

‘Nowhere I Could Talk Like That’

Togetherness and identity on online forums

‘Nergens kon ik praten zoals hier’

Samenzijn en identiteit op internetfora

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de
Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
op gezag van de
rector magnificus

Prof.dr. H.G. Schmidt

en volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties.

De openbare verdediging zal plaatsvinden op
donderdag 2 december 2010 om 13:30 uur

door

Willem de Koster
geboren te Delft



Promotiecommissie

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Togetherhness and Identity on Online Forums

Willem de Koster

Cover design: David Scheper

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Printed in the Netherlands

Printed on FSC paper

ISBN 978-90-9025836-2

NUR 757

For my beloved grandfather Henk de Koster



Acknowledgments

Thanks to various people, the past few years have been a wonderful time. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman have been the best supervisors one could wish for. They were the first to show me that sociological research is first and foremost a very amusing game, and they stimulated me to explore research areas beyond the focus of this dissertation. At the same time they were always willing – literally day and night – to provide critical, yet constructive, comments on my work. The numerous forms of support provided by my dear friend Jeroen van der Waal have been invaluable as well. His outstanding academic qualities are only paralleled by his good company, and I very much look forward to our collaboration in the years to come. I am also grateful to David Scheper for the design of the cover and to Miriam Miller and Dennis Timp for their sharp eye for textual errors in draft versions of this thesis. My respondents cannot be named here personally, but they should know that I greatly appreciate the many hours they have generously granted me – without their frank, in-depth accounts of their experiences, motives and understandings, this dissertation could not have been written.

Various colleagues have been very important to me, for they provided not only a splendid social atmosphere, but also a stimulating and intellectually open research environment. I feel proud and privileged to be part of a talented team that combines hard work with great pleasure. Peter Achterberg, whose humorous presence I highly appreciate, continues to be tremendously important because of his incredible skill in recognizing important sociological problems and transforming these into elegant research designs. I also owe thanks to Ineke Noomen, who has constantly been ready to critically reflect on all aspects of my research and whose thorough, no-nonsense approach makes collaboration on any task very pleasant. Peter Mascini deserves a word of thanks for his critical feedback – the value of his razor-sharp analytical mind can hardly be overestimated – as well as for his

companionship during occasional nights at the pub, all well worth the hangovers. Samira van Bohemen, Roy Kemmers, and Katerina Manevska have also made many contributions to an enjoyable research climate, and I am very happy that they will be around in the coming years. All the LOBOCOPs are highly appreciated as well, for noisy, yet fruitful, discussions of work in progress, and for cozy dinners at Lucas's unsurpassed restaurant *Hong Kong*.

The good times I have spent among my family and friends have invariably been highly important to me, but two people deserve special mention. This book is dedicated to my grandfather Henk de Koster, who has always been a great example to me. Although he never had the opportunity to enjoy a formal education himself, he has taught me the intrinsic value of academic development, and I am very grateful for that. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of Masja van Meeteren. She has read and commented on every single word of this thesis, but by far her most important contributions lie outside academia: she has been the best girlfriend imaginable. Masja, I consider myself extremely lucky to share my life with you, and I very much look forward to the birth of our new friend. I love you!

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Chapter 1

Opening the online community question

'Are virtual communities true communities?'

(Driskell and Lyon 2002)

'Togetherness comes in many kinds.'

(Bauman 1995: 44)

Introduction

Ever since the early days of the discipline, sociology has been characterized by a marked interest in community. Classical, modern and postmodern sociologists have all in their own ways contemplated and studied the decline and revival of various forms of community (see Day 2006 and Delanty 2003 for overviews). Quite recently, the advent of computer-mediated communication has brought about a new notion of community, that of the virtual community.¹ Whereas many scholars have been fascinated with this subject from the mid-1990s onwards, sociologists have rather surprisingly by and large left scholarship on virtual communities to the interdisciplinary field of research that might be termed 'Internet studies' (S. Jones 2006).

In Internet studies, a remarkably rich body of literature exists on the subject of virtual community. It has been a focal point of this field of research ever since Howard Rheingold published his frequently cited book *The Virtual Community* in 1993, and it continues to keep scholars occupied. Time and again it has been observed that virtual community is a central theme in Internet research (Silver 2000, 2006; Wilbur 1997: 5; Wittel 2001: 62) and that so-called Internet community

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studies ‘constituted one of the earliest and most dynamic fields of interest in the new field of Internet studies’ (Cavanagh 2009: 1). The overwhelming scholarly engagement with the subject is underlined by a quantitative study demonstrating that community is the central concern *par excellence* in Internet research (Rice 2005).

Even though the theme has been enthusiastically embraced in Internet studies, the scientific debate on virtual communities has run aground, as I will argue below. The present study, therefore, aims to inspire a new direction in this field, and to do so it adopts a sociological perspective. In this chapter I will present an overview of the online community debate, discuss its shortcomings, and suggest an alternative approach aimed at a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness.

The development of the online community question

Abstract contemplations: the nature of online groups

In popular discourse, the concept of virtual community has become diluted to the extent that it has lost all analytical value. This is, for instance, clearly observable in the self-labeling of various web shops; as Wellman (2001: 228; cf. Nip 2004: 413) observes ‘Internet marketers label as a “community” disconnected aggregations of random visitors to websites’. Whereas this is understandable from a commercial point of view, it horrifies many social scientists to see one of their key concepts stripped of its content. Unsurprisingly, they have not been willing to surrender the concept that easily (cf. Lister et al. 2009: 214; Wellman 2004: 125); seemingly triggered by the sloppy use of the community label in popular discourse a lively scholarly debate has developed.

When this debate was initiated, the focus was on abstract theoretical reflection. Instead of simply and uncritically labeling all online gatherings as communities, the validity of the online community label was posed as an open

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question. Stressing that 'there are many aggregations of people that do not qualify as communities' (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999: 242; cf. Herring 2008), scholars have contemplated whether the community label can be applied to online groups. They have aimed to determine 'to what degree [one] can say that the Internet facilitates "community"' (Foster 1997), discussed the 'fundamental problem (...) whether the current activities on the Internet can be considered as a "community" in the sociological sense' (Liu 1999) and written articles with titles like 'Are virtual communities true communities?' (Driskell and Lyon 2002).

The dominance of this debate in Internet research is underlined by the fact that it has been frequently observed by other scholars as well. Already in 1998, Baym (p. 37; cf. 2000: 2-3) noted that many 'arguments are in essence about whether or not on-line groups deserve the label "community"'. Since then the discussion has continued and observations of it have been repeated (see e.g. Fox and Roberts 1999: 644; Haythornthwaite 2007: 124; Matzat 2004: 67; Roberts et al. 2002: 225; Wilson and Peterson 2002: 455-7), and as recently as 2008 Tuszynski (p. 52) once again stressed that 'the debate over whether online groups can be legitimately called communities' is 'perhaps the most pervasive ongoing debate for academics dealing with new media technology'.

This debate is as problematic as it is widespread. As the various phrasings of the key question reveal, it addresses the 'true nature' of online groupings in general. Whereas a concern with the Internet as an undifferentiated whole is quite common in Internet studies at large,² it hampers the development of empirically grounded theoretical understanding of online sociality, especially when it is combined with semantic discussions about the essence of communities.

First, considerations of the Internet in general have inspired grandiose claims of cyber-enthusiasts and critics alike that are amusing at best. The founding father of the virtual community concept, for example, claimed that 'whenever [computer-mediated communication] technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies' (Rheingold 1993: 6), and this position is criticized in rather grotesque terms by Lockard (1997: 225), who states that 'cyberspace is to

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community as Rubber Rita is to human companionship'. There is little reason to accept either of these claims as apt descriptions of social reality; the argument that virtual communities are always formed if people get access to an Internet connection is just as naïve as the *a priori* stance that meaningful online sociality is outright impossible.

Second, the discussions about the nature of communities that have accompanied claims such as those cited above have taken the character of essentialist conceptual hair-splitting. Various authors have claimed that one or another essential element of community is lacking in the online realm (see Matzat 2004: 67 for a concise overview), and as such the debate has deteriorated into conceptual quarrelling instead of an empirically informed theoretical discussion. If scholars seeking 'to determine if virtual communities are indeed true communities' (Driskell and Lyon 2002: 375) rely on a dichotomous distinction between 'true' and 'false' community, it obviously depends on the definition that is employed whether the answer is affirmative or negative. To say the least, it seems unlikely that consensus about the correct definition of community will ever be reached, and if these discussions are continued the debate on the online community question would go far beyond the point of boredom.

This rather unproductive direction in discussions of the online community question has partly been taken because systematic empirical research has long been lacking (Castells 2001: 117). Far too often, scholars have argued 'by assertion and anecdote' (Wellman and Gulia 1999: 188) and relied on 'traveller's tales' (Ester and Vinken 2003: 672; Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004a: 41), and, as Castells (2001; cf. Baym 2000: 198) aptly puts it, 'taking advantage of this relative void of reliable investigation, ideology and gossip have permeated the understanding of this fundamental dimension of our lives'. Fortunately, however, not all Internet scholars have been engaged in wide-ranging debates that often are more revealing about the preoccupations of the scholars involved than about online social reality; a more empirically oriented line of investigation has developed as well.

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Empirical studies: focused assessments of online community

An important step forward has been made by scholars who have discarded conceptual discussions on the Internet in general. They, too, are critical of unsubstantiated uses of the community label found in popular discourse, but instead of entering into an ongoing conceptual debate they have laudably turned the virtual community question into an empirical one. This line of research, which mostly addresses online forums (Hodkinson 2007: 626), stems from the assumption that some online venues could be online communities, whereas others are not (cf. Herring 2002: 142).³ As Papadakis puts it:

‘The concept of community cannot be taken lightly, and not all online groups are necessarily communities. Discussions in the popular media often portray almost all computer-mediated groups as communities. However, sociologically speaking, the concept *community* encompasses far more than just conversation among people. (...) Using long-standing sociological criteria, it would appear that most of the hundreds of thousands of online groups are not communities but [merely] information-sharing networks’ (2003: vii, italics in original).

Following this line of reasoning, various scholars have sought to determine whether specific online venues qualify as communities. Nieckarz’s study of the online interactions of people who trade recordings of live music performances, for instance, aims to answer one simple question: ‘is it a community?’ (2005: 418). To do so, he first conducts a literature review to distill the characteristics a community ‘must have’ (2005: 408) and then compares his observations to this benchmark, one aspect of community after another. In a similar vein, Liu (1999) argues that ‘empirical testing for the presence of community’ should be done by ‘comparing its properties against empirical signposts of community’.

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Although these attempts to move beyond mere conceptual discussions are laudable, they echo the main problem characteristic of the more speculative studies discussed above: the empirical research advocated by Nieckarz (2005) and Liu (1999) displays a dichotomous logic similar to theoretical discussions on the Internet in general. There are only two possible research outcomes – a particular online venue either constitutes a community, or it does not – and the conclusions scholars arrive at ultimately depend on their arbitrary conceptualizations of community.

Opposing such approaches, Fernback (2007) argues that it is more fruitful to analyze the meanings people attach to their online social relations than to ask whether or not the community label is applicable. This critique, however, does not imply that research that is sensitive to the perspective of participants themselves does not exist. In fact, some studies focus on the experience of a 'sense of community' online. Such an approach has been advocated by Ward (1999a: 96), who argues that an online aggregation 'only becomes a community if [the participants] perceive it to be so, and experience the spirit of community'.⁴ Systematic empirical studies focusing on experienced sense of community online have, however, adopted an approach similar to that characteristic of other writings on virtual communities. An example is a study of Blanchard and Markus (2004), who stress 'it is important to know *whether* a sense of community exists in particular online settings' (2004: 66, emphasis added). To answer this question they, too, try to use a kind of benchmark: following a literature review conducted to establish the defining elements of a virtual sense of community, they study an online settlement in order to determine whether that sense of community is present or not. This is the dominant practice when it comes to studies of online sense of community. Addressing so-called 'MOOs' – a specific type of socially oriented virtual environment – Roberts et al. (2002: 229), for example, try to answer one simple question: 'Do MOOs have a sense of community?', and considering the sheer number of online venues that are theoretically all open to empirical scrutiny, it hardly comes as a surprise to find numerous variations: Blanchard's (2004a) wondering whether 'the *Julie/Julia Project* [is] a virtual community' is a telling example, as is Brignall and Van Valey's

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(2008) investigation of the degree to which World of Warcraft exhibits specific tribal characteristics.

Such studies invariably arrive at little more than the conclusion that a subjective feeling of community is possible online. Silverman's (2001: 237) piece on the online group she is part of, for instance, simply concludes 'we are a community', and Forster (2004: 145) measures the sense of community in two online groups to arrive at the conclusion that groups on the Internet 'can evoke a high sense of community from their members'. Of course, findings like these are relevant as they provide evidence to reject claims that meaningful social relationships are entirely impossible in the online realm – even after more than a decade of Internet scholarship some scholars still consider this an important discussion (see e.g. Bambina 2007: 54-7). Whereas these studies have fulfilled an important function, it is important not to stick to the question they focus on, because their findings do not yield theoretical insight beyond this single debate. It remains unclear what the broader theoretical implications are of the empirical observation that a specific online forum features a sense of community among its members, or what it means that members of a specific online forum 'reported a moderate sense of community at best' (Blanchard 2004a).

Reshaping empirical research: from benchmark to sensitizing concept

These empirical studies of virtual communities are all mostly descriptive, and considering the fact that this is a newly developing field of research it is unsurprising that such a focus on description is symptomatic for this literature in general (cf. Wellman 2004). In fact, various scholars have complained that studies to date have yielded few insights as analyses of virtual communities hardly ever move beyond the level of plain description (see e.g. Arnold 2007; Ester and Vinken 2003: 671; Papadakis 2003: 2; Porter 2004). From a theoretical point of view, it is, of course, not as important to *describe* whether a particular group qualifies as a community, as it is to *understand* varying experiences of online togetherness. In this perspective it is important to observe that some of the studies discussed above do

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report some empirical variation, even though the authors themselves do not reflect on it. While Roberts et al. pose a dichotomous question and use a checklist of elements of a sense of community to answer it, they observe that 'individuals experienced sense of community (...) in different ways' (2002: 232). Likewise, Blanchard (2004a) observes that 'some respondents did believe that the [online venue under scrutiny] was a virtual community. (...) However, many others did not', and Nip (2004: 424) concludes, 'It seems to be the case that different participants give different meanings to their participation'.

Although these authors do not themselves discuss the theoretical implications of such observations, these seem highly relevant in the light of critiques of the use of the community concept in Internet studies. After all, what is problematic is that time and again a specific conceptualization of community or sense of community is taken as a benchmark to describe whether a specific online venue qualifies as a community or not. It might, however, well be that different online participants experience and/or aspire to different forms of 'virtual togetherness' (Bakardjieva 2005: 165-188; see also Bakardjieva 2003, 2009: 97; cf. Sassenberg 2002: 35); Bauman's (1995: 44) observation that 'togetherness comes in many kinds' may well hold for the online realm as well, and the variation in online experiences reported above points in this direction. This suggests that one can aim to understand differences in online togetherness, instead of describing whether a specific forum does or does not fit an arbitrary definition of community. To do so, one should depart from the common research practice in two respects. First, researchers should not be blinded by the dominance of the concept of community and should keep an open eye for variation in the form of different articulations of virtual togetherness. Second, the focus of analysis should shift from the level of the forum as a whole to that of individual members or subgroups that may have different online experiences on one and the same forum.

Such an alternative approach would meet the wishes of recent critics of the literature on virtual communities. Postill (2008: 423) argues 'that researchers need to approach [the online sociality] question with an open mind, with the expectation that sociality may take on plural forms even within a single universe of practice', and

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his argument resonates with those of other scholars. Baym (2000: 201), for example, eloquently puts forward that 'conceptualizing all online communities as a single phenomenon because they share a medium is like reducing all towns, cities, and villages to a single phenomenon because all of them are built on earth', and likewise Fernback (1999: 215) worries: 'If, as observers of social relations in cyberspace, we simply impose the term community onto all social aggregations in the virtual realm, we may miss the nuances of the virtual social experience'. Instead of applying the 'the broad brush of community' (Fernback 2007: 66), the online community question could be 'opened' so as to allow for variation: from this perspective a strongly cohesive, homogeneous type of virtual togetherness, commonly understood as community, simply is one of the possible types of virtual togetherness that could be encountered (cf. Bakardjieva 2003: 294, 2005: 168).

What is needed, in short, is to study the diverse meanings participants in online forums attach to their online social relationships. All too often Blumer's (1969: 52) observation that researchers 'are slaves to their own pre-established images' has applied to students of virtual communities. This is highly problematic since, in Blumer's words, 'people act toward things on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them, not on the basis of the meaning that these things have for the outside scholar' (1969: 51; cf. Gusfield 2003: 122). This is why the present study does not rely on the concept of community as a 'definitive concept [providing] prescriptions of what to see' (Blumer 1969: 148), but rather employs it as a 'sensitizing concept [suggesting] directions along which to look' (*ibid.*). Instead of applying a benchmark to determine whether a forum is a community or not, it looks for different articulations of virtual togetherness. As such, it aims to keep an open eye for the different meanings that online interactions may have for different users. And taking such an interpretive approach, it becomes possible to move beyond the mere level of description and to address the question of how to understand variation in articulations of virtual togetherness.

Toward a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness

A need for contextualization

The above indicates that the virtual community debate should not be prematurely closed by concluding that a sense of community occurs on certain online forums (cf. Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004a: 41). On the contrary, the online community question should be further opened, and this calls for a new line of systematic empirical studies. In line with the proposed sensitivity to various articulations of virtual togetherness, the present study breaks with the dominant research practice and adopts an explorative character. It strives for theoretical understanding by inductively looking for patterns of virtual togetherness. As such, it constitutes a specific response to the more general pleas of those dissatisfied with the totalizing dichotomous debates in Internet studies. Baym (2000: 3), Fernback (1999: 215) and Postill (2008: 427) have, for instance, all argued for qualitative research aimed at the construction of empirically grounded theoretical insights. Naturally, such an explorative outlook does not mean that one should proceed without an analytical framework informing the empirical research. Notwithstanding its inductive character, the present study rests upon a set of ideas that provide guidance throughout the research process.

The aim to provide understanding of various forms of online togetherness implies a need for contextualization; it should be uncovered how specific forms of togetherness are shaped in specific contexts. Again, this resolves more generally held concerns among Internet researchers. An increasing number of scholars are dissatisfied with the overwhelming focus on the nature and consequences of the Internet in general and therefore call for contextualized understandings of online social life; this is even considered a crucial goal to achieve in the current phase of Internet studies (see e.g. Bell 2007; Kennedy 2006: 860; Silver 2000). DiMaggio et al. (2001: 319) conclude in a widely cited review article: '(...) the Internet has no intrinsic effect on social interaction and civic participation. This nonfinding should challenge scholars to understand the circumstances under which different effects

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are produced', and similar arguments can be found elsewhere. Sassenberg (2002: 27), for example, claims that, contrary to what has been commonly held, 'the Internet cannot be adequately described as an invariant situation (...). It might be supposed that different groups on the Internet create different situations for those interacting within these groups'. Likewise, Matzat (2004) has forcefully argued that "the" Internet should no longer be regarded as a constant that has uniform effects for its users. Rather, the consequences of its use depend on a number of contextual conditions'. The approach developed here departs from Sassenberg's (2002) use of quantitative methods and Matzat's (2001; 2004) reliance on general behavioral models, but I fully subscribe to their emphasis on contextualization as a way out of the current deadlock in Internet studies. However, my approach differs in one important respect. In contrast to the authors cited above, I do not propose to simply treat Internet use as an independent variable that has different *effects* for different groups of people. A crucial aspect of my endeavor is to understand how online participation itself is shaped in different contexts of meaning (cf. Alexander 2003).

This aim to arrive at contextualized understanding of various forms of virtual togetherness, of course, does not in itself provide a research framework. What is needed is an idea of how to achieve such a contextualization. Below I will propose to study online participation as purposive action related to offline social life.

Online participation as purposive action

As Bakardjieva (2003, 2005: 168) argues, different articulations of virtual togetherness are most likely related to different aspirations. If the reasons people have for their online participation differ, they may value different types of online togetherness. Thus it is important to address motivations for online participation as the 'reasons and purposes on the basis of which people steer their conduct' (Albas and Albas 2003: 349). This has, however, hardly been done. Because of a lack of research little is known about the motives of forum participants (Scott and Johnson 2005: 3; Tuszynski 2008: 20), but ideas about the reasons people have for joining online forums naturally do exist. Commonly cited ones are accessing information

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and the exchange of social support, and these can be supplemented by equally broad notions such as seeking friendship and recreation (see Ridings and Gefen 2004 for a review, and see Wang and Chang 2010 for recent empirical research developing scales to measure such motives). Obviously, these categories are rather unspecific and, therefore, of limited analytical value.⁵ Moreover, in empirical research on virtual communities, aspirations to participate in a forum are hardly ever taken into account. If reasons underlying forum participation are addressed at all, these are usually implicitly considered to be self-evident and as such excluded from empirical analyses.⁶

First, Rheingold (1993) considers participation in online venues self-evident because human beings have universal social needs they fulfil online, and this line of thought is echoed in more recent accounts. Wood and Smith (2005: 124), for instance, hold that 'all people have a need for inclusion, a desire for the company of others' which is provided for by virtual communities. Obviously, such ideas of metaphysical basic human needs are unhelpful for sociological research, as these are by definition excluded from empirical scrutiny (cf. Achterberg et al. 2009a: 697-8), and as Slevin (2000: 107) argues, Rheingold's examples can just as easily be taken 'to show that individuals using the internet do not band together because of some mysterious biological attraction but for reasons which pertain to their active involvement, the interlocking of different purposes or projects in the specific social and historical circumstances in which they find themselves'.

Second, scholars frequently rely on a notion of self-evident uniform 'shared interests' underlying participation in a certain online venue and omit a thorough study of how these interests are defined by specific participants. Usually, scholars consider any collective on the Internet to be based on shared interests by definition (see e.g. Bellini and Vargas 2003: 3; Koh and Kim 2004: 76; Mukerji and Simon 1998: 270; Wilson and Peterson 2002: 449), and it is considered a truism that this is what makes people participate online. Vance (2008: 143), for example, writes of 'cyberspace, where disembodied minds meet to discuss shared interests and seek information', and Russ (2008: 98) maintains that 'we turn to virtual communities to connect with like-minded others'. Of course there seems to be much truth in these

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statements, as it is indeed plausible that many people participate in a specific online forum because they have an interest in the central theme or main subject of this particular forum. However, it is unsatisfactory to simply conceal presumed shared interests in a black box, as it is far less plausible that an interest in the theme of a specific forum means the same thing for all forum members alike. Different interests in participating in a certain forum might be related to various aspirations, and this is obscured by the common perspective that neglects the possibility that different groups of members of a particular forum might have different reasons for their online activities.

All in all, it is important to break with this common research practice by addressing online participation as a form of purposive action. As specific uses of online forums most likely go together with specific types of online togetherness, scrutinizing the reasons individual members have for online participation might provide the basis for the contextualized understanding that is aimed at in the present study.

Moving beyond the virtual

In order to attain a 'motivational understanding' (C. Campbell 2006: 212) of different types of virtual togetherness, it does not suffice to draw up an inventory of different reasons for online participation. Instead, the act of online participation should be placed in 'an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning' (Weber 1964 [1921]; cf. C. Campbell 1996: 67-79). Therefore, it is important not to focus research aimed at acquiring a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness exclusively on the online realm. The purposes served by participation in a specific forum might vary among users with different experiences in offline social life. As McLelland (2002: 388) stresses, 'it is important to remember that when individuals log on they do so as real people in actual locations for specific purposes; the meaning of the internet is thus partly the product of social context' (cf. Fox and Roberts 1999: 666; Ward 1999b).

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Unfortunately, Internet scholars have long treated online interactions as occurring in a virtual realm unconnected to a broader social context. In fact, 'the majority of research *about* the internet has been research *in* the internet' (Hardey 2002: 571, emphasis in original). This is not only characteristic of the cyberlibertarian rhetoric of the 1990s, which was 'driven by a feverish belief in transcendence' (Robins 2000: 78; cf. J.E. Campbell 2004), but also of research into the online community question, which 'has concentrated on group cultures originating from the interactions of online participants, thus treating online group phenomena in isolation from the actual daily life experiences of the subjects involved' (Bakardjieva 2005: 167; cf. Chan 2006: 4-5).⁷ As Cavanagh (2007: 11) puts it, 'one of the central assumptions of this body of literature [is] that community formation online is driven by a logic of its own'. This observation has been made in various review articles, criticizing this bias toward the virtual as 'counterproductive' (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 456) and the idea of a separate cyberspace as 'a fiction [that] can no longer be maintained' (Herring 2002: 152). Increasingly scholars have recognized that 'nobody lives only in cyberspace' (Kendall 1999: 70; cf. Kennedy 2006: 871) and that it is, therefore, highly important to scrutinize the interrelationship of online and offline interactions and experiences (J.E. Campbell 2004: 192). This has been advocated as an important next step in Internet studies (Wellman et al. 2002: 161-2), and it features as a dominant theme in Hine's (2000) seminal text on *Virtual Ethnography*. However, it is still not a common practice, giving rise to ongoing laments about the bias toward the virtual that continues to characterize much Internet scholarship (e.g. Hardey 2002: 571; Nip 2004: 409).

This lack of attention to offline contexts of online interactions can partly be understood from the methods that have been used in studies engaged with the virtual community question. Studies that do not rely on mere speculation, anecdotal evidence or simplistic benchmarks have mostly applied ethnographic participant observation to arrive at thick descriptions of specific online venues (Cavanagh 2009: 5). As Slater (2002: 541) explains, most of these online ethnographies carry 'assumptions about community and bounded social spaces that both seemed appropriate to the Internet and at the same time framed it in a very particular way,

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as a social space that could be examined in its own right, as internally meaningful and understandable in its own terms'. As such, these online ethnographies have probably been partly responsible for the common blind spot for the interrelationship between online and offline social life.⁸ Apart from such ethnographies of online venues, some scholars have applied social network analysis to study the structure of interpersonal relationships in online forums (e.g. Bambina 2007). Since such studies draw upon quantifications of postings to online forums, it is not surprising that these, too, tend to have a blind eye for their embeddedness in offline contexts.

Apart from this lack of attention to the interrelationship between interactions on and offline, it is problematic that studies that do address offline social life tend to do so without an analytical focus. These studies do not strive to attain understanding of the way in which specific offline experiences fuel specific online interactions or how different forms of virtual togetherness relate to offline social life. A good example is Marshall's *Living on Cybermind* (2007), which devotes a whole chapter to 'the Internet and the World' in which 'the current [Western English Speaking] social situation' (idem: 10) is discussed. Naturally, such a description of an enormous monolithic offline context adds little to our understanding of the reasons underlying the participation of concrete users.

This general neglect of analytical understanding of the way in which online and offline social life relate to one other is, of course, comprehensible, as such an understanding is difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, the present study aims to break with most of the previous research in Internet studies by taking the interrelationship of online and offline social life seriously, since it seems evident that 'the best work recognizes that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life and seeks to better understand the weaving' (Baym 2006: 86). As such, it attempts to answer Robins's (2000: 92) plea to 're-locate virtual culture in the real world'. More specifically, it proposes to take the daily life experiences of those involved into account, as forum participation might serve different purposes for people having different offline experiences. In chapter two I will elaborate on the way in which I attempt to accomplish this difficult task, and in the concluding

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chapter I will make suggestions for further research addressing the interrelationship between online and offline social life based on my conclusions.

Research question and theoretical relevance

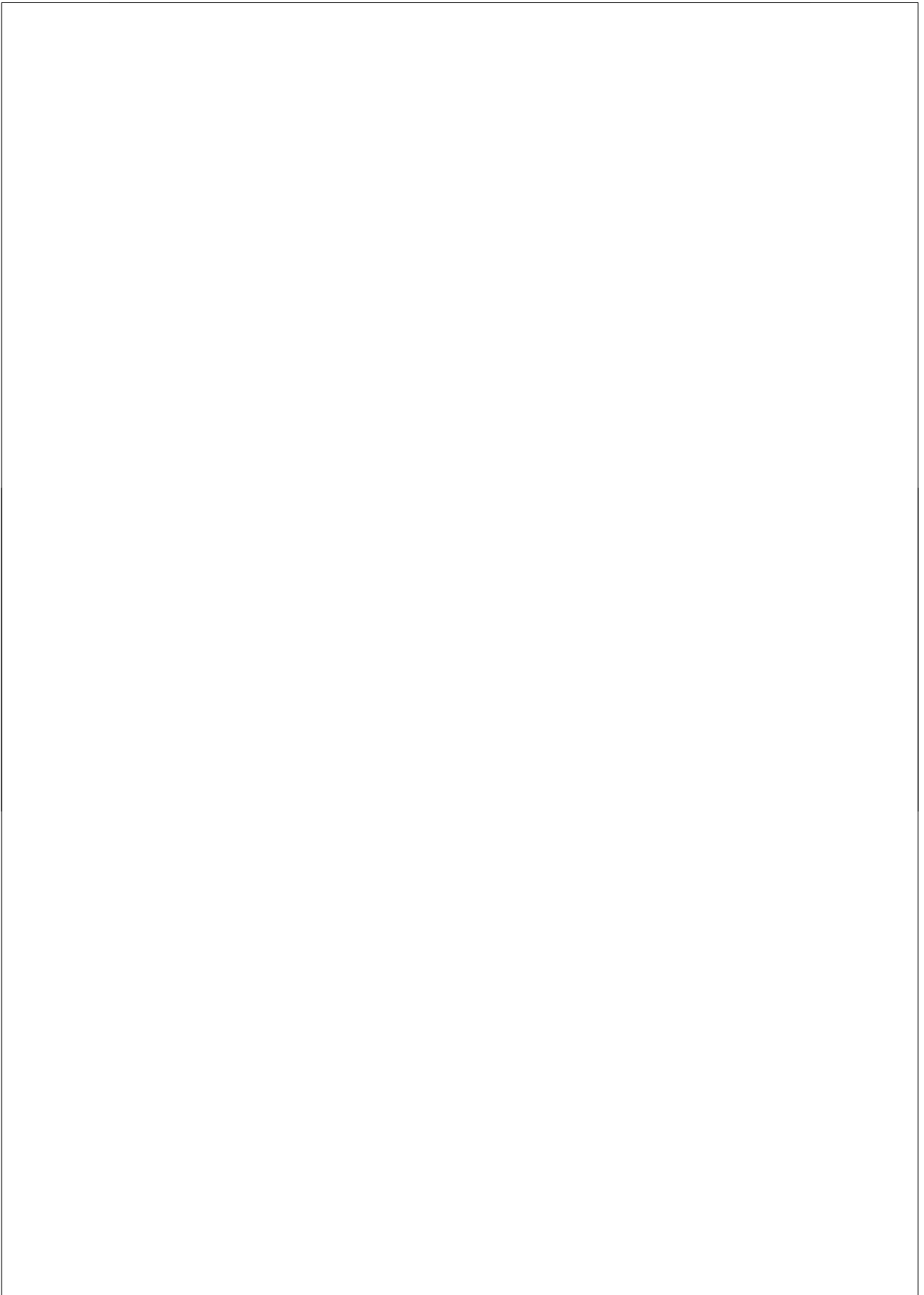
Above it has been argued that it is fruitful to strive for a contextualized understanding of different types of virtual togetherness in order to overcome problems haunting discussions on the community question in Internet studies. I have proposed to do so by addressing online participation as a form of purposive action related to offline social life, and therefore I seek to answer the following research question:

How can different types of virtual togetherness on online forums be understood in relation to offline social life?

As my study aims to provide an understanding of differences in virtual togetherness, it promises to offer more theoretical insights than studies that merely assess whether the community label is applicable to the Internet as a whole or to specific forums. This not only provides a way out of the current deadlock in the literature regarding the online community question, but also helps to illuminate broader scholarly discussions revolving around the nature and social significance of participation in online forums. As Cavanagh (2007: 4) rightly observes, 'debates about the internet inevitably take on a dichotomous quality, with each claim about its nature or development balanced against a contrary claim'. A contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness as strived for in this study promises precisely to overcome such rigid, unproductive discussions. After all, instead of establishing the nature or effects of the Internet as a monolithic whole, it sheds light on the circumstances under which specific uses and outcomes are likely to occur. This could not only help to move beyond technological determinism and metaphysical views on universal anthropological conditions as a basis for understanding online

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sociality, but could also illuminate discussions of the nature of online interactions, so-called 'cyber-balkanization', and the online-offline distinction. Following a discussion of the design of this study (chapter 2) and empirical analyses of different types of virtual togetherness (chapters 3-6), the concluding chapter (7) not only reflects on the implications of my results for scholarship addressing the online community question, but also draws on the contextual understanding of virtual togetherness developed throughout this thesis to shed light on these broader debates in Internet studies.



Chapter 2

Designing the study of virtual togetherness

In the previous chapter I have made a plea for a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness. In order to arrive at such an understanding, it is necessary to depart in several ways from the common practice in research on online communities. In this chapter I will discuss the design of my study, paying attention to the case selection, methods and data, and ethical issues.

A serial case study of Dutch online forums

Serial case study design

Since I aim to inductively develop an understanding of different types of virtual togetherness, a comparative case study design is best suited for the research at hand. Such a research design makes it possible to explore variation in patterns of togetherness within and between forums. A comparison of multiple cases allows for an analysis of whether and how groups of users with different reasons for participation value different types of virtual togetherness. Below I will discuss my research design and compare it to previous studies addressing the online community question.

Although interpretive comparative analyses of carefully chosen cases were already advocated by Paccagnella in 1997, such studies are still not common. If multiple sites are studied at all, this is usually not done in order to conduct a comparative analysis (e.g. Adler and Adler 2008; Hodkinson 2007), and the overwhelming majority of publications related to the virtual community question simply focus on one online venue (Cavanagh 2009: 5). This is not only true for

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journal articles and book chapters (e.g. Blanchard 2004a; Blanchard and Markus 2004; Brignall and Van Valey 2008; Ley 2007; Nieckarz 2005; Roberts et al. 2002; Ross 2007; Silverman 2001),⁹ but also for book-length analyses (e.g. Bambina 2007; Baym 2000; J.E. Campbell 2004; Kendall 2002; Marshall 2007). Such studies typically provide richly illustrated in-depth insights into social life on particular online venues. As Baym indicates (2001), she 'tried to weave as rich a tapestry of one online space as [she] could' in 'a book that tells a small story in a lot of detail'.

Accounts like these have, of course, been very valuable, as they played a crucial role in downplaying some of the grotesque speculations that have long permeated discussions of the social significance of the Internet. It is, however, difficult to draw broader theoretical conclusions from such in-depth inquiries into social life on particular forums (cf. Drew 2005: 452), and, therefore, a single case study design is not best suited for the current theory-building endeavor. What is needed to develop a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherhness is a research design that enables insight into togetherhness on specific online forums, as well as comparison across cases. This is why random selection of participants in a wide variety of online venues (e.g. Fernback 2007; Koh and Kim 2004) is not useful either. Because I aspire to inductively develop empirically grounded theoretical insights, I employ a *serial* case study design. In contrast to a parallel case study, in which multiple cases are selected simultaneously, the findings on each case in a serial comparative case study inspire the selection of a further one. As such, each case is selected on theoretical grounds that develop throughout the research (cf. Dul and Hak 2008: 44).¹⁰

It is important to note that case selection based on theoretical considerations is rather exceptional in Internet research. Whereas the online groups studied by Chan (2006) and Forster (2004) were explicitly selected because of a theoretical interest, this is not a common practice. On the contrary, various scholars do not make clear why they chose to study a particular online venue instead of another one (e.g. Bambina 2007; Blanchard 2004a; Blanchard and Markus 2004; Nieckarz 2005; Orgad 2006). And, strikingly, if scholars do set out why they scrutinized a specific online venue, it quite often becomes clear that their decision stems from a personal

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interest. And, of course, why not combine research with pleasure and analyze a discussion group consisting of fans of a television series if you enjoy that series yourself (e.g. Baym 2000; Tuszynski 2008)? And if you already are a member of an online group of therapists studying relational theory (Silverman 2001), an 'online craft forum aimed at the young hipster crowd' (Russ 2008: 97), a mailing list devoted to discussions of life online (Marshall 2007) or an online pregnancy and mothering group (Ley 2007), why not study it? Whereas this may be perfectly legitimate when striving for in-depth understanding of sociality on a particular online forum, it is not advisable when one is looking for a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness. Since that is what I aspire to, I adopt a serial case study design in which cases are selected on theoretical grounds.

Now, what are the theoretical considerations underlying my case selection? In line with the serial design of my study, these will be elaborated upon in the empirical chapters that follow, but some initial reflections are, of course, needed nevertheless. In line with my more general aspiration to address online participation as purposive action related to offline social life, I propose to pay attention to the way in which identity is relevant to different types of virtual togetherness.

This seems especially worthwhile as theorists such as Bauman (2001a, 2001b, 2004), Beck (1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996, 2001), Castells (2004) and Giddens (1991, 1994) have time and again stressed that identities are no longer 'pre-given' (Heelas 1996) in contemporary modernity. Whereas tradition once provided clear-cut, pre-packed and unquestioned identities, the erosion of the once taken for granted legitimacy of traditional institutions has fueled problems of meaning and identity (cf. Achterberg 2006). Questions of identity have arisen as identities have become increasingly uncertain and socially contested. Against this background a literature on individual online identity play developed in the 1990s, while questions relating to social identities were not explicitly taken into account in Internet studies. Most likely because identity has predominantly been approached as self-identity in Internet studies, different dealings with identity have been extensively discussed in postmodern accounts of disembodied identity play, but

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have been left out of most studies relating to the virtual community question.¹¹ However, the fact that different identities are articulated, celebrated and contested in different contexts could also lie at the basis of varying aspirations to seek out or construct virtual togetherness. Therefore, my serial case selection is inspired by an aim to keep an open eye for the way in which members' identities are important to the togetherness they seek and construct online.

Focusing on online forums

In addition to these general considerations pertaining to the case selection, it needs to be considered what class of online venues qualifies for selection. The Internet features a wide range of venues on which interaction among users takes place, among which are various types of online chatrooms, blogs, social networking sites and online forums. Most empirical studies on the online community question address online forums instead of other online venues (Hodkinson 2007: 626), and for various reasons I will do so as well.

First, discussions that take place on online forums are more stable and persistent than interactions enabled by chatrooms or social networking sites, and this yields major practical advantages when it comes to the use of archived data and recruitment of respondents. Second, members of online forums can enter into interaction with other forum members by posting messages in existing 'threads'¹² or by creating new ones themselves, whereas discussions on blogs take place in reaction to the posts written by the blog owner. As such, the interaction featured on online forums is less hierarchical than that on blogs, and therefore online forums seem better suited for studying shared or contested notions of virtual togetherness. Third, in contrast to social networking sites, which mainly feature complex networks of dyadic relationships, messages on online forums can be read and replied to by any other forum member. Therefore, online forums are more likely to stimulate shared or contested notions of virtual togetherness, which means they are better suited for the research at hand than social networking sites.

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Since the number of online forums is literally uncountable, a choice to address online forums does not provide much of a focus in itself. However, the considerations that informed my research question help to further delimit the scope of my study. Internet scholars usually distinguish between groups that are formed online and pre-existing groups that use the Internet as an additional means of communication (Cantoni and Tardini 2006: 160; Koh and Kim 2004: 79-80; cf. Blanchard and Horan 2000: 7). Because of my aspiration to address online participation as a form of purposive action and to keep an open eye for the way in which identity is relevant to different types of virtual togetherness, I do not aim to study online forums populated by people who draw upon pre-existing ties. As such, the focus of this study differs from that of the literature on so-called 'community networks' (Virnoche and Marx 1997), which deals with the question of how Internet use affects geographically defined communities (e.g. Hampton and Wellman 2003), and the present study will also not address online 'settings that facilitate interactions among friendship networks or family members' (DiMaggio et al. 2001: 317). Instead, attention will be paid to online forums that are somehow of interest to members who can be geographically dispersed and who do not necessarily have prior ties. In studying these forums it will not be taken for granted that their participants all have a uniform self-evident shared interest in the forum at hand; how members themselves define their interest in participating in a specific forum will be actively scrutinized. Such an approach fits best with my goal to understand online participation as purposive action.

Three Dutch forums: Stormfront, RefoAnders, and Flitsservice

Above I have argued that a serial comparative case study of online forums that are not based on pre-existing ties is suited to answer the research question at hand. Although I aim to arrive at theoretical insights whose value is not limited to a specific national context, I will limit my empirical research to Dutch forums because of the following considerations.

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Since I aim to understand differences in virtual togetherhness in relation to offline social life, it is first of all necessary that my research design allows for enough variation in offline contexts. However, this does not imply that internationally comparative research is needed: conducting my research in a single country does not mean that the offline context is held constant. The Netherlands obviously does not provide a monolithic context for online participation, and different social groups have different experiences in offline social life. This means that it is perfectly possible to compare types of virtual togetherhness that are differently related to offline social life without engaging in *internationally* comparative research. Moreover, my language skills limit the scope of forums that could be analyzed to those in Dutch or English, and this, too, suggests that it is better to limit my research to the former. If I were to analyze forums on which communication takes place in English, these could be populated by people residing anywhere across the globe. This would mean that there could be too much, instead of too little, variation in forum members' offline experiences: I could end up with a series of idiosyncratic accounts that do not allow for systematic comparison. Furthermore, the analysis of data on Dutch forums is less problematic, because it is easier for me to interpret information on the offline social lives of Dutch persons than data on the offline experiences of people living in numerous countries I am not familiar with. Another benefit is that concentrating my research on Dutch forums helps to avoid significant language problems that could hamper interpretation and lead to superficial data. Because all participants in Dutch forums are most likely fluent in Dutch, the research will not be hampered by a language barrier between me and my respondents. The odds that the data collection is hindered by such a barrier are much higher in the case of forums on which people interact in English. Worldwide, many people have only moderate knowledge of the English language, and therefore people who do not master the language sufficiently to serve as respondents are likely to be active on these forums.

These arguments suggest that refraining from studying non-Dutch forums is not problematic for answering my research question on differences in virtual togetherhness. However, one final issue needs to be considered in order to decide

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whether Dutch forums do indeed provide suitable cases. A rich literature on the so-called digital divide suggests that familiarity with the Internet is distributed unevenly across the population: socially advantaged groups typically display higher levels of Internet access, use and skills (see e.g. DiMaggio et al. 2001 for an overview). As Internet access obviously is a necessary condition for participation in online forums (cf. Wilson and Peterson 2002: 460), a study on virtual togetherness in a country in which the Internet is not commonly accessible runs the risk of systematically overlooking a specific share of the population (cf. Murthy 2008: 848). Even though my research does not strive for statistical generalizations, this would still be a problem: the variation in possible types of virtual togetherness would be limited. As such, it would limit the diversity of the theoretical insights that my research can yield. Against this background, Dutch forums are a very apt choice as the Internet is widespread in the Netherlands. Notwithstanding higher Internet access rates for males, young people, the more highly educated and higher income groups (De Haan 2003), the Internet is extraordinarily accessible in the Netherlands, which minimizes the risk of systematic blind spots in research on virtual togetherness. The Netherlands, for instance, had 86.5 Internet users per 100 inhabitants in 2008, a rate that was only topped by Iceland (90.6) and Sweden (87.8) (ITU 2010: 105-6), and it ranks fifth on the International Telecommunication Union's *ICT Development Index*, which measures levels of Internet access, use and skills across the globe (ITU 2010: 10). In short, socio-economic and cognitive barriers to online participation seem relatively low in the Netherlands, which implies that Dutch forums are suited if one aspires to conduct research on virtual togetherness in a single country.

Having elaborated on my decision to focus my research on Dutch online forums, it is important to stress that this choice does not imply that my results merely have value for the Netherlands. My results will be more than empirical findings on a specific set of Dutch forums, because I aim to uncover theoretical insights on differences in virtual togetherness in relation to offline social life. Hence, my conclusions give rise to hypotheses for further research that could be conducted in other countries (see chapter 7 for a discussion).

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Three Dutch forums are included in my research. The first one, which is addressed in chapter three, is the Dutch branch of the international 'Stormfront White Nationalist Community' – mostly referred to as *Stormfront* for the sake of brevity – which is the largest right-wing extremist Internet forum in the Netherlands.¹³ The main part of the data collection on *Stormfront* took place in August and September 2005, and some additional data were collected in September 2007. The second forum, whose members' experiences and understandings are analyzed in chapter four, is *RefoAnders*.¹⁴ This is a Dutch forum for people who identify as orthodox protestant homosexuals,¹⁵ which is advertised as 'RefoAnders the meeting point around homosexual feelings for people from orthodox Christian circles'.¹⁶ Data regarding participation in *RefoAnders* were collected from February through July 2008. The third and final case is the forum of *Flitservice*,¹⁷ which has been set up to connect motorists who want to be informed about the location of speed controls in the Netherlands – its subtitle is 'your guide against senseless speed controls'.¹⁸ Chapters five and six are devoted to a discussion of participation in this forum, which was studied from March through May 2009.

It should be noted that it is an explicit decision to introduce these forums by mentioning their real names. Even the existence of Internet search engines that can easily locate many online texts does not mean that anonymizing online venues makes no sense by definition: not all online forums are indexed by search engines, and participation in online forums can be studied by means of methods that do not require that verbatim quotes from forum postings are presented. My decision not to replace forum names with pseudonyms merits attention from an ethical point of view (reflection on ethical issues related to specific research methods is provided below).

Internet scholars disagree on the question of whether real forum names and locations should be omitted from publications in order to protect the subjects involved. Some researchers include identifying information in their publications without discussing the ethical implications of this practice (e.g. Awan 2007; Blanchard 2004a; Broad and Joos 2004; Chau and Xu 2007; Johnson and Ambrose 2006; Joinson and Dietz-Uhler 2002; Nip 2004; Russ 2008; Sessions 2010; Ward

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1999a, 1999b; Wojcieszak 2010), whereas others use a fictitious name to denote the online venue under scrutiny (e.g. Blanchard and Markus 2004; Blevins and Holt 2009; Chan 2006; Kendall 2002; Ley 2007; Mowlabocus 2008; Ross 2007). Even apart from the fact that these divergent practices imply that there is no generally accepted mode of conduct regarding this issue, it is, of course, an ethical imperative to reflect on the reasons underlying the eventual decision, even though this is hardly ever done. A notable exception is King (1996; see also Sixsmith and Murray 2001: 427-8), who has made a strong plea for anonymizing online groups. His argument holds that an online group as a whole can be irrevocably damaged if its name and location are made public: because members may feel exposed they could cease to participate, which could even lead to the complete extinction of the online group.

Even though King's argument mostly refers to covert research, which I do not practice, I have seriously considered these issues. For two reasons, however, I do not use fictitious names to denote the forums included in my research. First, from the start of my data collection I have made myself known as a researcher and provided my institutional affiliation and e-mail address on all three forums, and to date none of their members has argued that the name of their forum should be replaced with a pseudonym, while various members even argued against this. Second, the findings presented in chapters three and four demonstrate that some forum members take a minority position in offline social life, and hiding a forum used by a minority group could contribute to further marginalization of that group (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002: 243-4). Anonymizing these forums might, therefore, inflict harm to their members instead of protecting them from it.

I have made the same decision in my publications on *Stormfront* (De Koster and Houtman 2006, 2008) and *RefoAnders* (De Koster 2010).¹⁹ Having shared these articles with members of these forums, I received many positive and enthusiastic reactions. There were no complaints whatsoever about the fact that the forum names were mentioned and neither of the groups fell apart when my research was made public. This *post hoc* observation supports my evaluation that my disclosure of the forum names and locations does not harm the online groups based on these forums.

Interpretative research: qualitative content analysis and interviews

Research approach

Having elaborated on the general research design and case selection, I will now discuss my research approach in more detail. My choice for a specific approach is closely related to my critique of the prevailing literature on the online community question. As argued in the previous chapter, one of the main problems in this literature is that scholars do not take seriously the experiences and understandings of those involved. Instead, they engage in abstract conceptual discussions or rely on fixed, preconceived benchmarks to which they compare their data. As such, Internet researchers have been 'slaves to their own pre-established images' (Blumer 1969: 52) who have consistently taken up dichotomous questions about the existence of community online. I have proposed to overcome the current deadlock in the field by 'opening' the online community question: I aspire to explore various types of virtual togetherness by taking seriously the meanings that participants themselves attach to their online participation. This desire not to force data into preconceived categories resonates with a wide variety of slightly different approaches that are often taken together under the umbrella of 'grounded theory' (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kelle 2007: 193). Of course, as explained in the previous chapter, my position does not imply that I enter the field as a tabula rasa without any sensitizing ideas (cf. Charmaz 2006: 16-7; Kelle 2007: 207-8), and I concur with Charmaz (2006: 10) that theory is *constructed* instead of discovered as suggested by the title of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) seminal work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

In this light, the role played by the concept of community deserves some attention. In the next sub-section I will concisely discuss how the literature on the concept of community informs my data collection, and after that I will address the methods I employ in my research, along with a discussion of ethics and validity.

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Community as a sensitizing concept

Although I intend to break with much of the literature on the online community question by inductively looking for different types of virtual togetherness, reflections on the concept of community are valuable for my research as various conceptualizations of community provide me with 'directions along which to look' (Blumer 1969: 148).

Various scholars have complained that the concept of community is 'one of the most nebulous concepts in the social science lexicon' (Driskell and Lyon 2002: 375) that remains 'unclear' (Bess et al. 2002: 8), and is 'rarely defined other than in a sort of "we all know what one is" way' (Komito 1998: 97; cf. Yang 2000: 156) in empirical Internet research. Nevertheless, quite a cottage industry revolving around the conceptualization of community has developed in Internet studies. As Cavanagh (2009: 2) observes, the problem of defining community is an unwelcome legacy received from the long-standing field of community studies. Already in 1955 Hillery published his famous study reviewing ninety-four different definitions of community. He concluded that 'all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement' (1955: 117), which underlines once more that it makes no sense to strive for one 'true' conceptualization of community (cf. Vaisey 2007: 851-2; Willson 2006: 22). Instead of 'obsessive attempts to formulate precise analytic definitions' which lead to 'an abyss of theoretical sterility' (Cohen 1985: 38), it is better to see what different elements of community can be discerned on the basis of the literature in order to use these to sensitize my empirical analysis for different aspects of forum members' understandings of virtual togetherness.²⁰

Despite the vast number of different conceptualizations, scholars seem to agree that 'commonality' lies at the core of community (Fernback, 1999: 204; Wilbur, 1997: 8; Willson 2006: 22). More specifically, it is widely held that members of a community have a shared culture and display mutual commitment (see for instance Etzioni and Etzioni 1999; Etzioni 2004; Komito 1998; Willson 2006: 21-35).

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The former comprises commitment to 'shared values, norms, and meanings' (Etzioni 2004: 225; cf. Fernback 1999: 211; Katz et al. 2004: 325, 327), 'a common value or meaning system' (Komito 1998: 99; cf. Driskell and Lyon 2002: 377; Papadakis 2003: 9). As formulated by Cohen (1985: 16), 'the quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things'. This means that 'what holds a community together is the *perception* of commonality/similarity' (Willson 2006: 32, emphasis in original). And because members of a community consider themselves to have a shared identity and to be like-minded, they feel they 'understand each other well' (Bauman 2001a: 2) and are 'hardly ever puzzled or taken aback' (*ibid.*).

According to the literature, this shared culture goes hand in hand with 'communal solidarity' (Komito 1998: 98), that is, 'a solidarity among all those who comprise it' (Foster 1997: 25; cf. Papadakis 2003: 9), and 'affect-laden relationships' (Etzioni 2004: 225; cf. Katz et al. 2004: 325). Members of a community display 'an immutable "we-feeling"' (Foster 1997: 25) which can be termed an 'experience of *gemeinschaft*' (Vaisey 2007: 852; cf. Wood and Smith 2005: 127). It is a widely held idea that these feelings of connectedness go together with a sense of belonging (Blanchard and Markus 2004; Foster 1997: 29; Katz et al. 2004: 327; Kelemen and Smith 2001: 372; Nieckarz 2005: 407; Papadakis 2003: 9; Quigley 2005: 160; Wittel 2001: 51), and foster intimacy (Driskell and Lyon 2002: 377; Fernback 1999: 216; Watson 1997: 109) and sociability (Wellman and Hampton 1999: 648). Because of these characteristics, members of a community feel safe (Bauman 2001a: 2; Willson 2006: 28-9), and their commitment gives rise to the 'feeling that members matter to one another and to the group' (McMillan and Chavis 1986: 9). Therefore, 'leaving a community is emotionally traumatic' (Fernback and Thompson 1995).

Apart from a shared culture and mutual commitment, some authors stress the importance of associated 'community behaviors' (Blanchard and Markus 2004). These include the exchange of support (Driskell and Lyon 2002: 377; Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004b: 5; Nieckarz 2005: 408; Willson 2006: 28), as well as attempts to attain and maintain group intimacy (Watson 1997: 110; cf. Nieckarz, 2005: 407). Symbolic boundaries are considered crucial to community (Cohen 1985: 12-3), and

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these can give rise to practices of inclusion and exclusion, conformity to common rules (Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004b: 5; cf. Papadakis 2003: 9) and 'conduct-policing' (Watson 1997: 111). Finally, Papadakis (2003: 9) adds 'collective action' to characteristic community behaviors.

It cannot be overstressed that these different elements of community will not be used as a checklist to determine whether the forums at hand qualify as true communities or not; this literature review merely serves to sensitize my research to various aspects of togetherness. I will keep an open eye for qualitative differences pertaining to one and the same element of community: aspects such as a sense of belonging or affect-laden relationships might, for instance, be differently articulated among different groups of forum users who have different reasons for participation, indicating different types of virtual togetherness. Moreover, Brint has argued that researchers should adopt a 'disaggregating' approach: an aggregated concept of community should be abandoned by 'separating out variable aspects of social relations from the larger concept in which they were embedded' (2001: 5), since 'the obvious difficulty with [an aggregating] approach is that these qualities do not necessarily line up together on one side of the conceptual divide' (idem: 3). Such a disaggregating approach seems advisable for my research, as it might enable me to uncover different types of virtual togetherness consisting of different configurations of the various elements that are commonly lumped together under the community label.

Understanding togetherness through qualitative methods

Which methods are suited to study virtual togetherness along the lines sketched above? Various scholars whose work relates to the online community question make use of quantitative network analyses (e.g. Bambina 2007; Chau and Xu 2007; Reid and Chen 2007). Although this is quite common, I refrain from using this method. I will discuss one extreme example in detail of a study on the online community question that employs network analysis in order to make clear why my research question needs to be answered with different methods.

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Chau and Xu set out to study virtual communities that are conceptualized roughly in line with the literature discussed above. They speak of '*virtual communities*' which involve the social interaction between members characterized by memberships, sense of belonging, relationships, shared values and practices, and self-regulation' (2007: 58-9, italics in original) and claim that an 'analysis of the connections between bloggers could (...) identify these virtual communities, their characteristics, and their relationships' (idem: 59). However, closer scrutiny makes clear that their method is fundamentally unable to determine the presence of the characteristics of community that make up their conceptualization. They explain the rationale underlying their method as follows:

'(...) find a set of core pages containing both authoritative and hub pages for a specific topic. The core is a directed bipartite subgraph whose node set is divided into two sets with all hub pages in one set and authoritative pages in the other. *The core and the other related pages constitute a Web community (...). Treating the Web as a large graph, the problem of community identification can also be formulated as a minimum-cut problem*, which finds clusters of roughly equal sizes while minimizing the number of links between clusters' (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

The main problem haunting this method is that network ties do not necessarily indicate a sense of belonging or shared values and practices. Without additional research by means of methods that take the understandings of those involved into account, it is simply impossible to determine the meaning of ties that are uncovered by means of a quantitative network analysis. On what ground would one be able to decide whether 'the core and the other related pages' indeed constitute a community as conceptualized above? After all, the networks that are uncovered could signify a wide range of different relations. Who decides whether ties in a network stand for support, information sharing, hostilities or something else? Obviously, studies like Chau and Xu's (2007) rest upon an incredible degree of over-

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interpretation by the researchers. In fact, they unintentionally provide Anderson's (1983) notion of 'imagined communities' with a new meaning.

While one can of course reflect on the risk of over-interpreting the meaning of hyperlinks (e.g. Friedman 2007: 807-8), it constitutes a problem that cannot be solved satisfactorily in the light of the research question at hand. This means that network analysis is not an apt method for my research. What is needed instead are methods that take the experiences and understandings of those involved into account. Whereas this means that in principle surveys could be used, such a standardized research method does not fit the explorative character of my research. Instead, I make use of qualitative content analysis as well as online and face-to-face interviews, as these methods allow inductive exploration of the experiences and understandings of those involved. Below I will elaborate on my use of these methods one after another, including a discussion of issues of ethics and validity.

Forum messages as data: qualitative content analysis

The forums under scrutiny all have a substantial number of members who have posted a large number of messages. At the time of the data collection over 224 thousand messages had been posted in approximately 19 thousand threads on *Stormfront*, while *RefoAnders* had nearly 300 registered members who had together posted over 20 thousand messages, and *Flitsservice* had over 10 thousand members who had submitted around one million contributions to the forum. These postings are all automatically archived, and this means that a rich source of data is available online.

In each of the three case studies, these naturally occurring conversations were used for an explorative analysis. These analyses enabled me to familiarize myself with the forums and their populations, which was very helpful in establishing and maintaining contacts with forum members throughout my research. Familiarity with the prevailing codes of conduct of the forum population under scrutiny is very important: there is much evidence that online participants react negatively toward researchers who do not understand their cultural codes (Maczewski et al. 2004: 72).

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Moreover, the explorative analyses helped me to develop some crude theoretical ideas that could be explored in the remainder of my research.

In the first case study, which focuses on *Stormfront*, I have extended my explorative content analysis into a more thorough interpretative analysis (Hijmans 1996) of the messages on the forum. I have selected messages by means of relevance sampling (Krippendorff 2004: 118-20): I have analyzed those forum messages that contain information relevant to answering my research question. Instead of addressing all postings (which would be practically impossible) or drawing a random sample from these, I have studied postings in which members address their extreme right identity, their offline experiences and actions relating to this identity, their motives for participation in *Stormfront*, and the way they experience *Stormfront*.

Naturally, if data are gathered on online forums, harm to individual users or the group as a whole should be avoided (Eysenbach and Till 2001; King 1996). However, the need to obtain informed consent for the use of these data is under debate (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 461), and this discussion revolves around one key question: 'A fundamental issue is whether these venues are to be considered public or private. If they are public, the archived responses of individuals may be construed to be matters of public record, and few ethical considerations apply when the records of these responses are used in research. If web-based venues are private, however, individuals' responses may be privileged and protected' (Pace and Livingston 2005: 35; cf. Garcia et al. 2009: 75; Lawson 2004).

Some argue that messages posted on Internet forums are 'public acts deliberately intended for public consumption' (Paccagnella 1997), and that 'it needs to be remembered that people who interact in public, archived forums are aware that their online discourse can be widely accessed' (Wojcieszak 2010: 652). To say the least, it is doubtful that such categorical statements hold for all online venues (cf. Sveningsson 2004: 57), and therefore it is not surprising that others find it difficult to determine whether communications on online forums are to be regarded as private or public (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2000: 234; Eysenbach and Till 2001: 1105). Still others embrace a perspective that practically precludes the use of forum

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messages: 'The early online data rush which treated every content found on the Net as open to downloading, analyzing and quoting has been countered by an ethical perfectionism leaving almost no space for research on virtual forums' (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2000: 233).

Since discussions of ethics are, of course, held because of the responsibility to protect the subjects involved, it seems self-evident to pay attention to their understandings instead of engaging in abstract discussions about the question of whether interactions in online settings are public or private (see Cavanagh 1999; Lawson 2004; Sixsmith and Murray 2001: 427; Waskul and Douglass 1996 for similar arguments). This means that no universal guidelines can be formulated and that ethical decisions must be made for each study separately. Aspiring to take the members of online forums seriously, King (1996) distinguishes two aspects of online groups that are vital in determining the need for informed consent.

The first is 'group accessibility', which is about the actual anonymity of an online group, and indicates 'the degree with which the existence of and access to a particular Internet forum or community is publicly available information'. Group accessibility is lower – and the need for informed consent higher – if procedures like registration are required to gain access to the messages on a forum (cf. Ess and Jones 2004: 31; Eysenbach and Till 2001; Pace and Livingston 2005: 38).

Since 'there is a distinction between *being* anonymous and *feeling* anonymous' (Kennedy 2006: 870, emphasis in original) it would be 'ethically dangerous' (Waskul and Douglass 1996: 132) to base an evaluation of members' understandings of the public or private nature of an online venue solely on its accessibility. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to 'perceived privacy' as well. This denotes 'the degree to which group members perceive their messages to be private to that group' (King 1996). If the perceived privacy in a group is higher, there is a greater need to protect the participants' privacy (Ess and Jones 2004: 33). Attention has to be paid to indications of perceived privacy in the content of the forum messages, which can, for instance, be inferred from members' tolerance for 'lurkers'²¹ (Cavanagh 1999). Besides, the number of users of a forum is important. If ten people use a forum, the perceived privacy, and therefore the need for informed

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consent, is probably higher than in the case of hundred or thousand users (Eysenbach and Till 2001: 1104; cf. Waskul and Douglass 1996: 133) – an expectation that has been corroborated by empirical research on chatrooms (Hudson and Bruckman 2004: 138).

Stormfront is characterized by a high level of accessibility. The forum is well known, the messages can be read by anyone – including non-members – and these are indexed by Internet search engines. The perceived privacy on the forum is very low. The users explicitly indicate that they are aware that non-members with diverse backgrounds read the postings on the forum. Furthermore, the number of users online is high at any moment – during my data collection on this forum the number of users online averaged at about one hundred.²² Therefore, I did not regard it necessary to obtain informed consent for the use of *Stormfront's* forum messages in my qualitative content analysis. Moreover, in this case I consider replacing usernames with pseudonyms (see e.g. Baym 2000; Blevins and Holt 2009; Carter 2005; Kendall 2002; Sixsmith and Murray 2001: 427-8) neither necessary nor useful, as all messages can be easily retrieved with the help of a search engine. These ethical decisions are supported by approval of the forum's moderators, as well as by the fact that no complaints were uttered by forum members when my publications on *Stormfront* (De Koster and Houtman 2006, 2008) were discussed on the forum.

In my case study of *RefoAnders* I have considered the same criteria of group accessibility and perceived privacy to determine my course of action. Although permission was obtained from the forum administrator to conduct an explorative content analysis of the forum and various members invited me to read their postings, I have decided not to present a content analysis of *RefoAnders* because of ethical concerns. Specific members cannot give informed consent on behalf of other members (cf. Sixsmith and Murray 2001: 426), and the criteria discussed above suggest it is best not to disclose forum conversations to the outside world. First, group accessibility is presently low: when I began my study of *RefoAnders* the forum consisted of a publicly accessible part and a part that was visible only to forum members, but the entire forum is currently restricted to members only.²³ Second,

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for some members the perceived privacy on the forum is high. This does not, however, mean that I rely on impoverished data in my case study of *RefoAnders* as compared to the first one: I was able to conduct more interviews with members of this forum than with participants in *Stormfront*, and I have participated in offline meetings organized by *RefoAnders*'s forum members (see below).

In contrast to *RefoAnders*, *Flitsservice*'s group accessibility is high, and the perceived privacy online is low. Its formal disclaimer states that the forum is freely accessible to anyone, the forum is well-known and has a very high number of members, and members indicate that they are aware that non-members frequently read the forum. This situation resembles the one on *Stormfront*, but nevertheless I have decided not to conduct a systematic qualitative content analysis beyond my initial explorative analysis of *Flitsservice*'s forum. In the case of *Stormfront* the interpretive content analysis I conducted is important as a form of triangulation – I could only conduct a modest number of interviews with *Stormfront*'s members, which were all held online (see below). In the case of *Flitsservice*, however, I can rely on nearly twice as many interviews, most of which were conducted face-to-face. Besides, my explorative content analysis indicated that postings on *Flitsservice*'s forum contain less information on members' motives for participation than contributions to *Stormfront* do. Thus, triangulation is less important than in the case of *Stormfront*, and the time it would take to conduct an intensive qualitative content analysis most likely outweighs the insights it would yield.

Beyond data-harvest: the importance of in-depth interviews

Obviously it is very tempting for anyone interested in studying online sociality to rely on forum messages that are freely available online. What more could a researcher wish for than such neatly stacked piles of data? Therefore it is not surprising that many studies solely analyze online messages (see e.g. Bambina 2007; Blevins and Holt 2009; Mowlabocus 2008; Papacharissi 2009; Preece 1999; Ward 1999a).²⁴ While I make use of qualitative content analysis myself, I think it is important not to limit research on virtual togetherness to the study of online texts.

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Leaving ethical issues related to the study of forum messages aside, I have held in-depth interviews in all three case studies because this comes with several advantages.

Interviews enabled me to systematically explore all issues of interest to my research question without being dependent on what was accidentally discussed in fragmented naturally occurring forum conversations (cf. Ross 2007: 311; Ward 1999a: 102). This seems all the more important given my interest in the relationship between online and offline social life: studying this relationship solely by means of an analysis of online postings would rest on the assumption that forum members extensively discuss their offline as well as their online experiences on the forum. Besides, interviews are important for a more substantive reason: they allow better access to forum members' understandings of online and offline social life. Because interview respondents can be asked to explain their answers, less interpretation on the side of the researcher is needed than in the case of an analysis of online texts (cf. Baym 2006: 85).

The intensive in-depth interviews I conducted had an open character that fits well with my aim to construct empirically grounded theoretical insights: during the interviews respondents were encouraged to speak freely, while it was insured that certain themes were addressed in each interview (cf. Charmaz 2006: 28-35). The explorative qualitative content analyses supported the interviews in two respects. First, they provided some sensitizing theoretical ideas that were explored in the interviews. Second, they enabled a detailed discussion of the forum and the togetherness constructed there: because the content analyses had familiarized me with the forums and their participants I was able to understand what people told me, and I could provide examples of forum discussions and ask for reflection on these.

All my data are in Dutch, and I have translated all quotes presented throughout the book into English, both quotes from forum messages and from interviews. In doing so, I have tried to reflect the original wording as accurately as possible – just like the transcription of most conversations, this sometimes results in

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sentences that are not entirely fluent. Forum messages are distinguished from the interview data by italicizing the usernames accompanying quotes from the forum.

Contacts with the research population

On all three forums I have posted a call for participation in order to recruit respondents. It is sometimes suggested to approach forum members individually instead (Meho 2006: 1291), but I opted for general calls for participation because individual requests can be experienced as intrusive. However, I did get in touch with individual members if people expressed interest in my research without contacting me directly, for instance through a posting in a thread in which my research was discussed. Naturally, I only posted my calls for participation after the administrators of the forums had given permission to do so (cf. Broad and Joos 2004: 932; Forster 2001; Hamilton and Bowers 2006: 825; Marshall 2007: 8). In contrast to a disproportionate number of covert research projects in Internet studies (see Murthy 2008: 839-41), I have been fully open about my identity as a researcher and the goal of my project from the outset of my research. The calls for participation served as an important means to share information about my professional background and my research.

First of all, I used these to explain the goal of my research and the reason why I aimed to conduct interviews with forum members (cf. Meho 2006: 1291-2). Moreover, I stressed that I would ensure confidentiality and that I would present my data anonymously (all respondents have been assigned fictitious names). I added that I not only did so because of my own ethical evaluation, but also because I am bound to the professional code of conduct of the *Dutch Sociological Association*, to which I provided a link.²⁵ My contribution containing my call for participation evoked replies on each forum, and in the discussion that evolved I provided additional information. Elaborating on my original posting I, for instance, reassured various members that I only acted because of a scholarly interest and that I would not present any normative evaluations of the forum or its population. My care for

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respondents' privacy and my responses to their inquiries proved helpful to convince some forum members who hesitated at first.

Apart from providing substantive information, I used the calls for participation to provide some information about myself as a researcher. As I would ask people to share their personal experiences with me, I considered it appropriate to introduce myself under my full name and to use a photograph of myself as an avatar.²⁶ Moreover, I provided a link to my website, so that interested forum members could read about my career, research interests and previous research (cf. Carter 2005: 153; Garcia et al. 2009: 72; Hine 2000: 73). This was important because an 'atmosphere of suspicion' could arise if 'faceless researchers contact participants' (Mann and Stewart 2000: 136), and it has proven a successful way to build rapport (cf. Kazmer and Xie 2008: 271). Not only did various forum members appreciate some of my other projects, which may well have contributed to their constructive attitude, several respondents also indicated that an important incentive to participate in my research was my openness in an otherwise anonymous environment. One of them, for example, told me that he felt less inhibited to engage in an interview about his online and offline experiences because I had provided my full name and a photograph online. Combined with my above-mentioned sensitivity to concerns about value judgments and issues of privacy, my self-disclosure enabled me to recruit a substantial number of respondents (see below for details).²⁷ My careful course of action seems especially fruitful as many other scholars had little success when they tried to recruit respondents in online settings (see Garcia et al. 2009: 68 for some examples) – Hine (2000: 78), an authority in the field of online research, even states that a 'lack of response is fairly typical' in case of online requests for research participation.

My elaboration on issues of privacy and the rapport built with forum members throughout my research not only enabled me to collect a sufficient amount of rich data, but also contributed to the validity of these data. During the interviews – at the start of which I repeated my promise of confidentiality and anonymity and gave respondents the opportunity to ask for additional information about my project – members of all forums shared sensitive information with me, which

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indicates they did not feel inhibited to express themselves freely. Some details members of *Stormfront* told me could, for instance, be harmful to them if these were made public, and others indicated that they were happy that they were 'finally' able to discuss their experiences with an interested, non-biased outsider. Moreover, various members of *RefoAnders* told me emotional stories they had shared with very few other people, and several members of *Flitsservice* spoke of certain matters while it was not in their interest to share these with an outsider. Such information was not directly relevant to my research question and I do not present information that is harmful to my respondents. However, the fact that they felt not inhibited from sharing this information with me is indicative of the atmosphere of frankness that characterized the interviews.

Furthermore, positive evaluations of the interviews were common. Members of *Stormfront* indicated they found the interview 'well constructed' (Peter) and 'interesting' (Barend). My 'neutral point of view' (Ron) was praised, and one member told me that the 'best of it' was that 'it was not a standard survey but actual probing, and you seemed genuinely interested' (Dirk). This was important for others as well, who said that 'it was nice to be able to talk with someone directly' (Joop) and that it was 'pleasant to do, and fascinating to reflect on matters that [seem] self-evident' (Herman). Members of *RefoAnders* were enthusiastic as well. They observed that 'we have had a splendid conversation' (Hans), in which they were 'inspired to think things through' (Harry), and that I 'treated matters exhaustively' (Albert), with 'a great deal of attention' (Hans), which made them feel that they 'could tell much about their experiences' (Menno). Respondents recruited on *Flitsservice* also evaluated the interview positively. They were 'pleasantly surprised' (Herbert) and spoke of 'a good interview, with clear questions, and good probing as well' which enabled them to tell their story (Diederik), and they, too, found it 'very enjoyable' (Nick) and 'interesting and instructive' to be 'forced to contemplate matters you would otherwise not think through' (Ralph).

These reflections on the interviews are not only important because they suggest that people were willing to provide genuine, in-depth accounts of their experiences, motives, and understandings, but also because their positive

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experiences were helpful in recruiting new respondents. Various respondents stated online that they had enjoyed their interviews, and as a result forum members who had not yet participated in my research got curious about it. They were eager to learn more about the interviews, and some of them applied for one as a result. Furthermore, a few respondents who had enjoyed their interview were willing to bring me in contact with other potential participants. However, only in one case did this lead to an additional interview. As such, there was only a very small element of snowball sampling in my research. Given my aim to inductively explore different types of togetherness, this is a good thing: spontaneous reactions to an open call for participation most likely result in a more diverse research population than referrals by respondents do.

Interviews online and off

Having elaborated on the interviews and my recruiting strategy in general terms, it is time to discuss the specific interviews that were held in the three case studies. In the first one, which addresses *Stormfront*, forum members were initially very concerned about their privacy, and to overcome this problem online instead of face-to-face interviews were used. This worked out well: my respondents, for instance, stated that 'the interview is well designed, especially regarding privacy' (Arjan). Eventually, eleven members agreed to be interviewed online. Seven of them were between sixteen and twenty years of age, two between twenty and thirty, and two older than thirty. *Stormfront* seems to be frequented mainly by men, but women participate in the forum as well. Nevertheless, all respondents are male.

I inquired after their ideology and identity, their related experiences and actions in offline life, their motives for their online participation, and their experiences on the forum and the meanings they attach to it. These interviews have been conducted using software for synchronous communication, since this is most apt for non-standardized online interviews (cf. Wenjing 2005: 398). Instant messaging software is to be preferred above asynchronous interaction – for instance through e-mail – for two reasons. First, asynchronous interviews tend to become

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structured around interviewer's questions and to become too formal (Hodkinson 2000, cited in Mann and Stewart 2000: 76–77), while 'the ad hoc conversational nature of [instant messaging] interviews lets them resemble oral interviews. As a result, developing emergent probes in [instant messaging] interviews can be easier than in email' (Kazmer and Xie 2008: 259; see also Meho 2006: 1290 who lists the lack of direct probing in email interviews as an important disadvantage of that method). Second, due to its conversational nature it is easier to build rapport through instant messaging than by means of asynchronous communication (cf. Bowker and Tuffin 2004: 235). Respondents who preferred the asynchronous personal message service of *Stormfront* for reasons of privacy were persuaded to be interviewed by means of instant messaging software by explaining that my research was served most by in-depth interviews resembling conversations instead of surveys.

A practical objection to online interviews as compared to face-to-face interviews is that people might give shorter answers in conversations that are slower (Ayling and Mewse 2009: 567; cf. Schneider et al. 2002: 39), because typing costs more time and effort than speaking (Kazmer and Xie 2008: 265; cf. Meho 2006: 1289). Besides, it can be difficult to respond to unforeseen turns in the interview (see for many examples Markham 1998), and a lack of physical cues can make it hard to indicate that one is paying attention to a respondent's words (Vaida et al. 2004) – silence on part of the researcher can be wrongly interpreted as indifference (Mann and Stewart 2000: 140). Whereas this latter problem can easily be avoided by expressing interest 'as words, not silence' (Mann and Stewart 2000: 141), the other problems seem more persistent. Therefore it is unsurprising that the experiences of researchers using online methods are mixed (compare, for instance, those of Ayling and Mewse 2009, Kivits 2005 or Vaida et al. 2004 with those of Sanders 2005). Because all my respondents cooperated wholeheartedly, these practical problems could be overcome in my research, and it was possible to extensively address all of the themes mentioned above. The shortest interview lasted no less than almost two hours, while various respondents spent much more time during several sessions.

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Not only did I not experience problems related to my interviews through instant messaging software, the application of online interviews also has an important advantage in itself. Research shows that people tend to reveal more about themselves if they are engaged in computer-mediated communication instead of face-to-face interactions, especially when dealing with sensitive information (Joinson 2005; Madge and O'Connor 2002: 98; Meho 2006: 1289; Schneider et al. 2002: 34). Therefore, the use of online interviews is extra helpful when dealing with participants who were initially reluctant to participate because of concerns about their privacy.

In my case studies of *RefoAnders* and *Flitsservice*, forum members considered it important to safeguard their privacy as well, but in contrast to my study of *Stormfront*, this did not rule out face-to-face interviews. While recruiting respondents on these forums I expressed a preference for face-to-face interviews²⁸ – after all, these fit my research best, as they are more likely to yield rich data and offer the best conditions for in-depth understanding by means of probing. However, for some respondents I could only assure their participation in my study if other means of communication were used. In these instances I did not insist on using a uniform method of data collection (as some scholars do, see e.g. Crowley 2007: 622), and I adapted myself to the situation instead (cf. Kazmer and Xie 2008: 273).

During the interviews I conducted in my case study of *RefoAnders*, attention was paid to respondents' experiences pertaining to their sexuality and religiosity in offline life, the reasons for their online participation, their experiences on the forum, and the meanings they attach to it. I have conducted fifteen interviews with forum members of *RefoAnders*, thirteen of which were held face-to-face and two through instant messaging software (one of these because of practical reasons and the other one because of privacy concerns). Because the respondents put in a lot of effort, these online interviews were as extensive as the other ones. One interview took one hour, whereas all others lasted between one and a half and three and a half hours. Nine of my respondents were in their mid-twenties or early thirties, and six were in their forties or fifties. Men are overrepresented on the forum of *RefoAnders*, and this is reflected in my sample: fourteen of my respondents are male, one is female.²⁹

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My interviews with members of *Flitsservice* revolved around respondents' motives for their online participation, their actions and experiences in offline life that are related to it, their experiences on the forum, and the meanings they attach to the forum. I interviewed twenty-one of *Flitsservice's* forum members, and seventeen of these interviews were held face-to-face. Because of practical reasons three were held by telephone, and one was conducted by means of instant messaging software. The telephone interviews yielded rich data similar to the data provided by the face-to-face interviews. The online interview was the only interview in my entire study that was somewhat disappointing; whereas its contents theoretically resemble those of other interviews with members of *Flitsservice*, this particular online interview was of modest use as the respondent was inclined to provide rather brief answers (see chapter seven for a *post hoc* reflection on the circumstances under which online interviews are a method to be preferred). Most interviews took between one and two hours; the shortest one was finished after one hour, while the longest interview lasted for three and a half hours. Seven of the members of *Flitsservice* I interviewed were younger than thirty, ten were between thirty and forty, and four were between forty and fifty. More men than women are active on *Flitsservice*, and this is reflected in my pool of respondents: nineteen of them are male, and two female.

Apart from their online interactions, members of all three forums also organize offline meetings among themselves. Although Bambina (2007: 18), who merely relies on a selection of messages on a single forum, maintains the contrary, such meetings of forum members are quite common (see Sessions 2010 for a literature review, and see Kendall 2002; Marshall 2007: 43, 241ff. and Tuszynski 2008: 6 for examples). During the course of my research on *RefoAnders* I was invited by various forum members to join their meetings and so-called 'living-room gatherings' – the former involve recreational activities in public settings, while the latter take place in a room rented especially for this purpose. I gladly accepted these invitations, and the insights I gained at a collective bowling session, dinners and the like validated my interview findings. Nevertheless, I decided not to quote the conversations at these gatherings, because forum members understood these as

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private. Trying to attend such meetings was not feasible in the case of *Stormfront* due to forum members' concerns about their privacy. During my research on *Flitsservice* it was suggested that I could organize a meeting myself, but I eventually did not do so, because this would resemble a focus group interview instead of a regular meeting, while I could already draw upon a large number of interviews in which respondents extensively discussed their meetings.

Validity of data gathered online: fake identities and deception?

The overview of my research methods presented above indicates that some of the data my study relies on have been gathered online. Although the use of such data is widespread in Internet studies, it merits some additional attention in terms of validity. This most strongly applies to my case study of *Stormfront*, as this one completely relies on a content analysis of forum messages and online interviews.

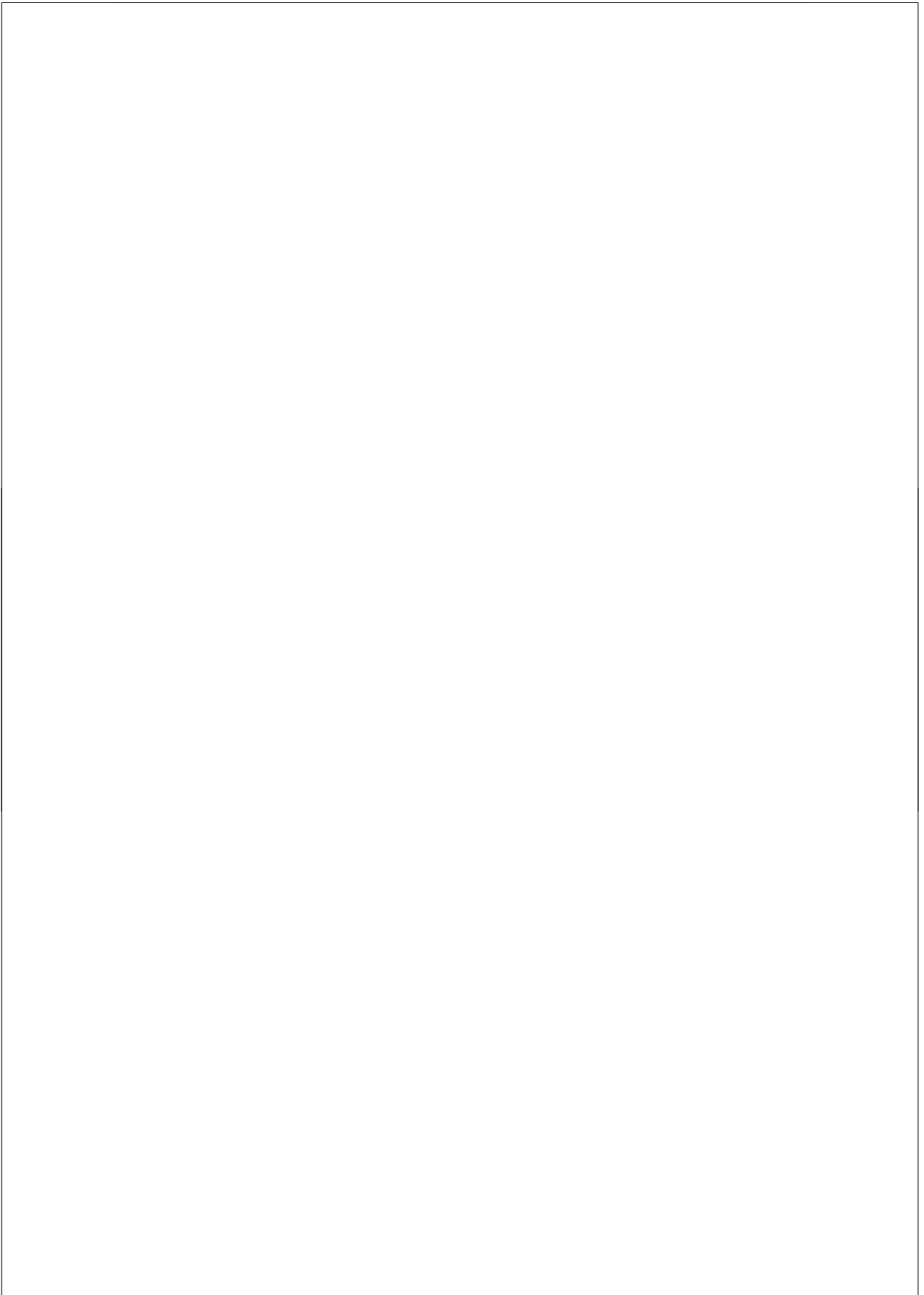
Concerns about data that are collected online exist because people might use the anonymity provided by online environments to adopt 'false' identities (cf. Green 2007). The possibility that respondents could engage in 'data fraud' (Hamilton and Bowers 2006: 824) by exploiting the anonymity of the Internet to mislead the researcher would make it difficult to assess the validity of data obtained by means of online interviews or retrieved from a forum (Garcia et al. 2009: 68; Hamilton and Bowers 2006: 824; Hine 2000: 22; Jacobson 1999: 133; Mann and Stewart 2000: 208; Pace and Livingston 2005: 37; White 2002: 260-2). Turkle (1995: 324) evades this problem by only reporting findings based on data collected among people she has met in person. Such a form of triangulation was not possible in my research on *Stormfront*, however, because my respondents proved anxious about protecting their privacy, a circumstance that made even the arrangement of online interviews a delicate operation. Had I insisted on personal interviews, it is almost certain that many of my respondents would have withdrawn.

Despite my reliance on data gathered online, I am convinced that these are valid. Apart from studies suggesting that conscious deception of researchers is very unusual (Mann and Stewart 2000: 212), my confidence is based on the fact that I

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could generally trace back participants' forum messages for years, indicating not only a high level of activity during a prolonged period, but also coherence as well as consistency with the interview data. Generally, 'internal consistency over a period of time leads one to trust that [a respondent] is not lying' (Seidman 2006: 25). Moreover, it seems very unlikely that people would invest so much time and effort in maintaining a trustworthy fake identity – something that would be very difficult to achieve anyway (Ayling and Mewse 2009: 573; Mann and Stewart 2000: 214; Van den Boomen 2004: 144). Furthermore, the synchronous nature of the interviews supports the validity of the data. Since people have less time to edit and review their synchronous communications as compared to asynchronous communications (Ayling and Mewse 2009: 566-7; Joinson 2005: 32; Kazmer and Xie 2008: 269-70; Meho 2006: 1292), the maintenance of a 'false' identity is more difficult to achieve.

Having discussed my research design and methods, it is now time to turn to the case studies themselves. In the next chapter my analysis of *Stormfront* is presented.



Chapter 3

'Stormfront is like a second home to me'

A virtual refuge for Dutch right-wing extremists

Introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, I will start my empirical research with an analysis of the Dutch branch of 'Stormfront White Nationalist Community', the best-known online forum for right-wing extremists of the world (Burris et al. 2000; Reid and Chen, 2007; Wojcieszak 2010; Zhou et al. 2005). Now, why did I select this forum as the starting point of my series of case studies? Naturally, many other forums could have been selected instead, but for several reasons this one is an apt choice.

As explained in chapter two, my serial case selection is inspired by an aim to keep an open eye for the way in which members' identities are relevant to the togetherness they seek and construct online. With such a point of departure, it seems best to take as a first case a forum formed around a clear-cut social identity. After all, virtual togetherness is considered to somehow rest upon online interactions pertaining to a collectively shared identity, and starting my explorative endeavor focusing on a forum revolving around a well-defined one prevents premature complexity. Against this background, *Stormfront* is exactly what is needed. Obviously, other Dutch forums may meet the above-mentioned criterion as well, but research on the online participation of right-wing extremists promises to be fruitful for an additional reason: virtual community features as a prominent theme in the scholarly literature on right-wing extremists, and the way in which it is approached reflects some of the problems in the more general literature on the online community question discussed in chapter one.

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Academic interest in right-wing extremism on the Internet has increased significantly since roughly the year 2000. Its strong focus on the role of the Internet in disseminating right-wing extremism has yielded insights into the ideological contents and structure of online networks (see Adams and Roscigno 2005; Caiani and Wagemann 2009; Duffy 2003; Gerstenfeld et al. 2003; Levin 2002; Schafer 2002; Tateo 2005; Thiesmeyer 1999; Whine 2000), but despite widespread claims about the existence of virtual communities, the social significance of online extremist forums for those involved is still far from clear. There has been a call for 'more systematic studies (...) to explore [extremist] groups' utilization of the web to form virtual communities' (Reid and Chen 2007: 178), and this 'fundamental question' (idem: 178) has been open since it was put on the research agenda as 'a worthwhile subject for further research' by Burris et al. quite some time ago (2000: 232; cf. Caiani and Wagemann 2009).

Although many scholars assume a sense of community on right-wing extremist online venues, this has not yet been systematically studied. In her analysis of the features of online neo-Nazi rhetoric Thiesmeyer (1999), for instance, asserts that a sense of community is present among members of extreme right-wing websites. However, this is neither demonstrated nor analyzed. And examining the rhetorical content of extremist sites, Duffy (2003) presumes a virtual sense of community as well, although this is not part of her analysis.

A common problem affecting this literature is that scholars do not take the perspectives of the participants in online venues into account. As a result, no theoretical understanding of the virtual togetherness sought or constructed by right-wing extremists has been obtained. Scholars, for instance, simply infer a sense of community from the presence of certain features of a website, such as 'imagery and icons' (Hara and Estrada 2005: 508; see also Thompson 2001). Others suggest that the mere presence of interactive features on online venues provides evidence for the existence of virtual communities, irrespective of the actual use of these features (Reid and Chen 2007; Zhou et al. 2005). Scholars also rely on network analyses of extreme right-wing online venues to 'identify communities' (Chau and Xu 2007: 59; cf. Reid and Chen 2007; Zhou et al. 2005), even though these are not

suited to acquire an understanding of virtual togetherness, as argued in chapter two. Moreover, if contents of right-wing extremist websites are analyzed, attention is usually paid to those created by the administrators of these sites (e.g. Hara and Estrada 2005; Reid and Chen 2007; Thiesmeyer 1999). Because the communications of individual users are clearly of most importance for the study of virtual togetherness, this is not a satisfactory approach either. And, ironically, in the exceptional case that participants in right-wing extremist web forums are interviewed (Glaser et al. 2002), this does not concern their online experiences: the Internet is merely used for contacting right-wing extremists in order to study their ideas about interracial violence.³⁰

Because of the research methods that dominate this field, the lack of attention to offline social life that characterizes the more general literature on the online community question is present here as well. Employing content and network analyses of websites, studies addressing a sense of community among right-wing extremists focus almost exclusively on the online context. This bias toward the virtual hampers the development of explanatory theory.

In short, a theoretical understanding of virtual togetherness among right-wing extremists remains lacking, but the fact that scholars studying the extreme right frequently speak of virtual communities suggests that some sort of meaningful virtual togetherness is to be found on *Stormfront*. This adds strength to my idea that *Stormfront* is a suitable case to start my series of inductive case studies aimed at acquiring understanding of virtual togetherness in relation to offline social life.

Taking seriously the need to systematically study the online and offline experiences of those involved, I start the analysis of *Stormfront* with an overview of the identities presented online. Then I pay attention to participants' experiences in offline social life. Subsequently, their reasons for participation as well as their online experiences are analyzed in relation to those offline. In the final section I reflect on the implications of my findings.

Identities presented online

The postings on the forum as well as the interviews point out that members of *Stormfront* have great troubles with contemporary western society. They all abhor its lack of shared moral guidelines and the individualism and cultural disorder that arise from this condition. On the forum, *Ridder in de Orde van Cicero* summarizes the members' common view as follows:

'Since (...) the nineteen sixties our leftist 'comrades' have brutally disrupted our cultural traditions. These 'liberal leftists' ridiculed family life and made many assaults on European traditions and customs. (...) We West Europeans have become alienated from our magnificent age-old cultural customs and traditional values. Instead, we were forced to deal with demo-liberalism, feminism, homosexuality, capitalism, paedophilia, multiculturalism and multiracialism'.

'Thanks to the social democrats, who have been in power for ages, anything goes. The Netherlands have become a giant mess since the nineteen seventies' states *Siegheiligman*, and *d0gZ* experiences cultural disorder in the Netherlands today, too: 'I do not hate races because they are lower. I hate them because they kill my culture.' This diagnosis of culture is inextricably intertwined with the extreme right identity of those involved. Six of the respondents describe themselves primarily as 'nationalist', one as 'extreme right', and four as 'national socialist'. This is in line with the characterization of *Stormfront* by moderator *Heidens Bloed* as 'a Nationalist or National-Socialist site'.

The members of *Stormfront* are strongly attached to the ideology that lies at the core of their identity. As Herman states it: 'My vision is reflected in every aspect of my daily life. It is not something I can set aside just like that, it is a feeling like the deepest and greatest love'. This idea is shared by many others, like Joop: 'My outlook on society is a very important part of my personality. And I act according to it'. For this reason, they are primarily active on *Stormfront* and not on other well-known

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right-wing forums. *Stormfront* is frequently characterized as a 'serious' forum that features profound discussions, whereas other popular Dutch extreme right forums are perceived as more childish and merely provocative. Dedicated members of *Stormfront* are even offended when they are not distinguished from visitors of the latter forums: '[these people] deprive nationalist right of any chance of being taken seriously because of their absurdly childish behavior' (Herman). They are considered 'brainless and stupid' (Dirk): '[they] don't know what they are talking about (...) and their ignorance harms our image' (Arjan). In line with this opinion, members of *Stormfront* who do visit other forums seem to prefer small and deeply ideological forums, among which the national-socialist 'Grossdeutsches Vaterland' is referred to most frequently.

Members of *Stormfront* express their attachment to their extreme right ideology in several ways online. First, usernames are chosen to reflect their views. Telling examples are *AryanMaster*, *KaKaKa* (a phonetic acronym of Ku Klux Klan), *HHakenKKKruiSS* (meaning *Swastika* and containing acronyms of 'Heil Hitler', 'Ku Klux Klan', and 'Schutzstaffel'), *Moslimhater* (meaning 'Hater of Muslims'), and *Zyklon_B*. Others bear names provided with a numerical code – '88', which stands for 'Heil Hitler', is especially popular. Examples are *Devil88lady* and *skinhead-88*. Many other members are active under less extreme names, but nevertheless use these to express the ideology they adhere to. Especially if the context is taken into account, names like *dutchNLpride*, *NationalistNL*, *WhiteDutchman*, and 'white and proud of it' leave little to the imagination. Members of *Stormfront* obviously acknowledge themselves, too, that usernames like these express an extreme right identity. *Dux Bellorum* writes 'You can choose that name (...) yourself, it CONVEYS something about you', while *HHakenKKKruiSS* explains his choice for this name by stating 'It makes immediately clear what I stand for, doesn't it?'

Members have the opportunity to place 'avatars' next to their usernames. These, too, are used to express an extreme right-wing identity, as a rule by means of historical nationalist or national-socialist symbols. As *Alfred Rosenberg* remarks: 'it goes without saying that [members] often have avatars of people or things that mean much to their ideology.' Many of these consist of the Dutch national flag and

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references to national-socialist Germany, the 'white power' movement, and the Dutch National-Socialist Movement. Many members also emphasize their ideology by means of a 'signature', a text placed automatically underneath all of one's messages. Signatures consist of quotes of Hitler, praise for the political leaders of national-socialist Germany, or slogans such as 'Own people first!! Down with multiculturalism!!!' and 'WHITE POWER!!!'.

In short, members of *Stormfront* are characterized by a deeply entrenched extreme right-wing ideology which they display online. What are participants' experiences relating to their extremist identity in offline social life? This will be discussed below.

'We are a threatened species, and the hunt is open': offline stigmatization

'Why are you a dirty Nazi?': negative reactions in everyday life

Many contributors to the forum indicate that their right-wing extremist identities meet with strong condemnation by people in their social surroundings. For several members, this even applies to their small family circle:

'My family from my mother's side, which I meet daily, is left or extreme left. Of course, you understand that these people look upon me askance. At every family party people come to ask me: "why are you a dirty Nazi?"' (*ElInherjar88(vl)*).

Members of *Stormfront* who still attend school are confronted with negative reactions there too:

'A friend of mine and I, who are in the same class, are constantly punished and abused by teachers when we make no secret of our

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rightist ideas, whereas we always express ourselves quietly and politely. We should not be punished, for it is our right to express our opinions, and schools ought to be neutral' (*Dorien_14*).³¹

Members who have a paid job experience the same difficulties, but often with more serious consequences: 'I was very probably fired because I am too rightist!!! After I had spoken with colleagues who share my ideas, someone has informed the floor manager (...). As you see, the leftist rats are everywhere' (*j.boere*). Adverse reactions outside school and the workplace are frequently reported on the forum as well:

'[Outside a group of close friends] I often encounter people who do not agree with me in class, at my soccer club and in the rest of my social surroundings. They think I am a Nazi, frequently without knowing the actual meaning of this word. (...) When my more extremist opinion arises, and I say I feel some sympathy for Hitler and that as far as I am concerned all non-whites should leave (so, not only the riff-raff), people often become suspicious and the insulting and stigmatizing starts again' (*Tha man*).

Fiuv uses an epigrammatic summary of those experiences as his signature: 'We are a threatened species, and the hunt is open.'

The interviews confirm the importance of experiences of social rejection. No fewer than eight of the eleven respondents experience negative reactions in their social surroundings. These are discussed in what follows, while I will pay attention to the three members who do not struggle with social rejection in the final part of my analysis.

For Dirk, Ferdinand, Herman, and Ron the negative reactions to their right-wing extremist identity that they encounter are no reason to hide their deviant ideas. Dirk, for example, says:

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“The headmaster has so often called me to account. (...) When I just told him why it was like that and why I had such an opinion, he had just one word to say: “Absurd”. After that, he said: “I do not want to hear anything about it. When from this time on people ask for your view, you should shut up. None of that for me.” He also said: “If you would not have such good grades, you would have been removed from school already””.

Besides, Dirk says he is called ‘racist’ everyday when he ‘just walks down the street’ in his jacket with a small Dutch flag attached. Although he considers himself ‘quite deviant’ as a result of these experiences, this is no reason for him to conceal his ideology.

When asked whether people try to impose their ideas upon him, Herman responds: ‘Some (unfortunately the majority) do so.’ They do so by ‘ignoring you, denying you your opinion because “you are just a Nazi”, [and by] banning certain ideas like [right-wing extremist] music and revisionism’. He, too, indicates that it is not possible for him to express his ideology at school without getting into trouble.

‘I am not allowed to join in political discussions at school because of my views (...) I am “too extreme” and “affect my fellow students in a negative way”. Sometimes one is not even permitted to enter class at all, sometimes one is sent out, sometimes one has to stay in the corridor, and so on’.

Unlike Herman, Dirk, Ferdinand, and Ron, the anticipation of such negative reactions is a reason for Arjan, Barend, Joop, and Peter – the other respondents who experience negative reactions in everyday life – to conceal their deviant ideology as much as they can. Outside his family, for instance, Joop hides his ideas. Expecting great trouble, he does not even consider disclosing these at his workplace:

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'If people at work (...) know that you are a right-wing extremist, this would greatly disturb the atmosphere. Cooperation with others would be much more difficult, many more tensions between colleagues would arise. If you have an opinion like mine, you cannot express it at a place like that'.

Arjan, too, does not inform people about his ideology, since he would have 'a lot of problems' if he did. He finds this really frustrating: 'I think it is disgusting that you can be fired or expelled from school if you express your opinion.'

What Joop, Arjan, Peter, and Barend, nevertheless, have in common with Dirk, Ferdinand, Herman, and Ron is that they do not feel free to express their ideas in Dutch society. Asked whether they experience freedom of expression, Herman answers 'Anything but', Dirk says 'Absolutely not!', and Peter states: 'Freedom of expression and democracy are an illusion'.

Stigmatization and fatalism

Summing up the foregoing, many members of *Stormfront* experience stigmatization in the classical sense of Erving Goffman (1986 [1963]), aptly paraphrased by Manzo (2004: 401) as 'an expectation of a discrediting judgment of oneself by others in a particular context.' They have, in other words, a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman 1986 [1963]). This leads not only to 'felt stigma', but also to status loss and discrimination (Green et al. 2005: 198, cf. Link and Phelan 2001). Naturally, the latter only holds for people whose stigma is known to others, the so-called 'discredited' (Goffman 1986 [1963]: 4). The 'discreditable' members of *Stormfront*, on the other hand, hide their stigma and try to 'pass' as 'normals' (Page 1984: 20).

The experience of stigmatization creates feelings of dissociation or disattachment (cf. Rotenstreich 1989). Some respondents emphasize this vehemently, explaining that they feel attached neither to those with whom they deal on a personal basis, nor to the Dutch population at large: 'On the one hand, I feel attached to them because of national consanguinity. But I do not feel anything but

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loathing for leftist treasonable people and I have no personal commitment to them' (Herman).³² These widespread feelings of disattachment prove to go hand in hand with aversion to political action: 'Frankly, I do not feel at all like devoting myself to a people of social democrats who hate me because of my anti-Jewish and anti-multiculturalist opinions. I prefer to be devoted to myself; let the Jew-blowing multiculturalist *hoi polloi* eat shit' (*De-botte-bijl*). The messages on the forum indicate that many members of *Stormfront* hold a fatalistic worldview. *Phrea/k*, for instance, does not think demonstrations are of any use, and *Parsifal* states: 'It is clear that "the extreme right" won't have any success under the current conditions. Demonstrations, discussion programs, and political parties are all useless (...). It is quite naïve to believe that these might work'. These views are reflected by my respondents. None of them is or would like to be a member of a political party, and only one of them is occasionally involved in political actions. Barend, for instance, does not dedicate himself to spreading his ideology: 'that would be pointless (...) it gets you nowhere.' Herman conveys as well that the implications of his ideology are usually limited to his thoughts: 'I do not want to provoke. I do not feel like ruining my life because of a criminal record this early'.

In short, for many members of *Stormfront* the great meaning they attach to their ideology does not lead to political action. It proves to function merely as a guideline for everyday life – respondents, for instance, indicate that they would always avoid 'racial mixture'. Joop explains: 'It is a signal. I believe many people (...) will not understand it, but what can I do? I do not have the power to change the law, so I have to make my contribution in another way'.

The common offline experience of the members of *Stormfront* discussed so far is, in short, stigmatization leading to dissociation and fatalism. Many members who experience stigmatization have not only turned away from society at large, but they also believe that little can be done to change the world according to their ideology. Now, how does this relate to their online experiences?

‘A place where I have many comrades’: the social significance of *Stormfront*

‘A safe place to express your opinion’: freedom of expression in anonymity

The lack of freedom of expression experienced offline is a reason for their membership in *Stormfront* for all respondents who struggle with stigmatization. For Ferdinand, it is even the most important motive: ‘*Stormfront* really is an exhaust valve for ideas that can be discussed hardly or not at all in daily life.’ This motive is mentioned on the forum, too: ‘I became a member because I am fed up with disclosing my feelings and thoughts’ (*remco*). And Dirk says about his first activities on *Stormfront*: ‘I had, as it were, finally found a place where I could express my opinion.’ Moreover, he remarks: ‘Nowhere did I have such a place where I could talk like that’. He feels free to express himself on *Stormfront*: ‘There, I can just talk about my feelings and about the way I see things.’ He, therefore, refers to *Stormfront* as ‘a safe place to express your opinion’. Like many other forum members, Herman shares this thought. According to him *Stormfront* is ‘a free port for nationalists where we can talk about our vision without being punished for it.’

Since this is possible because of the anonymity that is perceived on the Internet, the respondents who experience stigmatization declare without exception that they attach strongly to their online anonymity.³³ Therefore, they constantly warn one another not to disclose too many personal details. A new member who reveals details on his place of residence, family situation and the school he attends is, for instance, immediately lectured by an established member: ‘If I were you, I would not openly mention your personal information and remove it quickly. We do not live in a country in which every conviction is approved of’ (*Tiwazz*).

‘We are an oppressed species, this creates a bond’: a virtual Gemeinschaft

The freedom of expression they perceive online is not the only motive underlying the participation of the members of *Stormfront* who experience stigmatization – it is closely intertwined with urgent social reasons. These members greatly enjoy the

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company of like-minded spirits. One of Ron's reasons for being a member of *Stormfront*, for example, is that he 'feels more at ease' with like-minded people, and for Peter meeting virtually with 'people with a comparable opinion' is a prominent motive for participation in *Stormfront*, because 'this is not easy [offline].' Postings on the forum tell the same story. *Flaming13* writes: 'I am extremely happy that there are so many people who share my opinion on the whole multiculturalist issue. This site is really amazing'. Because of their similarities, the stigmatized members feel at home on *Stormfront* and display clear feelings of belonging, stating that '*Stormfront* is like a second home to me' (*Farkasfarsang*). Because members largely share each other's views, they can express themselves freely and generally feel accepted by the others.

Moreover, almost all respondents who experience offline stigmatization experience online solidarity and comradeship. Mainly because of this, *Martinborman* is very excited about *Stormfront*: 'At last, I have found a place where I can talk with comrades who think likewise.' Herman says: '*Stormfront* provides me a place where I have many comrades', and Dirk observes:

'[Comradeship] is really something that exists in this group, that is really true. Mainly because most of us have many problems expressing their opinions, since they experience a lot of resistance. People insult them and [they experience] everything I already told. Because of that, people feel more connected to each other: because they are, as it were, a cornered group'.

Another social aspect of *Stormfront* is the prominent thread in which members congratulate one another on their birthdays. All respondents who experience stigmatization consider this thread – with many messages enriched with toasting, dancing, and laughing 'smileys' – a source of sociability.

In short, it is clear that *Stormfront* is more than a mere collection of individuals: its stigmatized members understand it to be a type of togetherness that reflects the key characteristics of community discussed in chapter two. *Stormfront's*

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members who struggle with stigmatization in offline social life thus have ‘an intense experience of *gemeinschaft*’ (Vaisey 2007: 852; Katz et al. 2004: 334) online. The members experiencing offline stigmatization unmistakably display shared values, norms and meanings on the forum (cf. Etzioni 2004: 225; cf. Komito 1998: 99); they feel safe as they ‘understand each other well’ (Bauman 2001a: 2) and are ‘hardly ever puzzled or taken aback’ (*ibid.*). And the material presented above indicates that this goes hand in hand not only with sociability (Wellman and Hampton 1999: 648), but also with ‘communal solidarity’ (Komito 1998: 98) and ‘affect-laden relationships’ (Etzioni 2004: 225) that underlie a deeply felt sense of belonging (Foster 1997: 29; Kelemen and Smith, 2001: 372; McMillan and Chavis 1986; Nieckarz 2005). It is important to observe that *Stormfront*’s members who struggle with stigmatization in offline social life are strongly attached to this virtual *Gemeinschaft*, whether they hide their right-wing extremist identity in offline life or not. Some of them actively reflect on this themselves: ‘We have a cohesive factor: love for our people and fatherland, incomprehension by outsiders, and loyalty. [A community exists] because we are an oppressed species, this creates a bond’ (Herman).

The existence of a sense of *Gemeinschaft* is underlined by the various ‘community behaviors’ (Blanchard and Markus 2004; cf. Watson 1997) displayed on the forum. Consistent with their affect-laden relationships, members offer one another support in case of unpleasant events in their offline lives – mostly in the form of comforting words and compassion. All respondents who experience stigmatization acknowledge the existence of such support, and they all appreciate it. Moreover, conformity to common rules (cf. Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004b: 5; Papadakis 2003: 9) is enforced by means of social control: ‘conduct-policing’ (Watson 1997: 111) takes place to ensure the members live up to common rules. The moderators play an important role in this by constantly scanning the forum for deviant postings. Besides minor violations like sloppy usage of the Dutch language, quarrelling is strongly condemned: moderators see to it that members do not insult *each other*. One of the guidelines for posting is: ‘No attacks on other White nationalists’. This adds to the feeling of safety the forum’s stigmatized members

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value online. Arjan, for instance, thinks it is a great benefit that 'there are people in command, so that you do not get abused just like that'.

These internal practices of control go hand in hand with inclusion and exclusion. New members are, for instance, included as they are expected to introduce themselves in a prominently placed thread that has been created for this very purpose, usually to be given a warm welcome. Furthermore, the fact that 'leaving a community is emotionally traumatic' (Fernback and Thompson 1995) is reflected on the forum as well. The departure of a dedicated member evoked many 'sad' emoticons and expressions of grief. He was not only wished good luck – the loss for the other participants was stressed as well: 'I and many others will miss you', 'come back!' (*Thulean Knight* and *DutchSkinNL*). Exclusion of those labeled as 'outsiders' is common too. For example, moderators attempt to keep out people who endanger *Stormfront's* unity, and new members' contributions are screened before being posted 'because this forum is unfortunately visited a little too often by fools, opponents, and troublemakers' (*Full of Pride*). Of great importance as well are indications of disloyalty to nationalism or national socialism. Dissidents are either confined to a special part of the forum called 'the lion's den' or banned from *Stormfront* altogether. Moreover, those who set aside their extreme right ideology and leave the forum voluntarily provoke adverse reactions and are labeled traitors.

What is of great importance here is that the relevance of the material presented above does not lie in demonstrating that a 'true' community exists on *Stormfront*. Instead, the fact that members value and strive after a specific form of online sociality, which can be termed a 'virtual *Gemeinschaft*' as it features what many scholars consider to be the key aspects of community, can be *understood* from members' experiences of stigmatization in offline social life. As such, my analysis differs crucially from the common research practice that focuses on descriptively answering questions on the existence of community online.

Having demonstrated that the importance attached to a virtual *Gemeinschaft* on *Stormfront* can be understood from members' experiences of stigmatization in offline social life, I will now discuss the question of how their online participation relates to their offline interactions.

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'I stay safely behind my PC': Stormfront as a virtual refuge

For the greater part, the virtual *Gemeinschaft* exists exclusively online: many participants seem to be solely acquainted with one another through their online communications and have never met in person. This is noted by my respondents as well: 'Many members do not know each other in [offline] life' (Arjan). Moreover, the contacts of those members who do meet offline are also largely online – they meet only occasionally offline, whereas they are active on the forum on a daily basis.

If members do meet offline, this generally takes place at so-called 'drinks', which are organized irregularly by individual members. According to *Hatecore_Rudolf*, a drink is 'an informal meeting for members of the forum to get acquainted with each other' and 'the perfect chance to meet like-minded people'. Although announcements and evaluations of these meetings are posted in the forum's sub-section on 'activism and politics', political action is not intended. The drinks are all about comradeship and sociability, and 'not in any way associated with an organization or political party' (*Nordfront*): 'it is no demonstration, and there will be no parade' (*NordCore*). When asked why these apolitical meetings are discussed in a section on activism, moderator *Full of Pride* replies: 'After all, it is an activity 🍷'. And after one of the gatherings *orion1980* writes: 'We were not there to express our opinion. This day was solely intended to promote comradeship, and I believe this was a great success'. Messages on the forum indicate that these drinks are principally organized in support of the virtual *Gemeinschaft* on *Stormfront*, which is considered to be of primary importance. The goal is 'to see who you are talking with on the forum' (*Hatecore_Rudolf*): 'The purpose is to have a nice chat and to get to know the face that exists behind the *Stormfront*-username. Often, this stimulates the atmosphere on the forum' (*Full of Pride*).

Whereas these social meetings are supportive of the virtual *Gemeinschaft* which these members consider to be most important, some other members differently conceive of the relationship between online and offline social life. Unsurprisingly, a major right-wing extremist forum like *Stormfront* is also visited by

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people who are active in extreme-right political parties. Contrary to the greater part of *Stormfront's* members, their online participation is instrumentally motivated, instead of aimed at constructing a specific type of virtual togetherness: their contributions to the forum focus on the dissemination of information on extreme-right party matters and offline political actions. One party whose members make such an instrumental use of the forum is the Dutch right-wing extremist fringe party NVU.³⁴ A member called *nvu-ombudsman*, who – just like other NVU members active on the forum – has adopted the NVU party logo as an avatar, has for instance started a thread called 'News from the NVU headquarters', in which information on the party is provided and in which demonstrations are announced. Other threads on offline activism are generally started by people affiliated with political organizations as well, and they are by far the most active contributors to these discussions. Indicative of the fact that the motives for online participation of *Stormfront's* members who struggle with stigmatization differ from the instrumental ones of this group of participants, these political activists seem to hold a marginal position on *Stormfront*. After demonstrations announced on *Stormfront*, the latter frequently complain about low levels of participation: 'It is a great pity that so few of us were present' (*dietschland_jeugd*). The low levels of activism of most forum members are reflected upon by activists. *Tatts32*, for instance, laments: 'Probably no one will come. People talk much, but actions are often omitted'. And *Cherryl* cries out: 'Fair words butter no parsnips. I have read quite a few pieces around the forum, and it strikes me that a great fuss is made, whereas little happens. The section activism/politics itself is plainly ridiculous. (...) Not to mention the assemblies where just four people turn up'.

From time to time, anger is expressed by means of variations on the pejorative term 'keyboard warrior'. As NVU-member *Sander* states: 'There are too many keyboard warriors who all think they know better, but stay home and do nothing'. In reaction to such remarks, members not affiliated with political parties clearly indicate they prefer to participate solely in *Stormfront*. *Sonne* argues: 'Surely, I am entitled to have an opinion without actively carrying it out. (...) I do not attend demonstrations and I neither join a political party, but how I think and act... that

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says enough. If this makes me a keyboard warrior, that is all right. I feel good this way. (...) I am not ashamed of it'. And *WhiteDutchman* writes: 'So I stand behind my ideology, and I stay safely behind my PC indeed'. This focus on online interactions is in line with the fatalistic worldview observed before: 'I will not waste time and energy. I wipe my keyboard clean once again to express my opinion on the net' (*Oi*).

In short, all evidence suggests that the virtual *Gemeinschaft* constructed by *Stormfront's* members who struggle with stigmatization in offline social life functions as a 'second home' in which they find refuge. Their interactions largely take place online, and the offline meetings that do take place are secondary to the togetherness online. The virtual *Gemeinschaft* valued by these members does not function as a basis for offline collective action. Whereas people connected to extreme right-wing parties make instrumental use of the forum, a large part of the members of *Stormfront* value it as an online refuge, which can be understood from their experiences of stigmatization and fatalistic worldviews. They are disattached from society at large, believing nothing can be done to alter their position, and in the virtual *Gemeinschaft* found on *Stormfront*, they turn away from people thought to hold different views as much as possible. This conclusion is validated by the numerous adverse reactions to outsiders who are perceived as threats to the virtual *Gemeinschaft*: 'We are comrades, brothers, and sisters, this is our home. Leave us alone, we do not force you to read these messages, do we?!' (*The Trooper*). And the observation that online and offline social lives are understood as strictly separated by the forum members who struggle with offline stigmatization is underlined by members who are of the opinion that their online participation has a seamy side as well:

'I do think [participation in *Stormfront*] makes [offline life] somewhat harder, because I see it like this: what one does not know causes no woe. So, if it would not be there, I would not miss it either. But since I know there are places where I can express my opinion, it is harder to accept that this is impossible in normal life. Then I feel somewhat trapped' (Dirk).

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Since the findings up to this point indicate that offline and online experiences should be understood in relation to one another, I will conclude my analysis of virtual togetherhness on *Stormfront* by discussing the three respondents who have different offline experiences.

Members without offline stigmatization

Evert, Steve, and Wouter are the respondents who do not experience stigmatization in offline social life. For Wouter and Steve this is the case because their political views are more moderate than those of the forum members who do struggle with stigmatization because of their extremist identity. Wouter conveys he is under the impression that his vision is accepted on the whole: 'I am not hampered to express my real opinion (...), because I am not as extreme as some others'. Steve has 'never felt hampered' in the expression of his opinion either, which he does not consider deviant: 'Leftists can easily agree with me. (...) And I can associate well with immigrants; many of them even share my opinion. They are not happy with particular things either'. For Evert, in contrast, offline stigmatization of his extreme right identity is no issue at all because he associates, privately as well as professionally, mainly with people who share his political outlook.

Not surprisingly, those three respondents have other reasons for participation in *Stormfront* than those who do experience stigmatization. They do not seek togetherhness online and value the forum for instrumental reasons instead. Wouter visits *Stormfront* primarily for the information that is available on the forum, whereas Steve has a broad interest in politics and therefore uses *Stormfront* as an instrument to support his diverse political activities and to share his knowledge. Evert participates because he likes the political issues discussed on *Stormfront*, and because he thinks the medium offers a specific advantage: he indicates he simply is more of a writer than a talker.

Unlike members who struggle with stigmatization in offline life, Evert, Steve, and Wouter are not part of the virtual *Gemeinschaft* that provides refuge, and they

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do not display attachment to its social and supportive role. Wouter says: 'No, I do not think it is cozy. (...) To be honest, I think it is somewhat pathetic to have to look for sociability on the Internet.' Steve even thinks it is 'strange' to ask whether *Stormfront* could offer something extra over offline life. None of them experiences online solidarity or comradeship. Evert writes his postings 'mainly for [himself]', and 'does not care about' what other members think of him. Steve conveys that members he does not know personally offline are 'just numbers' to him. He considers online social contacts to be of minor importance, and he characterizes *Stormfront* as 'a database of knowledge' rather than as a virtual *Gemeinschaft*. And whereas anonymity is very important for the members who struggle with stigmatization, Evert could not care less: his real identity can very easily be deduced from his username.

Because Evert, Wouter, and Steve do not experience offline stigmatization, they are not part of the virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge. This adds validity to the finding that the value *Stormfront's* other members attach to a virtual refuge can be understood as a reaction to stigmatization in offline social life.

Conclusion

For many members of *Stormfront*, participation in the forum can be understood as a reaction to negative experiences because of a 'spoiled identity' – as a reaction to stigmatization. This is in line with Ervin Goffman's (1986 [1963]) classical analysis, according to which the stigmatized seek moral support, acceptance, and comfort with people who share their stigma. Many members are active on the forum for this very reason: they consider themselves 'a threatened species' and understand *Stormfront* as a virtual *Gemeinschaft* that primarily functions as a place in which they seek refuge. The importance of offline experiences, which are often neglected in common research practice (Bakardjieva 2005: 167; Cavanagh 2007: 11; Hardey 2002: 571; Nip 2004: 409), is also indicated by the accounts of those who are not stigmatized offline: for them, *Stormfront* has no importance as a virtual *Gemeinschaft*

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providing refuge, which validates the central mechanism discussed in this chapter. All in all, my findings are a first indication that it can be theoretically fruitful to employ an interpretative approach to find out for what reasons a specific type of virtual togetherness is valued and constructed on a particular forum by certain people.

The mechanism of offline stigmatization leading to the formation of a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge discussed here resonates with a suggestion made by other scholars. Although 'there is much anecdotal evidence that the Internet provides significant benefits to people with unusual identities or concerns' (DiMaggio et al. 2001: 318),³⁵ this theoretically vital issue has hardly been studied systematically yet. As such, the first of my series of case studies has provided fresh theoretical insight, which is all the more important as scholars have observed that 'exceptionally little' is known about the backgrounds of online community formation (Blanchard and Horan 2000: 13) and have argued that this subject should therefore 'remain high on the agenda for research in the virtual communities tradition' (Blanchard and Markus 2004: 77).

Naturally, my analysis is based on data with certain limitations – although I have triangulated my online interviews with a qualitative content analysis, their small number and the self-selection of respondents imply a need for further research. This is especially important since I have only gained insight into one type of virtual togetherness, whereas the participation of people for whom the forum merely has instrumental value demonstrates that this specific type of virtual togetherness does not coincide with the forum as a whole. Even though I merely uncovered one type of virtual togetherness here, this suggests that different types of virtual togetherness can co-exist on one and the same forum. Because the mechanism I discussed obviously entails merely one linkage between offline and online life, the next chapters should look for more variation in order to arrive at a more elaborate understanding of the relation between virtual togetherness and offline social life.

Chapter 4

A refuge and a springboard

Different types of virtual togetherness among orthodox protestant homosexuals

Introduction

This chapter focuses on *RefoAnders*, a Dutch forum for people who identify as orthodox protestant homosexuals, which labels itself as ‘the meeting point around homosexual feelings for people from orthodox Christian circles’ in its running head. Why did I decide to pick this forum as a second case? Given the fact that I have adopted a serial case study design in which the selection of a new case is inspired by the findings yielded thus far, a look at the results of my analysis of *Stormfront* is necessary.

Aiming to keep an open eye for the way in which members’ identities are relevant to the togetherness they construct online, I started my inductive endeavor by analyzing participation in *Stormfront*, a forum that revolves around a clear-cut social identity. This has proved a fruitful choice, as my analysis has yielded insight into a mechanism by which the value attached to a specific type of virtual togetherness can be understood from experiences in offline social life. However, an understanding of how different types of virtual togetherness are related to offline social life has not been developed yet, simply because my analysis uncovered merely one type, a virtual refuge. Nevertheless, my findings indicate that the virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge does not encompass the entire forum population, which suggests that online forums might simultaneously feature multiple types of togetherness. Therefore, a second case that promises more variation is needed.

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Given my interest in the way in which members' identities are relevant to their virtual togetherhness, *RefoAnders* is an apt choice. Whereas it is formed around a collectively shared identity as well, this identity is not as unitary and clear-cut as the identity around which *Stormfront* revolves. The fact that an orthodox protestant homosexual identity consists of different and potentially conflicting elements promises more diverse results. Different people might deal differently with such a hybrid identity. Furthermore, even though 'the online experiences of sexual minorities have been largely absent in the literature on cyberspace' (J.E. Campbell 2004: 14), scholarship to date has contemplated a broad range of purposes that might be served by the online participation of sexual minorities. Munt et al. (2002), for instance, suggest that interactions on online venues might decrease social isolation, yield support in the process of coming-out, and help negotiate membership in offline minority communities. Friedman (2007), too, mentions alleviating isolation and adds opportunities for collective action and access to information otherwise hard to come by (see also Cabiria 2008; Mehra et al. 2004). These suggestions are in need of empirical elaboration and contextualization, and even though it is unlikely that a single forum serves all these different possible purposes, a forum for a sexual minority might provide a good case study because it probably features variation in motives underlying participation. Moreover, this case differs from *Stormfront* in the sense that *RefoAnders's* members are most likely embedded in an offline social context they are not fully averse to – the fact that they identify as *orthodox protestant* homosexuals suggests that at least some of them attach value to embeddedness in an offline religious context in one way or another. This is an additional reason to expect that a case study of *RefoAnders* will yield fresh insights.

My analysis of participation in *RefoAnders* starts by addressing members' experiences in offline social life and moves to a discussion of motives for online participation to finally address the question of how different types of virtual togetherhness can be understood against this background.

Offline experiences: homosexuality in an orthodox protestant context

Two types of offline experiences were revealed by an analysis of the fifteen interviews I conducted with members of *RefoAnders*, and these are discussed below. Here the focus is on the experiences in offline social life up to the time the respondents joined the forum. The reader should, however, bear in mind that the offline experiences of some respondents changed over the course of their forum membership (as will be discussed below) and that these thus do not represent fixed categories.

'A lonely struggle': stigma, isolation and emotional problems

A first type of offline experiences is found exclusively among forum members who do not have a homosexual relationship – a few of these either live alone or at their parental home, and others are engaged in a heterosexual marriage. The latter provide various reasons for being married to someone they are not sexually attracted to. One is that it was simply not conceivable to some members to have a non-heterosexual relationship. Since they were deeply embedded in an orthodox protestant social environment, this option was discursively excluded. As Piet states: 'In retrospect I would say that I could have known that I was a homosexual. [But] for a long time, I did not recognize it as such, plainly because it did not exist as an option in the surroundings I was in. "Homo", that was a term of abuse, those were perverts, nothing else. That was how I knew it.' Other members were aware of their sexuality before their marriage, but experienced social pressure to conform to heteronormative standards: 'If you came out you were expelled for the rest of your life. So I just married' (Cees). For some their conformism to this heteronormative social pressure was inspired by the idle hope that their sexual feelings towards men would wear off if they entered a heterosexual marriage: 'I thought "maybe it will stop after some time"' (Hans).

Only Cees and Piet consider their marriage bearable – the other married forum members are considerably less positive. Menno's wife has been 'very angry

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and sad' after she found out about his sexuality, and others report severe problems. Hans paints a grim picture: 'She knows that I am homosexual, but she doesn't accept it. She has been very aggressive (...). If she threatens to cut off your "thing", that is very... that really is not pleasant.' René has similar experiences: his wife 'said she loathes [him]' and she 'is constantly humiliating [him]'. René, too, anticipated physical violence: 'At first my wife was apathetic and then it transformed into abusive language and threats'. Because he feared for his physical well-being, he even fled his home for a short time.

These negative reactions to homosexuality are not only given by spouses of forum members; other relatives are strongly opposed as well. Piet's parents reacted with incomprehension: "'You better keep quiet about it. Don't talk about it anymore because otherwise more will come". That was literally the reaction I got from my parents. (...) As if it was contagious.' Condemnation by their family members is a recurring theme in these men's lives: 'My mother said: "I would rather have had a retard than a child like this." (...) My parents absolutely could not handle it' (René). Hans met with aversion as well: 'My parents, brothers and sisters (...) did not want to have anything to do with me anymore. (...) Things got really difficult. My parents never visited me again'. Such a loss of social contacts is a common experience. Menno says that his sister-in-law told his wife: "'You should go away from that man. I have always told you that he was no good and he cannot enter my house anymore.'" Negative experiences such as these are not limited to married men and can be found among forum members who live either alone or at their parental home as well. They, too, informed a small circle of relatives about their sexuality and encountered similar reactions of incomprehension and condemnation. According to Fred his 'family life is turned upside down', and as such 'the worst case scenario' he envisioned 'has come true', and Joeri's parents 'regard it a real problem they can hardly manage' – an experience shared by Edwin, who reports he did not receive any support from his parents, who 'will never accept it.'

These shared experiences resemble those of most members of *Stormfront* discussed in the previous chapter: they fit the classical notion of stigma formulated by Goffman: the sexuality of these forum members is labeled an 'attribute that is

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deeply discrediting' (1986 [1963]: 3). They all feel they have a 'spoiled identity' (idem), as they 'perceive that they are labeled, stereotyped, and separated from others.' (Green et al. 2005: 198). However, they are 'discredited' only in a narrowly defined social context. Since they fear that they would face status loss and discrimination – that is, 'enacted stigma' (Green et al. 2005: 198) – if their sexuality were known outside their family, they try to 'pass' (Page 1984: 4) as heterosexuals by shielding information about their homosexuality from others. Thus, they are 'discreditable' (Goffman 1986 [1963]) in social contexts outside of their family and fear that their stigma might be revealed.

Their general assessment is that a coming-out in their religious community would have socially devastating consequences. Time and again these forum members extensively explain that the taboo surrounding homosexuality in their churches prevents them from being open about their sexuality. Foreseeing great problems, René, for example, is careful not to reveal his stigma: 'I would regret it if it were disclosed, because people would revile and humiliate me. (...) Imagine, for instance, that the whole church knew that you were homosexual (...), then people would not greet you anymore. Then the situation would become intolerable. I am sure they would get rid of me by annoying me'. Just like the others dealing with problems of stigma, the 'fear of being thrown out' is reason for Menno to reveal himself 'as little as possible'.

The stigma of these forum members and the associated fear of disclosure underlie social isolation and feelings of loneliness. The relatives of these forum members not only label homosexuality as a severe problem, but also rule out the possibility of discussing the issue. Joeri indicates 'There is very little communication about it (...) I never had the opportunity, the chance to tell how I experience it to be this way. They never asked me about it either'. Not only are relatives unwilling or unable to empathically discuss homosexuality, they also tend to resist contact altogether. Hans concludes: 'they tried to force me into social isolation', and Menno, too, 'felt really lonely and alone' after his family learned about his sexual feelings. Moreover, since they feel they have to shield their stigma as much as possible, they cannot openly discuss their sexuality with others.

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This poses an additional problem, as they themselves have intense emotional problems about their sexuality. Without exception they wrestle with their feelings, as these seem to contradict their religious beliefs. Like the others, Cees explains that in his view homosexuality is a flaw stemming from original sin: 'We live in a broken world and homosexuals experience that brokenness.' Therefore forum members like Cees regarded it as 'shocking' to discover their sexuality – Fred, for instance, thought: 'I am not supposed to be the way I am.' Since he understood homosexuality as an 'imperfection', he got a 'sense of inferiority'. Nevertheless, 'it is part of my being, I cannot change that. I have to learn to accept that' (Menno).

In short, these forum members have experiences of stigmatization and social isolation, and these problems are the more salient as they face severe personal emotional problems about their homosexuality they cannot share with others. Menno summarizes these offline experiences as 'a lonely struggle'.

'It is all about how you do it': reflexive questions of identity in everyday life

The daily life experiences of a second group of forum members, none of whom is married to a woman, are not characterized by fear of social condemnation and intense emotional struggles. This is reflected in relatively easy coming-outs, which did not inspire much critique or resistance. Bas states: 'It did not cause any problems. (...) my parents don't have any trouble with it, my family takes a positive stance', and he stresses that this differs from the negative experiences of other forum members: 'That is an advantage I have over other people on the forum, that it is very easily dealt with.' Bas's situation is not unique, however; more members tell such a story: 'My family was quite positive; not averse from it that is. (...) In that sense, it is not much of an issue in my personal life' (Karel). Tom has a similar experience: 'My family is fully Christian, but they reacted positively without exception'. In their own local church these members usually do not meet with grave problems either. As Harry explains: 'It doesn't meet condemnation (...) I am in the same situation as all other believers'. Only Guus's coming-out in the church fuelled

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discontent with the clergy, but partly because of the 'special' positive stance of his parents, this did not upset him.

Since they hardly have any significant negative experiences with regard to their sexuality, these forum members generally see little reason to conceal it. Just like Albert they are 'openly homosexual' – 'friends, family, acquaintances, the village I come from, they all are informed about it' (Bas). As a result, they do not find themselves socially isolated. Tom, for instance, has contacts with homosexuals with a similar religious background. Others not only have companionship outside the forum, but also have homosexual relationships they can engage in relatively easily because they do not feel a need to hide their sexuality. Guus, for example, does not mind 'kissing [his] friend on the balcony' and Albert and Karel both live together with another man. Only Sam foresees problems if he were to disclose his sexuality outside his family, but he does not have problematic experiences of social isolation either, mostly because he can rely on people who provide various forms of support – he describes this as 'being in a very luxurious position', thanks to which his 'life is quite all right'.

Not only do they not experience stigmatization, they also do not regard their own sexuality as problematic in itself. They do not wrestle with a contradiction between their sexual feelings and their religious beliefs. As Harry explains: 'I would not call it a struggle. Personally, I have always experienced my homosexual feelings as a matter of course, thus not as something creating a barrier with God. (...) Homosexuality never caused a religious crisis or an identity crisis'. This view is shared by the other members who do not experience stigmatization. Guus 'never had questions about being homosexual', and Albert, who did have doubts in the past, now is 'at rest', and he accepts his sexuality. Tom, too, states 'it is not something that worries me' and echoes Bas's account that 'one is a human being, a Christian, and accidentally one happens to be a homosexual'.

In short, although they generally do not positively embrace their sexuality, this group of forum members does not face problems of stigmatization or emotional troubles. However, this does not mean that homosexuality is not an issue at all in their offline social lives. Being embedded in an orthodox protestant offline social

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context and desiring to live faithful Christian lives, they have other questions to deal with: 'you are simply different and that is something you have to go on with' (Sam). They do not struggle emotionally with their sexuality, but issues concerning everyday life are all the more relevant. Albert, for instance, states: 'I think that in a responsible life one can very well be homosexual as well as Christian. That is not the issue, it is all about *how* one does it.' In this respect, these forum members contemplate questions such as whether they would like to engage in homosexual relationships, whether these are theologically justifiable, and, if so, how to arrange them. It is, in short, about 'finding ways to deal with that sexuality as a religious person' (Albert). In addition, they also consider how to address their sexuality in church. That they experience no stigmatization in their offline social lives does not mean they are insensitive to the religious context they are part of. Not only do they think about who to inform, at which moment, and in which way this is best done; they also have to occasionally guard themselves against critique. Karel, for instance, still anticipates occasional confrontations about his sexuality: 'As long as I am part of a church and have a relationship, I will be asked questions, for the rest of my life. At these moments, you have to deal with it, you are made aware of it again (...) And yes, that is something I take seriously. In that sense it consumes energy.'

All of this is rather different from the stigmatization and emotional struggles reported above. These forum members generally do not experience social condemnation and fear of disclosure of their sexuality, and they accept their sexual feelings as they are. However, they, too, have salient identity problems in offline social life. Instead of stigmatization these are reflexive questions of identity. They face inescapable questions of how to faithfully live everyday life as a homosexual in an orthodox protestant social context. Answers to these questions cannot be provided by traditional authorities, and as a result of this lack of clear-cut guidelines for thinking, feeling and acting, these forum members 'have no choice but to choose how to be and how to act' (Giddens 1994: 75; cf. Bauman 2001b: 46-7; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996: 29; Giddens 1991: 80-1).

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Having discussed the different problems of identity these two groups of forum members have regarding homosexuality in orthodox protestant contexts, I will discuss the reasons for their online participation in the next section.

Reasons for participation in *RefoAnders*

'You have to get it off your chest': seeking empathic support

For a discussion of the respondents' reasons for participating in the forum, it is important to note that those struggling with stigma see no alternatives in offline social life. First and foremost, this is because they attach great importance to their religion. Without exception, they regard their faith as 'an essential element of [their] existence' (René) and they stress time and again that institutional embeddedness is of utmost importance in vitalizing their religious beliefs. Second, for those who are married to a woman their religious principles prevent them from ending unpleasant marriages they would not recommend to anyone. Apart from financial reasons and fear of further isolation, they do not want to break their marriage vows for moral reasons: 'I have promised to be faithful unto death; I believe that is not something one can give up just like that' (Menno). Third, the importance they attach to their religious convictions renders them averse to the flowering Dutch gay scene. For these reasons they remain in an offline social context in which they are condemned or fear that they will be, feel alone and cannot discuss their emotional struggles with their sexuality.³⁶ This is the background against which their participation in the forum can be understood.

For starters, their religious beliefs are the reason they specifically chose to join *RefoAnders* instead of another forum. The importance the respondents attach to their religious beliefs not only steers them away from forums for secular homosexuals, but also underlies their preference for *RefoAnders* compared with other forums for Christian homosexuals. In this respect, specific religious views are

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considered important: 'what I found elsewhere was all liberal and not really corresponding to our [views]' (Piet).

On the forum of *RefoAnders* they seek relief from the troubles that plague them in offline social life. Because of the anonymity provided by the self-chosen usernames – which is considered 'invaluable' (Menno) – they can 'be out' online without fear of the negative consequences they face offline.³⁷ Cees explains: 'The main advantage of the forum is that you can remain nicely anonymous. (...) Nobody knows who you are'. Like the others who struggle with stigmatization, Edwin shares this view and believes online anonymity is 'very important' to avoid negative reactions of people such as his family members: 'Naturally, you want to be able to talk to each other without the whole world knowing about it, so it has to be hidden'. He stresses that only that way 'I can be myself on the forum' – an experience that is shared by the others, who state 'it goes without saying' that they are better able to 'be themselves' online than offline.

This is all the more important because it provides them with an exhaust valve for their emotional problems. Cees, for instance, discusses his reasons for joining the forum as follows:

'I really wanted to discuss my sexuality with others. (...) Sometimes, especially at the end, I felt like I was choking, I simply could not contain it. You have got something that haunts you all the time, and you cannot share it with anyone. That is so extreme, that is so frustrating. I thought "I have to discuss it with someone." You have to get it off your chest, don't you? And therefore, for that reason I came to *RefoAnders*'.

As Cees's words already suggest, these members do not simply want to express their feelings – this wish has an important social aspect to it. Because of their offline isolation they seek understanding from people living under comparable circumstances. As Fred explains: 'What I expected from it was some recognition (...) something like "I am no longer alone". All the time I had been thinking I was alone, you know'. This viewpoint comes forward time and again: 'For me, the

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acknowledgement and recognition represent the added value of *RefoAnders*' (Menno). Repeatedly these members state that they joined the forum because they were looking for 'companions in distress' – 'I think you have to have it [i.e. homosexuality, WdK] yourself to fully and clearly understand it' (Menno). Hans considered it 'extremely special' to meet people who 'fully understand him'. This is especially important because these members are in need of 'emotional support' (Hans) – they all stress that recognition is important because they were 'looking for support' (Joeri): 'When someone is despondent then you succor him, that simply is really important' (René).

All in all, the forum members struggling with stigmatization and isolation were looking for empathic support when they joined the forum – a desire to be among similar others who provide support and understanding permeates their accounts of their reasons for joining the forum. Therefore, their forum participation yields a great sense of relief. Because of sheer enthusiasm, Cees, for instance, does not know how to express his feelings best – he indicates that 'on *RefoAnders* I fully came out of my shell', 'it was so wonderful just to be able to say how it was', 'I have simply become another person' and 'it is so liberating'. Moreover, their participation reduces their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Fred states, 'it is of great help that there are others experiencing the same struggle'. As a consequence, they learn to come to terms with themselves: 'It has tremendously helped me to accept myself the way I am', Cees, for instance, states.

Because of these positive results, the meaning of their online participation changed for some members. This does not hold for all of them; Edwin, for instance, still feels socially isolated in offline life and therefore remains active on the forum in the same manner as before. However, the participation of Fred, Piet, and Joeri changed drastically. The empathic support they received on the forum helped them to overcome the problem of being 'discreditable' – having accepted their sexuality they no longer fear that their stigma might be revealed. Joeri, for instance, says: 'you don't have to play hide and seek anymore'. Because their offline feelings of stigmatization decreased, their forum use became similar to that of the second group of members discussed below.

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'How do others deal with it?': seeking insight through interactions

Those who do not face problems of stigmatization and isolation in offline social life provide a different rationale for their forum membership. Nevertheless, just like the stigmatized members they are attracted to *RefoAnders* because of its explicit orthodox protestant signature. They, too, have an aversion to secular forums for homosexuals and are not attracted to other forums for Christian homosexuals. It is because of its 'more conservative dealing with the issue of homosexuality' (Harry) that *RefoAnders* is preferred: 'I come from a more orthodox milieu, and at [a more general forum for Christian homosexuals] (...) it is very liberal, anything goes. That doesn't really fit the denomination I come from, the outlook that prevails there (...) as well as my own perception' (Bas).

Although these respondents share the stigmatized members' preference for *RefoAnders*, they are not active on the forum for the same reasons. Tellingly, they do not attach importance to the forum's anonymity as the other members do. While recognizing 'that it is important for some people', Guus 'really doesn't find it interesting at all' as he 'has nothing to hide.' For Albert a username is 'absolutely not important': 'I just want to be frank. Everywhere I am just [full name]. I value openness', and – like Harry and Karel – Bas filled in so many personal details in his user profile that he is easily traceable: 'It is simply the way I am and people may know about it. I would not mind if it were published in the newspapers, so to speak'. Moreover, because these members can discuss their sexuality openly in offline life, they do not participate in the forum to give utterance to feelings that otherwise remain unexpressed: 'For me it is not something like an exhaust valve or something like that' (Tom). As they do not struggle with stigmatization and emotional troubles, they do not look for empathic support on the forum. Tom declares: 'It is not that I go looking on the forum whether there are any people who might understand me so that you are supported or something like that. No, that really is not why I am active on it', and Albert explains, 'I don't look for that kind of safety, I already feel safe'.

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Whereas the stigmatized members turn to the forum because they cannot 'be out' offline, the participation of these respondents is inspired by a desire to openly live as a homosexual in an orthodox protestant context. Since they feel that they need to learn how to do this faithfully as well as practically, they turn to a forum populated by people living under similar conditions: because no universal clear-cut answers can be given to their reflexive questions of identity, these members consider it of utmost importance to draw on the lived experiences of those situated in comparable offline situations instead of on traditional authorities and sources like the Bible and the media. Harry, for example, finds it 'important to talk about it, with other Christians that is, but on a personal level, next to the Church' and Bas explains: 'Well, those Biblical texts are there, but I do not live with those. It is just my experience and from that you have to live'. And Karel stresses that the forum offers 'interaction' because of which it is possible to learn 'from the personal lives of people' apart from discussions in the mass media.

Because other members face the same questions in everyday life, they can help in a process of 'personal development': 'You are all homosexual, you are all Christian and you seek people among those Christian homosexuals to develop yourself, to learn from others' (Bas). Explaining what he values most in his interactions with other forum members, Harry, too, indicates his forum participation is about personal development instead of expressing emotional problems and receiving empathic support and understanding: 'I always try to get starting points, and I stand in great need of feedback.'

The questions at hand are about how to be and how to act in day-to-day life, and to find answers these members look for insightful experiences, information, and advice. This differs from the aspirations of the members struggling with stigmatization, who explain that for them 'tips and advice are not really what it is about', as they attach greatest importance to 'recognition and the feeling of not being alone' (Menno). Bas sets out his most important reason for his participation in *RefoAnders*:

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'I came out of the closet and then everything was all new. And then you are eager to get information, "how do others deal with it?" You think it is crystal clear, but after a while (...) certain questions arise. (...) "How do I fit my homosexuality in with Christianity?", "Can these go together?", "And in a relationship?", "How do you deal with it at home, with family, with reactions, with the church?"'

As Harry puts it: 'The question that keeps me busy is: in what way can I lead a chaste, Christian life? On the forum of *RefoAnders* I can ask that question. (...) On the forum I post messages in which I put my personal questions of life into words'.

A related question these members seek answers to on the forum is how to handle occasional queries about their sexuality in offline life: 'It is important for my personal life because I just want to be an active member of a church, and in daily life in Reformed denominations you occasionally encounter people who raise questions, like "how do you do that, explain, how is it possible?" Sometimes you can use a forum, not just because of the argumentation but to get insight into their way of thinking, so that you recognize it and it is less conflicting' (Karel).

These members highly value their online interactions, as these help to ameliorate their offline lives. Harry, for instance, says 'thanks to the interactions on the forum I feel more confident in day-to-day life', and Karel observes: 'my best experience is that I gained insight.' Likewise, Bas conveys: '*RefoAnders* has made me who I am today. (...) When you leave your parental home you are all alone in your development. Like "gosh, help, I have to solve it myself." To a large extent the forum helped me to do so'. Again, these positive results are associated with a transformation of forum use: 'at first you face questions and eventually you reach a point at which you think "well, I have sorted it out for myself". Then I wanted to share my things with others' (Bas). Joeri feels the same: 'now that I have answered my questions you become some kind of contact person for others.'

Thus, the online participation of this group of members is also inspired by the desire to help others with information and advice on issues they have sorted out for themselves. According to Tom, for instance, 'being an adviser for one another is

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one of the objectives of the forum', and Albert strongly believes he has to help others with the process he has been through himself: 'I know that there are many more homosexuals, and I want to mean something to them. (...) That is a very important part of my life, it provides meaning. I consider it important, for me it is something of a mission'. Karel shares this view, thinking, 'maybe I can seek interaction or just look what the concerns of these people are. Are there any questions I asked myself earlier and for which you might give someone advice?' For Guus, too, 'helping young Christian homosexuals' is 'most important'.

Finally, the online participation of this group of members decreases as they face 'burnout' (cf. Marshall 2007: 101-2): they grow tired of discussing the same topics time and again. Albert explains: 'then you think "boys, it is history repeating." I am a little done with it to re-enter that discussion over and over again and I feel that it is wearing me out, that it consumes too much energy'. Joeri concurs: 'At a certain point in time you are done with discussion. At least, half a year ago I thought "well, by now it is all clear to me, I know how I want to arrange my life" and then you almost have to force yourself to have a look on the forum'.

All in all, the forum members concerned with reflexive questions of identity participate in *RefoAnders* because this enables them to draw on the lived experiences of those living in comparable offline situations, as well as to share their own insights with others in need of advice. As such, the reasons inspiring their forum participation differ from the desire for emotional support prevalent among the forum members who struggle with stigmatization. Whereas the analysis thus has revealed two distinct groups with different offline experiences and related reasons for their online participation, this naturally does not imply that these groups are monolithic wholes. Of course, there are differences among members of both groups – some members facing reflexive questions of identity, for instance, stress questions about relationships, whereas others emphasize learning how to act *vis-à-vis* fellow churchgoers. However, what is important in the context of my research is that they share a focus on reflexive questions of identity that differs from the desire for emotional support characteristic of the stigmatized members.

Togetherness on *RefoAnders*: a refuge and a springboard

In what follows, I will discuss how these different reasons for participation rooted in experiences in everyday life go hand in hand with contrasting understandings of togetherness on *RefoAnders*. It will be shown that those struggling with stigmatization understand *RefoAnders* as a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge, whereas members facing reflexive questions of identity value the forum as a springboard, while appreciating a far less solid 'personal sociality'.

Different understandings of social relationships

Although all members appreciate associating online with people sharing their orthodox religious beliefs as well as their sexuality, important differences lie behind this similarity. For those struggling with stigmatization, this common identity fuels a generalized attachment to other forum members. Cees indicates that 'being among like-minded people or companions in distress (...) absolutely excites connectedness to each other'. Edwin shares this feeling of attachment: 'I feel attached to the forum itself' – this extends to the forum members 'in general': 'you are connected to persons who are the same as you are, who have faith and are homosexual'. This is echoed in the account of René, who experiences a 'connection with *RefoAnders*.' As such, an oft-quoted aspect of community is present among the members facing stigmatization in offline social life – there is 'communal solidarity' (Komito 1998: 98), 'a solidarity among all those who comprise it' (Foster 1997: 25; cf. Papadakis 2003: 9).

The relationships with the forum population in general are not experienced to be 'affect-laden' (Etzioni 2004: 225) by members who use the forum to deal with reflexive questions of identity instead of problems of stigmatization. Albert conveys he has no special attachment with other forum members in general, and Guus 'never felt attached to Christian homosexuals (...) simply because we happened to be on the same forum or shared the same homo-background'. This is not to say that they do not experience any attachment to other forum members at all – these feelings are,

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however, limited to specific members with whom they associate when dealing with the questions they face. Sam, for instance, indicates that a feeling of connectedness 'is not something I experience with regard to the forum, but I do when it comes to some individual members.' Tellingly, Fred, whose forum use transformed from seeking empathic support to dealing with reflexive questions of identity, indicates his attachment changed over time. He confirms that he had a generalized feeling of solidarity at first, but now believes that 'you have to choose your people'. These are 'people you get along with well' (Tom), and in this respect the members dealing with reflexive questions of identity frequently speak of 'friends' (Guus), 'friendships' (Joeri) and 'companions' (Sam).

These differences between generalized, encompassing feelings of solidarity on the one hand and personal companionship on the other are reflected when it comes to a sense of belonging. Those struggling with stigmatization not only feel attached to the forum and its members in general, they also have outspoken feelings of belonging. Edwin, for instance, notes that his 'connectedness' makes him 'feel at home' on the forum, and Menno, too, 'feels at home' because of 'the atmosphere on *RefoAnders*'. Likewise, Cees says he 'pretty much feels at home there' even to the extent that – even though 'it is a weighty term' – *RefoAnders* feels like 'a second home' to him as 'it has become part of [his] life.'

The forum members whose participation is related to reflexive questions of identity do not have such an emotional sense of belonging on the forum. Tom, for instance, states: 'It is not like I don't have any emotions, but with regard to a forum I do think like "get a life", it is just a computer screen.' And now that Joeri has overcome his struggles, this is reflected in his forum participation: 'At a certain moment you experience a change and from then on it is merely pleasant to keep up personal contacts through the forum'. Moreover, these members explicitly dismiss the idea of the forum being a second home to them: it is a suggestion Guus merely laughs at, and Sam says: 'It is absolutely not a second home. It is sad that it is to some others, something is wrong if it is your second home'. And referring to his current quest to ameliorate everyday life, Fred states: 'I would rather build my own home'.

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These divergent understandings also come to light when the members themselves reflect on *RefoAnders* as a community. Although some think the community label 'is a little too strong' to be applied to the forum (René), the members struggling with stigmatization embrace a discourse of *Gemeinschaft* when it comes to their online interactions, because they 'have something in common that binds them' (Menno). Edwin is very outspoken on this matter: 'Naturally, the forum is like a little city in itself, a village in itself'. Later on he says: 'I like it to be part of that community – it really is a community, isn't it?' This is not how those driven by reflexive questions of identity see it. Some of them indicate that the forum may be a virtual *Gemeinschaft* for members who deal with stigmatization, like Albert who notes that there is 'a group of people who feel safe among each other, who want to and dare to talk among each other, which they would not dare anywhere else'. But, as his words already point out, this is not the meaning he himself attaches to the forum. That some of those dealing with reflexive questions of identity denote the forum a community at all is only because they have a shared identity consisting of 'homosexuality and Christian faith' (Harry). Others are utterly dismissive of the idea. For Guus this is the case because 'there absolutely are no common bonds' and in Sam's view '[the forum members] are all individuals who give their opinion once in a while'. Fred laughs while stating, 'it would be way too limited, with such a pack of homosexuals among each other' to speak of community on the forum.

In short, those who struggle with stigmatization in offline social life understand the forum to be a virtual *Gemeinschaft* – they strikingly reflect the perspective of *Stormfront's* stigmatized members. On the other hand, those addressing reflexive questions of identity in day-to-day life do not have such a sense of *Gemeinschaft*, but nevertheless value a shared identity and report feelings of connectedness with specific fellow members. Although their forum membership is not inspired by a desire to form affective social bonds, their online participation has nevertheless given rise to social relations that may be characterized as 'personal sociality', an amalgam of two similar concepts that are often contrasted with *Gemeinschaft*: 'personal community' (Wellman et al. 1996; Wellman et al. 2002; Wellman et al. 2003; cf. Wilkinson 2010) and 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001; cf.

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Willson 2010). These concepts were developed to indicate that many people are nowadays 'limited-liability members of several partial communities rather than fully committed members of one all-embracing community' (Wellman and Hampton 1999: 650). In times of 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al. 2003) and 'personalized networking' (Wellman 2001), people 'cycle through interactions with a variety of others' instead of 'relating to one group' (Wellman et al. 2003). This is precisely what can be seen among the members of *RefoAnders* who participate in the forum to deal with reflexive questions of identity. As they are not socially isolated in offline life, they have no generalized feelings of attachment to *the* forum community, but rather value contacts with 'companions' and 'friends' they have met on the forum while they were seeking answers to reflexive questions of identity – the latter being part of personal networks not confined to *RefoAnders*.

These differences are not limited to the forum: the offline gatherings organized around it are differently valued as well. Some have not been able to attend these because of practical reasons, but members of both groups do visit these offline meetings. Their offline participation reflects their specific concerns rooted in their everyday life experiences.

Those struggling with stigmatization regard offline gatherings as valuable because they provide the same sense of belonging as their online interactions do. As Hans puts it: 'you feel at home among that kind of men'. And just like his forum participation, René's attendance at offline meetings – which he keeps secret from his wife – is inspired by a desire to retreat from his negative experiences at home and to associate with people he feels comfortable with: 'Then I really don't want to go back to the world I come from, do you understand? I belong in that world [of *RefoAnders*], but I live in another world. (...) You feel at home in that world among men and then you come back into a marriage with a shouting wife'.

In line with their understanding of online social relationships, those dealing with reflexive questions of identity provide different accounts of their offline participation. They primarily value the offline meetings because of the personal contacts they have there, as a way of keeping up friendships. Guus, for instance, is very clear about his visits to the *RefoAnders* living room: 'The motivation for me is

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that I simply see friends of mine at that moment. [Mentions specific names.] Well, they all live that far away, you don't have time for that during the week. And that is my motivation to just visit [the meetings]’.

In short, the different reasons underlying online participation go hand in hand with different understandings of online and offline social relationships with fellow forum members. These different motives for participation are also reflected in views on symbolic forum boundaries and diversity, which shed light on the way the different groups aspire to ‘attain and maintain’ (Watson 1997: 110) the kind of togetherness they value.

Symbolic boundaries and diversity

To start with, forum members have different opinions about the forum's accessibility to outsiders. Those seeking empathic support desire that their communications be hidden from the outside world. They greatly appreciate the ‘members-only’ part of the forum, reflecting their desire to retreat into a virtual *Gemeinschaft* of like-minded people. Cees states: ‘it is very important that not everyone and his dog can access the forum.’ Edwin explains: ‘Naturally, you want to be able to talk to each other without the whole world knowing about it, so it has to be hidden.’ He summarizes this position as: ‘I consider it important that everything is private.’ The members who are focused on reflexive questions of identity hold different views. They state that they ‘are not hindered’ (Fred) by the fact that non-members can read their contributions to the forum and that they do not care about what non-members can read. Joeri says: ‘I am aware that some people are really attached to it, and also make a plea to make a much larger part exclusively accessible to members, but no, I don't see that distinction myself’. Karel declares: ‘I consider it to be public’.

Divergent stances on boundaries also appear in opinions about so-called ‘user groups’, that is, sub forums for specific groups of members such as ‘youngsters’ or ‘married people’. Stigmatized members use this feature, and they consider it important ‘because there are people who really have solidarity with each other in a

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small community within a larger community' (Edwin). The forum members facing reflexive questions of identity, however, do not participate in user groups, and some of them denounce these groups as 'pathetic' (Guus) or 'nonsense' (Bas), as they do not stimulate insights that can be used in everyday life: 'Even though you don't share someone's position, you can still learn from each other' (Bas). Joeri explains: 'I am a proponent of a broad forum of which people of all ages are members, precisely because you can help each other with advice and the like', and Sam adds: 'Why would someone of another group not be of value to you?'

The aversion to 'user groups' among the latter group of forum members is reflected in their general stance toward diversity on the forum. Because they are active online to learn about reflexive questions of identity, they value the presence of members with different characteristics: 'Everyone has his own story, absolutely. And from every story you can learn something yourself' (Bas). In line with this perspective, heterosexuals are welcomed on the forum, and their presence is regarded as 'all right' (Albert) as long as they do not try to impose their own views. Harry says: 'I believe we need their input (...) in church we are one. The "homo question" is not about homosexuals alone.' Fred explains: 'I don't oppose to heterosexuals on the [forum]. Not at all, because I have to deal with them in society as well', and Joeri says, 'it provided me with insight into the way a heterosexual who doesn't understand homosexual feelings looks at the phenomenon', which helped him 'adjust [his] strategy'. Guus, too, values the online presence of heterosexuals because 'it is like practicing, isn't it? Let them go, talk to those heterosexuals and let them see what the reactions are'. For Karel this is specifically important, as it helps him learn how to handle incidental critiques of his sexuality: '[Heterosexual member] is an example of someone I could meet in everyday life and who would ask me [critical questions] (...) But how do you handle that? [This member] is someone who put me on a track like "all right, if someone acts like this, then I might do..."'

Those struggling with stigmatization hold different views. As virtually belonging to a group of like-minded, understanding peers is what relieves their plight, they do not want to see the cohesive *Gemeinschaft* found on *RefoAnders* disturbed by outsiders. Only for Edwin the presence of heterosexuals is all right, but

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not because he himself values it: 'No, that is purely for themselves. That is not of importance to us. They ask questions (...) because they don't understand'. Cees argues, 'properly speaking, the forum is not [for heterosexuals]', and others are more outspoken – Menno states: 'properly speaking, they don't belong [on the forum]'. According to him, heterosexuals undermine the conversations between like-minded homosexuals because 'they don't understand', and Hans explains he does not like their presence because 'then I feel somewhat spied on'.

Both groups not only disagree about the question of how to deal with heterosexuals on the forum, they also have different outlooks on diversity in viewpoints pertaining to homosexuality and religion. Some of those experiencing stigmatization in offline life regard divergent opinions 'inconvenient' because these are 'confusing' (Menno). Others 'don't have troubles' (Cees) with different stances, but they do not consider it especially valuable, either, that different opinions are represented on the forum. On the other hand, the forum members dealing with reflexive questions of identity highly appreciate diversity in viewpoints expressed on the forum, which 'just keeps it all healthy' (Bas). They indicate that they 'like to listen to other opinions' (Harry) and consider 'a broad range of opinions' 'helpful' (Fred) because they try to learn from their online interactions: 'Even the negative things – in case I totally disagree – yield positive things [because] I think "well, that is not how I want it to be for myself"' (Fred). Guus especially values diversity in opinions because it aids the 'youngsters' he aims to help: 'In the beginning it is nice to find some like-minded people, and people you can talk to. But if you are young you want to move ahead, you know. Then you want to look at "how is it to have a relationship. Can I live with that or not?"'

In line with their positive stance toward plurality in viewpoints, these members value debates on the forum: 'a forum is of course a place where people have discussions. The moment you only allow people with a specific opinion to the forum it is no longer a forum, then it is a meeting-place of people who think alike, then the discussion is gone' (Piet). They 'like fierce discussions' instead of 'chit-chat' (Albert), because these bring 'clarity' (Fred), 'break taboos' (Guus) and help to 'critically look at your own points of view' (Joeri). Those aiming to find empathic

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support among like-minded people take a different stance, as fierce debates impede their sense of *Gemeinschaft*. Hans argues, 'it doesn't get you anywhere', and when asked for an example of a negative experience on the forum, Edwin tells about a forum member 'who really tried to bring down my views on certain things', which he 'regarded as very mean.' According to Edwin, the expression of contrary opinions 'only leads to more discussion (...) [and] forces you in a defensive position', which undermines the support on the forum.

In short, the two groups have different understandings of virtual togetherness. Just like *Stormfront's* stigmatized members, *RefoAnders's* members who struggle with stigmatization value a clearly-bounded, homogeneous *Gemeinschaft* in which they find emotional support as a *refuge*. In contrast, those seeking insight into reflexive questions of identity look for informational support and want the forum to be an open, heterogeneous place for deliberation, because this suits their aspirations best. As their online participation helps them to ameliorate their offline lives, they value the forum as a *springboard* instead of a refuge. And while this is what is of primary importance to these members, they also have come to appreciate social relationships with specific fellow forum members which are part of their personal networks of sociality.

Conclusion

In my analysis of participation in *RefoAnders* presented above, two different types of virtual togetherness could be distinguished, a refuge and a springboard. By addressing their reasons for participation rooted in offline social life, why users value a certain type of togetherness can be understood. Two mechanisms between online and offline social life have been discussed in this chapter. Both feature a pre-existing problem of identity that underlies a specific type of virtual togetherness: while stigma inspires a retreat in a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge, reflexive questions of identity stimulate the use of an online forum as a springboard.

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These results demonstrate first that the significance of the findings presented in the previous chapter is not limited to *Stormfront*. The conclusion that *RefoAnders*'s members who struggle with stigmatization in offline social life also seek refuge in a virtual *Gemeinschaft* underlines the fact that a mechanism with more general relevance has been uncovered. More important than this corroboration is that my analysis of *RefoAnders* has brought additional insight. Whereas merely one mechanism was found in the previous chapter, this case study added a second one and as such made an important contribution to my theory-building endeavor. Moreover, the findings presented in this chapter add further strength to my initial plea to take the experiences and understandings of those involved into account if one wishes to arrive at an understanding of participation in online forums. My finding that one and the same forum may house distinct types of togetherhness that are valued by different groups of members who have different motivations for online participation demonstrates that it is highly problematic to simply assume that people participate in online forums in order 'to connect with like-minded others' (Russ 2008: 98).

Finally, these findings inform a discussion in Internet studies at large. They shed light on the idea that Internet forums provide Goffmanian (1990 [1959]) 'back-stages'. Examining the literature, two different notions can be distinguished. In line with Goffman (1986 [1963]: 81), some authors put forward that online forums function as back-stages in the sense that the stigmatized can reveal their stigma there and 'openly seek out one another for support and advice' (Deshotels and Forsyth 2007: 212; Quinn and Forsyth 2005: 198-9). As such, online forums are back-stages enabling the stigmatized to live a 'double life', shielding their identity in offline life and being open about it online (Adler and Adler 2008: 50). Others, however, mean something entirely different when dealing with the subject of online back-stages. Referring to Goffman as well, Mukerji and Simon (1998: 259), for instance, denote online venues as back-stages because these enable rehearsal to manage or respond to public life, and Munt et al. (2002: 135) assert that the website they studied is used as a back-stage because participants 'solicit opinion and debate on the appropriate behaviour and values' to build connections in their local

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communities. Thus, some scholars label online forums as back-stages because these can be places individuals can retreat to, whereas others speak of online back-stages as venues in which people can obtain insights and practice for offline front-stage performances.

These differences can be understood by taking the offline experiences of forum users into account. For both groups on *RefoAnders* the forum has back-stage characteristics: it is a venue apart from their front-stage offline social lives in which their performances are given (Goffman 1990 [1959]). These offline performances, however, greatly differ, and this underlies different uses of the online back-stage. The refuge function the forum fulfills for those struggling with stigmatization is a back-stage in the first sense, whereas the springboard function for those facing reflexive questions of identity closely resembles a back-stage in the second sense. This extends Goffman's observation that the function of stages varies in relation to different performances; not only can a specific place switch from front-stage to back-stage and vice versa (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 127-9), it can also function in distinct ways as a back-stage for groups giving different front-stage performances. Besides, my material indicates that different uses of an online back-stage go hand in hand with different ideas about their accessibility. Some authors suggest that participants can only 'take full advantage' of an online back-stage if it is hidden (Ross 2007: 321), but this does not hold in general. Those desiring the back-stage to be a place to retreat to require it to be closed off from the front-stage, whereas those looking for insights into reflexive questions of identity do not. As the latter regard it as a place for deliberation, they even welcome members of their front-stage audience back-stage.

Having discussed the implications of the analysis presented in this chapter, it is time to continue my inductive enterprise. A third case study is necessary in order to acquire additional insights into virtual togetherness. This will be discussed in the chapters that follow.



Chapter 5

'I had never even thought about collective action before'

An online social movement

Introduction

In the previous chapters I have discussed two distinct types of virtual togetherness, and I have demonstrated how these can be understood by taking differing reasons for participation rooted in offline social life into account. I sketched how, on the one hand, those experiencing stigmatization in offline social life seek refuge in a clearly bounded, tight-knit homogeneous virtual *Gemeinschaft*. On the other hand, those facing reflexive questions of identity use their forum as a springboard in order to ameliorate their offline social lives and merely appreciate specific contacts with fellow forum members as part of their network-like personal sociality that extends beyond the forum.

These two mechanisms have in common that both have been uncovered by focusing on forums whose theme revolves around a specific identity. From the outset *Stormfront* and *RefoAnders* were formed around social identities, which is reflected in their self-labeling as 'Stormfront White Nationalist Community' and 'the meeting point around homosexual feelings for people from orthodox Christian circles' respectively. As indicated by the participation of distinct groups of users, such a focus does not mean that the togetherness on these forums is predetermined. However, in both cases it is evident that problems of identity existing prior to online participation are salient to an understanding of togetherness on these venues and that a forum's focus on a specific identity plays a crucial role in this respect.

Since this dissertation is a theory-building endeavor, in this chapter its scope is broadened by selecting as a third and last case a forum that has, in contrast, not

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been started around a specific identity. As forum members' identities may be relevant to the togetherness they construct online in ways other than because of the pre-existing problems of identity discussed above, this seems to be a fruitful strategy to further increase variation. Thus, to further develop understanding of virtual togetherness in relation to offline social life, I will now focus on a forum centered around an instrumental day-to-day issue instead of a particular identity. A suitable case would be a forum that is formed around an instrumental question, but is nevertheless heavily frequented not only in terms of sheer numbers of users, but also in terms of duration and intensity of participation. After all, long-term intensive participation seemingly indicates that participation in the forum is regarded as salient by the participants in some way or other, suggesting that some sort of virtual togetherness is to be found.

Such a case is provided by the forum of *Flitsservice*. As indicated in chapter two, this forum has been set up to connect motorists who want to be informed about the location of speed controls in the Netherlands – its subtitle is 'your guide against senseless speed controls'. Alerts are posted on the website and distributed through other digital media and can be used without costs or entering into any obligations. Forum membership is not even required to make use of speed control notifications. Nevertheless, the forum has over 10 thousand members, some of whom have been active for years and posted thousands of messages. All in all, this suggests that, even though it does not originate from a pressing problem of identity, the forum is somehow salient to certain participants beyond simple instrumental reasons, and their sheer numbers practically guarantee that some variation is to be found.

Below, I will explore the reasons underlying participation in the forum, the online experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to the forum, and how these are related to offline social life.

Initial motives

What is it that brought the members of *Flitsservice* to the forum in the first place? The founder and administrator explains that *Flitsservice* was originally set up as nothing more than a 'very primitive' text messaging service coupled to a website. This developed into 'an authority in the field of speed control notifications', and the administrator explains that the forum has been supportive in that process in as much as 'most people who provided notifications were simply people active on the forum'. This means that to him the forum is first and foremost useful 'to get people involved' in sharing speed control notifications, and hence 'the forum is just an addition, you know. My core activity consists of the notifications. That really is my thing.' Although *Flitsservice's* primary focus is on the distribution of speed control notifications, its founder adds that a broader goal is 'to inform motorists on car issues, legal issues related to road traffic' with 'a distinct focus on speed controls and not on parking fines, alcohol controls (...) and you name it.'

Unsurprisingly given *Flitsservice's* focus, many members got involved simply because they were trying to avoid speed controls: 'I was trying to find out where these cursed speed cameras were positioned, whether there was a site for it, because I had been caught for the umpteenth time. (...) And then you automatically end up on *Flitsservice*' (Els). Herbert, too, explains that he visited *Flitsservice* 'purely for the speed control notifications. (...) Purely to reduce the sums of the speed penalties.' This is considered 'a practical necessity' (Diederik), as respondents spend much time on the road: 'I think I came there through the speed control notifications. I cover quite a few kilometers annually, and then some care always is necessary. (...) Then it is good to know in advance where to anticipate the dangers' (Leen).

Flitsservice's slightly broader scope is reflected in the initial reasons to visit *Flitsservice* cited by some other members. Otto explains: 'at some moment I had a question about a traffic penalty and I entered it in a search engine. And I came across the forum of *Flitsservice*. (...) I did not agree with the fine and I wanted to know what I could actually do about it.' Jochem, too, was hoping 'to get advice' related to a speeding ticket, whereas Ralph was 'simply looking for a standard notice

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of objection because [he] was sick of it' – just like Philip, who used the 'appeal generator' as a practical tool.

A related reason to seek out *Flitsservice* lies in the technical information that is provided. Apart from an interest in 'the technology behind speed controls' (Adriaan) out of 'curiosity' (Teun) members were interested in *Flitsservice* because it offers details on radar detectors – that is, systems that locate and warn motorists about radar-based speed controls. Tjerk notes: 'there are some techniques and gadgets on it [with which] you can keep an eye on speed controls', and Frank says his first visit to *Flitsservice* was 'purely because information was provided' on it: 'I was looking for a better radar detector than the one I owned that moment and therefore I searched on the Internet.' Another member explains: 'I had received an enormous fine, a really high fine, because of speeding. (...) Then I thought "I ought to place a radar detector in it." (...) I used a search engine and *Flitsservice* was among the first hits.'

Even though the scope and attractiveness of *Flitsservice* thus proves to be broader than speed control notifications alone, questions about fines and radar detectors are inspired by a desire for information as well. Again and again the respondents mention that they were looking for useful information, and they simply encountered the forum through search engines or *Flitsservice's* notifications that are broadcast by radio stations. As such, it seems little more than a database for motorists usage of which is inspired by instrumental reasons. In that light it is unsurprising that many members of the forum are so-called 'one day flies' – forum statistics show that over 6,300 of the roughly 10,200 forum members have posted merely five messages or fewer. Thus, for an important share of its members *Flitsservice* is just a source of information that is used passively. This is echoed in the account of Jochem, who 'is not very active': 'since I posted that single topic I have not replied anymore and that is two months ago or something like that.' In reply to the question of what *Flitsservice* means to him, he 'actually cannot say anything else than a description [of its formal characteristics].'

However, this does not seem to be the case for all members. As Kees observes: 'some people simply stay around.' The remainder of my analysis is

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focused on these members who do not seem to share the founder's viewpoint that 'the forum is of minor importance. The notifications and the website are number one.' What keeps them tied to the forum for years, participating intensively?

Their initial motives apparently cannot account for their prolonged and frequent participation. In this respect it is particularly striking that speeding tickets no longer pose a serious problem for them personally. Sometimes explicitly and pleased, sometimes offhandedly, respondents indicate that they have succeeded in avoiding speeding penalties: 'Well, actually I never get any tickets myself. None at all, really never' (Tjerk). Leen, too, states he 'never received a speeding ticket', and Nick says: 'Luckily I do not get many fines.' Obviously, *Flitsservice* is important in this, but not in a way that requires active participation: the use of notifications is not restricted to forum members and neither is the use of the photo-illustrated reports of speed controls that are provided online. These reports 'are especially helpful if you have only just started; to see how the traffic police teams operate, how they set up the devices and such. To learn to recognize these' (Philip). However, over the course of their participation veteran members have learned to spot the speed controls themselves: 'after a while, you know where they are positioned' (Els) – 'if you have read ten or twenty of these, you have read them all, I think' (Xander). In a similar vein, Yvette explicitly states that her current participation is not inspired by a want of technical or legal information: 'because all that knowledge, I think, well, I will be able to read it again if I would ever need it. But now I do not need it.' In short, since *Flitsservice's* active participants 'hardly ever receive any tickets anymore and (...) do not care that much anymore', their membership 'is no longer directed at [avoiding] speed controls' (Herbert). What follows will explore what keeps certain users tied to the forum nevertheless, and it is argued that two distinct types of virtual togetherness have evolved among *Flitsservice's* members. One of these is discussed below, and the other one is analyzed in the next chapter.

The online construction of collective identities

Among the forum members discussed in this chapter, two groups can be discerned: one of these can be labeled as anti-institutional and the other consists of concerned citizens. As discussed below, these groups share certain views about Dutch speed control policies but diverge on other issues.

These members have in common that they did not plan from the outset to be active on the forum for a prolonged period. Ralph, for example, states: 'I did not do so intentionally, anyway', and Gert says: 'I think it grows over the years.' As Philip's initial motive was purely instrumental, he 'totally did not' expect his participation to evolve – that has happened 'as a matter of course'. These respondents report that the intensity of their activities on the forum has grown since they became a member. Philip explains: 'At the start I was hardly active on the forum. Every now and then a message here, a posting there. Meanwhile, this has increased vigorously.' Kees has a similar experience: 'In the beginning I was there only once in a while, but that has become more and more'. Tellingly, for both of them the only minor disadvantage of their current membership is that it 'costs so much time'. These accounts are echoed by the other respondents. In the instances that the intensity of their participation has in the meantime slightly decreased from 'entire days' to still 'almost every day', this is 'compelled by necessity' because of obligations at work (Cor) – for the same reason Philip is currently active for 'an hour a day', which he considers 'not much'. The analysis presented below shows that the motivations underlying sustained intensive membership evolved during online participation.

'It all sucks': the social articulation of anti-institutional views

The anti-institutional group is characterized by discontent concerning the Dutch government's traffic policy. Not surprisingly, they are averse to the way the government applies speed controls: these are regarded as 'ridiculous taxes in disguise' (Gert). However, their malcontent is broader and more deeply embedded than disagreement with speed controls alone. It is, for instance, argued that the

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government takes away money from Dutch motorists without providing anything in return: 'In the Netherlands you pay that much on road tax, motor vehicle tax, VAT, fuel; all roads could have been paved with gold if they had returned that money to the motorists' (Gert). Another element of their critique is that Dutch traffic policy is 'way too restrictive (...). It takes the brain-work away from the motorist. One does not longer think if one obeys all those rules blindly. (...) It is just a whole lot of slaves on the road now' (Cor). Moreover, traffic controls add to the experience of being under permanent state surveillance: 'The control has gone way too far. (...) I constantly feel chased down' (Kees).

Strikingly, their negative stance *vis-à-vis* the government is not only broader than speed controls; it even goes beyond the Dutch traffic policy and is aimed at the government in general. This is related to a dislike of governmental interference in their personal life. Cor explains that partly because of his aversion to restrictions imposed by the government he 'has become a fierce opponent of the existence of large parts of the government. (...) the government is a kind of evil that has to be kept in check.' Likewise, Kees is 'not quite positive': 'That meddlesomeness; they interfere with my life sphere. I think that is ridiculous.' This is considered all the more problematic because, according to this group of forum members, urgent problems are not being dealt with: 'There is too much patronizing in this country. For everything there are rules and prohibitions, whereas they do not act decisive when it comes to real crime. (...) They do not do a damn thing about that. (...) Priorities are totally wrong' (Kees). This underlies a negative evaluation of the Dutch government in general: 'They really ball up things here. One sees it is deteriorating every week. (...) The bureaucracy, the taxes, it all sucks' (Gert).

This evaluation of the Dutch traffic policy in particular and the functioning of the government in general is not simply individually held: it has provided the basis for the construction of a shared politically articulated identity among this group of members. Time and again these respondents stress that they have come to recognize their own political views in other forum members, and that as a result a collective identity has evolved along with their participation in the forum. As Kees analyzes the participation of members who stick around: 'They discover the forum,

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and they discover the other forum members.’ Gert explains: ‘With some members, who think quite similar and have the same vision, I have affinity, to put it like that. And eventually it grows until you get the idea “here are more people like me” (...) and therefore you visit it nearly every day to peek around.’ Moreover, Kees says: ‘Thanks to the forum I discovered that there are many more people who actually think like I do.’ When these members’ initial non-political, instrumental reasons for joining the forum are taken into account, it is all the more clear that the forum has played a crucial role in the construction of a collective identity. While these members were simply looking for some instrumental information, they happened to end up on a forum on which people with similar political discontents were active. By recognizing this, a social identity has been forged out of political discontents that were merely individually held prior to their forum membership.

Just like their personal discontent, the basis of this collective identity is not limited to a similar stance on traffic-related issues. Even though Cor states ‘simply being fed up with speed controls’ is what unites *Flitsservice*’s members, others stress the importance of more general issues: Kees’s idea that the other forum members are like-minded is ‘especially about traffic, but also about other matters.’ According to Gert

‘you simply see that people give things in other fields more serious consideration (...). It does not have to be limited to cars, it can also be about other political issues. I think that they are in general more freedom-minded and therefore there is more resemblance than just driving a car.’

This preference for personal freedom proves especially relevant:

‘My conclusion was actually that these are all people with a strong desire for freedom who simply terribly dislike patronizing rules. It simply is a disposition for people. I mean, people who are not troubled

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by vast amounts of rules and who like to be oppressed simply do not visit *Flitsservice*' (Ralph).

In such comparisons with those who do not share the collective identity that has been constructed among these members, the common factor of this group of forum members is clearly articulated. Gert, for instance, explains his reasons for remaining active on the forum as follows:

'I think that on that site – and naturally that does not hold for all people – there is a hard core of people who quite well know how life works. So, who are pretty much more intelligent and who are somewhat more sensitive to the whole Dutch organizational power than the majority of the *hoi polloi*.'

That it is this collective identity that lies at the heart of their prolonged participation instead of their initial instrumental interest in avoiding speed controls is underlined by Ralph:

'That is the reason you visit it in the beginning, the notifications and the legal know-how, but that is not the reason you stay. (...) I think that if there had been another platform that had kicked at a different part of the government I had ended up there in a similar fashion. (...) For me, it did not necessarily have to be about traffic.'

The collective identity that is valued among these forum members is obviously less clearly defined and more fluid than the identities of the stigmatized members of *Stormfront* and *RefoAnders*. And unlike people who seek refuge online, they do not experience a generalized attachment to the other forum members. Nevertheless, the collective identity that has evolved online fosters a sense of attachment among forum members who share it: 'Just like in society you feel more attached to some than to others' (Cor). Ralph reflects on this: 'I think the common viewpoints and the

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common characters you encounter there – all urging for freedom – that simply makes it pleasant to associate with each other, because you simply are on par with each other.’ Likewise, Kees states: ‘Well, I feel quite attached to other forum members because they have rather similar ideas.’ This goes hand in hand with a sense of belonging in this group. Again this differs from the deep emotional attachment to the forum experienced by people struggling with stigmatization who seek refuge in a virtual *Gemeinschaft*. The forum most certainly does not function as a ‘second home’ to this group of *Flitsservice*’s members; they feel comfortable rather than at home. Cor, for example, says he does not feel emotionally attached to the forum, but at the same time he has a sense of belonging which he explains as: ‘It is just nice and pleasant there.’ And Ralph describes it as: ‘I feel comfortable there. I would not regard it my home, but it is pleasant. (...) Simply discussing, knowing each other, dealing with something you really oppose to. These are all things that just make you feel good.’

In short, among this group of anti-institutional members a politically inspired collective identity has been constructed which fosters mutual attachment and inspires prolonged participation in the forum.

Concerned citizens

The second group of respondents, whom I have labeled as ‘concerned citizens’, by and large shares the viewpoints on speed controls discussed above. It is argued that ‘the whole speed control policy (...) has nothing to do at all with safety’ (Diederik) – ‘it is just principally incorrect if one continuously keeps harping on the fact that speed causes accidents’ (Maarten). Moreover, Philip reflects the financial reasoning mentioned above: ‘What I think is really sad is that speeding fines that should serve the purpose of teaching people to behave better are actually used in the Netherlands to fill the treasury.’

However, on other issues these forum members deviate from the anti-institutional group. Even though they share a dislike of ‘the patronizing aspect’ of governmental policy (Maarten), they have no deeply felt discontent about the Dutch

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government in general. They argue that 'priorities are mislaid in the Ministry of Justice' (Leen), but they are not outright negative about every aspect of the government. Rather, they are 'dissatisfied with the current policies and the way in which these are designed' (Herbert). Despite their concerns, these members do not depict the government and its servants as malevolent. Diederik, for instance, explicitly states: 'I am not against the police or something like that, not at all' to later add: 'I have no general sense of discontent. I do not have that.' He merely 'gets excited' if he witnesses people in authority acting unjustly. As such, these concerned citizens do not share the anti-institutional ethos of those discussed above; they rather worry about the functioning of democratic institutions. Diederik, for example, considers it not right that the burden of proof seems to be reversed in Dutch traffic laws, and he is troubled by his observation that some policemen write out tickets arbitrarily. Among this group of forum members the Dutch infrastructure is another point of serious concern, and they signal concrete problems that should be dealt with: 'the broadening of highways and the construction of roads and additional traffic lanes, I think this has to be sped up considerably' (Herbert). Philip shares this opinion: 'A large problem is, for instance, the Dutch highway-system. That is strongly outdated, poorly maintained.'

Again, the views of these forum members are not simply individually held. Similar to the anti-institutional group, their concerns have been socially articulated online: they have constructed a collective identity on the forum, and they experience mutual attachment associated with that identity. When asked to elaborate on the sense of unity he says he experiences on the forum, Diederik explains:

'Very strongly with regard to the Dutch traffic policy. That motorists are cash cows in several ways. And that there is a culture of greed, to grab as much money as possible from everywhere. (...) I do not think that that is an idea, but even a truth. And that is something you share.'

Others stress that there is more to it than similar stances on traffic-related issues: 'Naturally, it is the speed control policy in the Netherlands that ties us all together,

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but at the same time all kinds of things', says Philip. And Herbert ranks among the benefits associated with his use of *Flitsservice* 'making contacts with people who more or less think alike about traffic policies and social aspects. And [that is because] you have shared interests, that is cars and traffic policy.'

Just like the collective identity of the anti-institutional group, the existence of their shared identity cannot be understood by taking these members' initial instrumental motives for participation into account. Having joined the forum to save on speeding tickets, they came to interact with people who share their concerns, and this provided the basis for a collective identity that underlies their prolonged participation. Like the others, Herbert indicates that this came about totally unexpectedly. Prior to his forum membership he simply 'did not have any clear ideas on the forum's population', and he stresses that he had not envisaged anything beyond an instrumental use of the forum: 'I had expected that I would use it purely as a source of information and I did not expect to actively contribute myself. [The reason that this nevertheless happened was] that it appeared that there were people who had the same interests as I have.' Thus, instead of actively looking for like-minded people, the politically oriented members of *Flitsservice* have accidentally found these on the forum.

The fact that a collective identity has been forged out of individually held political concerns is also underlined by the boundaries these concerned citizens speak of. Whereas their shared identity is not explicitly and unambiguously labeled, it is nevertheless quite clear to the members who shares it and who does not. Philip states: 'Funnily, just the name they pick often tells you whether they will stay or not.' When asked how this works, he replies: 'Yes, well, I don't know, maybe a feeling. Like, if one picks a name like that, you already know "well that is only for this specific instance and thereafter you will never see them again."' And whereas their views on speed controls overlap with those of the anti-institutional group discussed above, clear boundaries are drawn in other respects, most clearly when it comes to sentiments *vis-à-vis* the Dutch government: 'If one would make a cross-section and take an average forum member, that would have certain characteristics – group characteristics – I do not fit in with. [For instance being] opposed to public servants

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in general, [arguing that] “public servants do nothing” (Diederik). Like Diederik, Herbert dissociates himself from the political views he witnesses among certain groups of users:

‘I have noticed that [the views of the general forum user] do not fully correspond with [the views of those I associate with personally]. I found that there is a very active group on the forum with more rightist tendencies, especially in the direction of Wilders’s club.³⁸ That is not something that has my political preference. I merely notice that the idea that the political decision-making is very slow and tardy, that that idea prevails on the forum as well as with myself.’

Besides, Maarten ‘tries to find a balance’ in his life by ‘keeping [his] life socially responsible’ and feels this sets him apart from other members. From this perspective he states: ‘Personally I think the average forum member is a little too extreme in his doings.’ Diederik shares this perspective and criticizes ‘people who strongly make a stand in a way that should not be done’: ‘If someone has a serious story then you do not want that twenty people first say “what a dirty trick of those policemen, they are all the same.” (...) Look, if it is a crappy officer you should tell him, but in general that is simply not the case.’ Leen, too, distances himself from the anti-institutional ethos of the group discussed above: ‘There are people who simply strongly attack everything. Then I think “yes, well, you do not have to do that.”’ Moreover, he keeps his general political views to himself because he fears that he would be the victim of a ‘flamewar’ if he put these forward in a forum discussion.

In short, the fact that these concerned citizens feel that ‘in the recent past there have been enough reactions on the forum that would make me not know where to hide from shame’ (Diederik) clearly sets them apart as a specific group of users. As such, the collective identity they value and the mutual attachment that goes with it are by and large limited to their group. Maarten, for instance, feels attached ‘to some and absolutely not to some others’. Herbert echoes this perspective, stating that he experiences attachment ‘to some more than others. But

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it is not the case that I feel connected to the entire forum, no.' For Philip, too, this would be 'too general' and he indicates that he gets along better with certain members than with others.

Just like the connectedness experienced by the anti-institutional group of users discussed above, these feelings are not identical to the deep emotional bonds that characterize a virtual *Gemeinschaft*. This is, however, not to say that these feelings of connectedness have no value for the members involved. Herbert explains: 'I do not know whether I have a feeling of affection toward the forum, but we treat each other with respect'. Diederik confirms he has a sense of solidarity, and Philip labels his contacts with other forum members as 'very positive' and states: 'Surely, you get, well, a certain bond to each other.' Furthermore, Herbert indicates he values his contacts with specific members and explains: 'I do not think the large scale [of the forum] is a huge disadvantage because within that group I have found a select group [of people] of whom I read everything anyhow and with whom the contact is somewhat more intensive.' And the group of concerned citizens experiences a sense of belonging as well, even though it is less profound than the experience of a 'second home' prevalent among people who seek refuge online to escape from offline stigmatization. Leen indicates he finds it 'difficult' to say that he feels at home on *Flitservice*, as 'feeling at home is too warm, too affective. Those words do not fit here.' However, Herbert says he 'surely [has a sense of belonging] among the more active group of users [he] is part of. That extends somewhat beyond traffic policies alone', even though this has no strong affective connotation. And Diederik says he feels at home 'sometimes, and sometimes not. Like I indicated before, there is a great number of members I neither could nor would like to get along with. But well, I do not direct myself to them.'

The findings presented above indicate that even though their initial motives for joining the forum were merely instrumental, two distinct, yet partially overlapping, politically oriented groups have evolved online. Whereas both groups – labeled as anti-institutionalists and concerned citizens respectively – share an aversion to current speed control policies, their evaluation of governmental institutions differs. What they have in common is that their collective identities have

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been constructed on the forum based on views that were simply individually held prior to online participation. As these social identities constructed online fuel a specific sense of attachment and belonging, they provide a basis for the prolonged and intensive participation of the forum members involved. However, to acquire an understanding of the virtual togetherness that is important to these forum members and its relation to offline social life, it is important to discuss how they act on the basis of the collective identities that have been constructed on the forum. As will be discussed below, members of both groups engage in various forms of collective action.

Collective action through the forum

As analyzed above, feelings of connectedness and a notion of a collective purpose have been constructed among both groups of forum participants over the course of their membership. As such, their prolonged participation has provided the basis for a collective struggle:

‘Acting collectively requires the development of solidarity and an oppositional consciousness that allows a challenging group to identify common injustices, to oppose those injustices, and to define a shared interest in opposing the dominant group or resisting the system of authority responsible for those injustices’ (Carty and Onyett 2006: 234; cf. della Porta and Diani 2006: 100-13).

The anti-institutional group and the group of concerned citizens discussed above each have developed their own repertoires of action, which can be understood in the light of their specific definitions of the problems at hand. Even though various of these actions are undertaken individually, they can be considered collective in nature, as they are aimed at collective goals (cf. Brunsting and Postmes 2002: 527; Postmes and Brunsting 2002: 290-1).

'Frustrating the system': protest and resistance

An important form of collective action of the group characterized by an anti-institutional ethos is protest: these members use the forum to voice their discontent with the Dutch government and its policies. Cor is the only respondent in this group who is not engaged in this specific form of collective action: from the outset of his participation he considers 'being able to express frustrations' to be 'simply fun' and 'nothing more', as 'on a forum one is quite powerless in this respect'. This does not qualify as protest as it is not aimed at exercising influence in order to pursue changes (della Porta and Diani 2006: 165-8). In contrast, it resembles the expressive function of an 'exhaust valve'. Others, however, do use the forum as a means of political protest. Ralph's current participation in *Flitsservice* is, for instance, partially inspired by his desire to 'create awareness': 'In my view many things should change in the attitudes of many Dutchmen regarding a number of critical matters. And I believe that keeping things to yourself is not the way. And I know that there are many people who are susceptible to opinions like these, so expressing them most likely is beneficial.' In this way he tries to help establish broader support for the critiques expressed by himself and his fellow forum members.

The protest function of the forum is not limited to persuading fellow citizens. Instead, Gert and Kees value the forum because it offers them 'an indirect channel to influence decision-makers' (della Porta and Diani 2006: 166). To my question of whether he believes that government policies might change due to *Flitsservice*, Gert replied: 'I think that in any case the signal will become clearer.' And Kees says 'I regard it to be unjust and I like to stand up against injustice inflicted on people. That is something I just cannot stand.' He underlines his view that his activities on the forum are a form of political action as follows: 'And I also feel like, at least I do something, at least I talk back instead of sitting with my arms folded.' He indicates this is the reason that he has become a more active forum participant over the course of his membership, even though his initial participation was – exceptionally – already inspired by his feelings of discontent instead of merely traffic-related

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instrumental motives. Next to these forum-based activities these members fill in opinion polls and the like in order to communicate their views to others: 'If [a large national newspaper] or [the Dutch motorists association] takes a survey that can be filled in online about something, then we do so' (Gert).

Protest, 'a political resource of the powerless' (della Porta and Diani 2006: 166), is not the only form of collective action these forum members engage in: they offer active resistance to the Dutch government as well. The 'step-by-step guide' explaining how to make use of the Dutch 'freedom of information legislation'³⁹ provides a tool that is used to actively oppose the Dutch system. These respondents point out that they do not merely appreciate procedures for appeal because these can help to save money: these provide them with a highly valued instrument of resistance. An important aspect is that large numbers of requests for information and appeals can clog the system of the Dutch authorities.

For Cor submitting a request for information 'is simply an additional instrument to keep people busy (...). Supposedly, they think it is very annoying.' Ralph, too, believes that this could help to 'overload' the system:

'Look, I think nobody would grieve if the central processing unit of the attorney general would say the day after tomorrow "we have totally overworked ourselves and there are heaps of letters laying here, we cannot do it anymore, we just cancel it all, nobody has to pay his fine."
Of course, that is a fantastic goal in itself.'

Even though he does not believe it realistic to expect that the whole apparatus can be taken down, putting sand in the machine 'naturally' is a motive for him to file an appeal. Gert has a desire to 'frustrate the system' as well, since he believes the Dutch speed control policies are 'ridiculous': 'They are not called nonsense fines for no reason. Properly speaking, it is not more than logical that one tries to screw the whole lot back as much as possible, to put it simply.' From this perspective he thinks *Flitsservice* is not only important to 'prevent getting screwed' but also, for 'advanced members', 'to offer resistance and share that with each other.'

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That these procedures are used as instruments to fight back is underlined by Kees, who states: 'Recently I have received a ticket for a minor speed violation and at least I do something. I try to dodge it. (...) It really influences the policies, because I have read stories that arrears of work are piling up at the justice department. They simply cannot manage it anymore.' That this is not done for individual monetary benefit and that it is instead considered a political act to appeal a fine is illustrated by the fact that the sum of the penalty is irrelevant: 'Let's put it like this: even if it were a fine of ten Euros then I still would have done it' (Kees). In line with the use of these formal procedures as a means of political action, these forum members actively draw attention of non-members to the possibility of appealing with the use of freedom of information legislation: 'To point out to my fellow citizens that there really is a possibility to attempt something instead of nothing' (Kees). Ralph is even more active: 'On behalf of all my friends and acquaintances I appeal to all their fines, just for the fun of it, because it is possible.' The reason behind all this is simple enough: 'the more appeals, the greater the chance that the whole thing comes to a deadlock'.

'Serving a higher cause': constructively thinking along

The group of concerned citizens makes use of the freedom of information legislation and procedures for appeals as well, albeit for different reasons. One of these is that they aim to protect themselves against penalties they consider unjust. Philip argues: 'It is simply a citizen's right', and following an anecdote about a dishonest police officer, Diederik observes:

'Even if it were about seven Euros I would still have gone after it. So it is not primarily about the money, but then what is it primarily? Maybe it really is about unfairness. That it is a really grave mistake. And if I deserve to get a fine then I simply pay it, but if I think something is wrong I am not going to pay.'

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Maarten explains his considerations as follows:

'I think I am a little more moderate than the average [forum member] (...). I have appealed using the freedom of information legislation twice. The first time I was apprehended and the way in which my speed was determined was simply wrong. And the second time my girlfriend supposedly would have ignored a red traffic light. This was supposedly observed by a police officer, but that police officer could never have seen this and my girlfriend always neatly obeys all the rules and never ignores a traffic light. And at that point it was absolutely impossible. Therefore we started a procedure and right after a reaction came like "all right, the ticket is cancelled." (...) In between I have received at least ten other speeding tickets for which I did not use the procedure. (...) The freedom of information legislation as such is very useful if you feel like you have been fined wrongfully so you can obtain all the paperwork indicating that it is not right. And that is what I use it for, and I think that is what is meant by this law. And that is very good, and I do not want to abuse that for every ticket of eighteen Euros I receive.'

This motive of protection against injustice is sometimes mentioned by the anti-institutional group of members as well, but the crucial difference lies in the reasoning behind it – for instance, Ralph, who is a member of the anti-institutional group and appeals as many tickets as possible, says: 'Even if it were completely correct in a legal sense, then I still would not agree.' His practice of appealing every single penalty stands in stark contrast to the considerations of the concerned citizens. As concerned citizen Diederik explains: 'Last year I got a ticket because I had speeded seven kilometers an hour, but I will not appeal against it. It was me, I drove too fast. Then you know that you will get it.'

Apart from resisting perceived injustice, there is a dimension of collective action as well. Diederik explains that it is partly 'to give off a signal. That is the only

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way to express an oppositional stance [as] there is no political party that bothers about it.' In a similar manner he argues:

'If there are elements in the traffic policies or the way it is put into effect – that are two distinct things – and [I] do not agree with it, then I can start complaining about it to you or I can do something about it. Well, grumbling in The Hague [the seat of the Dutch parliament, WdK] is of little use, so I just fight the way it is put into practice. I can make it clear to those carrying out these policies.'

For Philip 'a political signal comes with it' as well, namely, 'that citizens are simply tired that ten million fines per year are issued for petty offences.'

This does not mean these members want to 'irritate for the sake of irritating. No, that is something I do not do' (Diederik). Only Leen is 'reluctantly, with some hesitation' not entirely dismissive of this idea, but as these concerned citizens do not share the anti-institutional ethos of the other group of users, they do not intend to undermine the system altogether:

'For me it is not about challenging all tickets at any cost. It is not my motive to help people with that. I do think that if one receives a fine that is really unjust that one should be able to do something about that. But appealing whatever the costs in order to frustrate the system is not my attitude. So I do not want to help doing so. In these matters I am selective' (Herbert).

Likewise, Maarten argues: 'Some say "with these appeals using the freedom of information legislation you kill the entire machinery and everything gets stuck." [But] then it only costs more tax money and people to fix it. I think it does not get you anywhere.'

Instead of opposing the Dutch government in general and its traffic policies in particular, these members embrace a discourse of citizenship and its associated

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rights. This, too, is an essential element of their motivation for using the legal instruments promoted on the forum. In contrast to the attempts to actively resist governmental traffic policies, the activities undertaken through the forum are regarded as a mode of active citizenship. Arguing that he does not want to be a 'docile citizen', Diederik says:

'In the Netherlands it is still the case that one is innocent until proven guilty, but when it comes to traffic policies it seems to be the other way around. (...) If you have the opportunity to make a stand against it then you should do so. (...) Yes, it [serves] a higher cause. Politics should not be taken for granted, democracy should neither be taken for granted.'

And Maarten explains his point of view as: 'As a citizen it should remain possible to publicly stand for your rights on certain aspects. And not like "I am a police officer, so I am right, so you should simply listen", because that is the way it goes. Or that [politicians] say like "we decide it is like this, so citizens should simply obey."' While explaining the importance of collective action undertaken by the forum members, Diederik echoes this perspective:

'If a police officer does not like you he can write out a ticket just like that. (...) You simply have to be vigilant, and a site like *Flitsservice* keeps it sharp. (...) They say [the speed controls] are all right, but no one checks it. If *Flitsservice* would not exist, they could do anything they want. Then you could just as well receive an unjust ticket as a just ticket. But now it is like they have to deal with it in a right way, otherwise it's their turn. (...) Who checks the police? Like that, and in a right manner. Not malignant, I do not like that. In a constructive manner if that is possible.'

Leen's motivation to help others by providing legal advice on the forum reflects a concern about the functioning of institutions as well. He worries that people are

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unaware of the particular features of Dutch traffic law: '[When they receive a ticket] people think "well, that remains to be seen, they still have to prove it." But they do not have to prove anything, and in the meantime the opportunities for defense or appeal have expired.' Therefore he tries to assist people 'who cannot make a stand for their legal rights in any way.' Thus, instead of fighting against the system these concerned citizens try to safeguard it by contributing to institutional checks and balances.

In line with their self-declared constructive attitude they attempt to contribute to the common good in another way: they try to establish a dialogue with the Dutch government on issues that go beyond mere speed controls. Maarten hopes for influence on national traffic policies: '[I hope that the new prosecutor in charge of road safety] will sit down with *Flitsservice*. Like "in which way can I establish a policy that is less one-sidedly focused on hauling in money and instead truly takes care of safety, and that that is really done in a just manner."' The aspirations of some others even go beyond that – they envision the forum as developing into a kind of special interest group. Philip explains one of his current reasons for being active on *Flitsservice* as:

'I hope it really carries enough weight to influence decisions. (...) I think [politicians] can get a positive addition from it because they can establish contacts with part of the citizenry through it. Very often I think that politicians in The Hague are surrounded by people who only go around in the same circles. That they are not properly connected to society. And an Internet forum is a very good means to provide insight into the feelings that are present in society. (...) As a citizen you do not have many other means at your disposal – apart from voting once every four years. And exactly because you can unite in groups like this your position is stronger.'

In line with their lobby-like aspirations these members make use of the forum to discuss and compare the pros and cons of various possible policies, instead of using

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it as a means to protest against the Dutch government: 'No, I really do think I have something to say. I do not simply try to criticize, I really try to constructively think along. (...) To come up with alternatives' (Philip).

Whereas all forms of collective action discussed above already entail an undeniable orientation toward social life beyond the forum, several members take this a step further. They physically expand their activities to the offline realm by attending community participation meetings at which citizens are informed about intended policy measures and can discuss these among themselves, as well as with representatives of the authorities. Philip tries to influence policy-making by attending these meetings. He describes these as 'platforms for people who are concerned with it. They can inform themselves about the course of things, and can actually be heard somewhere.' In sharp contrast to his initial motives for his forum membership, Herbert indicates that at the moment participation at these meetings is his primary reason for remaining active on the forum: 'The most important reason is an active stance with regard to the construction of roads and the extension of roads and things like that. So, taking a stance in these matters as a united front at these meetings.' He explains:

'I find it annoying if people [merely] loudly shout "I think this is ridiculous and they should do something about it". If you have the opportunity to do something about it you should seize it – no matter how small your chances are. That is my incentive to participate in [these community participation meetings].'

He even qualifies a specific meeting as the best experience he has had relating to *Flitservice*:

'[That was] forming a story at such a participation meeting. And especially the meeting [last year] has been a very good experience because a great number of people were involved. A large active group – it already started on the forum, that you noticed that the level was high.

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(...) I found that really pleasant (...) because I really do think that you can bring something about through active participation.'

Although these community participation meetings take place outside the forum, *Flitsservice* is of great importance. Philip once again makes clear that his offline participation clearly stems from his online activities that evolved over the course of his membership: 'I had never even thought about it before'. Herbert, too, indicates that his 'active input (...) originated on the forum'.

Moreover, the forum is also of crucial importance in the organization of this form of action. Herbert explains:

"Taking the first steps toward consultation starts on the forum. There it is said "boys, at that date there is a meeting." There are a number of people who make sure they keep informed and say "there is a meeting, shall we go there?" People have interest and normally other members respond to it. The consultation [as a way of preparing for the meeting, WdK] takes place in an area that is somewhat closed-off or through personal messages or through e-mail in case you are intimate.'

Philip set outs the same procedure: 'Then you simply see who are interested.' Usually that is 'a small group' of forum members – 'often you see the same people. There is a number of people who are more active really' (Philip).

Differently evaluating online diversity

Now that it has been established that members of the groups of anti-institutionalists and concerned citizens undertake specific forms of collective action, one issue remains to be discussed. In the previous chapters strikingly divergent stances *vis-à-vis* online diversity and deliberation were found. Whereas those using a forum as a springboard to deal with reflexive questions of identity value online deliberation with a heterogeneous population, well-articulated boundaries are very relevant to

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those seeking refuge in a virtual *Gemeinschaft*. How do *Flitsservice's* members who are involved in collective action value diversity on their forum?

Neither of the two groups opposes the participation of 'outsiders', such as police officers or environmentalists, on the forum. However, their perspectives on this matter diverge. Of those involved in the anti-institutional group, only Cor thinks that it would be 'all right' if a member of an organization for environmental protection would join the forum because he 'could learn something from it'; the other anti-institutional members have different points of view. For Ralph it is useful that some police officers are active on the forum because they provide factual information: 'They do keep things precise. You cannot just shout something, just tell lies, because if one of them reads it they will contradict it.' In accordance with his anti-institutional ethos, this positive evaluation, however, does not stem from a desire for deliberation: 'Personally, I do not think it will alter my view on the police.' The same holds for his stance toward the imaginary presence of environmentalists on the forum. He indicates this would not help him to sharpen his ideas – rather he would appreciate it as an opportunity to disprove theirs: 'I think that everything they would post there would generally be that thin that you could easily burst it. (...) If they provide arguments these would already be lies or at least half lies. And well, at least that is interesting to refute.' This evaluation of online diversity is in line with the inclination of anti-institutionalist members to undertake collective action in the form of protest. Similarly, Gert would not value the presence of environmentalists as an opportunity to engage in deliberation, but merely because it would provide him with an opportunity to express his own opinion:

'[If an environmentalist joins the forum] then I wish him good luck, and he should surely enter the discussion. That is fine with me. Then I will really explain to him that thanks to the motorways I can make money to pay for his welfare benefits.'

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Likewise, Kees thinks a discussion with environmentalists ‘just won’t work’, and welcomes police officers since they contribute ‘to the extent that you learn through the forum that not every agent supports the policies.’

The concerned citizens, on the other hand, do embrace the online presence of ‘outsiders’ as an opportunity for deliberation. Reflecting their desire to constructively contribute to institutional arrangements by safeguarding checks and balances as well as proposing alternatives to existing policies, they aspire to establish an online dialogue with other parties. Diederik explains:

‘That way different parties involved with traffic policies and their enforcement can get together to clarify to each other how they see things. In general or specifically. That is what is nice about such a forum. (...) [That is] a great advantage. I think that if you want to form an opinion you should know the backgrounds of a great many sides, know the story behind it.’

Leen, too, appraises the online participation of police officers as ‘added value’, and Herbert says: ‘I think it brings about diversity and contrasting viewpoints. I do think it is important that they speak up. Otherwise it would be very one-sided and very dull.’ The same holds for their stance *vis-à-vis* environmentalists. Philip would welcome an environmental activist ‘with pleasure’: ‘Look, the forum is there to have discussions, not to echo each other’s opinions.’ Herbert sets out why this is important: ‘I would like to enter into a discussion with [environmentalists]. (...) That would provide me with a good image of what is going on in society with regard to these matters.’ Moreover, he indicates this helps at the community participation meetings he attends: ‘You know what to expect. You have an idea of what other people’s opinions are and what other people think.’

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Two branches of a social movement

Reviewing the above, two groups can be discerned that are characterized by partially overlapping, yet distinct, ideological frameworks: one with an anti-institutional ethos and one consisting of concerned citizens. Their collective identities have been constructed online, and feelings of mutual attachment and belonging have developed on the forum. Using specific instruments found online, members of both groups strive for common causes pertaining to Dutch traffic laws and policies that strikingly surpass the individual motivations because of which they joined the forum.⁴⁰ Despite their ideological differences and distinct repertoires of action, both groups display a similar type of virtual togetherness: they make up two branches of a social movement that has developed online.

A widely accepted conceptualization defines 'social movements as consisting in networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity' (Diani 2000a [1992]: 156; cf. della Porta and Diani 2006: 20-2; Diani 2000b: 387; Diani 2001: 5-6) This is an apt description of the type of virtual togetherness that has developed among the forum members discussed above. As such, it differs from a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge on the one hand, and a springboard and the associated network-like personal sociality on the other. Some of the constituting elements of these types of virtual togetherness are present among these members of *Flitsservice*, but in a different configuration and with qualitative differences.

A similarity lies in the fact that a social movement's boundaries are defined by a collective identity (Diani 2000a [1992]: 162; della Porta and Diani 2006: 21-2; cf. Nash 2000: 127; Polletta and Jasper 2001): 'membership ultimately depends on mutual recognition' (Diani 2001: 6). Such a collective identity has been constructed among these members of *Flitsservice* and not only consists of a shared set of beliefs, but also underlies a sense of belonging, which are both characteristic of a social movement (Diani 2000a [1992]: 161). Moreover, members display feelings of

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mutual attachment. In short, there is a 'mutual recognition as members of the movement linked by a distinctive culture and solidarity' (Diani 2001: 7).

However, the feelings of attachment and belonging of members involved in the online social movement are not as profound as these prevalent among the members of a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge – they would not refer to the other forum members as 'real comrades' or 'brothers and sisters' providing them with 'a second home'. Moreover, their affect-laden relationships are not generalized to the forum population at large, but restricted to a specific group of fellow members. Furthermore, as demonstrated above there is no uniform collective identity among these members of *Flitsservice* – two partially overlapping, yet distinct and conflicting, articulations of identity are present among them. This is unlike the generalized notion of a shared identity characteristic of the virtual *Gemeinschaft* discussed in the previous chapters, but it is in line with prevailing conceptualizations of social movements that underline the existence of internal diversity: "collective identity" does not imply homogeneity of ideas and orientations within social movement networks. A wide spectrum of different conceptions may be present, and factional conflicts may arise at any time' (Diani 2000a [1992]: 162).

As such, the online social movement can easily be distinguished from the virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge analyzed before. At the same time it differs from the network-like personal sociality appreciated by people who use their forum as a springboard. While it is less encompassing and profound than a virtual *Gemeinschaft*, there is more collectivity to it than to personal sociality. Members of the online social movement not only have developed a collective identity, they also experience mutual attachment and a sense of belonging in a specific sub-group on the forum. This constitutes more of a collectivity than the personal sociality discussed in chapter four. After all, people who use their forum as a springboard do not experience any generalized attachment either to the forum in general or to a specific sub-group of members – they merely may value ties to specific individual members. Moreover, they dismiss the idea of a sense of belonging on the forum altogether.

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Finally, a crucial difference with a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge as well as with a springboard lies in the fact that collective action is an essential element of the online social movement. Social movements are not necessarily anti-institutional (Diani 2000a [1992]: 169) – thus both branches fit the conceptualization – but are by definition involved in collective action (Diani 2000a [1992]: 164-5; della Porta and Diani 2006: 22). As demonstrated above this holds for both branches – both the anti-institutional group and the concerned citizens engage in collective action with instruments tailored to their specific views and the associated aims.

Conclusion

Above, I have discerned two groups of members of *Flitsservice* whose prolonged, intensive online participation is inspired by political motives. They are both branches of a specific type of virtual togetherness: an online social movement. What is important to note is that this online social movement is not a reflection of the initial reasons for the forum participation of its members. Rather, it has come about unintentionally. This stands in contrast to both types of togetherness discussed in the previous chapters. The appreciation of a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge is directly fueled by offline experiences of stigmatization. And the use of a forum as a springboard can be straightforwardly understood from pre-existing reflexive questions of identity. The important role of various forms of collective action for members of the online social movement is, however, strikingly at odds with their original use of *Flitsservice* as hardly more than an information database providing practical individual benefits.

These members' current participation in the forum of *Flitsservice* can be understood as a form of purposive action as well, but one that has evolved online. It is on the forum that they have constructed a collective identity on the basis of political views that were individually held prior to their online participation, and this inspired their involvement in various forms of collective action. Before their

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online participation triggered their desire to engage in collective action, they were not contemplating or involved in protest or activism. The fact that this online social movement really is an expression of spontaneously flowering 'bottom-up' grassroots collective action is underlined by the observation that the forum itself has been merely set up around the dissemination of speed control notifications – the forum was not started because of political mobilization efforts by some sort of movement leaders.

As such, in contrast to mechanisms of distinct offline problems of identity underlying specific types of online participation, members' identities are relevant to this type of togetherhness because collective identities have been constructed online. Thus, the relationship between virtual togetherhness and offline social life is different than in the previous case studies: instead of online participation inspired by motives rooted in offline social life, *Flitsservice* features online dynamics among its members that have profound consequences for offline social life. After all, the implications of their online participation are not limited to the forum population; instead their online participation directly relates to a wider institutional context at which their collective actions are aimed.

Moreover, forum participation is not only relevant to offline social life because it is the collective identity constructed on the forum that stimulates activist aspirations, but also because the repertoires of collective action are based on means provided online. The forum is the means by which members signal protest, offer resistance, contribute to institutional checks and balances, and suggest alternatives to existing policies. It is on the forum that details of freedom of information legislation and procedures for appeal are provided and discussed. And on the forum attendance at community participation meetings is arranged and information necessary for active involvement in such meetings is shared.

Besides these conclusions that directly relate to my research question on the relationship between virtual togetherhness and offline social life, the observation that a social movement has developed on the forum of *Flitsservice* is relevant with regard to the more general literature on social movements and the Internet. In the 1990s it was commonly thought that the Internet would stimulate the rise of new types of

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social movements (May 2002: 15), but more recent scholarship has not followed this lead. Discussing the instrumental and symbolic contributions of computer-mediated communication to social movements, Diani elaborates on the theoretical possibility that the Internet could stimulate the creation of new movements. His key question reads 'should we expect the emergence of new types of "virtual" social movements, disconnected from a specific location in space without reference to any specific "real" community?' (2000b: 388), and his conclusion is outright negative: 'Whatever the specific form of these networks, [computer-mediated communication] may be expected to reinforce already existing ties rather than creating new ones. Sustained collective action is unlikely to originate from purely virtual ties if they are not sustained by previous interaction' (idem: 394). Elaborating on his self-declared 'sceptical view' of the information society, May (2002: 86) reaches the same conclusion: 'New ICTs may enhance already existing networks, but this is not the same as stimulating new types of [political] community'. And Loader, too, claims that the adoption of new media 'does not represent the creation of entirely new virtual social movements but rather a new means of providing *existing* social movements [with specific benefits]' (2008: 1920, emphasis added).

Even though the question of whether the Internet has merely reinforced existing links or created new movements from scratch should be answered empirically (della Porta and Diani 2006: 133-4), the former perspective permeates the scholarly literature and seems to be considered self-evident to the extent that it is not even explicitly discussed in empirical studies. Time and again, empirical research into social movements and the Internet simply focuses on instrumental uses. In numerous publications scholars analyze the Internet as a resource for networking practices (Olsson 2008) and a communication resource utilized by established social groups (L. Stein 2009), discuss 'uses and limitations of Internet technologies for contemporary activism' (Gillan 2009), address 'how social movements manipulate the Internet to their advantage when fighting powerful organizations' (Leizerov 2000: 461) or go into 'the question of how Internet elements are integrated into political activism' (Nielsen 2009: 267). In fact, in an

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edited volume that is entirely devoted to 'new media, citizens and social movements', researchers merely address 'the *use* of ICTs by social movements' (Van de Donk et al. 2004: 1, emphasis added). And if the subject of mobilization is discussed, scholars view the Internet as a mere tool as well. Carty and Onyett, for instance, focus on its utility as a 'mobilizing tool' (2006: 229), and Scott and Street (2000) argue that the Internet provides established social movements with new opportunities for communication and mobilization. Nip's (2004) study of collective identity building envisages the Internet as more than a tool, but she, too, focuses on a movement that is maintained and reinforced instead of newly formed.

Brunsting and Postmes (2002: 531) take a minority stance and offer the rare suggestion that 'the Internet may allow social behavior to occur and transform individual actions into collective ones'. This is a worthwhile addition to a field of research that has one-sidedly focused on instrumental uses of the Internet by existing social movements at the cost of its possible role in spawning new ones. The findings presented in this chapter go beyond this suggestion, as they demonstrate that a social movement emerged on the forum of *Flitsservice* even without prior individual activism or activist orientations. This indicates that scholars have prematurely discarded the online emergence of social movements as a research interest. Given the potentially wide-ranging socio-political implications of social movements, overcoming this blind spot seems of vital importance for assessments of the social relevance of online interactions, which is one of Internet studies' central themes.

The finding that a social movement based on a collective identity emerged on the forum of *Flitsservice* also has implications for the literature on social movements and collective identities in general. Reviewing this literature, Polletta and Jasper (2001: 285) conclude that one of the key questions that have been obscured thus far is whether collective identities are invented by people themselves. Although it has been discovered in a quite modest empirical case study, the social movement on *Flitsservice* clearly demonstrates that online interactions can lead to the invention of a collective identity fueling collective action. This happens even without the presence of 'organizers' who strategically frame it, which is not clearly recognized in

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this field of research that seems to regard such framing prerequisite (cf. Polletta and Jasper 2001: 291). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to answer the question whether this is a rule or an exception, but the finding that it is possible may open the door to future research looking for contextualized answers.

Having discussed the social movement that has originated on the forum of *Flitsservice*, a second type of virtual togetherness evolved there is analyzed in the next chapter.



Chapter 6

'Not just a club of car lovers'

An online neo-tribe and its offline ramifications

Introduction

An online social movement is not the only type of virtual togetherness that has evolved on the forum of *Flitsservice*. The analysis presented below reveals that there is a group of users whose sustained and intensive online activities are inspired socially instead of politically, even though they do share certain concerns of the members of the online social movement discussed in the previous chapter.

Despite their initial instrumental reasons to seek out *Flitsservice*, which do not require intensive participation at all, these members, too, have come to spend a considerable amount of time on the forum: daily online activities are the rule rather than the exception. Bram indicates, 'I am there simply every day', Frank is on the forum 'several times per day', Tjerk says, 'I think it easily takes half an hour to an hour each day', and Els explains:

'I log in every day, I even have it at home on my PC as [a start page], if you open the Internet then it opens at *Flitsservice*. (...) It is simply open the whole day and from time to time I look at it. When I am at work I naturally have to work. Let's say that on average I spend an hour to an hour and a half on it on working days, and then at home another hour up to an hour and a half.'

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Otto, too, says: 'When I am at home (...) *Flitsservice* is just open and sometimes you take a look at it', and he indicates this adds up to 'actually an hour throughout the day.'

As Adriaan indicates, their intense participation is fueled by the idea that there is something special about this particular forum: 'It has become a kind of addiction [laughter] (...). For example, a moment ago the site did not work and then you feel totally awkward. (...) I do know other forums, but none like this one.' This is an experience that has evolved over the course of their membership, as put forward by Bram: 'Now I am simply there every day (...). That has grown little by little, it was not like a switch was pulled or something like that.' Having established such a firm connection to the forum, these members foresee enduring participation. Tjerk thinks he will be active 'just in the same manner as now', and Xander states: 'I will never go away. If everything remains the way it is now, I will stay for sure'. What is it that underlies this positive evaluation of the forum and the long-term intensive participation it inspires?

'If it clicks...': celebrating a shared lifestyle

Like the users constituting the online social movement discussed in chapter five, these members have developed a notion of a collective identity. The common identity they celebrate is grounded in a shared discontent with the Dutch traffic policies as well. As Bram puts it: 'If you support the policy then you are not a forum member of *Flitsservice*'. Tjerk expresses the idea that an interest in governmental traffic policies is a necessary prerequisite for lasting participation in the forum. Addressing so-called 'one day flies' he says:

'I can imagine that people only come with a specific question (...) and after that think "well, it is all finished". I think that people like that do not so much have that interest in traffic policies, so they are gone

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afterwards. And I believe that if you do not have that interest, you simply should not be there, then it is good to leave.'

Otto, too, thinks common ideas about traffic policies 'bind everything together': 'Everybody agrees about speed and enforcement' and 'no one will say that there are too many roads, that is clear enough'.

In contrast to the members of the social movement, this has, however, not fueled a politically articulated collective identity among this group of users that could account for their enduring online participation. Naturally, the distinction between both groups is analytical and empirically some overlap does exist, as is illustrated by Bram who appeals fines 'by definition' in order to 'put sand in the machine' and who visits community participation meetings 'to argue against' people opposing road extensions. The dominant attitude among this group of forum members is, however, rather different. Els, for instance, is 'proud' that *Flitsservice's* members undertake action against speed controls, but she herself does not undertake actions against traffic policies: 'It would be nice if we could do so, but I would not know how'. Otto indicates that a desire to influence policies 'is not a reason' underlying his forum membership: 'If you want to change things you should become a politician, and I do not feel an urge to do so.' And Nick experiences 'resignation' and explains he 'is not that naïve to think that something will happen'. Moreover, if these members make use of procedures to appeal fines, this is not primarily inspired by a wish to influence the government. Instead of being valued as instruments of collective action, these procedures serve their individual needs. Apart from Frank, who tries to communicate his disapproval even though putting sand into the machine 'will never be [his] main goal', these members employ the freedom of information legislation 'simply to save your own skin' (Xander) or 'have never used it' at all (Els). Furthermore, Nick 'did not seriously consider' attending community participation meetings, whose existence is even unknown to Els. Yvette says 'currently this is not a reason for me to be active [on *Flitsservice*]', and Xander summarizes this position as: 'To change the world, you should not be on *Flitsservice*'.

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If these members' long-lasting intensive participation is not bound up in a political project, what is it then that keeps them tied to the forum? The answer lies in the fact that, notwithstanding their political discontents, they have constructed a collective identity that has a different focus. Whereas the initial foundation lies in shared understandings of traffic policies, it is a common lifestyle that is of vital importance to this group of members. On the forum they have accidentally come to interact with people who share their lifestyle, and out of their similarities a collective identity has been forged. As Xander puts it: 'it is not *Flitsservice* in itself, it is the kind of people who are active there.' The common elements of this collective identity are 'much broader' than similar views on speed controls alone (Frank). In this respect it is important that these members share a general interest in traffic-related themes that go beyond mere traffic policies: 'Most forum members are people who not only are on the road a lot, but who like that as well' (Bram). Nick makes the same observation: 'It is very obvious, but I feel that the interest taken in traffic-related subjects is above average. And that people are simply very serious about driving, which hugely differs from the average Dutchman.' And Els notes: 'It is a common interest. We all like to drive a car and we all want as many roads as possible, preferably all to ourselves.' For Tjerk it is 'shared interests in cars and traffic' that make the forum 'rather addictive', and Frank indicates that 'beautiful cars, fast cars and things like that are one of the things that bind [a specific group of] members together', but there is more to it than this: 'It is not just a club of car lovers. Once in a while a car comes up for discussion, but it is not like you are talking about cars all the time' (Nick). Reflecting on the differences between *Flitsservice* and a forum that revolves around a specific type of car, Yvette says: 'There the tone is very friendly, but those are all people with one passion and that is that car. *Flitsservice* is much broader, simply much more general.' Adriaan asserts that 'a number of members have almost identical interests' and he feels that people who are 'like him' are drawn together. Yvette tentatively explains what these 'specific similarities' that 'facilitate mutual connections' are about:

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‘That is what you see in [the group] we are part of, a similar kind of lifestyle. I think that is one of the similarities. (...) How do I put it... it’s about having made a life for yourself, with your own home, your own car. Simply working and being fed up with the additional speed cameras that are being put up everywhere. A certain perspective on traffic policies in general in the Netherlands. A specific way of associating with each other. How do you relate to others? Not only among each other, but also the way you relate to the rest of the world. (...) Quite open, quite socially. (...) Family life is very important for almost everyone, I noticed as well. All that is relevant (...) for the club we are part of. I cannot judge how things are with others.’

Such a discourse of hardworking, responsible citizens permeates accounts of the lifestyle shared by these members. Yvette says: ‘They are all people who work hard (...) and also have a certain level of intelligence’ and Nick adds: ‘[My contacts with those other forum members] are very positive. You find out you have quite a lot of similarities. You are serious about driving, you dare to think for yourself. And I see that they are people who have a strong drive. That they are people who generally work hard, who make the most of their lives. These are things you have in common. And also having a ready tongue; everyone is pretty assertive. And it is very nice to go through that with each other.’ Bram paints a similar picture:

‘That is a question about what the definition of the average forum member of *Flitsservice* is. A *Flitsservice* driver keeps his pace, really has no conscientious objections if he occasionally reaches 200 or 250 [kilometers per hour], even if it is on a road where 100 or 120 is allowed, but lives his life low-profile. So in a car, well... Opel is not very much appreciated, but a Volkswagen, a Seat, a Ford. Just common brands. No weird spoilers or things like that placed on it, but simply a car as it comes out of the factory that, above all things, does not attract attention.’

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The importance of these notions of a common lifestyle within this group of members is underlined by members' spontaneous reflections on socialization. They indicate that adherence to specific cultural codes is a prerequisite to fit into what they refer to as the 'hard core' of users. When discussing the intake of new members, Frank, for example, says: 'Well, you have a certain culture on the forum and it is not always easy to point out what that culture is. But by being receptive to the forum's influences people can certainly adapt to it.' Bram indicates this account fits with his own experience: 'If it clicks you naturally become a member of that hard core of users. That is the way it went with me too. That happened very naturally, I have never done so wittingly, and neither have others, it simply happened.'

That it is a shared lifestyle that is crucial to this process is underlined by respondents' reflections on the social characteristics of the forum population. These make clear that structural social cleavages are considered irrelevant. Yvette speaks of 'a very broad public, really ranging from young to old and from all sections of the population, to put it like that', and Els gives a similar account: 'There are people who own a Mini Cooper and [others who own] a Maserati, and anything in between. And there are people ranging from [housewives] to people with special educations and really high graduates and anything in between. That is what makes it mightily interesting.' Frank elaborates on this:

'The funny thing about *Flitsservice* is that all layers of society flock together there. There are students, (...) people who are busy building their own lives, (...) even pupils. There are (...) young adults (...) [and] respectable fathers of a family (...). And there are people who are somewhat higher educated, who have made it in life. They all get together there. That is very [special] about *Flitsservice*. I do not think there are many forums featuring such a broad range of people.'

While structural social positions thus do not form a criterion for membership in this group of members, inclusion is hampered for members whose lifestyle is considered

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to be at odds with the common one celebrated among this group. Respondents note that members who do not share their lifestyle are not accepted into their hard core of users:

‘Some people are just being ignored, because... it sounds weird, but they just have no business there. (...) There is [a person] who does not even own a driver’s license. Well, that is not a prerequisite, I know that, but he simply cannot join in the conversation. He does not know what we are talking about. (...) I do not know how [some people] ended up on *Flitsservice*. (...) Such [a member], what makes him come here? And what does he have to say? But he is simply ignored by everyone, without telling each other. And every day he returns and says something, but he never gets any answers.’ (Els)

Bram tells a similar story: ‘As a group you can – and that often happens unintended – get rid of someone by annoying him, to put it like that. That sounds very tough, but it really is the way it is. (...) You do not have to consult about it with each other, it completely happens of itself. The moment you make a shitty remark about someone others fall in with you in that. And that – again, it sounds very tough – is not something to be proud of, but it actually is the way things go.’ These members have a clear picture of the type of members who cannot join their group, as is vividly explained by Nick:

‘On the legal sub forum there are quite a few people who we call “Johnnies”⁴¹ or “Sportcaps”. People who drive such a Honda Civic with an oversized exhaust pipe and who receive tickets all the time. Antisocial speeding in built-up areas and things like that. And people like that could never belong to the hard core of users. (...) They do not think about the consequences of their behavior. (...) Of course [it is also about general interests and tastes]. Naturally, a specific type of music goes with a share of these “Sportcaps”, and also showing off. Windows

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open, loud music. That absolutely does not fit us. What you see among the hard core is that they all have very decent cars, at least at first sight. That attract as little attention as possible. Our driving style attracts attention in itself, so attracting little attention in traffic is important anyhow. In this respect there are very clear differences. A single exhaust pipe is preferred over a double one, just to name an example.'

Bram, too, observes a watershed between members of the hard core and certain newcomers. The latter 'hold little appeal' to the former and are described as:

"Typical "Sportcaps" or "Johnnies" driving a Golf 2 or 3, fat exhaust pipe underneath it, or none at all but just an open pipe. Mostly makes a lot of noise but does not move. Wears a baseball cap. [Bram demonstrates their attitude]. Slouches with one hand on his gear-lever and the other on the wheel. Without doubt you see them drive by once in a while. And they are active in car tuning, mostly concentrating on the exterior. So there has to be a spoiler on it, but it does not matter whether it has a function or not, so to speak. That is a certain kind of people [who are not appreciated].'

More generally, Tjerk indicates that 'people who are considered odd' by the members of the hard core 'do not last very long, because the others react like "please act normally"'.

According to Otto the same would hold for an environmentalist, who 'would care little for driving anyhow. He would not easily feel comfortable (...) [as he] lacks the common factor, so to speak'. Frank makes the same assessment: 'I personally do not think that an environmentalist would want to become part of the hard core. (...) The average environmentalist does not have any affinity with cars, driving, new technologies and things like that. Especially within the hard core that is one of the things that bind together, beautiful cars, fast cars and things like that'. This account is echoed by Xander: 'People who have a greener outlook, so to speak, lack more

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interests generally speaking. (...) On a great number of issues these are dissimilar, so you just have less common interests'. And Tjerk puts forward: 'It would be all about environment this and environment that, and we really have less affinity with that'.

In short, even though their common lifestyle revolving around specific tastes and cultural values is not formally defined by these forum members, it is nevertheless quite clear to them which participants share it and which are outsiders. The importance attached to this shared lifestyle by this group of users is what distinguishes them from other forum members. Jochem, who merely uses the forum instrumentally to deal with speeding tickets, for instance, says: 'I do not really believe they are my kind of people (...). I think that [they are] professional drivers, people who have a great interest in cars. (...) If you are much more used to deal with cars, then I think you have a much stronger connection to such a forum.' And the forum members constituting the online social movement addressed in the previous chapter are not bound together by shared tastes either. Obviously both groups are in the end analytical constructs that partially overlap empirically, and it is not that members of the online social movement do not like cars at all – Herbert, for instance, says that he is 'a great lover of cars' and that he values it that others share this interest. However, their focus is on political struggles for which they do not draw upon shared lifestyles. The fact that Leen considers himself 'not a car fanatic' who only owns 'a rust pile that costs just a few Euros a month' because a lack of public transport makes him 'dependent on cars' does not hamper his involvement with the online social movement. Moreover, Philip indicates that common views are of minor importance when it comes to issues other than traffic policies, and he is aware that this is different for other users: 'For me it is primarily about traffic policies and related issues. But there are others who really solely come because of the cars.'

‘It absolutely does not have to be traffic-related’: the primacy of sociability

Whereas collective action constitutes the core of the participation of members involved in the online social movement, the users who celebrate a shared lifestyle have a different focus in their activities on the forum. For them sociability has come to feature as an important goal in itself. In this respect Frank has some reservations and carefully states:

‘Of course it is not only about sociability. Sociability is a part of forum life (...) it is part of the total experience so to speak. If there were only sociability *Flitsservice* would not exist. You have a certain basis and that is traffic policies and that is the foundation of *Flitsservice*. And sociability and the transfer of information about other issues come with that.’

Others are, however, outright enthusiastic about the sociability they found online, and in discussing it they do not refer to speed controls or traffic policies. Adriaan, for instance, indicates he does not visit the forum to discuss serious issues and says: ‘For me it is about sociability, some relaxation.’ When asked for his most important current reason for his online participation, Sjors answers: ‘Sociability [and nothing else]’. Otto, too, says: ‘Just discussing issues of everyday life, things that happen in your life, that happen in someone else’s life. Happy things, sad things. Those are shared and well, it is quite easy to share these things with the others. (...) That is what makes you stick around.’

The importance attached to sociability goes hand in hand with a specific type of forum participation. Many members who celebrate a shared lifestyle are active in the so-called off-topic discussions on the forum – that is, discussions that are not related to traffic policies in general or speed controls in particular. Whereas these off-topic discussions consist of little more than ‘plain bullshit’ (Jochem) in the

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opinion of members whose forum participation is motivated by instrumental legal concerns, they fulfill a vital social function for those celebrating a common lifestyle. Stating that 'it should be somewhat useful and that is mostly small-talk' Tjerk seems most reserved, but he, too, underlines the importance of discussions on broader issues: 'Some people can totally lose themselves in [objections to speed controls]. I think that is really excessive. I do like it when people have questions on all sorts of things'. Others have fewer reservations, like Yvette who is 'hardly ever' active in legal discussions and says the off-topic section is 'extremely cozy'. The sociability that is highly valued by Sjors 'simply consists of joining the conversation in off-topic discussions' that are about 'really anything that has my interest'. And Adriaan indicates that 'little by little' he has become more active in these discussions: 'I am more active in the section off-topic than on-topic.' He explains:

'Off-topic is absolutely not serious. These discussions are actually related to day-to-day issues. What really keeps people busy. For example, the thread on birthdays or the topic about crazy movies or what do we have for dinner today? Or what kind of car does someone from *Flitsservice* drive? Things like that.'

Again and again, he indicates this is a feature of *Flitsservice* he especially values: 'That is why *Flitsservice* is unique, in my opinion. (...) On [other forums] it is all so very serious. Come on, man! Whereas that is something you do not find very much on *Flitsservice*. No, you know exactly what car people drive and almost which color or what type of rims. These issues are elaborated upon much more deeply.' This perspective is echoed by Otto:

'It absolutely does not have to be traffic-related at all. Well, sometimes it is just about the fact that someone is paying attention to you and from time to time that is very nice too. (...) That makes you feel good. There are also forums that only offer serious on-topic discussions, and I am not into those.'

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That is why he most actively contributes to off-topic discussions, even though he did 'absolutely not' expect to do so at the outset of his forum participation. Nick, too, indicates his participation has gradually focused on social aspects of the forum: 'Currently it is mainly the off-topic section and discussions in which people are active who I know personally, so it has become a bit more social.'

Some of these users celebrating a common lifestyle are especially drawn to the so-called *café*, a part of the off-topic section that is entirely devoted to small talk over virtual drinks that are served by posting pictures of various beverages: 'I visit the *café* in the off-topic section on a daily basis' (Els). This does not hold for all of them. Bram, for instance, says: 'I always skip the *café* thread (...). If people start to post pictures of a cup of coffee or a glass of beer and things like that, then I drop out', and Nick adds:

'I do not visit the *café* (...). Occasionally I read it. People light-heartedly write down their personal experiences in daily life (...) but the discussion is rather trite. It predominantly is like "Good morning, I am going to get a cup of coffee, I just arrived at the office." Things like that. I do not really think that contributes much.'

Others are, however, outright enthusiastic about it. Yvette says: 'There is a kind of *café* which really is only about small-talk [laughter] but which [is] really cozy', and Adriaan explains: 'Then there is the *café*. The *café* is always cozy. It is completely off-topic, so it has nothing whatsoever to do with traffic policies or things like that, but you just get to know people [better and better].' Els shares his enthusiasm:

'[In the morning] I call at the *café*. Sometimes you make coffee, sometimes tea, well not really of course [laughter]. And there also is a topic which is a kind of quiz, like you have to guess which records and artists are meant. Well, I often take part in that nonsense.'

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Adriaan underlines that this preference for discussing shared interests and everyday issues is characteristic of the hard core of users celebrating a common lifestyle: 'Those are very active in the off-topic section. They frequently visit the café or just react on off-topic issues. Who are really not into traffic policies, but who nevertheless want to be on the site so they can discuss stuff they are interested in or that is relevant to their group.'

The social significance of these off-topic discussions is recognized by the members who constitute an online social movement, but they do not especially value it for themselves. Some of them are occasionally active in the café, but as Kees indicates this is not related to the primary reasons underlying his online participation: 'If I have a look there and join in, then it is because I am bored.' Philip adds:

'No, I am active there very infrequently. Some people are very active there and I am somewhat outside of that group. (...) In the off-topic discussion different people are active than the ones in the on-topic discussions. (...) That group is more about small-talk than about real discussions, so to speak.'

At the same time these members recognize that it is important for other members: 'No, you won't see me there. I am not such a socializing person. (...) The café is just really about interpersonal relationships between forum members. (...) I find it rather uninteresting to slam down ten cups of coffee in the café and leave again. No, I am just not into that' (Ralph). Diederik, too, says: 'No, there is an important social aspect to it and that is not [relevant] to me', and Leen observes: 'Well, of course the forum fulfills a social function, but I do not know in which way. There are people who before they go to sleep always check out on the forum late at night, "Goodbye, I go to bed now." It would not occur to me to do something like that. But well, it happens.'

‘A nice club of people with a common interest’: the emergence of a neo-tribe

Just like the members of the online social movement, the group of users who celebrate a shared lifestyle experience connectedness with other forum members. Again, a generalized attachment to the forum population at large is of minor importance. Any remarks made about such a generalized attachment express the opinion that similar views on speed controls are a ‘commonality’ (Els) that ‘bind members together’ (Otto) or ‘provide some sort of tie’ (Xander). However, this is ‘rather superficial’ (Bram): they ‘absolutely’ (Nick) feel more connected to a specific group of users than to the forum population at large. Adriaan elaborates on this:

‘I think it really is about a sub group. Look, it is not that I feel attracted to everyone on the forum, to put it like that. Look, that part that is really active in the legal sections and people like that I do not easily feel attracted to. (...) It is a completely different kind of people, in my opinion. (...) [I predominantly feel attached to] the hard core that likes sociability.’

The latter provides him with ‘just a kind of family. It is a family you enter into.’ Els states social bonds emanate from the off-topic discussion because participants ‘share weal and woe’, and Tjerk indicates this ‘nice group of people, with whom you just nicely... yes, have some sort of friendship or a bond’ is important to him:

‘That is what makes it very nice, otherwise you would not keep coming back. If it is something that is very loose you would not stay on the forum for a long time. (...) If there would not be such a steady group, then... It is just very nice that we all know each other now to a certain extent. (...) that is what makes it pleasant to talk with each other on

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such a forum instead of people you do not know at all or [forums whose] composition changes all the time.'

This attachment to a specific group of users is socially articulated on the forum. Tjerk, for instance, explains: 'If there is a newcomer who really disses someone, then the rest often supports him, like "hey, do you know who you are talking to? That is one of our hard core, we do not accept it if a newcomer like you just lashes out at him.'" The mutual attachment of these members is not only expressed in dealings with outsiders; it also underlies mutual concern that goes hand in hand with social pressure to participate. Otto explains: 'Sometimes you miss someone for a few weeks or even a couple of months and then you start thinking "hey, I have not heard of him a long time". (...) Then you just send a [personal message] like "well, is everything all right, because I hear or see little of you." (...) Just like I inform if I do not see my neighbor for a few weeks.' Els gives a similar account: 'That is how it works, it is not just cozy, but although social control might be an overstatement you really worry about each other when someone is absent without a reason, so to speak.' And mockingly referring to these practices as a disadvantage of his forum membership, Xander states: 'It consumes very much time. And you cannot choose what you want yourself, because you are simply fetched back if you are away for a while.'

These articulations of mutual concern inspire a sense of belonging in this group of users: 'Not too long ago I have been offline for some weeks [because of practical personal worries] and then people started to wonder "hey, where is [he]?" Until I eventually was called by someone, "you are being missed, is everything all right?" These are things that make you really feel at home. At least that you feel welcome, so to speak' (Bram). This sense of belonging is not as deeply felt as the one that prevails among people struggling with stigmatization who understand their forum as a second home providing refuge. As expressed by Xander, it rather is about having 'a really nice place to visit.'

In contrast to people who face stigmatization offline and wholeheartedly embrace *Gemeinschaft*-like notions of community, these members of *Flitsservice*

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experience a 'lighter' sense of online togetherhness. Tellingly, these members themselves contemplate concepts denoting a less pressing type of togetherhness than community when asked if they would describe the forum as such. Adriaan says: 'No, it is more something like a club. I think a club is more appropriate than a community. (...) [Community] is too heavy a word for *Flitsservice*. Way too heavy even. No, and I do not think [our] people would want to associate themselves with it.' Els shares this view: 'I would not describe it like that [as a community]. A club, a club of people. With a common interest.' Frank argues:

'In my experience it is more like a tea house, like the Turks and the Moroccans have. A place to meet each other. And you do not invite people who are not real friends at your home at once. You meet them in a more neutral place. (...) I think that is how it is for *Flitsservice*.'

And Tjerk has doubts about these matters because *Flitsservice* 'really revolves around certain topics. And really personal situations are addressed sometimes, but not often.'

Reviewing the above, the type of virtual togetherhness constructed and celebrated among this group of members can be conceptualized as an online 'neo-tribe' (Maffesoli 1996a), crucial to which is the idea of 'affectual sociality' (Hetherington 1998: 63). It is a group 'distinguished by [its] members' shared lifestyles and tastes' (Shields 1996: x) which is about 'shared sentiment and common passion' (Maffesoli 1996b: xvi) and not defined along class lines (Bennett 1999; cf. Hetherington 1998: 7, 53, 61).

Members of a neo-tribe are concerned with 'undirected being-together' (Maffesoli 1996a: 81) as 'lifestyles are experienced for their own sake' (Maffesoli 1996a: 82): a goal 'is not essential; what is important is the energy expended on constituting the group *as such*' (Maffesoli 1996a: 96, emphasis in original). As a 'being-together that is self-sufficient', 'a sociality without purpose' (Maffesoli 1996b: 29; cf. idem: 16, 33), this online neo-tribe is intrinsically valued, and this means it

clearly stands apart from the goal-oriented online social movement discussed in the previous chapter.

This online neo-tribe differs in important respects from tribes in the traditional anthropological sense (Bauman 1992: 136-7; Maffesoli 1996a: 76; Shields 1996: x, xii) or a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge. In this respect it is of crucial importance that the shared lifestyle that lies at the basis of this group of members of *Flitsservice* is not as rigid as the clear-cut identity that underlies a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge. The latter caters exclusively to those holding a specific well-defined identity, whereas the collective identity built upon a shared lifestyle that sustains *Flitsservice's* neo-tribe is “fluid” rather than “fixed” (Bennett 1999: 599); it is a ‘diffuse union’ (Maffesoli 1996a: 73).

This goes hand in hand with ‘weak powers of discipline’ (Shields 1996) and ‘fluid boundaries’ (Bennett 1999: 600) that markedly contrast with the clear boundaries drawn between insiders and outsiders in a virtual *Gemeinschaft*. For instance, on *Stormfront* people who do not subscribe to the prevailing extreme-right ideology are considered ‘troublemakers’ and confined to a secluded part of the forum, and dissidents are pejoratively labeled traitors and excluded from the forum. And *RefoAnders's* members who are attached to the forum as a virtual *Gemeinschaft* indicate that heterosexuals ‘do not belong there’. Contrastingly, in a neo-tribe ‘the question is simply not asked, and acceptance and rejection depends on the degree of feeling felt both by the members of the group and the applicant’ (Maffesoli 1996a: 140). This is precisely what we see on *Flitsservice*: without explicit labeling of insiders and outsiders, the members of the ‘hard core’ feel who is to be included in their group. Those who do not fit in are not formally expelled from the forum, but simply ‘do not last very long’ due to the way in which members of the neo-tribe approach them.

Finally, participation in the neo-tribe on *Flitsservice* is perfectly compatible with ‘membership in a multiplicity of overlapping groups’ (Shields 1996: xii), whereas this does not hold for a virtual *Gemeinschaft* revolving around a specific identity. The latter is purposely chosen to deal with pressing problems of stigmatization in offline social life and as such holds special value as a refuge. In the

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experience of its members, a virtual *Gemeinschaft* in which they 'finally found like-minded people' thus does not simply co-exist on equal standing with other groups.

In short, even though *Flitsservice's* neo-tribe is of social value to its members, it is not as strictly bounded and greedy as a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge in which people fully immerse themselves. Having established that a second type of virtual togetherness is present on the forum of *Flitsservice*, it is time to scrutinize how this online neo-tribe relates to offline social life.

Beyond the forum: meetings, holidays and a wedding

In a separate section of the forum general offline meetings are organized by members for members. Users indicate they entertain sociability at these meetings, which are about 'kart racing, having dinner together or playing paintball, things like that' (Frank) – 'everyone likes that, and the atmosphere is simply companionable at such a race track' (Tjerk). As the focus is on sociability, specific activities are not considered a prerequisite. Nick says he also visits meetings that are 'really only about dinner, to chat so to speak', and Otto does as well: 'if it is in a restaurant to have dinner together or something like that, it is all right'. In a similar vein, Els explains why she visits meetings: 'Simply sociability. To see each other, especially the first time (...). Just to see each other in real life and to chat. (...) Just to meet each other in a restaurant and have a chat, that is what I found sociable. That is what is most pleasant.' Thus, for members of the online neo-tribe, their motivation for attending these social gatherings reflects their forum participation. Adriaan explains: 'Simply the people you know from the café (...). Well, you just want to meet them in real life', which 'absolutely' stimulates the atmosphere in the café section on the forum (Otto). Els indicates these meetings fulfill the same function: 'It is a café in real life'.

Whereas the focus of members of the online neo-tribe on sociability as a goal in itself differs from the politically inspired forum participation of members of the online social movement discussed in the previous chapter, this is not to say that the

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latter do not appreciate these offline meetings socially at all. Philip is even 'very positive' about these, and Kees, too, participates offline for social reasons, which demonstrates that no absolute empirical distinction can be made between these different groups of users. Ralph, however, indicates that to him discussion on substantial matters, as opposed to social meetings, is what is of primary importance: 'Otherwise I would hang around in the café all day too'. And Cor enjoys activities such as kart racing, but indicates 'it is less likely' that he would attend a meeting in a café: 'I have always refused to have dinner in a restaurant together. I do not feel like that. (...) invest that money (...) in equipment or a certain provision or something like that, and not in a dinner. I really think that is a waste.' Diederik says: 'I know that there are many people who have real life contacts with each other and who have meetings and things like that. I have been there once, but well, it really does not mean that much to me. (...) Nice to have seen or done it once, but not again'. Leen is even less enthusiastic: 'I do not think I would do so very soon (...) what should I do there?'

But even given these differences in focus, these general social meetings are relevant to members of the online neo-tribe as well as to some members of the online social movement. When it comes to other articulations of offline sociality, however, there is a difference. For some members of the online neo-tribe, their offline interactions move beyond these general meetings that are publicly organized on the forum. This is not the case for all of them, as indicated by Tjerk, who says: 'For me, it should not be any closer than that'. But others indicate they even find it 'especially sociable outside the forum' as compared to the forum itself (Nick).

These members indicate they attach great importance to 'the so-called mini-meets, spontaneous meetings among a couple of people that can be held anywhere' (Nick). Sometimes these are organized openly on the forum – the member who started the first one recounts: 'In [city x] it all started. Once I just shouted in the café "the weather is beautiful, I am going to [city x] to sit in a sidewalk café, does anyone join me?"' And Otto sets out:

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‘Once in a while it is nice to drink a beer with someone, or like a while ago there was a lecture [at venue x]. We went there with [some] people. That is just nice. And shortly [I will go to event x] and there I will meet someone too. (...) These are just things you discuss on the forum. Like you shout: “At this and this date I will attend [event x], who will be there too?”’

On other occasions these mini-meetings are, however, held more privately. This is observed by *Flitsservice*’s administrator, who speaks of ‘those secretive mini-meets they organize and to which they only invite a select group of people’. Frank explains:

‘At first it were more general meetings that were grandly announced on the forum. These are still there, but there are many more mini-meetings that are not directly put on the forum but organized among ourselves. And therefore these do not directly relate to *Flitsservice*, but are more about friendship.’

Yvette says:

‘The large meetings that are announced to everyone long in advance (...) are visited by lots of people and sometimes a small club of people originates from there who call on each other outside *Flitsservice* as well. That is related to *Flitsservice*, but not just on the forum, but meeting each other somewhere on a Friday night.’

Whereas the meetings that are publicly organized on the forum are also attended by members of the online social movement, these more private gatherings are reserved for specific members of the online neo-tribe. Bram describes these as a ‘fixed group having more frequent meetings’. He indicates this is a group of friends whose meetings do not exclusively revolve around *Flitsservice*, but are nevertheless focused on the same interests as those discussed online. These meetings are not just

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about chatting over a drink in a public venue – members of this group invite others into their private life spheres as well. Bram says that mini-meetings are organized at ‘for instance birthday parties’, Frank indicates some members ‘come over to each other for coffee each week’, and Nick explains he also meets fellow forum members apart from *Flitsservice*: ‘That happens indeed. If I am in [city x] because of my work and I know someone is around, then I ask whether he likes to have a cup of coffee and to chat. Or if someone celebrates his birthday then I sometimes show up as well.’

Other social gatherings of this specific group of members of *Flitsservice*’s neo-tribe are even more intimate than birthday parties and meetings over a cup of coffee. One of these members, for instance, shares one of his best experiences relating to his participation in the forum:

‘I had had a really serious accident (...) and I was all but dead when I gained consciousness at the intensive care unit, and I spent eight days in the hospital. (...) And really from the moment that someone of *Flitsservice* heard the news that I was in the hospital, each day at least four members of *Flitsservice* have visited me. Among them people (...) who had to travel hundreds of kilometers to visit me’.

One of those members indicates this means something special to him: ‘You do not bring flowers to any random forum member who is in the hospital. Of course, that is not the way it works’. Another forum member, who lives quite far abroad, tells a similar story: ‘Three years ago I was living in [country x] and I had to undergo surgery, and some people even wanted to come to [country x] just for one visiting hour’.

Much to their joy, more pleasant events are also shared among this group of forum members. The member living abroad is regularly visited there by his fellow forum members, around ‘four or five times a year’. He says: ‘As I live outside of the Netherlands we have organized a number of meetings abroad. (...) With a limited group of course, that is really like the hard core of *Flitsservice*’. Bram explains: ‘The

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group I am talking about consists of roughly fifteen to twenty people, and that goes as far as like that you really go on holidays with each other. And it is quite funny that starting from nothing, like only the forum, you have gone this far'. Nick, too, enthusiastically elaborates on 'the very nice days' he has spent on 'short holidays' with a specific group of forum members. Bram emphasizes that such events are limited to certain members of the online neo-tribe. When asked if these holidays are organized openly on the forum, he replies: 'No. Previously, that is how it was done, but since the invasion of Johnnies such things are very strictly kept outside of the forum. Often through [personal forum messages], so it is still the forum that connects us'.

For many of these forum members, a highlight has been a marriage that has resulted from participation in *Flitsservice*. Following an anecdote on how 'the fire was lit', their master of ceremonies concludes: 'So they really only know each other because of *Flitsservice*'. The bride explains how important the forum was to her wedding: 'Of course we have met each other because of *Flitsservice*, but half of our social lives, half of our social contacts consists of people of *Flitsservice*. Even to the extent that our honor attendants are [forum members, just like] our master of ceremonies and our photographer'. Moreover, other forum members attended the wedding as guests. The bride says: 'In fact, we invited everyone to the reception'. She explains this was 'quite logical' to her 'since we know each other there and it does feel like a sort of distant relatives or something like that. A sort of vague uncles and aunts and you invite those to your reception as well'. Hence, the reception was publicly announced on the forum, 'an invitation for all who felt like coming', the bridegroom indicates. The bride adds: 'Because we know each other through *Flitsservice* and you loosely speak with many people in the café, it was absolutely normal to invite the people of *Flitsservice*'.

Whereas all members of the online neo-tribe were invited to the reception, a small group was more intimately involved: 'And people from that little club, who we knew somewhat longer and at least better or who we had met more often at meetings... we invited those to the party itself, the wedding'. The bridegroom explains:

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‘Active users, there are about two hundred of those, you cannot be friends with all of them. Just like in a pub, there you do not associate with everyone to the same degree. There is a steady group of people you buy a drink for and hang around with at the bar, and there are others you simply come across.’

This is indicative of a distinction made by the socially inspired forum members: these all feel attached to the ‘diffuse union’ of their neo-tribe, while some of them experience stronger bonds of deep friendship with a specific section of it. The intensive association among the latter group indicates that the fluid neo-tribe formed online has solidified in offline contexts to take the shape of a tight group of friends. This is how these members themselves reflect on it. Bram indicates there is ‘a fixed group of people you get along with very well and with whom you step outside of the forum, so to speak’. Nick ‘absolutely’ feels more attached to this specific group of ‘dear friends’ than to the online neo-tribe in general, and the others, too, speak of ‘a group of friends’ (Bram), ‘friendship’ (Frank) and ‘absolutely true friends’ (Yvette) when denoting the former. As this group of friends is valued as a collective, it differs from the networks of personal sociality that are appreciated by the members of *RefoAnders* who use their forum as a springboard, as discussed in chapter four.

Whereas the neo-tribe is tied to the forum, without which it would not last, this group of friends is less dependent on it. On the one hand, their social contacts are intertwined with their forum participation. Bram, for instance, says: ‘It is a nice club, so that is an incentive to remain on the forum’. On the other hand, this group of friends has become emancipated from the forum. Reflecting on his group of friends, Bram, for example, explains: ‘It has emanated from the forum, but meanwhile... imagine that *Flitsservice* would be closed now, that would not mean that you do not see these people anymore. Meanwhile, it has started to run parallel to the whole forum’. Likewise, Frank says: ‘[Because of] the friendships that originate from it the

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forum share becomes less important and the share of personal contacts [becomes] more important'.

All in all, for some members their participation in the forum has not only yielded an online neo-tribe, but also brought about a close group of friends that could even sustain itself without online interactions. It is important to note that the social motivations inspiring their current activities cannot be understood from their initial instrumental motives to seek out *Flitsservice* – instead these have developed spontaneously as they unintentionally entered into online interactions with people sharing their lifestyle. This is explicitly put forward by these members themselves, and time and again they stress that their socially inspired participation has evolved over the course of their membership. Frank, for instance, says that currently social reasons are most important to him and indicates that 'that is certainly something that has developed over time'. Xander says, 'right now it is simply a club of sociability', and Nick says 'personal contacts' are now most important to him. Otto, too, agrees that *Flitsservice's* social aspect 'is what makes you stick around', and according to Els sociability and connectedness 'permeate' her forum participation. Adriaan says he expected this 'not at all' when he joined the forum, but now he foresees future participation 'just for sociability'. That such socially inspired participation has evolved spontaneously is underlined by the forum's administrator, who 'just takes it as it is', and has not actively stimulated this: 'Many things just happen at the initiative of the forum members. I contribute rather little to that'.

Tellingly, these social motivations have eclipsed their initial instrumental ones:

'The group of people I visit birthday parties with and the two holidays I have spent with people of *Flitsservice* are of such an importance right now that these really are more valuable than discussing traffic policies (...) [the latter] are not the reason to log in each day again' (Bram).

Another member indicates that the trips abroad he now highly values were 'unthinkable' at the outset of his forum participation: 'I just had a look there for a

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radar detector'. And indicating that the information on speed controls that is available on the forum merely has an encyclopedic function for her, Yvette concludes 'it is the social aspect indeed' that underlies her continuing participation. Xander, too, says that discussing speeding tickets currently 'is not the reason to be active there. The reason is that social companionship. Other people go to a pub and we meet each other online'.

This socially inspired group of forum members constituting a neo-tribe online, which for some has solidified into an offline group of close friends, can be distinguished from the online social movement discussed in chapter five. Nevertheless, as indicated above, some empirical overlap naturally does exist. This does, however, not alter the fact that this analytical distinction is validated by various forum members themselves. Yvette, for instance, observes multiple 'cores' on the forum, explaining that 'the club of sociability' she is part of co-exists with 'a legal core, for example', and Adriaan, too, speaks of multiple 'sides of the forum'. Members of the online social movement are also aware that other members have different reasons for their online participation than they themselves have. As Philip says: 'I see quite a few people who prioritize friendships'. And those who are not intensively involved and who have only instrumental reasons for their forum membership make the same observation: 'For others it is just a social gathering (...). That is not what the forum is to me (...). For me it is functional' (Jochem).

Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter indicate that next to a social movement, a neo-tribe has evolved online among a group of members of the forum of *Flitsservice*. Again, scrutiny of their initial instrumental reasons to visit *Flitsservice* cannot provide an understanding of their intensive participation for years in a row. Instead of using *Flitsservice* as a mere database containing information on speed controls that can be used for individual benefits, these members celebrate a shared lifestyle and use the forum to strive for sociability as a goal in itself. As such, the forum

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features a neo-tribe that is not directly related to the formal mission of *Flitsservice* of exchanging speed control notifications. Tellingly, many of their highly valued interactions take place in so-called off-topic sections and do not revolve around speed controls in particular or traffic policies in general at all. Only the fact that certain people who are drawn to an online venue that offers information on speed controls apparently have a similar lifestyle can indirectly account for the existence of this online neo-tribe.

While their collective identity is of vital importance to the long-term intensive participation of the members of the online neo-tribe, this is not because they have been propelled to the forum by pre-existing problems of identity. In other words, the forum is not sought out because it fulfills a specific function in dealing with offline problems of identity. Instead, forum members have constructed a collective identity online as they accidentally discovered that other members have a similar lifestyle, and the neo-tribe has been built around this collective identity. Just like the online social movement discussed in the previous chapter, the online neo-tribe has thus come about unintentionally, and this is what sets these types of virtual togetherness apart from the intentionally constructed ones discussed in chapter three and four.

In addition, the fact that the online participation of the members of the neo-tribe is not focused on *Flitsservice's* central theme demonstrates once more that prevalent notions of self-evident common interests underlying participation in certain online venues do not suffice. The co-existence of this neo-tribe with a social movement on the same forum leads to the same conclusion: these distinct types of virtual togetherness cannot be understood from one and the same self-evident common interest in the forum of *Flitsservice*.

Finally, the fact that this neo-tribe evolved on the forum itself does not mean that its implications are limited to the online realm, even though it is – unlike the online social movement – not aimed at external goals. At the general meetings that are organized by forum members the online neo-tribe is extended offline. There these members celebrate their lifestyle and enjoy sociability in a similar fashion as on the forum. Whereas these meetings are primarily supportive of the online neo-

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tribe which is considered to be of most importance, other offline interactions really move beyond the forum. Among a specific group of members, the fluid online neo-tribe has solidified into a close group of friends who share important events in their lives, ranging from joint holidays to hospital visits and a wedding. Whereas their contacts are sustained by their online interactions, this group would not disintegrate if the forum would cease to exist. In this sense, this more solid form of togetherness has been emancipated from the forum. Since it only exists because it originated from the neo-tribe that has evolved online, it clearly is an offline ramification of online participation.

This finding is a relevant addition to the literature, as some scholars argue that social relationships formed on Internet forums are confined to an online realm separate from offline social life. Without empirical evidence beyond the contents of messages posted on a single forum, Bambina, for instance, argues:

‘Naturally occurring forums (...) are not extensions of face-to-face groups, nor are they hybrids of face-to-face groups and online interactions. They are made up of relations that form in a manner and environment like none other. Members make first contact online, and *most, if not all, of their interactions stay online so that there is a complete lack of physical interaction or contact*’ (2007: 18, emphasis added).

This position seems awkward already in the light of many studies indicating that offline meetings supporting interactions on online forums are quite common (see Sessions 2010 for a literature review, and see my observations on offline gatherings in this and previous chapters), or that members engage in dyadic relationships with other participants (e.g. Kendall 2002). However, what my results add to this literature is that virtual togetherness may be transferred offline in a form that is neither subordinate to online social life nor dyadic in nature. After all, the group of friends that formed out of the online neo-tribe is considered important in itself by those involved, and it is a collective instead of a cluster of one-on-one relationships. This serves to further stress that scholars should not *a priori* assume that the social

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implications of virtual togetherhness are confined to an online realm, as this would entail an unwarranted blind spot for the wider social significance of online interactions.

Chapter 7

Contextualizing virtual togetherness

What has been learned?

Aspiring to find a way out of the deadlock in the literature dealing with the online community question, I set out to develop a contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness. To do so, I have addressed online participation as a form of purposive action and sought to answer the following research question: *how can different types of virtual togetherness on online forums be understood in relation to offline social life?* Below I will discuss the main findings of my research and reflect on their general implications for scholarship addressing the online community question. I will conclude this dissertation by elaborating on the implications of my results for broader debates in Internet studies.

Four types of virtual togetherness

By means of three serial case studies, I have inductively explored different types of virtual togetherness. Speaking of the forum he participates on, one of my respondents stated 'nowhere I could talk like that'. I have adopted this quote as the title of my thesis, as it somehow holds for people engaged in all four types of virtual togetherness I have analyzed. However, as indicated by the overview of my results below, the expression holds different meanings for different groups of participants.

It was found that those struggling with problems of stigmatization in offline social life seek refuge in what I have termed a virtual *Gemeinschaft*, which is clearly bounded and homogeneous and characterized by generalized, deeply affective relationships, a profound sense of belonging and mutual support. In contrast, people facing reflexive questions of identity in everyday life proved to use their forum as a

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springboard in order to obtain informational support enabling them to ameliorate their offline lives, and some of their online social relationships are part of their 'personal sociality'. Instead of a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge they value an open, heterogeneous place for deliberation and only feel connected to specific fellow forum members – these are part of their personal networks of sociality that are not limited to the forum.

These first two types of togetherhness have in common that they can be directly understood from offline social life. Experiences of stigmatization on the one hand and reflexive questions of identity on the other provide distinct reasons for online participation, and by taking these into account it can be understood why participants value and construct different types of virtual togetherhness. Once established, these in turn affect their offline lives. Not only do forum members organize occasional offline meetings that reflect the togetherhness constructed online, their online participation also mitigates some of the emotional problems associated with stigmatization or yields insights that can be applied to deal with reflexive questions of identity in offline life.

In contrast, the other two types of virtual togetherhness do not stem from initial motivations for joining a forum. Analyzing participation in a forum revolving around an instrumental goal instead of a specific identity, I have demonstrated that both a social movement and a Maffesolian (1996a) neo-tribe have been constructed online without prior intentions of doing so. In the case of the online social movement, people who initially visited the forum for instrumental reasons have constructed a collective identity online: political views that were previously only individually held have been socially articulated during their participation, and this provides the basis for attachment to a specific group of forum members. Their sense of connectedness and the associated sense of belonging are not as encompassing and profound as the generalized attachment of a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge. Nevertheless, this type of togetherhness is socially meaningful and important to the participants, and it provides the key to understanding their prolonged participation: members engage in various forms of collective action on the basis of the collective identity constructed online. Even though their forum membership is

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not inspired by pre-existing problems of identity, their participation is thus not isolated from offline social life. It can be understood as a form of purposive action related to offline life as well, but one that has evolved over the course of their forum membership.

The fourth and last type of virtual togetherness I have discussed features a similar relationship between online and offline life. In this case, a neo-tribe has been formed online as forum members have constructed a collective identity on the basis of a shared lifestyle. This type of togetherness is more fluid than a virtual *Gemeinschaft* providing refuge, which is rigidly bounded and in which people fully immerse themselves, but this does not imply that it is void of social significance. On the contrary, members highly value the sociability of the online neo-tribe for its own sake, and this is what keeps them tied to the forum. Moreover, their virtual togetherness fuels sociality beyond the forum. For some this merely involves an extension of the neo-tribe in the form of offline meetings that supplement their online interactions. For others, however, the offline implications of their online participation are more far-reaching: part of the fluid neo-tribe has solidified into a tight group of friends who frequently associate with each other and who share the most important events in their lives.

Now, how do these four types of virtual togetherness relate to each other? Comparison along the lines that have been developed throughout this dissertation reveals that they can be arranged along two dimensions. The first one has to do with the relationship between togetherness and identity. All types of togetherness rest upon shared identities, but the way in which members' identities are relevant to the togetherness they construct online differs. On the one hand, the refuge and the springboard both stem from pre-existing problems of identity: it is because people face problems of identity in offline social life that they use and value an online forum as either a refuge or a springboard. As such, these types of togetherness are intentionally constructed from the outset of members' online participation. On the other hand, the neo-tribe and the social movement have both been formed online without pre-existing problems of identity. Instead, lifestyles and political views that were individually held prior to online participation have been socially articulated on

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the forum, and as a result these types of virtual togetherness have evolved. Thus, the social identities that underlie the online neo-tribe and the online social movement have been formed over the course of online interactions without prior intentions of doing so.⁴²

Next to this distinction between intended and unintended types of virtual togetherness, there is a second dimension along which the types of togetherness discussed above display differences: this pertains to the reasons for which they are appreciated by their participants. On the one hand, the springboard and the online social movement are both extrinsically valued: people using their forum as a springboard try to ameliorate their offline social lives, and participants involved in an online social movement aim at offline social change. Thus, these types of virtual togetherness provide participants with means to realize ends in offline social life. On the other hand, the refuge and the online neo-tribe are both intrinsically valued: the comfort and safety provided by a virtual refuge and the sociability offered by an online neo-tribe are valued for their own sake. This is not to say that they stand in isolation to offline social life; however, instead of means to an end they are considered goals in themselves.

The above indicates that the four types of virtual togetherness can be arranged in a typology consisting of two dimensions, as depicted in figure 1 below.

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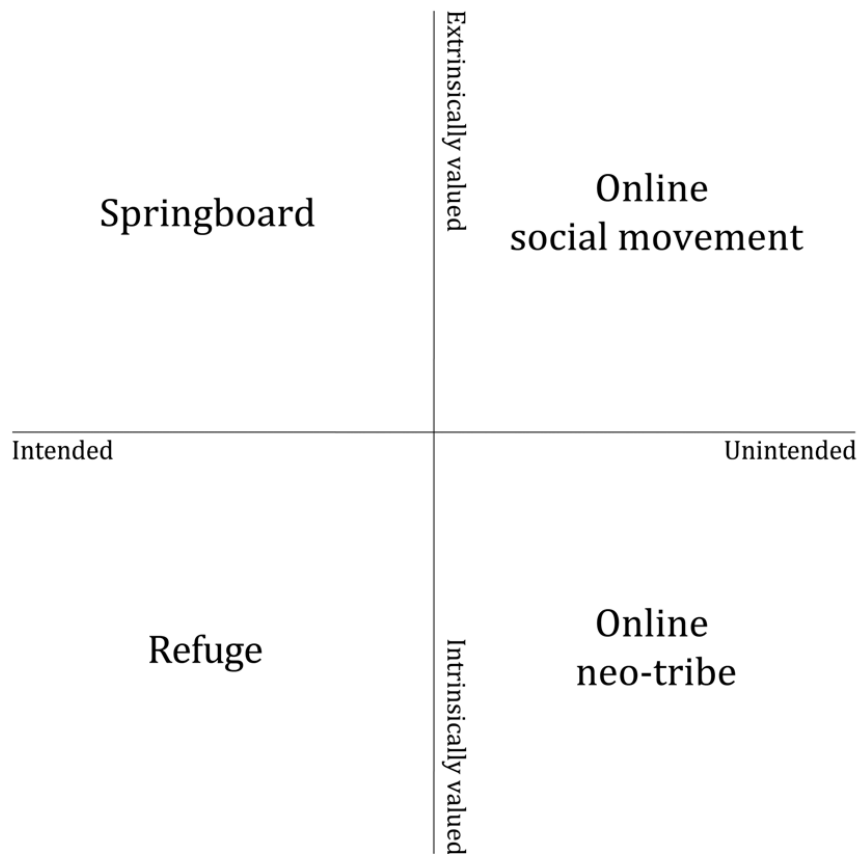


Figure 1: Typology of virtual togetherness

As this typology of virtual togetherness is empirically grounded, it differs from prevailing typologies of virtual communities, which merely entail formal classifications. Take for instance Blanchard's (2004b) typology, which is based on technological characteristics and in which 'asynchronous' and 'synchronous' classes of 'virtual communities' are distinguished and divided into specific technical types. Of course, one can draw up such a categorization without problems, but as it merely entails an arbitrary description, it does not provide a basis for acquiring theoretical insights. The same holds for Porter's (2004) typology of virtual communities, which consists of two main categories. The first one, 'member-initiated', is divided into

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‘social’ and ‘professional’, and the second one, ‘organization-sponsored’, consists of the classes ‘commercial’, ‘nonprofit’, and ‘government’. Despite the fact that the article describing it has already been cited more than one hundred and fifty times,⁴³ it is unclear exactly what is to be learned from this classification. According to the author it ‘might be used as a foundation for theory construction’, as it ‘could be the first step toward developing strong theory to help understand this relatively new phenomenon’, and on top of that it might facilitate ‘programmatic research agendas’. However, it remains unclear how research aimed at constructing or testing theories is theoretically informed by the typology Porter proposes.

In contrast to such established categorizations, my empirically grounded typology yields theoretical insight: based on the ‘motivational understanding’ (C. Campbell 2006: 212) developed in my empirical analyses, the mechanisms underlying the types of togetherness distinguished in my typology of virtual togetherness can be formulated as theoretical propositions.

These propositions are developed best when it comes to the types of togetherness that have been constructed intentionally. Here, my research indicates that if people struggle with stigmatization of their identity in offline social life, they are likely to use an online forum formed around that identity as a refuge. And if people face reflexive questions of identity in offline social life, they are likely to use an online forum devoted to their identity as a springboard. Since these propositions are based on a motivational understanding of online participation, they consist of theoretical mechanisms instead of mere idiosyncratic descriptions. This is already supported by the fact that I found the same mechanism in two different case studies, but both propositions obviously entail suggestions pertaining to specific identities embedded in certain cultural contexts beyond the ones I analyzed in this thesis.

Since stigma varies across time and place (cf. A. Stein 2009: 49), my first proposition, for instance, leads to the expectation that the online experiences of homosexuals in Iran, a country notorious for its homophobia, resemble those of stigmatized Dutch right-wing extremists and orthodox protestant homosexuals. And it also suggests that the increased framing in morally progressive western countries of Islam as deeply problematic (cf. Duyvendak 2004) encourages Muslims living in

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these countries to seek refuge online. Moreover, my conclusion that reflexive questions of identity inspire the use of an online forum as a springboard also underlies theoretical expectations of the online participation of other groups. It, for example, leads to the expectation that an experienced lack of guidance by pre-given gender roles inspires transgender individuals living in morally progressive countries to participate in an online forum in order to contemplate how to be and how to act. And it suggests that migrants who are adrift if they face a new society with cultural codes largely different from the ones that prevailed in their country of origin use an online forum as a springboard as well.

The mechanisms underlying the types of togetherness that have come about unintentionally can also be formulated as theoretical propositions. If people participating in an online forum come to interact with people who share their political discontents or concerns, a social movement is likely to evolve online. And if people participating in an online forum come to interact with people who share their lifestyle, a neo-tribe is likely to evolve online. However, the latter two propositions are not fully developed yet: the main contribution made by my research in this respect consists of demonstrating that it happens. What is needed to arrive at more elaborate theoretical propositions is an understanding of how exactly a neo-tribe or social movement is constructed online on the basis of lifestyles or political concerns that were merely individually held prior to online participation, as well as insights into the online and offline circumstances under which this is likely to happen.

Such insights can be gained by adopting an ethnographic approach, understood as 'a long-term involvement amongst people, through a variety of methods' aimed at understanding various aspects of their lives in relation to others (Miller and Slater 2000: 21). Ethnographies online and off can shed light on the processes through which individually held political concerns or lifestyles are forged into a collective identity providing a basis for an online social movement or neo-tribe. And as such research allows for in-depth scrutiny of the embeddedness of online participation in offline social life, it can help to uncover the conditions under which these processes take place.

Implications for scholarship on the online community question

Having discussed my typology of virtual togetherness and the mechanisms underlying it, it is time to address the more general implications of my research for scholarship dealing with the online community question. First of all, my findings indicate that it is problematic that Internet scholars dealing with the online community question have one-sidedly focused on dichotomous questions. The variation in virtual togetherness discussed above could not have been uncovered if a benchmark was applied in order to determine whether a specific forum qualifies as a community or not. The four types of togetherness discussed here all consist of different configurations of characteristics that fit prevailing definitions of community, and they display qualitative differences. However, if the standard research practice had been followed, these would not have been conceptualized as four distinct types of togetherness. Instead, each would have been classified as either 'community' or 'non-community' on the basis of an essentially arbitrary cut-off point. Such a neglect of variation would have hampered the development of theoretical insights, which suggests that the common research practice should be abandoned in favor of less rigid approaches that allow for understanding or explanation of differences in virtual togetherness. In addition, such an approach should not aim to determine the togetherness characteristic of a forum as a whole. After all, my study has shown that different groups of users with different reasons for participation can aspire to and construct different types of togetherness on one and the same forum. This is another reason why it is problematic that many scholars try to establish whether a specific online venue as a whole is a community or not. Besides, it indicates that comparisons of online sociality across broad categories such as recreational or informational online venues are way too crude to yield meaningful insights (cf. Pasek et al. 2009: 200-1).

These findings are important for yet another reason. They indicate that meaning does not emanate from a forum itself – why specific actors attach certain meanings to it should be actively studied (cf. Blumer 1969: 3-4). My findings hence

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add strength to arguments of scholars critical of technological determinism (e.g. Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004b; Q. Jones 1997; May 2002: 24-8; Slater 2002; Soukup 2006: 437; Wittel 2001: 62), as they emphasize that the technical features of the Internet in general or online forums in particular do not determine specific types of virtual togetherness. On the contrary, using exactly the same technology, people strive for distinct types of togetherness because these are important to them in relation to their offline social lives.

Furthermore, my findings demonstrate that an interest in a forum's central theme does not mean the same for all participants alike – for some groups it is not even the main reason for participation. This means that it is unproductive to simply presuppose that people participate in a certain online forum because of a self-evident shared interest in that forum's central theme (e.g. Bellini and Vargas 2003: 3; Koh and Kim 2004: 76; Mukerji and Simon 1998: 270; Wilson and Peterson 2002: 449). Such a perspective neglects the different perspectives of those involved, whereas these are crucial in constructing a motivational understanding of online participation. In order to arrive at an understanding of differences in virtual togetherness, it should therefore be actively scrutinized how participants themselves define their interest in an online forum.

Finally, an important conclusion that can be drawn from my results is that it is of vital importance not to treat online interactions as taking place in a virtual world isolated from offline social life. Although similar pleas have been frequently made (e.g. Bakardjieva 2005: 167; J.E. Campbell 2004), scholars discussing the online community question have thus far largely neglected to take forum participants' experiences in offline social life into account. This neglect is the main reason why many studies do not move beyond mere descriptions and cannot account for either the origins or the social implications of online togetherness.

All in all, my research suggests that the approach I have developed in this dissertation is a viable alternative to the dominant research practice pertaining to the online community question. It helps to overcome the current deadlock in this field by providing a basis for theoretically understanding differences in virtual togetherness, instead of descriptively answering dichotomous questions on the

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existence of online community. Whereas the 'systematic theory of online community development' (Matzat 2004: 68) some long for has not been completed yet, I have provided a set of theoretical propositions on virtual togetherness that can be extended and elaborated by scholars who adopt the perspective outlined above. Below, I will provide some reflections on the appropriate methods for doing so.

Reflections on methods for further research

The main advantage of the methods I have applied is that they have enabled me to conduct multiple case studies. For practical reasons, my aim to acquire an understanding of togetherness on multiple forums ruled out time-consuming intensive ethnographies. Whereas a combination of qualitative content analyses and online and offline interviews has been well-suited to answer my research question, these methods come with certain drawbacks as well. One is that my insights about the interrelationship between online and offline social life are based on forum members' accounts of the offline contexts they are situated in – these have not been observed directly. And because of a lack of longitudinal data collection, my conclusions on changes in participation rely on respondents' accounts as well. Despite these drawbacks, forum members' stories did allow me to acquire an understanding of their online participation, and since my methods have yielded clear and interpretable patterns instead of widely diverging accounts, my data seem valid.

However, additional insights can be gained if future research applies ethnographic methods online and off. Such research could not only help to elaborate the theoretical propositions on the unintended types of virtual togetherness, as suggested above. It could also offer further insights into the offline implications of online interactions, and it could scrutinize how the interrelationship between online and offline activities develops over time.⁴⁴ I believe it is important for such research to address the online and offline practices and experiences of a specific online group. Miller and Slater state in their widely acclaimed book *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*: 'if you want to get to the Internet, don't start from there'

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(2000: 5). This is primarily sound advice for scholars who want to join them in studying 'how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular' (idem: 1). However, it is not very well suited for research focusing on virtual togetherness, because it could lead to a lack of focus. If ethnographic research on virtual togetherness starts offline, the research subjects might well be scattered around a wide variety of online venues. This could result in a collection of idiosyncratic descriptions that do not allow for the development of theoretical insights on virtual togetherness – if the people under scrutiny engage in online togetherness at all. Therefore, my suggestion is to start ethnographic studies of virtual togetherness by focusing on an online venue and to follow its users online as well as in their offline lives to better understand how their online participation is embedded in the realities of everyday life.^{45, 46}

Finally, my experiences with online interviews allow me to reflect on the question of under which circumstances this is an appropriate method. I concur with Kazmer and Xie (2008: 273) that there are no fundamental objections to interviewing people through their preferred medium, while certain considerations should be taken into account. Some scholars note that online interviews are not 'necessarily' better than or inferior to face-to-face interviews (Garcia et al. 2009: 67), but this observation naturally does not suffice. I would like to add to the developing literature on online research methods (e.g. Ayling and Mewse 2009; Kazmer and Xie 2008, Mann and Stewart 2000; Meho 2006; Murthy 2008) that online interviews seem better suited to study some groups than others.

I have successfully applied online interviews in my case studies of *Stormfront* and *RefoAnders*, and this is not only because I studied 'a phenomenon that is highly integrated with Internet communication' (Ayling and Mewse 2009: 573). Rather, with the benefit of hindsight, online interviews seem especially beneficial for research dealing with stigmatized populations. It is widely acknowledged that people disclose more sensitive information if they communicate online instead of face-to-face (see Joinson 2005; Madge and O'Connor 2002: 98; Meho 2006: 1289; Schneider et al. 2002: 34), but there are two other reasons why online interviews are well suited for research on people who face stigma.

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As observed by Crowley (2007), researchers usually struggle to get access to stigmatized populations since these commonly experience the presence of outsiders as threatening. As online contacts are commonly understood as considerably less intrusive than face-to-face encounters, offering potential respondents the option of online interviews can substantially increase their willingness to participate in a study. Such was the case in my research, and it most likely holds for research on other stigmatized groups as well. Thus, online interviews are not only suited to study stigmatized groups because they yield more data on sensitive issues, but also because they facilitate the recruitment of respondents.

Moreover, my experiences suggest that the practical problems associated with online interviews are smallest if one deals with people struggling with stigma. A common problem haunting online interviews is that people give relatively short answers (Ayling and Mewse 2009: 567), because typing costs more time and effort than speaking (Kazmer and Xie 2008: 265). However, this did not trouble my interviews with stigmatized members of *Stormfront* and *RefoAnders*. Having persuaded them to be interviewed, they were very happy to share their stories with an interested outsider in a safe setting – an opportunity they do not encounter often. Therefore, they cooperated wholeheartedly and invested much time and effort in sharing their experiences and understandings in detail. Thus, due to their great motivation to seize this unique opportunity to give vent to their feelings, the practical problems that usually haunt online interviews were overcome. This stands in stark contrast to the online interview I held with one of the members of *Flitsservice's* neo-tribe. Since he was not troubled by pressing concerns, he was not particularly motivated to share his story with an interested outsider, and as a result the practical disadvantages of online interviews prevailed: even though the interview lasted over two hours, it did not yield rich data, as answers were short and probing was hardly successful.

The above suggests that online interviews are particularly useful if one aims to scrutinize stigmatized populations. In other situations online interviews are most likely less important for acquiring access and less successful in producing rich data. As this suggestion is based on a modest number of observations, future research is

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needed to determine the circumstances under which online interviews are a method to be preferred.

Beyond dichotomous debates

Having sketched how my research theoretically and methodologically informs scholarship on virtual togetherness, I will finally discuss how my findings relate to several debates in Internet studies other than the one on the online community question in a narrow sense. Broader discussions of the nature and social significance of online interactions are reminiscent of the unproductive debates about the existence of 'true communities' on the Internet. As Cavanagh (2007: 4) rightly observes, 'debates about the internet inevitably take on a dichotomous quality, with each claim about its nature or development balanced against a contrary claim'. This has been the case ever since the earliest days of the field. Just like the introduction of new media technologies before (Schoenbach 2001), the advent of the Internet has spawned optimistic and pessimistic speculation alike. As has been noted by countless observers of the field (e.g. DiMaggio et al. 2001; Ester and Vinken 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Haythornthwaite 2007; Katz et al. 2004; Silver 2000; Wellman 1997, 2004; Wellman and Hampton 1999), utopian enthusiasm and dystopian fears pervaded the literature of the 1990s. While these feverish dreams of cybersalvation and damnation have died out, contemporary discussions about central issues still echo their dichotomous logic and abound with antonyms (Petrič 2006: 292). And similar to early observers who treated online interactions as occurring in a 'monolithic cyberreality' (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 450), many present-day researchers make statements about the Internet as if it were an undifferentiated whole.

In order to overcome the deadlocks in which such debates inevitably end up, it is important not to try to determine which position is valid *in general*. Instead, the contextualized understanding of virtual togetherness developed in this thesis could provide a way out by suggesting in which instances online interactions are likely to

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display certain characteristics. Below I will draw upon my research findings to inform discussions on 1) the question of whether online interactions are persistent or fleeting, 2) 'cyber-balkanization' and online deliberation, and 3) the online-offline distinction.

Are online interactions persistent or fleeting?

When it comes to the nature of online interactions, a rather skewed debate exists on the question of how stable and enduring these are. A few scholars have painted pictures of persistent and encompassing online togetherness (e.g. Baym 2000; Rheingold 1993; Tuszynski 2008), while many others have one-sidedly suggested that the online realm features a 'light' form of sociality, characterized by limited engagement and fleeting memberships. The latter position dominates the literature: 'Online relationships (...) are often interpreted in pessimistic terms, as fragmentary, fleeting and ephemeral' (Cavanagh 2009: 9). Day (2006: 230), for instance, speaks of 'high degrees of voluntarism' due to which online groups '[lack] solidity and permanence'. Such claims are often based on the conventional wisdom that one can step out of a collective on the Internet by just one click and join another one by simply moving to another window – an idea popularized by the highly influential work of Turkle (1995). Fernback and Thompson (1995), for instance, state that 'leaving a virtual community might be as easy as changing the channel on a television set', and Bauman (2004: 25) denotes groups formed online as 'electronically mediated, frail "virtual totalities", easy to enter and easy to abandon'. Many variations on this theme can be found, and the common thought is that people display little commitment to online groups if they can disengage easily. As Norris (2004: 33) puts it: 'commitments to any particular online group can often be shallow and transient when another group is but a mouse click away'.

Tempting and commonsensical as these arguments may seem, it is problematic that they all neglect the experiences and understandings of the participants involved. As rightly noted by Tuszynski (2008: 55), the fact that it is technically uncomplicated to leave a virtual group does not imply that participants

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either want or feel free to do so. The degree to which this is the case is likely to vary among different types of virtual togetherness.

Since the argument goes that virtual groups are 'unstable' because 'participants can join or leave (...) whenever they please' (Chan 2006: 21), it is important to question whether members of online groups would want to leave these groups at all. Whereas this might well be the case for people who are merely active online in order to obtain a simple piece of instrumental information – such as *Flitsservice's* members looking for legal advice – my findings indicate that it is not true in general. Here it is particularly important to consider the axis of my typology that pertains to the reasons why the virtual togetherness at hand is valued.

If a type of virtual togetherness is in itself important to its members, it is not likely that they will easily abandon it, even though this would pose no practical problems. Thus, virtual togetherness that is intrinsically valued is likely to be persistent. Consider, for instance, the refuge, one of the two types of intrinsically valued virtual togetherness I have analyzed: since its participants consider their refuge to be a 'second home' to which they would prefer to retreat altogether, they have weighty reasons to stay. So, it seems very improbable that they would make use of the technical possibility of exiting with a single mouse click.

In contrast, members participating in a type of virtual togetherness that is extrinsically valued may reach their goal and consequently cease to be active. If online participation is a means to an external end, it is hence likely to be more fleeting than virtual togetherness with an intrinsic value. However, this should also be understood by taking the motivations underlying online participation into account: if members leave an online forum after having met their goals, this fleetingness is clearly not simply caused by the technical characteristics of online forums. Take, for instance, members who use a forum as a springboard to deal with reflexive questions of identity. After a while they might feel that there is not much to be learned anymore. In that case, they might leave the forum altogether (if they do not stick around to help others), but this change cannot be explained by simply pointing at the technical features of the online forum that make it easy to leave it.

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In addition to the question of whether forum members themselves are positively motivated to participate, it is important to take social pressures into consideration. If people feel obliged to participate, this, too, could lead to prolonged intensive participation in spite of technical ease of leaving. Again this suggests that intrinsically valued types of virtual togetherhness are more stable and persistent than extrinsically valued ones. If virtual togetherhness constitutes a goal in itself, online interactions need to occur regularly and among roughly the same group of people; otherwise it could hardly be meaningful to those involved. After all, it would be nearly impossible to construct a type of togetherhness that is intrinsically valued on the basis of occasional interactions with different strangers succeeding one another. Therefore, members involved in a type of virtual togetherhness which they intrinsically value have good reasons to exercise social pressure upon one another to stimulate persistent participation. A closer inspection of both intrinsically valued types of togetherhness proves that such pressures are prevalent here indeed. Participants seeking refuge value a virtual *Gemeinschaft*; they feel deeply attached to the other participants and are inclined to try to keep them aboard – for example by openly grieving the departure of fellow members. And the online neo-tribe features social pressure to participate as well. The sociability strived for by its members goes hand in hand with mutual concern, and if the participation of members of the online neo-tribe becomes less intense, they are actively drawn back to the forum by other members – ‘you are simply fetched back if you are away for a while’, as they put it.

The situation is different in case of extrinsically valued virtual togetherhness. Of course, fellow participants are required here as well, but in contrast to intrinsically valued types of togetherhness, it is less of a problem if participation of other members is more occasional, for interaction is not a goal in itself. ‘Successful’ participation is less dependent on prolonged, intensive interaction with a specific group of members. Instead, anyone contributing to the external goal is appreciated. This is illustrated by both types of extrinsically valued togetherhness I have analyzed. Members who use their forum as a springboard consider each piece of advice and every debate to be valuable. And instead of continuous discussions with the same group of users, these members appraise fresh insights that can be offered by

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occasional participants. In line with this, members do not report the experience of pressures to participate and do not indicate that they have exerted these themselves. And whereas an online social movement rests upon a shared identity and mutual solidarity, this is not a goal in itself. Therefore, every single contribution to collective actions by people who identify with the common cause is valued, and its members are again less inclined to pressure one another to participate intensively than in the case of intrinsically valued types of virtual togetherness.

In short, types of virtual togetherness with an intrinsic value are more solid than extrinsically valued ones, because of members' own positive motivations for participation, as well as the social pressures that come with these. This indicates that it makes no sense to label online interactions in general as either fleeting or persistent. Rather, differences should be understood in the light of the different reasons that underlie online participation for different groups of people.

Cyber-balkanization or online deliberation?

While the above-mentioned notions on the fleeting or persistent nature of virtual togetherness are scattered throughout the literature, a more focused discussion has developed on the subject of 'cyber-balkanization' versus online deliberation. Initiated in the mid-1990s by Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1996), popularized by theorists such as Putnam (2000) and Sunstein (2001, 2007), and taken up in recent empirical research (e.g. Garrett 2009; Johnson et al. 2009; Kobayashi and Ikeda 2009; Koop and Jansen 2009; Williams 2007; Wojcieszak 2010; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009), this is one the most salient ongoing discussions pertaining to the social significance of online interactions. The underlying idea is that online contacts can be selected to a far greater extent than offline ones. Online, people can effortlessly seek out specific venues they wish to participate in, and it takes only one click to leave a place if it does not please one. This thought has inspired two contrasting scenarios that revolve around the question of whether or not people use the Internet to retreat into homogeneous virtual enclaves.

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The scenario of cyber-balkanization is most extensively discussed and rests upon the notion of 'self-insulation' (Sunstein 2007: *passim*): it is assumed that people prefer the company of like-minded others, resulting in homogeneous 'cyber ghettos' (Dahlgren 2005: 152; Johnson et al. 2009) or online 'echo chambers' (Garrett 2009; Sunstein 2007) in which people merely reinforce their shared opinions (see also Agres et al. 1998: 76-7; Norris 2004: 33; Putnam 2000: 177-80; Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 2005). The argument is that 'whatever your politics, whatever your fetish, a corresponding website (...) can be found online' (Lister et al. 2009: 219) and that the Internet therefore consists of 'a Byzantine amalgamation of fragmented, isolating, solipsistic enclaves of interest based on the collectivity of assent' (Doheny-Farina 1996: 55, cited in Cavanagh 2009: 109-10). Moreover, it is frequently added that such fragmentation goes hand in hand with intolerance: if people are not exposed to different points of view, they might become intolerant of opinions and lifestyles other than their own (Dahlgren 2005: 152; Johnson et al. 2009: 61; Kobayashi and Ikeda 2009: 931; Williams 2007) and even engage in violent conflict (Sunstein 2007: 220).

The scenario of online deliberation is the exact opposite of cyber-balkanization. Instead of luring users into mutually intolerant enclaves of like-minded people, the Internet would 'bring people all across the world closer together' (Papacharissi 2002: 16). In this perspective, the Internet is 'lauded as an expansion of the public sphere' (Davidov and Andersen 2008: 32) which provides a forum for the exchange of ideas among people with heterogeneous backgrounds and opinions.

Unfortunately, these theories, too, have been subject to the sweeping generalizations that characterize Internet studies at large. Just like the early scholarship dealing with the online community question, scholars involved in the cyber-balkanization versus online deliberation debate try to establish which theory holds for the Internet in general (Wright and Street 2007: 850; cf. Johnson et al. 2009: 63). Kobayashi and Ikeda, for instance, address the subject of cyber-balkanization by investigating '*the* impact of *the* Internet' (2009: 932, *emphasis added*), Dahlberg evaluates 'the extent to which *the* Internet does in fact enhance *the*

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public sphere' (2001, emphasis added), and Koop and Jansen (2009: 160) are under the impression that a large sample suffices 'to make broad statements about online democratic deliberation' (see also Brundidge and Rice 2009: 149).

Of course, such studies inevitably result in contradictory findings (see e.g. Mossberger et al. 2008: 49-52) that cannot be understood if the focus remains on the Internet as a monolithic whole. Whereas some suggest that 'the true nature of the internet as a public sphere' lies in the middle (Papacharissi 2002: 21), a contextualized understanding of divergent outcomes seems more promising. To develop such an understanding, the mechanisms underlying different outcomes should be scrutinized instead of assumed. In this case the mechanism that is presumed in the literature is 'selective exposure' (Brundidge and Rice 2009: 150): it is asserted that cyber-balkanization is a likely outcome 'simply because [the Internet] makes it so easy for like-minded people to speak with one another' (Sunstein 2007: 220) or because 'virtual interaction may allow people to more easily seek out others who espouse their own beliefs' (Agres et al. 1998: 76-7). The crucial point here is that the fact that the Internet makes it *possible* to interact exclusively with like-minded people does not imply that all people *want* to do so. Therefore, it is problematic that the existence of different types of virtual togetherness serving different purposes has not been acknowledged in research on cyber-balkanization and online deliberation.⁴⁷ My research findings indicate that some types of virtual togetherness are more inclined towards cyber-balkanization than others. As before, it is instructive to compare intrinsically valued types of virtual togetherness with virtual togetherness that has an extrinsic value for those involved.

If virtual togetherness is intrinsically valued, no online participation of outsiders is required at all. Such a type of togetherness sustains itself without being dependent on interactions with those who do not belong to it. Participation of people who do not share the common identity that lies at the basis of intrinsically valued togetherness is hence not appreciated. This means that types of virtual togetherness that have an intrinsic value for their participants feature characteristics of cyber-balkanization: my material indicates that these are virtual

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enclaves of like-minded people. Forum members who do not share the common lifestyle that is celebrated in an online neo-tribe can, for instance, not join it; these people are implicitly labeled as outsiders and consequently either ignored or annoyed by the neo-tribe's members until they leave. And members of a refuge, which is intrinsically valued because of a desire to escape stigma, strongly attach to homogeneity and are averse to participation of people who do not share their specific identity. They consider strict surveillance of the group's boundaries important and actively identify and exclude outsiders.⁴⁸

Things are different if virtual togetherness has an extrinsic value for those involved. If people participate in an online forum in order to achieve an external goal in offline social life, they will, at some point, have to deal with people who do not share their specific identity. Therefore, the online presence of people who do not share their identity can be useful to them, which means that they do not aim to retreat into a homogeneous virtual enclave. This is sustained by the views of members of both the springboard and the online social movement. Members of the social movement do not oppose the online participation of outsiders, as their presence is helpful in reaching the social movement's goals. For members of the anti-institutional branch, participation of their opponents provides an additional outlet for protest: they regard it an opportunity to ventilate their views to the outside world. And for the branch of concerned citizens aimed at constructive contributions to institutions, participation of outsiders constitutes an opportunity for deliberation which enables them to shape their own ideas and to learn to interact with opposition faced offline. Only in the latter case online heterogeneity goes hand in hand with online deliberation, but as neither branch displays a preference for homogeneity, the online social movement is certainly not characterized by cyber-balkanization. Moreover, the outlook of people who use their forum as a springboard constitutes the exact opposite of cyber-balkanization. Because they aspire to learn from their online interactions, they highly value the online articulation of diverging opinions as well as debate with participants who do not share their identity – this helps them because it brings clarity and enables them to critically reflect on their own points of view. As such, they are neither opposed to

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participation of people who do not share their identity nor intolerant of different viewpoints.

The above indicates that neither of the positions in the literature on cyber-balkanization and online deliberation is true in general, just as it shows that it does not make sense to assume that the 'true nature' of online interactions lies in the middle of these extremes. Instead, attention to the motives of those involved helps to understand why different outcomes occur even though people use exactly the same medium. If people's motives lead them to construct an intrinsically valued type of virtual togetherness, their online interactions will tend toward cyber-balkanization, whereas the opposite holds for people involved in extrinsically valued types of virtual togetherness. This means that the conflicting findings of earlier studies (see e.g. Mossberger et al. 2008: 49-52) most likely stem from research on groups of people who have different motives for their online activities.

An otherworldly realm?

A final issue on which divergent ideas have been formulated is the relationship between online and offline social life. As discussed in chapter one, most of the early literature of Internet studies regarded online interactions as taking place in an otherworldly realm unconnected to offline social contexts. Even after the utopian literature of the 1990s, which was 'driven by a feverish belief in transcendence' (Robins 2000: 78; cf. Aupers and Houtman 2005), the dominant practice in research on the online community question has been to focus on online interactions at the cost of attention to their interrelationship with offline social life (Bakardjieva 2005: 167; Slater 2002: 542). However, this practice has been widely criticized, and scholars now time and again stress that online and offline social life are fundamentally interwoven, stating that the idea of the Internet as a 'self-contained environment' is 'a fiction [that] can no longer be maintained' (Herring 2002: 152). Some have moved a step further: acknowledging that online interactions do not exist in a social vacuum, they suggest that the analytical distinction between online and offline itself should be abandoned. Garcia et al. (2009: 52; cf. Wilson and

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Peterson 2002: 456), for instance, argue that 'the distinction between online and offline worlds is (...) becoming less useful as activities in these realms become increasingly merged in our society, and as the two spaces interact with and transform each other'.

Whereas I wholeheartedly subscribe to the importance of understanding online and offline experiences in relation to each other, I believe it is important to realize that this does not imply that the distinction between online and offline social life is meaningless by definition. Rather, the fact that 'it is no longer a *necessarily* meaningful distinction' (Katz et al. 2004: 362, emphasis added) indicates that the online-offline connection is an empirical question that should not be obscured by discarding the online-offline distinction altogether (cf. Baym 2000: 204-5; Miller and Slater 2000: 5-6; Slater 2002: 543). In which types of virtual togetherness do participants make a meaningful distinction between online and offline social life, and in which way do they do so? My findings point to the existence of three different understandings of the online-offline distinction: some distinguish between online and offline social life in favor of the latter, others make no meaningful distinction, and still others prefer online social life over its offline counterpart.

People involved in extrinsically valued types of virtual togetherness do not attach special meaning to the fact that their interactions take place online. If people value their Internet forum as a means toward offline ends, they give priority to offline over online social life. This holds for members of the online social movement as well as for people using their forum as a springboard. Even though the social movement has originated online and the forum sustains its existence, the forum merely has instrumental value to its members. They do not denounce their online interactions as less real, but since their focus is on influencing institutions in offline life, they do not consider their online interactions to be of primary importance. And participants who use their forum as a springboard value it for instrumental reasons as well. The forum provides them with a unique place to extensively reflect on the questions they face, but they are clearly focused on offline social life: they, too, use the forum as an online means to an offline end. Again, a distinction between online and offline social life is made in favor of the latter.

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Whereas offline goals have priority over online means in the case of extrinsically valued types of virtual togetherness, things are different in the case of virtual togetherness that has intrinsic value for those involved. Just like the online social movement, the neo-tribe has evolved online and exists by virtue of the forum, while its members do not conceive of cyberspace as an otherworldly realm. However, members of the neo-tribe do not regard their participation as a means to an external goal. Therefore, they do not give priority to offline interactions: they celebrate their shared lifestyle and strive for sociality online as well as offline. For this group, the forum is simply a suitable medium that does not meaningfully differ from other means of communication. In this case, the online-offline distinction is thus void of meaning.

Finally, if the virtual togetherness that is constructed is not only intrinsically valued, but also stems from pressing problems of identity, understandings of the online-offline distinction are reversed in comparison to the outlooks of those involved in extrinsically valued types of virtual togetherness. People who seek refuge to escape from offline stigma conceive of their forum as a world separate from their unpleasant offline lives. For them, the online realm is not only a different world, but also a superior one – they would even like to retreat in their online ‘second home’ altogether if that were possible. Thus, whereas their online participation can most certainly be understood from their experiences in offline social life, they make a salient distinction between both worlds and even give priority to their online interactions to the extent that they would like to sever the ties with their offline life as much as possible.

All in all, people involved in different types of virtual togetherness prove to make different distinctions between online and offline social life. This means that the fact that online and offline social life should be understood in relation to each other does not imply that Internet researchers should discard the online-offline distinction altogether.

With these reflections on three broader debates in Internet studies, this dissertation on virtual togetherness has come to an end. Throughout this book I have developed an alternative approach for addressing the online community

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question, formulated theoretical propositions on virtual togetherhness, and offered suggestions for future research. I hope this will aid and inspire Internet scholars to conduct further systematic empirical research on virtual togetherhness.

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¹ Some scholars argue against the adjective 'virtual' because it would suggest that online communities are somehow less real than offline ones (J.E. Campbell 2004: 109; Guimarães 2005: 145; Watson 1997: 129-30; cf. Nip 2004: 424). However, such a meaning is not intended nor implied in any study I know of; literally countless studies simply speak of virtual communities when referring to communities on the Internet (see for just a few examples: Adler and Adler 2008; Blanchard and Horan 2000; Carter 2005; Ester and Vinken 2003; Fernback 2007; Fox and Roberts 1999; Katz et al. 2004; Liu 1999; Nieckarz 2005; Porter 2004; Ridings and Gefen 2004; Silverman 2001). In this thesis I will follow this common practice and use the adjectives virtual and online interchangeably to denote phenomena on the Internet. In line with my interpretive approach, I will study how participants themselves construct the difference between online and offline interactions without imposing *a priori* notions on this matter.

² A concern with the Internet in general is, for instance, also symptomatic of the major field of research concerned with the impact of Internet use on social capital. As Zhao (2006; cf. Pasek et al. 2009: 199-200) rightly observes 'most researchers have treated Internet use as a single category, assuming that different types of Internet uses all have similar effects on interpersonal connectivity'. See for highly influential examples: Kraut et al. (1998) and Nie and Erbring (2000).

³ When it comes to empirical research into the virtual community question, an exception to the common focus on specific online venues is Liu (1999), who holds that 'empirical testing for the presence of virtual community must be done in the context of a specific technical domain such as newsgroups, Internet Relay Chatting (IRC), Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs or MOOs), *et cetera*. This is because virtual communities, if they do exist, reside in specific technical domains of Internet-based group communication.' Whereas specific technical characteristics might, of course, provide conditions that influence the likelihood of virtual community formation, Liu's approach is flawed because it assumes internal homogeneity within specific technical domains. This assumption is highly problematic, not only because it is technologically deterministic, but also because even just a quick look at, for instance, the millions of online forums makes it hard not to note their bewildering empirical variety. So

although he narrows the scope from the Internet in general to a specific domain, Liu's approach is still overly general.

⁴ Of course, this argument reflects Cohen's (1985) highly influential plea to approach community as a phenomenon of culture that can be understood by focusing empirical analyses on meaning instead of structure.

⁵ Another problem is that research drawing upon such unspecific notions tends to be tautological. Wang and Chang (2010: 289), for instance, aim 'to see what motives drive people to make friends on the Internet' and find that 'the opportunity to meet new people' is among these. The same problem haunts research analyzing why people do *not* participate, which finds as the main reason 'not needing to post' (Preece et al. 2004).

⁶ An exception is Lin (2006), who stresses that 'the factors essential to members participating in virtual communities must be thoroughly understood'. However, she does not regard online participation as a form of purposive action and only pays attention to factors such as 'perceived usefulness', 'perceived ease of use' and 'facilitating conditions'.

⁷ Paccagnella (1997), for instance, advocates a research design 'allowing the researcher to control and rule out variables mostly related to the outside off-line world'.

⁸ Of course this does not mean that ethnographic approaches by definition preclude analyses of the interwovenness of online and offline social life. See Miller and Slater (2000) for a fine example of an ethnographic study that reflects more general anthropological critiques of romantic notions of bounded communities (cf. Slater 2002: 541). And see chapter seven for a discussion of how future research could benefit from an ethnographic approach in order to study how virtual togetherness is embedded in offline social life.

⁹ A modest but notable exception is Forster's (2004) comparison of sense of community in two online groups and one offline group. Although he is not able to draw clear conclusions from his analysis, his study is a scarce example of a systematic comparison of purposively selected online venues (see also Chan 2006).

¹⁰ A serial case study design has recently been forcefully advocated in a book-length plea by Dul and Hak (2008). Whereas I share their interest in *serial* instead of *parallel* multiple case studies, this is because I aim to inductively develop theoretical insights and not because I strive for the 'series of replications' sought by Dul and Hak (2008: 43).

¹¹ As observed by Silver (2000, 2006), Internet studies rests upon the twin pillars of online identities and virtual communities, which have been the focal points of two important, yet largely unconnected, debates. When it comes to online identities, scholars have discussed

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the online presentation of self (e.g. Waskul and Douglass 1997). In postmodern writings that were en vogue in the mid-1990s, it is argued that individuals make use of computer-mediated communication to present 'playful' self-identities and that the Internet supports fragmented disembodied selves (e.g. Turkle 1995). However, this literature has lost most of its former appeal due to a series of studies that exposed these fanciful accounts of online disembodiment and fragmentation as untenable and sociologically naïve. Various scholars have demonstrated that the Internet does not offer a transcendent space unaffected by 'offline' social life; instead offline identity markers such as gender, age, ethnicity and class are reconstructed in online interactions (see e.g. J.E. Campbell 2004; Hardey 2002; Kelemen and Smith 2001; Kendall 2002; Nakamura 2002; Robins 2000; Slater 2002). Others have added that the idea of individually constructed multiple selves is problematic, as it stems from a more general neglect of the importance of social contexts (see e.g. Robinson 2007; Wynn and Katz 1997). Following these critiques, scholarly interest in identity play has waned.

¹² A thread is a series of contributions focused on a certain topic.

¹³ *Stormfront* is located at <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/forumdisplay.php?f=22>.

¹⁴ *RefoAnders* is located at <http://www.refoanders.nl/1discussieforum/>.

¹⁵ The forum members describe themselves literally as 'homosexuals' (in Dutch: *homoseksuelen*) or 'people who have homosexual feelings' (*mensen met homogevoelens*). To reflect these definitions as accurately as possible, I have translated their identification as 'homosexual' even though 'gay' is the prevailing term in English. This is because the term gay is sometimes used in Dutch with reference to the secular Dutch 'gay scene' these participants are averse to.

¹⁶ In Dutch: *RefoAnders de ontmoetingsplaats rond homogevoelens voor mensen uit de orthodox christelijke kring*.

¹⁷ *Flitsservice* is located at <http://www.flitsservice.nl/phpBB/>.

¹⁸ In Dutch: *Uw gids tegen zinloos geflits*.

¹⁹ I have not yet written separate papers on *Flitsservice*.

²⁰ Although this concise review merely refers to twenty-four sources, it is firmly embedded in a much broader literature as various publications I draw on are themselves based on extensive literature reviews (see especially Driskell and Lyon 2002; Katz et al. 2004; Nieckarz 2005; Willson 2006).

²¹ Lurkers are people who read the contents of online venues without contributing themselves.

²² The lowest number of visitors I have witnessed on *Stormfront* is 56, the highest 268.

²³ I did not encounter any information that suggests that my presence as a researcher might have something to do with this change. It most likely is the outcome of shifting balance between different groups of users who hold different opinions about the accessibility of the forum to outsiders (see chapter four for an analysis).

²⁴ The fact that this is quite common (cf. Baym 2006: 85; Papadakis 2003: 45) naturally does not imply that studies combining an analysis of online postings with other methods do not exist (see e.g. Baym 2000; Ley 2007; Mehra et al. 2004; Tuszynski 2008).

²⁵ The Dutch Sociological Association's code of conduct is currently available at <http://www.nsv-sociologie-facta.nl/wordpress/wp-admin/docs/Beroepscode%20Nederlandse%20Sociologische%20Vereniging.pdf>.

²⁶ An avatar is a small image selected by each forum member which accompanies all her/his postings.

²⁷ These respondents did not sign formal consent forms, which are unusual in Dutch social sciences. However, my respondents did provide 'implied consent' (Jacobson 1999: 137; cf. Roberts et al. 2004: 162-3): my 'recruitment strategy allows respondents to opt in', which is important as 'enrollment is initiated by the respondents' (Hamilton and Bowers 2006: 825) following an explanation of the study's aims and methods as well as information on confidentiality and anonymity, which implies consent (see Broad and Joos 2004: 932-3 for a similar reasoning). I believe relying on implied consent instead of formal consent is not problematic as 'responsible and ethical research is not a matter of codes, policy, or procedure. Rather, responsible and ethical research centers on a commitment to protect the participants of one's study from potential harm' (Waskul and Douglass 1996: 130).

²⁸ In order to make my respondents feel at ease as much as possible and to save them travelling time and costs, I let them pick the interview locations. Some respondents preferred an interview in an office at my university, but I also enjoyed hospitality at people's homes and ended up in a parking area along a highway, an office, and quiet corners of cafés and restaurants. All face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

²⁹ To protect the anonymity of the female respondent, she has been given a male pseudonym and masculine pronouns are used to refer to her.

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³⁰ The only example of a study in which a sense of community is discussed by addressing the perspectives of right-wing extremists themselves is a thorough ethnographic analysis by Simi and Futrell (2006). However, their broad study of right-wing extremists' online activities on a wide variety of online venues is not primarily focused on the subject of virtual togetherness and as such does not yield the theoretical insights I strive for.

³¹ The number 14 in this username most likely does not refer to the age of this forum member, but to a fourteen-word slogan that is popular in right-wing extremist circles: 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children'.

³² Such feelings are not confined to the members who are open about their identity. The strategy of passing of those concealing their identity does not indicate in any way that they endorse the social norms underlying their stigmatization. Passing is just applied to avoid status loss. So, although implied by some authors (e.g. Carnevale 2007: 11-2), passing does not preclude strong feelings of disattachment from the prevailing cultural codes (see Simi and Futrell 2009 for a similar argument).

³³ Of course, it would be more precise to speak of 'pseudonymity' instead of the widely used concept of 'anonymity', since the members know each other through their usernames (cf. Roberts et al. 2002: 227). What counts for the stigmatized members of *Stormfront*, however, is that information by means of which they could be identified in offline life remains unknown to others.

³⁴ NVU stands for *Nederlandse Volks-Unie*, which translates as *Dutch People's-Union*.

³⁵ See, for example, Adler and Adler (2008), Bastani (2000), Blevins and Holt (2009), Brouwer (2004), J.E. Campbell (2004), Deshotels and Forsyth (2007), Elias and Lemish (2009), Mehra et al. (2004), Mitra (2006), Proulx and Latzko-Toth (2005), Quinn and Forsyth (2005) and Tanis (2007).

³⁶ None of the respondents considered 'healing' their sexuality – which is promoted in certain religious contexts (see Erzen 2006; Robinson and Spivey 2007; Wolkomir 2001) – a feasible option.

³⁷ See note 33.

³⁸ Politician Geert Wilders is the leader of the Dutch right-wing populist 'Party for Freedom' (*Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)*).

³⁹ In Dutch: *Wet openbaarheid van bestuur (WOB)*.

⁴⁰ Maarten is the only respondent who joined *Flitsservice* for political reasons – 'to contribute to the social debate' – that have not developed since.

⁴¹ For lack of an adequate translation of the Dutch term *Sjonnies* I have merely Anglicized the spelling. It roughly pejoratively refers to members of the lower working class who consume electronic dance music and dress in track suits.

⁴² It should be noted that my typology pertains to *virtual* togetherness, and, therefore, to *online* neo-tribes and social movements. Of course, not all social movements and/or neo-tribes originate from online interactions, and those that have been formed offline might use online forums in order to sustain their communications (see the concluding section of chapter five for studies on social movements that do so). This would mean, however, that online communication is added to offline types of togetherness, and this falls outside the scope of my research (see chapter 2).

⁴³ According to Harzing's (2010) *Publish or Perish*, accessed on August 9, 2010.

⁴⁴ Research addressing questions like these is lacking in Internet studies. Ahuja and Galvin (2003: 161), for instance, observe that 'extant research provides little insight into how new members are socialized into virtual groups', and Garcia et al. (2009: 56) 'found very few examples of ethnographic studies which dealt with the effect of [computer-mediated communication] or the Internet on "offline" aspects of social life.'

⁴⁵ Such studies would radically differ from the dominant ethnographies in Internet studies discussed in chapter one: the latter are *online* ethnographies aimed at understanding online group cultures in their own right (cf. Slater 2002: 541), instead of scrutinizing the interrelationship of online and offline social life.

⁴⁶ In order to fruitfully use this approach for in-depth scrutiny of *changes* in forum participation and their relation to offline social life, it is important not to focus on established members only and to recruit people as research subjects the moment they join the online venue.

⁴⁷ Most studies on cyber-balkanization do not take the offline contexts of online interactions into account (Brundidge and Rice 2009: 149; Wojcieszak 2010: 638), and studies that do look beyond the virtual realm typically include demographic and psychographic variables or items on political interest and political knowledge that contain no information about participants' reasons for their online activities (e.g. Johnson et al. 2009; Kobayashi and Ikeda 2009; Williams 2007; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009).

⁴⁸ Because of a lack of a systematic longitudinal analysis, I have not been able to determine whether participation in a virtual refuge fosters greater intolerance toward different points of view. Considering the motives of the participants such a relationship does, however, not

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seem self-evident. They do not want to be pestered by outsiders and, therefore, they retreat among like-minded people, but my material suggests that this might just as well reflect a desire to be left alone, as it might reflect a growing aversion to people who do not share their ideas. As such, prolonged participation in a virtual refuge might lead to growing indifference instead of intolerance. Further research is needed to find out whether and under which circumstances this is the case.



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Dutch summary

‘Nergens kon ik praten zoals hier’: Samenzijn en identiteit op internetfora

Hoewel sociologen zich al sinds het ontstaan van hun discipline hebben beziggehouden met vragen over gemeenschappen, hebben ze onderzoek naar virtuele gemeenschappen grotendeels overgelaten aan het interdisciplinaire veld van de zogenaamde ‘internetstudies’. Internetonderzoekers publiceren weliswaar intensief over gemeenschappen op het internet, maar het debat rond deze thematiek heeft weinig theoretische inzichten opgeleverd.

Hoofdstuk 1 begint met een kritische bespreking van de wetenschappelijke discussie over virtuele gemeenschappen. In het begin draaide deze discussie voornamelijk om de vraag of groepen op het internet al dan niet beschouwd kunnen worden als ‘echte’ gemeenschappen. Deze aandacht voor het internet als monolithisch geheel staat, samen met het essentialisme dat in deze vraag besloten ligt, theoretisch inzicht in de weg. Bij gebrek aan systematisch empirisch onderzoek heeft deze onvruchtbare discussie lang aangehouden, maar er zijn inmiddels ook wetenschappers die wel empirisch onderzoek hebben verricht. Zij gaan ervan uit dat sommige online ontmoetingsplaatsen gemeenschappen zouden kunnen zijn en andere niet, en onderzoeken daarom of specifieke internetfora als gemeenschappen gekwalificeerd kunnen worden. Sommigen proberen hierbij het gezichtspunt van de betrokkenen in ogenschouw te nemen door zich te richten op het bestaan van een subjectief ‘gemeenschapsgevoel’. Zulke studies kunnen echter, net als de eerdere abstracte beschouwingen over het internet in het algemeen, slechts op twee conclusies uitkomen – een bepaald forum kan wel of niet een gemeenschap worden genoemd. Dit is problematisch omdat zulke beschrijvende bevindingen geen inzicht bieden in verklarende mechanismen en nauwelijks implicaties voor wetenschappelijke debatten hebben.

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Uit theoretisch oogpunt is het niet zozeer van belang om vast te stellen of een bepaalde online groep al dan niet een gemeenschap is, maar om verschillende ervaringen van virtueel samenzijn bloot te leggen en te begrijpen. Om dat te doen moet het gemeenschapsbegrip niet langer als star referentiepunt worden gebruikt, maar als een attenderend begrip waarmee verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn ontdekt kunnen worden. Het tweede deel van *hoofdstuk 1* biedt een uitwerking van deze alternatieve benadering.

Het doel om verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn te begrijpen impliceert allereerst dat onderzocht moet worden hoe specifieke vormen van virtueel samenzijn worden gevormd in specifieke contexten. Daartoe is het belangrijk om participatie binnen internetfora te beschouwen in het licht van de beweegredenen die mensen ervoor hebben. Als mensen verschillende redenen hebben voor hun online participatie, zullen ze waarschijnlijk ook verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn nastreven. Daarom is het belangrijk om de beweegredenen van forumgebruikers expliciet in de analyse te betrekken, en deze niet, zoals gebruikelijk, buiten de discussie te plaatsen met aannames over universele menselijke sociale behoeften of vanzelfsprekende gedeelde interesses in de thematiek van een bepaald forum.

Voor een gecontextualiseerd begrip van verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn is het niet voldoende om een inventaris van verschillende beweegredenen op te maken. Er is aandacht nodig voor de offline contexten van online samenzijn. Het is immers aannemelijk dat individuen met verschillende ervaringen in het offline sociale leven verschillende redenen voor hun online forumdeelname hebben. Daarom breekt dit proefschrift met veel van het voorgaande onderzoek met betrekking tot de discussie over virtuele gemeenschappen door aandacht te besteden aan de relatie tussen het online en het offline sociale leven. Een en ander mondt uit in de volgende probleemstelling: *Hoe kunnen verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn op internetfora worden begrepen in relatie tot het offline sociale leven?*

Hoofdstuk 2 bespreekt de onderzoeksopzet. Voor een theorievormend onderzoek gericht op vergelijking van patronen van virtueel samenzijn die binnen

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en tussen fora kunnen verschillen, zijn seriële casestudies het meest geschikt. In tegenstelling tot de dominante praktijk in het internetonderzoek geschiedt de caseselectie op theoretische gronden. De vraag op welke manieren identiteiten relevant zijn voor verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn fungeert hierbij als theoretisch vertrekpunt.

Hoewel het doel van het onderzoek is om te komen tot theoretische inzichten die niet beperkt zijn tot een nationale context, worden er alleen Nederlandstalige fora geanalyseerd. Onderzoek gericht op Nederlandstalige fora heeft namelijk waarschijnlijk veel minder last van taalbarrières en interpretatieproblemen dan een onderzoek naar Engelstalige fora. Daarnaast is het internetgebruik in Nederland wijdverbreid, en vormt dit land natuurlijk geen monolitische offline context. Daarmee leent Nederland zich goed voor een vergelijking van typen virtueel samenzijn die op verschillende wijze verbonden zijn met het offline sociale leven, terwijl de variatie naar verwachting ook weer niet te groot is – wat wel het geval zou kunnen zijn in het geval van Engelstalige fora, die bezocht kunnen worden door mensen van over de hele wereld.

In totaal wordt participatie binnen drie fora geanalyseerd. Als eerste de Nederlandstalige tak van ‘Stormfront White Nationalist Community’, het grootste internetforum voor rechts-extremisten, kortweg aangeduid als *Stormfront*. Daarna *RefoAnders*, een forum voor mensen die zichzelf identificeren als orthodox protestantse homoseksuelen. En ten slotte *Flitsservice*, een forum dat is opgezet om automobilisten die geïnformeerd willen worden over de locatie van snelheidscontroles met elkaar in contact te brengen. In lijn met het exploratieve karakter van dit onderzoek worden deze cases bestudeerd aan de hand van kwalitatieve methoden, waarbij de aandacht steeds uitgaat naar de beweegredenen die forumleden voor hun online participatie hebben, hun activiteiten en ervaringen in het offline sociale leven die daarmee te maken hebben, hun ervaringen op het forum en de betekenis die zij aan het forum verlenen.

In alle drie de casestudies worden er, naast exploratieve inhoudsanalyses van de forumberichten, interviews met forumleden geanalyseerd. In geval van *Stormfront* vonden deze interviews plaats middels ‘instant messaging’-software,

omdat potentiële respondenten er grote waarde aan hechten om hun privacy zoveel mogelijk te beschermen. Op deze manier zijn elf leden van *Stormfront* geïnterviewd, en deze casestudy rust naast een analyse van deze interviews op een uitgebreide interpretatieve inhoudsanalyse van forumberichten. Om ethische redenen is hier in geval van *RefoAnders* van afgezien, en bij de analyse van participatie binnen *Flitsservice* wordt geen gebruik gemaakt van een systematische inhoudsanalyse omdat dit naar verwachting weinig aanvullende inzichten zou opleveren. Er zijn vijftien interviews gehouden met forumleden van *RefoAnders* (dertien persoonlijk en twee online) en eenentwintig met leden van *Flitsservice* (zeventien persoonlijk, drie telefonisch en een online).

In *hoofdstuk 3* staat *Stormfront* centraal. Omdat dit forum is geformeerd rond een duidelijk gedefinieerde sociale identiteit is het een geschikte eerste case om het theorievormende onderzoek waar dit boek om draait eenvoudig te beginnen. Daarnaast is het een goede keuze omdat men in de literatuur over online rechts-extremisme dikwijls over virtuele gemeenschappen spreekt, waarbij veel van de problemen die kenmerkend zijn voor het bredere internetonderzoek naar virtuele gemeenschappen worden weerspiegeld.

Kenmerkend voor de forumleden van *Stormfront* is dat zij veel waarde hechten aan hun extreem-rechtse identiteit, terwijl deze in hun offline sociale omgeving sterke weerstand oproept. Zowel binnen hun familiekring als op school, op hun werk en binnen sportverenigingen hebben ze te maken met stigmatisering in de klassieke zin van Goffman, en dit gaat hand in hand met een fatalistisch wereldbeeld – ze hebben het idee dat ze niets aan hun situatie kunnen veranderen en ze zijn niet geneigd tot politiek activisme. Hun ervaringen in het offline sociale leven blijken nauw verbonden te zijn met hun forumlidmaatschap. Ze zijn niet alleen actief binnen *Stormfront* omdat ze dankzij de door het forum geboden anonimiteit het gevoel hebben hun mening daar vrij te kunnen uiten, maar vooral ook om sociale redenen. Ze zijn verheugd dat ze, in tegenstelling tot in het offline leven, op het forum mensen met vergelijkbare denkbeelden kunnen treffen, en binnen het forum bestaat solidariteit en kameraadschap tussen de leden in het algemeen. Leden steunen elkaar en voelen zich veilig dankzij toezicht op de naleving van

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gedragsregels. Ook vindt er insluiting van andere rechts-extremisten en uitsluiting van buitenstaanders plaats.

De leden hebben, kortom, iets gevormd wat een 'virtuele *Gemeinschaft*' kan worden genoemd, en deze virtuele *Gemeinschaft* fungeert voor hen als toevluchtsoord: ze zien het forum als een tweede huis waarbinnen ze zich kunnen afschermen van de stigmatisering die ze in het offline sociale leven ondervinden. De relevantie van deze bevinding is niet gelegen in het aantonen van het bestaan van een 'echte' gemeenschap binnen het forum, maar in de conclusie dat het waarderen en nastreven van een bepaald type virtueel samenzijn kan worden begrepen uit specifieke ervaringen in het offline sociale leven. Deze conclusie wordt ondersteund door drie respondenten die niet kampen met stigmatisering in het offline sociale leven: voor hen heeft *Stormfront* geen betekenis als toevluchtsoord.

Het bovenstaande heeft een eerste mechanisme aan het licht gebracht, en maakt daarnaast duidelijk dat een bepaald type virtueel samenzijn geen betrekking hoeft te hebben op alle leden van een forum. Tegen deze achtergrond wordt in *hoofdstuk 4* gekozen voor het forum van *RefoAnders*. Onder meer vanwege de hybride identiteit die aan de basis van dit forum ligt – het forum is opgezet voor mensen die zich niet alleen als homoseksuel, maar ook als orthodox protestants identificeren – belooft deze case meer variatie. Dat is belangrijk vanwege het theorievormende karakter van dit onderzoek.

Onder de respondenten zijn twee verschillende identiteitsvraagstukken aan te wijzen. Een eerste groep kampt in het offline sociale leven, net als veel leden van *Stormfront*, met stigmatisering – in de orthodox protestantse omgeving waarin zij zich bevinden stuit homoseksualiteit op grote weerstand. Daarom voelen ze zich sociaal geïsoleerd en worstelen ze met emotionele problemen. Dit is de reden dat ze op het forum actief zijn. Daar kunnen ze dankzij de geboden anonimiteit terecht bij gelijkgestemden zonder angst voor negatieve reacties van buiten. De leden voelen zich verbonden met de andere forumleden in het algemeen, bieden elkaar een uitlaatklep voor hun problemen en voorzien elkaar van emotionele steun. Dit lucht op en geeft hen het idee dat ze er niet alleen voor staan. Omdat dit is waarom ze zich op het forum thuisvoelen, staan ze afwijzend tegenover felle debatten of inmenging

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van buitenstaanders als heteroseksuelen. Deze bevindingen betekenen dat het mechanisme dat in het vorige hoofdstuk werd blootgelegd meer algemene betekenis heeft: ook hier blijken gestigmatiseerden toevlucht te zoeken in een virtuele *Gemeinschaft*.

Een tweede groep heeft niet of nauwelijks te maken met stigmatisering. Wat hen bezighoudt zijn reflexieve identiteitsvraagstukken. Zij willen weten hoe ze hun leven als homoseksueel het beste kunnen inrichten in het licht van hun geloof en binnen hun orthodox protestantse sociale omgeving. Ze vragen zich bijvoorbeeld af of het een goed idee zou zijn om een homoseksuele relatie aan te gaan en of dit theologisch te rechtvaardigen zou zijn, en hoe ze met familieleden en kerkgenoten het beste over hun seksualiteit kunnen praten. Omdat traditionele autoriteiten geen antwoord kunnen bieden op hun vragen, proberen ze in interactie met andere forumleden inzicht te krijgen: deze leden proberen van elkaar te leren door het uitwisselen van ervaringen, informatie en advies. In tegenstelling tot de leden die kampen met stigmatisering, hechten zij niet aan online anonimiteit en gebruiken ze het forum niet als uitlaatklep of om elkaar emotioneel te steunen. Ze leggen er wel losse vriendschappelijke contacten, maar voelen zich niet in algemene zin verbonden met de andere forumleden en beschouwen het forum dan ook niet als een tweede huis. Omdat ze juist door verschillende visies en discussie tot inzicht willen komen, zien ze het forum als een open, heterogene plek voor debat en overleg in plaats van als afgesloten, homogeen toevluchtsoord. Voor deze groep leden heeft het forum betekenis als springplank: hun virtuele samenzijn is geen doel op zich, maar een middel om hun offline sociale leven vorm te geven. Met de conclusie dat mensen die te maken hebben met reflexieve identiteitsvraagstukken een internetforum gebruiken als springplank, is een tweede mechanisme blootgelegd dat inzicht biedt in de manier waarop het offline en het online sociale leven met elkaar verbonden zijn. De bevindingen in dit hoofdstuk hebben daarnaast implicaties voor een discussie in het internetonderzoek over de toepassing van Goffmans ideeën over 'backstages' op internetfora.

De eerste twee casestudies draaiden om fora die elk een focus op een meer of minder specifieke identiteit hebben. Om het inzicht in de manier waarop virtueel

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samenzijn en het offline sociale leven zich tot elkaar verhouden verder te ontwikkelen, wordt in *hoofdstuk 5* een ander type forum geselecteerd. Dit forum, *Flitsservice*, is niet opgezet rond een bepaalde identiteit, en draait in plaats daarvan om een alledaagse instrumentele kwestie, terwijl het wel veel leden heeft die er langdurig en intensief participeren. De vraag is hoe dat laatste begrepen kan worden.

In overeenstemming met de bedoeling van de oprichter en beheerder van *Flitsservice*, gebruikten de respondenten het forum aanvankelijk slechts om praktische informatie te vinden over snelheidscontroles of het aanvechten van verkeersboetes. Veel respondenten beschouwen het forum momenteel echter niet primair als informatiebron: binnen *Flitsservice* hebben zich twee typen virtueel samenzijn gevormd, een online sociale beweging (besproken in *hoofdstuk 5*) en een online neo-tribe (*hoofdstuk 6*).

De online sociale beweging heeft twee takken, die bestaan uit wat hier anti-institutionalisten en bezorgde burgers worden genoemd. De anti-institutionalisten hebben niet alleen een afkeer van snelheidscontroles, maar van de Nederlandse overheid in het algemeen. 'De overheid is een soort kwaad dat in toom moet worden gehouden', zoals een van hen het verwoordt. Ze voelen zich beknot in hun vrijheid en ergeren zich aan bureaucratische bemoeizucht. Terwijl hun onvrede voorafgaand aan hun forumparticipatie slechts individueel werd beleefd, zijn ze hun eigen politieke ideeën gaan herkennen bij andere forumleden. Daardoor is er gedurende hun forumlidmaatschap een collectieve identiteit gegroeid. Hoewel deze collectieve identiteit minder nauw omlijnd is dan die van de leden van *Stormfront* of *RefoAnders*, is deze belangrijk voor hun langdurige lidmaatschap. Deze collectieve identiteit gaat hand in hand met een gevoel van verbondenheid – niet met de forumleden in het algemeen, maar met leden die deze identiteit delen. En hoewel ze het forum niet zien als een tweede huis, voelen ze zich binnen deze groep leden op hun gemak.

De bezorgde burgers delen het standpunt van de anti-institutionalisten waar het gaat om snelheidscontroles, maar op andere punten verschillen ze van mening. Ze hebben geen diepgevoelde onvrede over de Nederlandse overheid in het

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algemeen. In plaats daarvan zijn ze ontevreden over het huidige beleid en maken ze zich zorgen om het functioneren van democratische instituties, waar ze veel waarde aan hechten. Daarnaast signaleren ze concrete infrastructurele problemen. Net als de anti-institutionalisten hebben ze gedurende hun forumparticipatie onderling een collectieve identiteit gesmeed op basis van voorheen individueel gehuldigde ideeën, en ook hier is er sprake van verbondenheid met leden van de eigen groep.

Het op het forum gegroeide idee van een gezamenlijk doel en de verbondenheid die daarmee samengaat blijken de basis te bieden voor collectieve actie. In lijn met hun verschillende opvattingen, hebben de groepen ieder hun eigen actierepertoire. Een belangrijke vorm van collectieve actie van de anti-institutionalisten is protest. Deze leden gebruiken het forum om uiting te geven aan hun onvrede over de Nederlandse overheid. Ze proberen daarmee niet alleen om buitenstaanders van hun ideeën te overtuigen, maar ook om een signaal af te geven richting beleidsmakers. Daarnaast proberen ze zand in de machine van het overheidsapparaat te strooien door intensief gebruik te maken van procedures om bij boetes documentatie op te vragen en bezwaar aan te tekenen. De groep bezorgde burgers maakt gebruik van dezelfde procedures, maar om andere redenen: ze verzetten zich alleen tegen boetes die ze als onrechtvaardig beschouwen en proberen controle op de overheid uit te oefenen. Daarnaast gebruiken ze het forum niet zozeer om te protesteren, maar om constructief bij te dragen aan beter beleid. Dit doen ze bijvoorbeeld door de voor- en nadelen van verschillende beleidsalternatieven af te wegen in de hoop dat deze informatie de overheid bereikt. Waar de bovengenoemde vormen van collectieve actie al een onmiskenbare oriëntatie op het offline sociale leven behelzen, gaan sommige leden nog een stap verder: via het forum organiseren zij deelname aan inspraakavonden, om op die manier overheidsbeslissingen rechtstreeks te beïnvloeden.

Het bovenstaande is de reden dat beide groepen kunnen worden beschouwd als takken van een online sociale beweging. Dit type virtueel samenzijn kent een andere relatie met het offline sociale leven dan een toevluchtsoord of een springplank. Terwijl beide laatstgenoemde typen rechtstreeks begrepen kunnen worden uit identiteitsvraagstukken die aan het forumlidmaatschap voorafgaan, is de

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online sociale beweging onbedoeld tot stand gekomen. De initiële motieven van de betrokkenen zijn niet de reden voor hun voortdurende participatie – hun huidige beweegredenen, die duidelijk een oriëntatie op het offline leven behelzen, zijn gegroeid tijdens hun forumlidmaatschap. Hoewel er doorgaans wordt beweerd dat sociale bewegingen slechts gebruik maken van internetfora, laten deze bevindingen zien dat ze daar ook tot stand kunnen komen.

Hoofdstuk 6 draait om een neo-tribe die binnen *Flitsservice* is ontstaan. Net als de leden van beide takken van de online sociale beweging, hebben de betrokken leden gedurende hun forumlidmaatschap een collectieve identiteit gesmeed, terwijl ze met instrumentele motieven op het forum terecht kwamen. Er liggen ditmaal echter geen politieke ideeën aan ten grondslag, maar een bepaalde levensstijl gebaseerd op een specifieke smaak en een specifiek waardenpatroon. De betrokken leden waarderen niet alleen een gedeelde interesse in autorijden en snelle auto's, maar herkennen in andere leden ook zelfredzame, hardwerkende, verantwoordelijke burgers. Hierbij worden structurele sociale posities niet van belang geacht. Hoewel deze levensstijl niet vastomlijnd is, is het voor de betrokkenen duidelijk wie er tot hun groep behoort – forumdeelnemers met een afwijkende levensstijl, zoals 'Sjonnies' of 'Petjes', worden niet opgenomen in deze groep. Waar de leden van de online sociale beweging hun forumparticipatie richten op collectieve actie, streven de leden die een gedeelde levensstijl vieren op het forum gezelligheid na. Ze zijn dan ook opvallend actief in forumonderdelen die niet draaien om snelheidscontroles of verkeersbeleid, maar om diverse onderwerpen die hen interesseren. Ook het zogenaamde café, een forumonderdeel dat geheel is gewijd aan geklets onder het genot van een virtueel drankje, is bij een deel van deze leden in trek.

Het virtuele samenzijn van deze leden is, kortom, gebaseerd op een gedeelde levensstijl en wordt gewaardeerd omwille van zichzelf. Dat is een belangrijk verschil met de springplank en de online sociale beweging die eerder zijn besproken. Daarnaast is de levensstijl die aan de basis van deze vorm van samenzijn ligt meer fluïde dan de duidelijk omschreven identiteit waar een virtueel toevluchtsoord om draait, worden de grenzen minder expliciet getrokken en gaan de betrokken er niet

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volledig in op. Er is dus sprake van een vierde vorm van virtueel samenzijn, en dit type wordt een online neo-tribe genoemd.

Hoe verhoudt deze neo-tribe zich tot het offline sociale leven? De leden van de neo-tribe nemen niet alleen voor de gezelligheid deel aan offline bijeenkomsten die publiekelijk op het forum aangekondigd, maar komen met hetzelfde doel ook op zelf georganiseerde, meer besloten bijeenkomsten bij elkaar. Bovendien heeft de fluïde online neo-tribe voor een deel van de leden buiten het forum vaste vorm aangenomen in de vorm van een hechte vriendengroep. Zij steunen elkaar bij moeilijke momenten in hun leven, gaan bij elkaar op de koffie, vieren hun verjaardagen met elkaar en gaan met elkaar op vakantie. Twee leden van deze vriendengroep zijn zelfs getrouwd, en bij de bruiloft werden verschillende rollen vervuld door leden van *Flitsservice*. Deze forumleden voelen zich verbonden met de leden van de neo-tribe, en ervaren tegelijkertijd sterkere vriendschapsbanden met een deel daarvan. Waar het voortbestaan van de neo-tribe afhankelijk is van het forum, zou deze vriendengroep ook zonder het forum kunnen voortbestaan. Wat deze gemeen hebben is dat beide dankzij de forumparticipatie van hun leden zijn ontstaan: noch de online neo-tribe noch de vriendengroep die er uit is voortgekomen kan worden begrepen uit de oorspronkelijke instrumentele participatiemotieven van de betrokken forumleden. Net als de online sociale beweging is de neo-tribe onbedoeld tot stand gekomen op het forum. Vooraf bestaande identiteitsvraagstukken spelen hierbij geen rol, wat betekent dat de online sociale beweging en de online neo-tribe zich duidelijk anders tot het offline sociale leven verhouden dan een toevluchtsoord en een springplank. Daarnaast maakt het bestaan van de vriendengroep die is voortgekomen uit de neo-tribe duidelijk dat sociale relaties die online tot stand zijn gekomen zich niet, zoals sommige onderzoekers beweren, altijd beperken tot een online domein dat losstaat van het offline sociale leven.

Het concluderende *hoofdstuk 7* biedt allereerst een overzicht van de vier typen virtueel samenzijn die in hoofdstuk 3 tot en met 6 zijn geëxploreerd. Deze kunnen langs twee dimensies worden geordend. De eerste dimensie heeft te maken met de relatie tussen samenzijn en identiteit. Alle typen virtueel samenzijn rusten

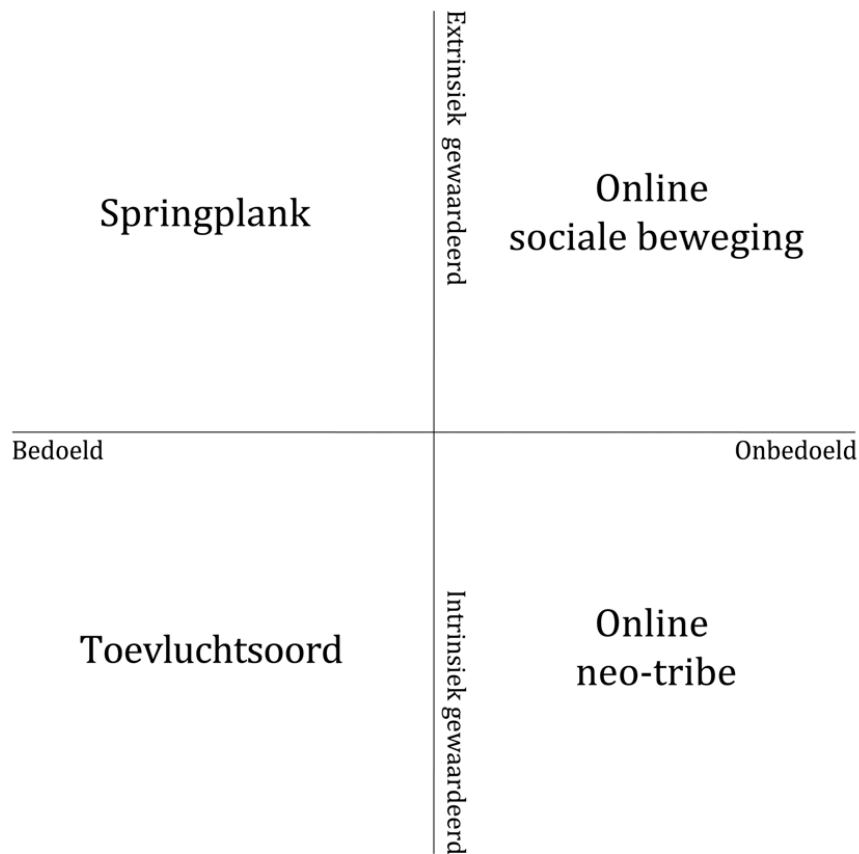
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op gedeelde identiteiten, maar de manier waarop de identiteit van de betrokken leden relevant is verschilt. Het toevluchtsoord en de springplank komen voort uit identiteitsvraagstukken die voorafgaand aan het forumlidmaatschap van de betrokkenen bestonden – de betrokken leden hebben deze typen virtueel samenzijn doelbewust tot stand gebracht. De online sociale beweging en de online neo-tribe zijn daarentegen ontstaan op basis van politieke ideeën en een levensstijl die pas op het forum sociaal gearticuleerd zijn – deze typen virtueel samenzijn zijn onbedoeld ontstaan tijdens de online participatie van hun leden.

Naast dit verschil tussen bedoelde en onbedoelde typen virtueel samenzijn is er een tweede dimensie waarop verschillen bestaan. Zowel de springplank als de online sociale beweging wordt extrinsiek gewaardeerd – deze typen virtueel samenzijn bieden de betrokkenen online middelen om doelen in het offline leven te verwezenlijken. Het toevluchtsoord en de online neo-tribe worden daarentegen juist intrinsiek gewaardeerd – in plaats van een middel tot een doel vormen zij voor hun leden doelen op zichzelf.

Het bovenstaande betekent dat de vier typen virtueel samenzijn kunnen worden geordend in een typologie zoals afgebeeld in figuur 2. In tegenstelling tot vigerende typologieën van virtuele gemeenschappen, die niet meer dan formele indelingen behelzen, is deze typologie empirisch gefundeerd en kunnen de mechanismen die aan elk type ten grondslag liggen worden geformuleerd als theoretische proposities. Deze zijn het beste ontwikkeld waar het gaat om de doelbewust gecreëerde typen. Mensen die in het offline sociale leven te maken hebben met stigmatisering van hun identiteit, beschouwen een forum geformeerd rond die identiteit waarschijnlijk als toevluchtsoord. En als mensen te maken hebben met reflexieve identiteitsvraagstukken, gebruiken zij een forum gerelateerd aan de identiteit waar ze vragen over hebben naar verwachting als springplank.

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Figuur 2: Typologie van virtueel samenzijn

De mechanismen aangaande de onbedoeld tot stand gekomen typen virtueel samenzijn kunnen ook worden gevat in theoretische proposities. Als mensen op een internetforum in aanraking komen met mensen die hun politieke onvrede of zorgen delen, is het waarschijnlijk dat er online een sociale beweging ontstaat. En als mensen op een internetforum in aanraking komen met mensen die hun levensstijl delen, is het waarschijnlijk dat er online een neo-tribe ontstaat. Deze laatste twee proposities zijn echter nog niet volledig ontwikkeld. Onderzoek met een etnografische invalshoek is nodig om inzicht te krijgen in de manier waarop een en ander precies gebeurt, en de omstandigheden waaronder dat waarschijnlijk is.

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Naast deze typologie en de bijbehorende mechanismen heeft het onderzoek meer algemene implicaties voor de discussie over virtuele gemeenschappen. Allereerst blijkt het problematisch dat internetonderzoekers zich eenzijdig hebben afgevraagd of groepen op het internet in het algemeen of op bepaalde fora in het bijzonder wel of niet gemeenschappen genoemd kunnen worden. Met een dergelijke benadering was het immers niet mogelijk geweest om verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn te onderscheiden, laat staan te begrijpen.

Daarnaast ondersteunen de resultaten bestaande kritieken op technologisch determinisme. Ze laten zien dat verschillende groepen leden verschillende betekenissen aan hetzelfde internetfora toedichten, hetgeen betekent dat technische eigenschappen van het internet in het algemeen of specifieke fora in het bijzonder niet bepalend zijn voor het soort virtueel samenzijn dat er ontstaat.

De bevinding dat het centrale thema van een forum niet voor alle leden hetzelfde betekent, en voor sommige groepen niet eens de belangrijkste reden voor hun participatie vormt, maakt bovendien duidelijk dat het niet zinvol is om *a priori* aan te nemen dat mensen op bepaalde internetfora actief zijn vanwege een vanzelfsprekende, gedeelde interesse in de centrale thematiek van die fora. In plaats daarvan moeten de beweegredenen van de betrokkenen actief worden onderzocht. Daarbij is het van groot belang om aandacht te besteden aan de offline contexten van online samenzijn. Dat de offline ervaringen van forumleden in de dominante onderzoekspraktijk worden veronachtzaamd is een belangrijke reden dat veel studies niet verder komen dan beschrijvingen en niets kunnen zeggen over de achtergronden of sociale implicaties van virtueel samenzijn.

Tot slot zijn de bevindingen van dit proefschrift relevant voor verschillende debatten in de internetstudies anders dan het debat over virtuele gemeenschappen in enge zin. Ook discussies over de vluchtigheid van online interacties, 'cyberbalkanisering' en het onderscheid tussen het online en het offline sociale leven zijn verzand in theoretisch onvruchtbare dichotomieën doordat de beweegredenen van de betrokkenen zijn veronachtzaamd.

Waar sommigen een beeld schetsen van langdurig virtueel samenzijn, suggereren veel andere wetenschappers juist dat sociale verbanden op het internet

Togetherness and identity on online forums

vluchtig zijn. Het voornaamste argument hiervoor is dat online groepen met een simpele muisklik verlaten kunnen worden. Dat het technisch eenvoudig is om uit een internetforum te stappen betekent echter niet dat mensen dat ook willen, en of dat het geval is verschilt tussen verschillende typen virtueel samenzijn. Als forumleden hun virtuele samenzijn intrinsiek waarderen zullen ze dit niet snel opgeven. Intrinsiek gewaardeerde typen zijn dus naar verwachting bestendig. Daarentegen is het waarschijnlijk dat extrinsiek gewaardeerde typen virtueel samenzijn na verloop van tijd verlaten worden, maar pas als de betrokkenen hun doelen hebben bereikt. En ook in dat geval moet de verklaring worden gezocht in de beweegredenen van de leden en niet in de technische eigenschappen van online fora.

De discussie over cyberbalkanisering draait om de vraag of mensen zich online terugtrekken in virtuele enclaves van gelijkgestemden. Dit zou waarschijnlijk zijn omdat het internet het mogelijk maakt om alleen om te gaan met mensen met dezelfde denkbeelden. Dat het mogelijk is om dat te doen betekent echter nog niet dat de betrokkenen dat ook willen. Ook in dit verband verschillen intrinsiek gewaardeerde typen virtueel samenzijn van hun extrinsiek gewaardeerde tegenhangers, wat opnieuw duidelijk maakt dat het onzinnig is om uitspraken te doen over het internet als geheel. Intrinsiek gewaardeerde typen virtueel samenzijn vereisen geen participatie van buitenstaanders, en deze vertonen dan ook kenmerken van cyberbalkanisering. Forumleden die betrokken zijn bij extrinsiek gewaardeerde typen virtueel samenzijn hebben echter vroeg of laat te maken met mensen die hun identiteit niet delen, en daarom staan ze niet afwijzend of zelfs ronduit positief tegenover de aanwezigheid van buitenstaanders.

Een laatste kwestie waarover uiteenlopende ideeën naar voren zijn gebracht is de relatie tussen het online en het offline sociale leven. Aanvankelijk werden online interacties benaderd alsof ze plaatsvonden in een andere wereld, los van offline sociale contexten. Dit idee is inmiddels uitgebreid bekritiseerd, en sommigen beweren nu zelfs dat het analytische onderscheid tussen online en offline moet worden opgegeven. In dit proefschrift wordt het van het grootste belang geacht om de relatie tussen online en offline ervaringen en betekenisverleningen te

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onderzoeken, maar dat betekent niet dat het onderscheid tussen het online en het offline sociale leven per definitie betekenisloos is. De vraag is juist of, en op welke manier, forumleden een dergelijk onderscheid maken. Er blijken drie verschillende opvattingen onderscheiden te kunnen worden. Omdat forumleden die betrokken zijn bij extrinsiek gewaardeerde typen virtueel samenzijn hun online participatie gebruiken om offline doelen te realiseren, maken zij een onderscheid tussen het online en offline sociale leven ten faveure van het laatste. In geval van intrinsiek gewaardeerde typen virtueel samenzijn ligt dit anders. Leden van de online neo-tribe zoeken zowel online als offline naar gezelligheid als doel op zichzelf, en voor hen heeft het online-offline onderscheid dan ook geen bijzondere betekenis. Mensen die online toevlucht zoeken om te ontsnappen aan offline stigmatisering hechten wel bijzondere waarde aan dit onderscheid: zij waarderen het online boven het offline sociale leven, en op het online forum keren ze zich zoveel mogelijk van hun offline leven af.



Curriculum Vitae

Willem de Koster (Delft, 1984) obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Sociology (both *cum laude*) at Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2005. Having completed his PhD thesis at the same university, he continues to work there as a cultural sociologist and a member of the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS).

In addition to his Internet research, results of which have been published elsewhere (De Koster and Houtman 2006, 2008; De Koster 2010), Willem has studied the genesis and manifestations of contemporary cultural conflict in Western countries. In collaboration with various colleagues, he has published on different forms of tolerance and their political implications (De Koster and Van der Waal 2006, 2007; De Koster et al. 2010), controversial cartoons (De Koster 2007), agony of choice (Van Doorn et al. 2007), the rise of the penal state (De Koster et al. 2008a, 2008b), the public role of religion (Achterberg et al. 2009a, 2009b; Roeland et al. 2010), welfare chauvinism (Manevska et al. 2010a, 2010b; Van der Waal et al. 2010), and anti-immigrant voting (Van der Waal et al. 2011).

In the years to come, Willem will continue his research in political sociology in the project *The Dutch Paradox of Tolerance: Post-Christian Cultural Polarization and PVV-Voting*, which was recently funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). In addition to his research activities, he teaches various courses in sociology and serves on the editorial board of the Dutch peer-reviewed journal *Sociologie*.

For more and up-to-date information on Willem's academic activities, please visit his website www.willemdekoster.nl.

