'Stormfront is Like a Second Home to Me'

On Virtual Community Formation by Right-Wing Extremists

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ABSTRACT

Although the subject of extreme right virtual community formation is often discussed, an online 'sense of community' among right-wing extremists has not been systematically analysed. It is argued that to study this phenomenon and to understand its backgrounds and function, the offline and online experiences and actions of those involved need to be taken into account. For this purpose, qualitative data has been collected on the web forum 'Stormfront', supplemented by extensive online interviews with eleven of its members. It is demonstrated that those experiencing stigmatisation in offline social life regard the forum as a virtual community that functions as an online refuge, whereas those who – due to special circumstances – do not experience offline stigmatisation do *not* display an online sense of community. It is concluded that offline stigmatisation underlies virtual community formation by Dutch right-wing extremists. Because this mechanism may have broader significance, additional hypotheses for future research are formulated.

Keywords: Internet Research, Virtual Community, Online-offline, Stigmatisation, Extreme Right

Online right-wing extremism

Academic interest in right-wing extremism on the Internet has increased strongly since roughly the year 2000. Its strong focus on the role of the Internet in disseminating right-wing extremism has yielded important insights into the ideological contents and structure of online networks (see Adams & Roscigno, 2005; Duffy, 2003; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Levin, 2002; Schafer, 2002; Tateo, 2005; Thiesmeyer, 1999; Whine, 2000). However, the social significance of online extremist forums for those actively involved is still far from clear, because researchers have so far hardly studied social interaction at extreme right Internet venues.

Although a number of studies suggest that right-wing extremists form online communities, this has not been studied systematically yet. In her analysis of the features of online neo-Nazi rhetoric Thiesmeyer (1999), for instance, puts forward that a sense of community is present among members of extreme right-wing websites. However, this is neither demonstrated nor analysed. The same holds true for Hara and Estrada's (2005) study of the characteristics of Stormfront, the most well-known extremist site (Burris et al., 2000; Reid & Chen, 2007). They too assume an online sense of community, but this is not studied: it is merely inferred from the presence of certain features of the website, such as 'imagery and icons' (2005: 508). 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. The only article claiming to really study extreme right-wing virtual community formation we know of (Thompson, 2001) relies on anecdotal and very indirect evidence –

again, the community label is merely applied by the researcher and a sense of community is not demonstrated.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that there has recently been a call for 'more systematic studies (…) to explore [extremist] groups' utilization of the web to form virtual communities' (Reid & Chen, 2007: 178). This 'fundamental question' (Reid & Chen, 2007: 178) has been open since it was put on the research agenda as 'a worthwile subject for further research' by Burris et al. quite some time ago (2000: 232). Since systematic studies on this subject have not been carried out yet, the existence, background, and function of online communities of right-wing extremists – the latter two vitally important from a theoretical point of view – remain obscure. Aiming to contribute to filling this void, we study virtual community formation on the Dutch section of the well-known extreme right web forum Stormfront. In order to develop a framework for such a research, we first give an overview of virtual community studies.

Research on virtual communities

Studying online sense of community

Online groups cannot be termed 'communities' just like that, because 'there are many aggregations of people that do not qualify as communities.' (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999: 241; cf. Fernback, 1999: 216, Papadakis, 2003: vii). Although 'community' is a hotly debated concept of which no universally agreed conceptualisation exists (cf. Driskell & Lyon, 2002; Komito, 1998; Yang, 2000), there seems to be agreement that 'commonality' lies at its core (Fernback, 1999: 204; Wilbur, 1997: 8). More specifically, it is widely held that members

of a community have a shared culture and display mutual commitment (see for instance Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999; Etzioni, 2004; Komito, 1998).

When it comes to the question of online community, claims thus cannot be made about the Internet as a whole, as the first wave of utopian and dystopian Internet studies of the 1990s did (see for an overview for example Wellman, 1997). This 'totalising' tendency has not completely disappeared since, as is indicated by studies that rely on a dichotomous distinction between 'real' and 'false' community to discuss whether virtual communities *in general* are 'true communities' (see for example Driskell & Lyon, 2002). Opposing this practice, Fernback has rightly argued it is more fruitful to pay attention to the meaning users attach to their online interactions than to ask in general terms 'whether or not cybercommunity is or isn't real community' (2007: 63, cf. Bakardjieva, 2005: 168-9). Because it is often used in a 'totalising' way, Fernback declares the concept of virtual community 'inadequate and inappropriate' (2007: 62), stating that scholars are 'burdened by the community label' (idem: 64). However, in the interpretive approach she herself advocates, it can be theoretically productive to find out under which circumstances people *experience* their online interactions as a community.

In an interpretive approach an 'aggregation only becomes a community if [the participants] perceive it to be so, and experience the spirit of community.'(Ward, 1999: 96) Thus, to meaningfully apply the community label members have to acknowledge its characteristics – they should recognise they have a shared culture and they should display mutual commitment. The same line of thought is followed by Blanchard and Markus (2004), who add that to warrant labelling an online group as a community such an 'experienced sense of community' should be supported by 'community behaviours', i.e.

offering support, practices of inclusion and exclusion, and social control (cf. Watson, 1997: 110).

From this line of reasoning it follows that analyses of hyperlinks between right-wing websites (see for instance Reid & Chen, 2007) are not suited to study online communities. Rather, attention should be paid to the experiences and actions of individual members at interactive web applications like discussion forums (cf. Burris et al., 2000: 232) – merely determining the *presence* of such interactive features irrespective of their use (see Reid & Chen, 2007) naturally does not suffice. An online sense of community and the associated actions could be inferred from the contents of these web venues. However, if contents of right-wing extremist websites are analysed, attention is usually paid to those created by the administrators of these sites (see Hara & Estrada, 2005; Reid & Chen, 2007; Thiesmeyer, 1999). This is hardly satisfactory for our purposes, as the communications of individual users are clearly of most importance for the study of an online sense of community. Of course, it would be ideal to combine content analysis of individual members' contributions with interviews. Ironically however, the only study we know of in which participants on right-wing extremist web forums are interviewed (Glaser et al., 2002) 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.

Offline backgrounds of online communities

From a theoretical point of view, it is obviously not so much important to *describe* whether a particular group qualifies as a community (e.g., Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Nieckarz,

2005; Roberts et al., 2002), but rather to *explain* or *understand* experiences of online community.

For this purpose 'it is vital we understand those physical-world needs fuelling online social relations' (Campbell, 2004: 192). To overcome a common problem in studies on social interactions on the Internet it is important 'to re-locate virtual culture in the real world' (Robins, 2000: 92), since 'nobody lives only in cyberspace' (Kendall, 1999: 70). All too often, attention to the motives and experiences of Internet users rooted in offline life is lacking (see for instance Baym, 1998). 'Most of the existing research (…) [has treated] online group phenomena in isolation from the actual daily life experiences of the subjects involved' (Bakardjieva, 2005: 167). Although it is frequently stressed that the interrelationship between online and offline phenomena should be taken into account, in common research practice this is hardly done (Hardey, 2002: 571; Nip, 2004: 409). This lack of attention for offline life is especially visible in the literature on online right-wing extremism, which is characterised by a strong bias toward the virtual: predominantly employing content and network analyses of websites, studies focus almost exclusively on online context. In this way, the social backgrounds and functions of potential virtual communities remain obscure, thus hampering the development of explanatory theory.

In short, there is a need for systematic empirical research taking the online and offline experiences and actions of those involved into account. Taking this need seriously, we start our study of the right-wing extremist web forum Stormfront with an overview of the identities presented online. Then we pay attention to participants' experiences in offline social life. Subsequently, their reasons for participation as well as their online experiences and actions are analysed in relation to those offline. In the final section we discuss our

findings and formulate hypotheses for further research. Before all this, we present our data and methods.

Data and methods

Stormfront

The Dutch branch of the international 'Stormfront White Nationalist Community' – referred to as 'Stormfront' for the sake of brevity – is the largest right-wing extremist Internet forum in the Netherlands.[1] Next to the forum members can exchange their opinions using Internet Relay Chat, but this option is hardly used. In order to become a member and be able to post to the forum, one has to register under a self-chosen username.

Apart from 'Stromfront Britain', the Dutch section is Stormfront's most intensively used branch. Since August 2001, when the message archive was lost due to the introduction of new software, approximately 19 thousand threads have been created, in which over 224 thousand messages have been posted. During the data collection for this article the number of users online was always high, averaging about one hundred. The lowest number of visitors we witnessed online is 56, the highest 268. Many participants have been members for several years and posted hundreds or even thousands of messages.

Qualitative content analysis

The first part of our research consists of an interpretative analysis (Hijmans, 1996) of the messages on the forum. We have selected messages by means of relevance sampling (Krippendorff, 2004), studying 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. We have translated all quotations below from Dutch.

Naturally, harm to individual users or the social group as a whole should be avoided if data are gathered at online forums (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; King, 1996). However, obtaining informed consent for the use of these data is under debate. Some argue that messages posted on an Internet forum are 'public acts deliberately intended for public consumption' (Paccagnella, 1997), whereas others find it difficult to determine whether communications on online forums are to be regarded as private or public (see Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

King (1996) distinguishes two aspects of online groups that are vital in determining the need for informed consent. The first is 'group accessibility', indicating '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. Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

The second aspect of importance is 'perceived privacy', denoting 'the degree to which group members perceive their messages to be private to that group' (King, 1996). Attention has to be paid to indications for perceived privacy in the content of the forum messages. Besides, the number of users of a forum is important: if 10 people use a forum, the perceived privacy, and therefore the need for informed consent, is higher than in the case of 100 users (Eysenbach & Till, 2001: 1104).

Stormfront is characterised by a high level of accessibility: the forum is well-known, the messages can be read by anyone – including non-members –, and are indexed by search engines like Google. The perceived privacy on the forum is very low: the users explicitly indicate 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. Therefore, we did not regard it necessary to obtain informed consent for the use of forum messages in our qualitative content analysis. Moreover, we consider replacing usernames with pseudonyms (see for example Carter, 2005; Kendall, 2002) neither necessary nor useful as all messages can be easily retrieved with the help of a search engine.

Synchronous online interviews

Contrary to common practice, our qualitative content analysis is supplemented with semi-structured interviews with members of Stormfront. During these interviews, respondents were encouraged to speak freely, while it was ascertained that the above-mentioned topics were addressed – we inquired after their ideology and identity, their related experiences and actions in offline life, their motives for their online participation, and – focussing on indications of a sense of community – the way they experience Stormfront. In order to recruit respondents, we posted a request at a prominent part of the forum after consulting one of the moderators.

Having overcome severe scepticism about our promise to safeguard their privacy, eleven members agreed to be interviewed online. These interviews have been conducted using software for synchronous communication, since this is most apt for non-standardised online interviews (cf. Wenjing, 2005). It is to be preferred above asynchronous

communication for methodological reasons, especially because asynchronous interviews tend to become structured around interviewer's questions and to become too formal (Hodkinson, 2000, cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000: 76-7).

A practical objection to online interviews is that people might give relatively short answers because typing takes much more effort than speaking. Besides, it can be difficult to respond to unforeseen turns in the interview (see for many examples Markham, 1998). Unsurprisingly, the experiences of other researchers using online methods are mixed (compare, for instance, those of Kivits, 2005 with Sanders, 2005). Because in our study all respondents cooperated greatly, these practical problems could be overcome and all of the themes mentioned above could be addressed extensively. The shortest interview lasted no less than almost two hours, while various respondents spent much more time during several sessions. Moreover, because respondents were reluctant to participate in this study at first, an important advantage of online interviews is that people tend to reveal more about themselves if they use computer-mediated-communication, especially when dealing with sensitive information (Joinson, 2005).

Seven of our eleven respondents are between sixteen and twenty years of age, two between twenty and thirty, and two older than thirty. Stormfront seems to be used mainly by men, but women participate on the forum as well. Nevertheless, all respondents are male. To protect the privacy of the respondents, we use fictitious names. In the analysis these names are distinguished from the usernames relating to data retrieved from the forum by italicising the latter.

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 moral guidelines for thinking, feeling, and acting, and the individualism and cultural disorder that arise from this condition. *Ridder in de Orde van Cicero* summarises the members' common view on the forum 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 & 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 characterisation 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 – it functions as a framework for thinking, feeling, and acting. 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 at other well-known right-wing forums. Stormfront is frequently characterised as a 'serious' forum that features profound discussions, whereas other popular 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 behaviour' (Herman). 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*', '*HHakenKKKruiSS*' (meaning '*Swastika*'), '*KaKaKa*' (a phonetic acronym of Ku Klux Klan), '*Moslimhater*' (meaning '*Hater of Muslims*'), and '*Zyklon_B*'. Others bear names provided with a numerical code – especially '88', which stands for 'Heil Hitler', is popular. Examples are '*88 remco 88*', '*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.' Figure 1 shows some examples.

[Insert figure 1 about here]

Many members also emphasise 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!!!'.

Now that it is clear that members of Stormfront are characterised by a deeply entrenched extreme right-wing ideology they propagate online, we discuss the participants' experiences relating to their extremist identity in offline social life.

Offline experiences: 'We are a threatened species, and the hunt is open'

Social rejection in various domains

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? (*EInherjar88(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 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*)

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. *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 less than eight of the eleven respondents experience negative reactions in their social surroundings. For four of those eight – Dirk, Ferdinand, Herman, and Ron – this is no reason to hide their deviant ideas. Dirk, for instance, says:

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.

Unlike Herman, Dirk, Ferdinand, and Ron, the anticipation of such negative reactions is a reason for Arjan, Barend, Joop, and Peter – the other four respondents who experience social resistance – 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:

> 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 get '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 contemporary 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.'

Stigmatisation and fatalism

Summing up the foregoing, eight out of the eleven interviewed members of Stormfront experience stigmatisation 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]), leading not only to 'felt stigma', but also to 'enacted stigma', which indicates status loss and discrimination because of 'negatively evaluated differences' (Green et al., 2005: 198, cf. Link & Phelan, 2001). Naturally, the latter only holds for the 'discredited', whose 'differentness is known about' (Goffman, 1986 [1963]: 4). The spoiled identity of the 'discreditable', on the other hand, is not known to others (*ibid.*). These members of Stormfront hide their stigma and try to 'pass' as 'normals' (Page, 1984: 20).

The experience of stigmatisation may create feelings of dissociation or disattachment, as Rotenstreich (1989) points out, and this is precisely what we find among these eight respondents. Some of them emphasise this vehemently, explaining that they feel attached to neither those with whom they deal on a personal basis, nor with 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 loathing for leftist treasonable people and I have no personal commitment to them.' (Herman)

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* 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

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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 the 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 – for instance, respondents 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, stigmatisation leading to dissociation and fatalism. Many members who experience stigmatisation have not only turned away from society at large, they also believe that little can be done to change the world according to their ideology. This being clear, we address the question how this relates to their online experiences below.

The role of Stormfront: 'A place where I have many comrades'

'A safe place to express your opinion'

The lack of freedom of expression experienced offline is a reason for their membership of

Stormfront for all eight respondents who experience stigmatisation. 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.' Since this is possible because of the

anonymity that is perceived on the Internet, the respondents who experience stigmatisation

declare without exception that they attach strongly to their online anonymity.[2] Therefore,

they warn one another all the time not to disclose too many personal details: '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*)

Stormfront as a community: sense of community and community behaviours

The freedom of expression they perceive online is not the only motive underlying the

participation of the members of Stormfront who experience stigmatisation – they have

urgent social reasons as well. First, they enjoy the 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 on Stormfront, because 'this is

not easy [offline].' Postings on the forum tell the same story. *Vlaming13* 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 stigmatised members feel at home on Stormfront and display clear feelings of belonging: '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 stigmatisation 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 stigmatisation 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 as its stigmatised members perceive it to be a community in many respects – a 'sense of community' (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; cf. Ward, 1999) is clearly present. The first dimension, comprising 'a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity' (Etzioni, 2004: 225, cf. Komito, 1998: 99), unmistakably exists on Stormfront: the members experiencing stigmatisation offline feel they 'understand each other well' (Bauman, 2001: 2) and are 'hardly ever puzzled or taken aback' (*ibid.*). The second dimension denotes 'communal solidarity' (Komito, 1998: 98) and 'affect-laden relationships' (Etzioni, 2004: 225). This is characterised by 'a feeling of connectedness that confers a sense of belonging' (Foster, 1997: 29, Kelemen & Smith, 2001: 372; McMillan & Chavis,1986; Nieckarz, 2005), clearly present among Stormfront's stigmatised members. And, in line with prevailing conceptualisations of community, members feel safe (Bauman, 2001: 2) and experience sociability (Wellman & Hampton, 1999: 648).

It is important to stress that the members who experience stigmatisation offline are strongly attached to the community function Stormfront fulfils, whether engaged in passing or not. Some of them reflect on this aspect of the forum 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 an online sense community is underlined by the 'community behaviours' (Blanchard & 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 stigmatisation acknowledge the existence of

such support, and they all appreciate it. Moreover, conformity to common rules (cf.

Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004: 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 the rules of the community. 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.'

These internal practices of control go hand in hand with inclusion and exclusion.

For instance, new members are included because 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 & Thompson, 1995) is reflected on Stormfront too. The departure of a

dedicated member evoked many 'sad' emoticons and expressions of grief. The member that

has left the forum was not only wished good luck – the loss for the community was stressed

as well: 'I and many others will miss you', 'come back!' (*Thulean Knight* and

DutchSkinNL). Exclusion of those labelled 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 the extreme

right ideology and leave the forum voluntarily provoke adverse reactions and are labelled traitors.

Having demonstrated that an online sense of community and the associated behaviours are present among Stormfront's stigmatised members, we now deal with the question which function this community fulfils.

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

For the greater part, the community exists exclusively online: many participants seem to be solely acquainted with one another through their online communications and have never met in person. Moreover, the contacts of those members who do meet offline are also largely online – they meet only occasionally offline, whereas they are active on Stormfront on a daily basis.

If members do meet offline, this generally takes place at so-called 'drinks'. 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 sub-section 'activism and politics', political action is not intended. The drinks are all about comradeship and sociability, and 'not in any way associated with an organisation 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 😀'. After such a gathering *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 organised in support of the virtual community on Stormfront, which seems to be of most 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*)

These social meetings, which are organised irregularly by individual members, are not the only offline activities discussed on the forum. Unsurprisingly, a major right-wing extremist forum like Stormfront is visited by people who are active in extreme-right political parties. Contrary to the greater part of Stormfront's members, their contributions focus on offline political actions. Threads on offline activism are generally started by people affiliated with political organisations, and they are by far the most active contributors to these discussions. These political activists seem to hold a marginal position on Stormfront. After demonstrations announced on Stormfront, activists 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 Stormfront members are reflected upon by activists. *Tatts32* 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 politician *Sander* states it: 'There are too many keyboard warriors who all think they know better, but stay home and do nothing.' In reaction to such remarks,

members clearly indicate they prefer to participate solely on 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 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 for the greater part of its members who experience offline stigmatisation, Stormfront 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 community online. Above, we have observed that offline experiences of stigmatisation fuel virtual community formation. To this we can add that this community does not primarily function as a basis for offline collective action: instead it is used as an online refuge by a large part of the members of Stormfront, which can be understood from their fatalistic worldviews. They are disattached from society at large, believing nothing can be done to their position, and in the virtual community 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 that are perceived as threats to the community: '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*)

Since the findings up to this point indicate that an important relationship exists between offline and online experiences, we discuss those members with different offline experiences below.

The significance of offline stigmatisation

Evert, Steve, and Wouter are the three respondents who do not experience stigmatisation in offline social life. 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, offline stigmatisation of his extreme right identity is no issue at all, because he associates, privately as well as professionally, mainly with like-minded people.

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

Unlike members who do experience stigmatisation offline, Evert, Steve, and Wouter do not conceive of Stormfront as a community and they do not display attachment to its

social and supportive role. Wouter says: 'No, I do not think it is cosy. (…) 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 characterises Stormfront as 'a database of knowledge' rather than as a community.

Because Evert, Wouter, and Steve do not experience offline stigmatisation, they do *not* experience Stormfront as a community. That they differ in this from the members who do experience offline stigmatisation, adds validity to the finding that extreme right virtual community formation can be understood as a reaction to stigmatisation in offline social life.

Conclusion and discussion

Stormfront is a stage for the display of extreme right identities. For many members, participation in Stormfront can be understood as a reaction to negative experiences because of a 'spoiled identity' – as a reaction to stigmatisation. This is in line with Ervin Goffman's (1986 [1963]) classical analysis, according to which the stigmatised seek moral support, acceptance, and comfort with people who share their stigma. Many members are active on Stormfront for this very reason: they consider themselves 'a threatened species' and experience Stormfront as a virtual community, which 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; Hardey, 2002: 571; Nip, 2004: 409), is also indicated by the online experiences of those who are not stigmatised offline: for them, Stormfront has no importance as a community. Naturally, these results are based on data with certain limitations – although we triangulated our interviews with a qualitative content analysis, their small number and the self-selection of respondents rule out definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that it can be theoretically fruitful to employ an interpretative approach to find out whether and *for what reasons* a particular forum has importance as a community *for certain people*.

The mechanism of offline stigmatisation leading to online community formation discussed here is an empirical corroboration of a suggestion made by other scholars. Although '[t]here is much anecdotal evidence that the Internet provides significant benefits to people with unusual identities or concerns' (DiMaggio et al., 2001: 318; see e.g. Bastani, 2000; Brouwer, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Mitra, 2006), this theoretically vital issue has hardly been studied systematically yet. Of course, the mechanism we encountered is but one of a wide range of imaginable linkages between offline and online life. Further theoretical contributions can be made by uncovering the mechanisms that lead to different outcomes (Papadakis, 2003: 45). These mechanisms can be revealed by studying various cases, since a case-based comparative strategy is best suited to develop theoretical generalisations on online social interactions (Pacagnella, 1997; cf. Orgad, 2006).

Although our finding that the Dutch branch of Stormfront provides the extreme right with a virtual shelter is probably typical for the Netherlands, which is after all one of the most culturally tolerant countries in the world (Duyvendak, 2004), this nevertheless suggests hypotheses for future research. Societies with less tolerant political cultures – in

Europe perhaps Italy with its legacy of fascism – are for instance less likely to encourage right-wing extremists to retreat into a virtual community. In contrast, it is likely that people with post-traditional identities – such as feminists or homosexuals – seek virtual refuge if they are situated in highly traditional contexts. Can the online experiences of homosexuals in Iran, a country notorious for its homophobia, for instance, be understood from offline stigmatisation as well? And do our findings also mean, then, that the increased framing in western countries of Islam as deeply problematic encourages virtual community formation by Muslims in these countries? Whereas Stormfront is obviously an extreme case, future research addressing questions such as these will have to decide whether the mechanism of virtual community formation uncovered here has broader significance.

Notes

[1] This forum is located at <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/forumdisplay.php?f=22>

[2] 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 stigmatised members of Stormfront, however, is that their offline identities remain unknown to others.

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Figure 1 Avatars used to express an extreme right identity online