

Scientists release report on the impact of online communities

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The Governance Lab (The GovLab) at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering released a report, "The Power of Virtual Communities," which examines the role online groups play in creating opportunities for

people to build new kinds of meaningful communities they often could not form in real space.

This first-of-its-kind research was built on interviews with 50 Facebook community leaders in 17 countries, 26 global experts from academia and industry, unique access to Facebook's underlying research and an original global survey conducted by YouGov of 15,000 people in 15 countries who are currently members of online and in-person communities, which found that in 11 of those countries the majority of people said that the most meaningful communities to which they belong are primarily online.

"Around the world, people who are otherwise voiceless in [physical space](#) are becoming powerful leaders of groups that confer a true sense of meaning and belonging for their members," said Beth Simone Noveck, director of The GovLab. "This brief report, which tells the stories of several of those leaders and how they govern global communities is, we hope, the beginning of greater and much needed study of [online groups](#) and their impact on social and political life."

Many of these Facebook groups cut across traditional social groupings and bring together people around a shared trait or interest:

- Female IN (FIN), created as a safe space for women in the Nigerian diaspora to discuss and seek support for problems associated with such challenges as relationship struggles, health issues, abuse, grief and loss. Female IN grew by word-of-mouth into a 1.8 million-person community with members in more than 100 countries.
- Surviving Hijab encourages its 920,000 female members to take up or continue wearing the Muslim head covering in the face of political and social criticism. Blind PenPals enables its 7,000 blind and visually impaired members to share stories and advice.

- Canterbury Residents Group acts as a public square in the British city of Canterbury and has 38,000 members, about the same size as the city's population.
- Subtle Asian Traits, which began as a modest initiative among nine young Australians of Chinese background to share funny memes about their Asian heritage, has expanded to a group of 1.82 million people who discuss and share the experience of growing up Asian in mostly majority-White societies.

The GovLab's report findings note that:

- Membership in online communities confers a strong sense of community, the lack of physical proximity notwithstanding.
- Online groups are a still fluid form of human organization that in many cases attract members and leaders who are marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit, and who use the platform to build new kinds of communities that would be difficult to form otherwise.
- Many of these groups have counter-cultural norms and are what political scientists might call "cross-cleavage" communities. These groups cut across traditional social groupings, and bring together people normally divided by geography around a shared trait or interest.
- The flexible affordances of online platforms have enabled new kinds of leaders to emerge in these groups with unique skills in moderating often divisive dialogues, sometimes among millions of members.
- Most groups are run as a labor of love; many leaders are neither trained nor paid and the rules that govern their internal operations are often uncoded and the hosting platform—in this case Facebook—holds significant power over their operations and future.
- These groups, some of which have huge memberships, remain

emergent and largely unrecognized: they are outside traditional power structures, institutions and forms of governance.

- More research is needed to understand whether and how these groups will operate as genuine communities over the long term, especially given the tensions that derive from conducting public life on a private platform such as Facebook, and how such groups and their leaders can be supported to ensure they provide maximum voice, participation and benefit to their members

Further, results from the YouGov survey and the interviews with group leaders indicated that the three most essential traits and behaviors for leaders to exhibit were welcoming differences of opinions, being visible and communicating well, and acting ethically at all times.

This report, published in six languages, further shines a light on the role leaders have and why it is important to further support them in running their community.

More information: The Power of Virtual Communities: virtual-communities.thegovlab.org/

Provided by NYU Tandon School of Engineering

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