaries has resulted in what sociologist Barry Wellman called "networked individuals." Rather than replacing face-to-face interpersonal relationships, digital technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet are being integrated into the day-to-day context and existing patterns of

social life (Koku, Nazer, & Wellman, 2001). According to Wellman (2003), "communities and societies have been changing towards networked societies where boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more recursive." With networked individuals serving as the basis of networked society through their computers or portable communication devices, the basic premise of social ties has changed from "linking people-in-places to linking people at any place" (Wellman, 2003). In other words, it is no longer the case that interpersonal relationships are dominated by locally embedded, given, physical, and unmediated social interactions. The immediate and ubiquitous nature of computer-mediated-communications have instead enabled people to participate and cycle through different social groups based on their interests, motivations, purposes and in different frequencies, capacities, and modes. The World Wide Web's ability deliver narrowly defined, personalized content at the global scale has also created new possibilities for how communities can be experienced.

Consequently, it is *the person*, rather than changes associated with the physical environment (e.g., urbanization, migration, economic development), that becomes the new focus of the community research. Questions that address *why* and *how* individuals engage in social interactions with friends, families, colleagues, or even strangers on the Internet, should be explored to shed lights on how physical and virtual communities may be formed and reformed in the information age. To that end, a psychological approach that focuses on the individual's perception and connection towards any given group would provide a deeper and richer understanding. This symbolic interpretation of community is similar to Benedict Anderson's (1991) characterization of an *imagined community*, in that face-to-face interaction and physical boundaries are not the prerequisites for the sense of togetherness. Rather, as Anderson had noted, "in the minds of each member lives the image of their communion" (p. 6), community is given meaning by its participants, and not necessarily bound by structure or location.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

If we accept the idea that community can be defined at such abstract and symbolic level, then the mechanism that holds individuals together in a community (physical or virtual) is the psychological sense of community. The notion of sense of community was originally proposed by Sarason (1974) as "the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (p. 157). However, the concept can be traced back to John Dewey, who suggested that we can only realize and appreciate our sense of humanity by

communicating with others through language and participating in shared experiences. As Dewey put it, "to learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values" (1927: 154).

In its early conception, social psychologists used sense of community as a construct to describe the basis of group cohesiveness, identity formation and communicative behavior at the community or neighborhood levels of social organization. For example, Ahlbrant and Cunningham (1979) found that those who were most satisfied with their neighborhoods enjoyed a stronger bond of social fabrics and interpersonal relationships, thereby increasing their commitment to the wellbeing of their communities. Along the same vein, Bachrach and Zautra (1985), in their study of coping response to a proposed hazardous waste facility, revealed that a stronger sense of community may lead to a "greater sense of purpose and perceived control" in dealing with an external threat. The factors that contribute to this sense of community as reflected in neighborhood attachment, satisfaction, and cohesiveness may include social bonding and behavior rooted-ness (Riger & Lavrakas, 1981), frequency and extent of residential roots and degree of social interaction with others in the nationhood (Riger, LeBailly & Gordon, 1981).

The results from these studies of urban neighborhoods demonstrate that the experience of sense of community does exist and that it can function as behavioral controls and predictors in day to day lives. However, as McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggested, it is not clear whether the elements used in these measures of sense of community contribute equally to an individual's experience or if some components are more important than others. Recognizing this problem, they proposed a framework to study sense of community that includes four fundamental elements: 1) *Membership*: the sense of belonging and emotional safety resulting from being part of a group community; 2) *Influence*: community cohesiveness and attractiveness depends on the community's influence over its members and the members' feelings of control and influence over the community; 3) *Integration and fulfillment of needs*: common needs, goals, beliefs, and values as the cohesive force that fulfills individual desires and binds the community together; and 4) *Shared emotional connection*: the bonds developed over time through positive interaction and shared history with other community members. The Sense of Community Index (SCI) that grew out of McMillan and Chavis's strand of research has been demonstrated as a robust instrument in measuring group cohesiveness across different geographical and economic sectors, and the concept itself has also proven to be a critical antecedents to participation in communal and civic activities or other types of pro-social behaviors (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Obst & White, 2004).

While much of the empirical evidence that supported the development of sense of community research has primarily come from studies of physical neighborhoods or communities, it does not mean that the framework cannot be applied to social interaction that takes place in cyberspace. As Omoto and Snyder (2002) pointed out, the important dimension of community are "fundamentally psychological in nature...there seems to be nothing inherent in them that requires that they be assessed with reference to a geographically bounded area such as one's housing block" (p.856). Early research in virtual community (e.g., Baym, 1995, 1997; Rheingold, 1993) had provided empirical evidence to support the idea that this virtual sense of community may exist. More recently, Blanchard and Markus (2002) studied newsgroup participants and noted that members create and maintain a sense of community through the social processes of exchanging support, creating identities, making identifications, and the production of trust. Similarly, Yoo, Suh, and Lee (2002) also observed that the sense of membership propels individuals to further participate in virtual communities. While the real implication of this virtual sense of community may still be inconclusive at this point, what seems clear from these studies is that the psychological processes of sense of community in cyberspace may operate in similar fashion to those in the non-virtual environment and, along with the unique characteristics associated with the Internet, can influence behaviors of an individual and perhaps also at the group level.

## **WHERE DOES IT COME FROM? FORMATION OF SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

### *Sense of Self*

So far in this essay, I have examined the changing conception of community and discussed the psychological mechanism of sense of community that can serve as an essential element in the way communities are formed and experienced, both online and offline. A key question that has yet to be addressed is where does this sense of community come from? Although McMillan and Chavis' (1986) conceptualization on membership, influence, integration/fulfillment of needs, and share emotional connection are useful in that it offers a framework to measure and evaluate sense of community, it does not provide insights on *why* individuals may elect to participate in these communities in the first place. To address this question, we need to explore some of the more fundamental dimensions within an individual's psyche, one of which is a person's sense of self.

The question of "who am I" is one that is important to an individual's function in his or her day-to-day life, and is also one that has interested many psychologists. Since William James' (1890) observation that a person's sense of self includes several different aspects such as the material, the social and the spiritual, scholars have explored the different components that make up the concept of self. For example, Gordon

(1968) developed a detailed typology that breaks down the self concept into a person's ascribed characteristics (e.g., sex and age); roles and membership (e.g., kinship, occupation, social status); abstract identifications (e.g., membership in an abstract category like human, voter, or ideological ones like Christian, Marxist); interests and activities (e.g., likes, tastes); and material references (e.g., possessions and resources, physical image). Research in this area has established that people see themselves as multifaceted and complex (Sande, Goethals & Radloff, 1998; Campbell et al, 1996), and the different components are the lens through which people perceive their worlds and organize their behavior (Swann, 2005). Since it is in the interests of the individual to have a stable self view (Secord & Backman, 1965), it can be expected that people will seek out behaviors (Berglas & Jones, 1978) or engage in cognitive processes (Newman, Duff & Baumeister, 1997; Kulik, Sledge & Mahler, 1986) to maintain values related to their self concept.

In the context of virtual communities, it is reasonable to suggest that, since participation in online groups is entirely voluntary, it may be used by individuals as a platform to extend, maintain, or even experiment with different senses of self. For example, scholars have noted that individuals, particularly teenagers, are using online social groups as a means to develop their own self concepts, and in many instances, are "trying-out" new and different identities in cyberspace (e.g., Turkle, 1997; Talamo & Ligorio, 2001; Thiel Stern, 2007). As such, the feeling of belonging and the sense of community that people may experience through these online social interactions is shaped by individuals' existing views about themselves, which serve as not only the motivational factors behind people's decision to participate, but also as determinants to influence their behavior in the online environment.

### *Personality & Dispositions*

As sense of community is an end product resulting from the interaction between individuals, another factor that could influence the strength and quality of such sense of togetherness is one's personality traits and dispositions. It can be expected that the Big Five personality model, a common personality measure on dimensions of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (cf. McCrae & Costa, 1999), may explain individual behaviors and may subsequently play a role in the formation of psychological sense of community. For example, Lounsbury, Loveland, and Gibson (2003) reported that individuals who are low on neuroticism are more likely to experience the positive emotions associated with sense of community. Extraverted individuals tend to have more frequent interactions with other members and thereby forming wider and stronger personal connections. Further, levels of openness to new experience may determine the extent to which individuals embrace or internalize the values and beliefs



held by other members or by the community. Finally, individuals who are higher on agreeableness and conscientiousness would behave more cooperatively with other members and conforming to group norms in order to preserve a sense of cohesion and belonging for the community. What seems clear from these findings is that, similar to the case of face-to-face interaction, personality traits also leak into social interaction in virtual settings with a high degree of consistency. That is, extroverted individuals are more likely to seek out online interactions with others, become more involved in online communities, and so on (Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crawford, 2002).

In addition to the personality dimensions measured by the Big Five model, individuals may also differ in their sensitivity to the external environment around them. Snyder (1974) referred to this process in which people observe and control their self-presentation and expressive behavior to communicate or conceal certain emotional states in different social situations as "self-monitoring." High self-monitoring individuals are sensitive to situational cues and are motivated to adjust their expressive behavior to act appropriately, whereas low self-monitors are motivated to communicate their true emotional state, regardless of the influence of the environment. For example, authoritarianism - the tendency of an individual to exhibit submission, aggression and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1996) is an indication of a closed or suppressed internal state while being attentive and obedient to the external environment. The motivational factor associated with self-monitoring may have implications on social behavior in a community or group setting, regardless of whether such interaction takes place online or offline. It is reasonable to posit that high self-monitors would change their behaviors or opinions according to the situation and the individuals that they interact with, while low self-monitors would be more driven to express their values or beliefs and perhaps attempt to influence others, and uphold existing rules or tradition. Consequently, we may expect varying levels of sense of community to be formed and experienced along individuals' self-monitoring tendencies.

#### *Offline Life Events and the Online Medium*

As Kurt Lewin's (1943) equation suggested that behavior is a function of the person and his or her environment, we also cannot overlook the effect of environmental factors that might have on the formation of sense of community. For instance, prior studies in community psychology have found that conflicts and problems in areas such as work, school, home, marriage, and/or health may function as a significant situational factor that may either mobilize or deteriorate support for others or involvement in community life (e.g., Barrera, 1988; Wheaton, 1985; Garcia & Herrero, 2004). It is reasonable then to suggest that, in the context of virtual community, different *offline* life events may shape and even predict online behavior and formation of this virtual sense of community. For example, an individual who is experiencing stress or

trauma in these areas in his or her offline life may become motivated to seek out camaraderie and friendship from online groups that he or she may not previously identify with. As the author (2008) found in an ethnographic study of online memorial groups, feelings of belonging and refuge that people experience through online interaction may help participants of virtual community coping with traumatic events that occur in participants' offline lives. In fact, the desire to share their emotions and experiences with others who are also going through the process of mourning is what drives people to participate in these online groups. On the other hand, it should be noted that offline life events may also pull people away from actively participating in virtual communities to attend to their real world obligations, and thereby decreases the level of sense of community that an individual or other group members might experience.

Another type of environmental factor that could change the forms of social interaction is the particular technological characteristics that surround the online group. Broadly speaking, current technology allows two basic modes of online interaction: *real-time* communication platforms such as Internet chats and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) enable individuals to interact with one another instantaneously, while *asynchronous* communication platforms such as newsgroups, blogs, discussion forums, or social networking Web sites usually present a lagged or relayed communications situation for the users. Existing literature indicates that these two forms of online interactions induce different social rules and individual behaviors (e.g., Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Schwier & Balbar, 2002). As a result, it is reasonable to suggest that the nature of the online medium may also produce different levels of sense of community. For instance, Schwier and Balbar (2002) found that while asynchronous platforms such as bulletin board or discussion forum offer similar levels of convenience and enrichment as Internet chat sessions, Internet chat gives users a sense of urgency and immediacy that ultimately creates a more dynamic environment and the added experience of togetherness. Based on these research findings, it can be argued that the technological characteristics that support the functions and operations of the online group may play a role in shaping participant's formation of sense of community.

#### *Virtual Sense of Community: The Online/Offline Intermix*

The theoretical and empirical evidence presented in this section suggest that sense of community stems from a variety of sources such as our views of self, personality traits or dispositions, and can be further influenced by environmental factors like life events or the nature of the platform. When thinking about sense of community in the virtual world, it is important to recognize that, while cyberspace may indeed transcend physical boundaries of time and space to allow people from diverse social or cultural backgrounds to converge, its effect on individual and community must be contextualized in terms of the

more permanent and stable characteristics of the person or the external environment. As we have seen from current research, there is no denying that the Internet has afforded new possibilities of social interaction. However, to treat the Internet as if it exists in a void will be a dangerous mistake. Therefore, it is important for future research to explore the ways in which individuals may be able to navigate in and juxtapose between both worlds – how one's online interaction translate into his/her offline behavior, and vice versa. To that end, I will examine the consequences of the virtual sense of community on political mobilization, one that has tremendous implication in the real life setting.

### **CONSEQUENCES: SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION**

#### *Group Identity and Motivated Reasoning*

As discussed earlier, a person's self concept is often used as a guiding framework or as a lens through which he or she sees the world. In other words, almost all facets of human social behavior are such as motivation, attitudes, beliefs, and intentions can be traced back to an individual's self views. When it comes to political behavior at an aggregate or community level, the notion of group identity, a significant part of an individual's social identity (Tajfel, 1978), plays an important role in affecting how we think and behave. As Turner et al. (1987) suggested, the formation of social identity involves a symbolic interaction process that creates "a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person" (p. 50). As a result, one would incorporate others' actions, reactions, feelings, and behaviors into his/her senses of self and treat them as his/her own *because* they all belong to the same social group or category.

With regards to the implication of this group identification on politics, Conover (1988) argued that, "group identification and consciousness can help structure political thinking so that individuals are more likely to react to their own groups with political sympathy" (p.74). Whether such group identification can be attributed to one's fixed demographic attributes such as race or gender (e.g., Yzerbyt, Rocher & Schadron, 1997) and or the fluid, subjective interpretation of values and beliefs (e.g., Hamilton, Sherman & Lickel, 1998), prior studies have established that group identification play a role in the formation of political beliefs and values (e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1981), inter-group conflict and tolerance (e.g., Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse & Wood, 1995), candidate evaluation and political thinking (e.g., McCann, 1997; Goren, 2005).

Cognitively speaking, the common theoretical assumption that follows this strand of research is that people have stored information and emotional reactions to different social groups or identities, and that they are purposive in their thinking and behavior toward them (Conover, 1988). This is also consistent with social-

psychological evidence that humans possess two distinct memory and cognitive systems (e.g., Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Deutsch & Strack, 2006) and that the two mental processes interact to produce and motivate people to engage in different depth of information search (Martin, Hewstone & Martin, 2007). As a result, the kind of attitudes and beliefs that we derive from our group membership play a significant role in determining the selection, perception, evaluation, and retention of information (Biek, Wood, & Chaiken, 1996; Lodge & Taber, 2000; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

This phenomenon has often been labeled as “motivated reasoning,” that is, people rely on a somewhat biased set of cognitive processes to arrive at the conclusion that they want to arrive (Kunda, 1990), and suggests that people often engage in “selective exposure” when making political decisions. For example, Donsbach (1991) found that potential voters favor congruent information (e.g., positive news coverage about their preferred candidate or negative news coverage about the opponents) over incongruent information. Likewise, Taber and Lodge (2006) found that it takes more time for people to evaluate incongruent than congruent information because people invest more cognitive resources to critically examine such counter-attitudinal information.

It is not difficult to see how sense of community may influence the strength and direction of these cognitive processes, as an integral part of the feelings of group identities is a strong sense of community and togetherness. For example, one could expect a strong political partisan who feel passionate about particular issues or candidates to engage in motivated reasoning, respond to mobilization calls, or engage in lobbying activities more so than weak partisans or those who are politically indifferent. With virtual communities, it is important to note that the basis for group identification goes beyond the ascribed designations of age, race, or gender to include many other achieved identities such as interests, values, and ideologies. However, as the Internet allows individuals to take on more identities or form virtual groups with other like-minded people, it also increases the likelihood of conflict when competing interests arise from multiple group affiliations (e.g., between two online groups, or between one’s online identification and his/her offline identification). In the section below, I will further explore how different levels of sense of community can interact with mobilization pressures from incompatible group interests/identities to result in different behaviors.

#### *Congruent vs. Cross-Cutting Pressures*

In our day-to-day lives, we are often faced with requests and pressures from our multiple group affiliations to act or think in certain ways. Some of these pressures may be *congruent* with our values, beliefs or identifications, and we are happy to comply with any requests in those circumstances. However, there are

also times when these mobilization pressures present a *cross-cutting* situation, where the different requests are essentially in conflict with one another. How do people cope with these pressures arising from competing and inconsistent considerations has been of great interest to political scientists. For example, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) noted that, "whatever the source of the conflicting pressures, whether from social status or class identification, from voting traditions or the attitudes of associates, the consistent result was to delay the voter's final decision" (p. 60). Likewise, Campell, Converse, Miller & Stokes (1960) suggested that "the person who experiences some degree of conflict tends to cast his vote for President with substantially less enthusiasm and he is somewhat less likely to vote at all than is the person whose partisan feelings are entirely consistent" (p. 83). According to Mutz (2002), individuals who are faced with cross-cutting pressure from multiple group affiliations often experience two psychological mechanisms in their decision making process: *ambivalence* and *social accountability*. When individuals are presented with a "no-win" situation in which one side will inevitably be alienated by any decision (Green, Visser & Tetlock, 2000), the combination of ambivalence and social accountability may cause a great deal of frustration and discomfort.

In the context virtual communities, it is reasonable to suggest that if cross-pressure arises from the competing interests between two online groups that an individual shares strong psychological connections with, the ability to remain anonymous in the cyberspace should provide a sense of security that, analogous to the privacy of a voting booth, allows him or her to act against the interest of one group without the fear of retribution from its group members. The same can be said for cross-pressure situations derived from conflicting interests between an individual's strong identification with a particular online group and his or her offline identities. In other words, the anonymity of cyberspace reduces the sense of accountability and creates a channel for individuals to cope with the feeling of ambivalence that stems from the cross-cutting mobilization pressures from different groups that they share strong sense of community with. On the other hand, if such mobilization pressure from online groups is one that is congruent with an individual's existing beliefs and values, strong sense of community should predict greater level of mobilization and behavioral intention.

### **INTERNET AND POLITICS: TOWARDS A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING**

As the Internet quickly gains popularity and political significance, scholarly research must also move beyond basic descriptive studies to examine the different kinds of social interaction and human relationships formed in these online meeting places. To that end, traditional personality and social psychology theories offer some fundamental frameworks that could help advance our understanding of individual behaviors in

cyberspace. In this essay, I have briefly discussed how different dispositional and situational variables may influence: a) the formation of sense of community in the virtual world; and b) the consequences that sense of community may have on political thinking and mobilization. Cyberspace is a rich field where important issues concerning human behaviors can be explored, and the theoretical and empirical evidence presented here only offer a glimpse of what may be possible. As many of these examples illustrates, the potential effect of the Internet and other digital communication technologies on social interaction and community life is intrinsically connected with the existing characteristics of the individual as well as the broader social, economic, and political structure. Therefore, it is imperative that we should be cautious about the deterministic undertone that is often associated with new technological innovations, whether it is positive or negative. As we have seen from the early European and American sociologists' concern over the effect of urbanization and industrialization on community life, to mass media research's worry about the effect of television on social capital, and to the recent debate on the utopian and dystopian impact of the Internet, the truth about the implication of these technological developments almost always lie somewhere in between either extremes. As individuals and communities are inherently grounded by the environments they reside in, it is important that scholars should never lose sight of the basic human psyche, the larger cultural milieu, and most certainly, the history that holds a given group or community together.

A more systematic approach to address the question of virtual community in the Internet age should be mindful of the ways that individuals navigate between the online/offline worlds and connect the study of the "virtual" with the study of the "physical" as well. To that end, the five ecological levels of analysis as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) may offer a useful guideline. For example:

- 1) *Individuals*: Future research can explore on how the Internet and other digital communication technologies have altered the ways in which people think about themselves and interpersonal relationships. For instance, focusing on the motivations behind online social behavior, we may be able to obtain greater insights on how people develop, change, or maintain their self views, identities and ideologies through these online interactions, which may shape their offline behavior or influence future interaction in cyberspace.
  
- 2) *Microsystems*: Future research can explore the role of the Internet and other digital communication technologies in day-to-day functions of intimate social groups such as families. The ways in which these technologies may be used to maintain and, in some instances, strengthen social ties within these groups will shed lights on the larger question of whether "virtual" community can replace the face-to-face interaction that once thought to be integral to any community life.

- 3) *Organizations*: Future research can explore the role of the Internet and other digital communication technologies in larger organizations, such as schools, businesses or volunteer groups, where individuals belong. Again, the extent to which these technologies may be used to create a sense of community and togetherness to facilitate organizational goals, whether online or offline, will be of interests to community scholars.
- 4) *Localities*: Future research can examine the impact of Internet and other digital communication technologies on geographic localities, such as neighborhoods, rural versus urban cities, or states. To what extent do these technologies change the way these larger communities handle public issues that concerns its members? And in what ways may (or may not) these technologies foster a stronger sense of community either virtually or physically? These are also questions worthy of further examination.
- 5) *Macrosystems*: Finally, future research can explore the impact of Internet and other digital communication technologies on society at large in terms of governance, politics, economic structure, and culture, all of which may, in turn, shape the cognitive structures of an individual as well as the way technologies are used and developed in society.

A thorough examination of these five levels of analysis will yield a greater understanding of the impact of the Internet on existing communities as well as the emerging phenomenon of virtual community. While the opportunities presented in these areas of research may be tremendous, the difficulty, however, lies in the choices of methods and measurement. Whereas quantitative or experimental approach may lend us insights into the psychological and cognitive processes in the computer-mediated communication situation, the motivation and the experiences that people may derive from these behaviors are perhaps better assessed using qualitative methods. At the macro level, the change in community life (or the structure of community) is gradual and may thus require longer periods of tracking and observation.

As such, the challenge for future research is to generate innovative methods that combine the advantages of different methodologies to address these issues. To that end, Wellman's (2003) "networked individualism" may prove to be a useful theoretical framework. By conceptualizing communities, physical or virtual, as series of networks shaped by the larger socio-economic environment, which can also be seen as larger networks (e.g., the network society) of national and global scale, we can contextualize individual differences in the broader social, historical, and cultural environment. Finally, with the multifacetedness of the Internet, studies that cross different disciplinary boundaries may help us better understand the complex web of relationships, cultures, and identities that are formed and reformed in cyberspace.

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