Political Potential and Capabilities of Online Communities

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1 Introduction

What are the political potentials of online communities? To what extent do they want to exert a political influence? And in which ways are they able to promote their objectives? To answer these questions a profound definition of the term "online community" is necessary. Howard Rheingold was one of the earliest authors to write about virtual communities. In 1993, he coined the idea of such communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 2000). If one regards this as a definition, it poses serious problems on online community research. How many people are "enough"? How much time will be "long enough"? What does a "sufficient human feeling" mean? Therefore the following article will leave out the quality dimension of the relationships and pragmatically define online communities as social relations between two people or more who interact via the Internet for a period of time and more than once.

The relation between offline and online interactions among the participants may be of relevance for the strength of the community, but it should not be part of the definition because it usually cannot be conclusively assessed by online research. Hence, online communities as defined above are not necessarily limited to the Internet; actually they will mostly have hybrid structures. People may be in contact offline first and then form an

additional online community, or they may get to know each other online and meet in the physical world afterwards. The first type of online communities can be characterized as virtualized, the second as devirtualised. And it is also possible that the lot of people interacting offline and online are not identical, so that the hybrid structures indeed cover two communities with one of them being a subset of the other or the two of them having an intersection.

Apart from the online/offline-proportions, there are several other distinctions that can be used to further categorize online communities, i.e.:

- the way in which the community is built (evolving communities versus formal act of foundation);
- the way how to become a member (evolving versus formalized membership);
- the main Internet communication means the community applies (e.g. chat, forum, wiki, weblog, microblog);
- the central topics the community deals with;
- the social system the community belongs to (e.g. education, science, economics…)

Accordingly, political online communities can be structured and organized in very different manners. What they have in common is that they are influencing or willing to influence the functions of the political system, and that is the process of legislation and the definition of norms for society as a whole. The articulation and aggregation of interests, political support, but also political socialization and recruiting of political personnel are usually regarded as central input functions of the political system (Fuhse 2005). So these are exactly the dimensions that should be considered in analyzing political potentials and actions of online communities.

2   Ways of Action

Online communities can make use of the Internet both for their inner organization and for interactions with the

outside world, and the multiple ways of action may be used in a politically relevant manner. The members may discuss and specify central objectives of the community in chats or forums. They may also vote on their leaders in e-votings. Passive members and new supporters can be mobilized via mailinglists and newsletters describing current events and future aims and asking for financial or active support. In order to address unknown people as personally as possible, e-mail-chain-letters can be used, because they are usually forwarded between mates and friends (Hauser 2001). The public can be informed by an interesting website which summarizes relevant information. This can be done in a fancy way when a fake-site parodies a well-known official website by imitating its design but filling it with completely different contents (Becker et al. 2002: 96-97). Online polling can be integrated to find out about opinions and use the results as arguments in campaigns. Important additional background information can be arranged in a wiki, whereas a weblog or a microblog is well-suited to go along with a campaign and report about current events, actions and success stories in a chronological order.

Table 1:   Ways of action for online communities

Presentation	Discussion	Influence
website	e-mail	e-mail to political deciders
newsletter	mailinglist	
webring	newsgroup	e-mail-chain-letter
(partly) weblog	forum	
(partly) micro-blog	chat	e-mail-flooding
(partly) wiki	(partly) weblog	online fundraising
	(partly) micro-blog	online polling
	(partly) wiki	online petition
		netstrike/denial-of-service-attack

Source: author's own illustration.

If the community wants to demonstrate support for other people's campaign, it can publish texts about this on their homepage, link to the others' websites, join a webring with these sites or share a common logo with them. Campaigning actions can then take place online or offline and often the two spheres are combined. The community can also decide to initiate or sign an online petition, but this means is usually only promising if online petitions are officially admitted in a political system, as they are in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag 2008). The members can also agree that each of them will send an e-mail to a certain politician. This way the protest becomes more impressive and is more difficult to ignore. If e-mail-flooding is successful, the receiving office sometimes needs a serious amount of time to filter the e-mails and find those that are not part of the campaign and need to be answered (Becker et al. 2002: 97). Another way of action is asking one's supporters to visit an opponent's disliked homepage at a well-defined point in time or writing a computer program to simulate this. This is called a netstrike or a denial-of-service-attack, because it can make the server crash so that the site will not be available for some time. But the participants may become criminally liable that way, and that is why many communities object to these methods (Medosch 2003: 261-262, Kuhn 2006: 83).

In addition to all that, it is possible to mobilize supporters via the Internet for offline actions such as information stands, collections of signatures, demonstrations or flash mobs. Flash mobs are very short meetings of participants who need not necessarily know each other but who come together in the public sphere for a few minutes to do something that has been announced online. Additional offline coordination can be done via mobile phones. At the beginning, flash mobs were only used for funny and absurd actions, but by now they have also been used in political contexts (Hartmann 2003: 122, Rheingold 2003, Sixtus 2003, Heise Online 2009).

3 International Experiences

Literature on political online communities presents several examples of successful online actions. For instance, when nuclear bombs were being tested on the Mururoa Atoll in 1995, a group called StranoNet from Florence used mailing lists and newsgroups to call people up on a netstrike against a website of the French government that was responsible for the testing. It is not certain how many people finally participated in that strike, but StranoNet celebrated it as a success (Siedschlag/Rogg/ Welzel 2002: 91, Medosch 2003: 262-263). A few weeks later, the community organized a second netstrike against the suppression of Chiapas Indians (Zapatistas) in Mexico. This time, it added an online instruction how to organize a netstrike, because it wanted to encourage imitators. In addition to that, it combined the online protests with traditional offline demonstrations (Medosch 2003: 266-268).

One association that is often mentioned in contexts of political online action is the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a non-profit organization that has been defending legal rights in the digital world since 1990. In 1996, it protested against the US Communication Decency Act, by publishing the text of the law and additional information about censorship and freedom of speech on its homepage and asking its supporters to link to the page and put the sign of a blue ribbon on their websites. Soon, hundreds of thousands of websites all over the world showed the blue ribbon. As a consequence, the American Supreme Court finally repealed the questioned law as unconstitutional (Bieber 1999: 167-169, Becker et al. 2002: 94-96, Kamps 2007: 240). The EFF and its blue ribbon campaign are still working today for the legal rights of bloggers and citizen journalists (EFF 2008).

Further famous protests were accomplished by hybrid community networks of globalization critics during the meetings of the WTO in Seattle in 1999, of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in

Washington in 2000 and during the meeting of the G8 Heads of State and Government in Genua in 2001. By establishing indymedia portals as information platforms on the Internet, the participants created a counter public sphere (Geiger 2006: 38, Wimmer 2008: 218-219).

Online protests reached a climax with the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003. In March, a call for action on the Spanish website noalaguerra.com led to an e-mail-flooding and to a consecutive breakdown of servers of the governing party in Spain which supported the war (n-tv 2003). At the same time e-mail-chain-letters began collecting virtual signatures as a sign of protest that should be handed on to the United Nations. And on February 15th 2003, the Internet platform MoveOn.org organized a virtual march on the American Congress which blocked telephone wires and fax machines of deputies for hours. In addition, the community did on-line-fundraising to collect money for anti-war adver-tisements in newspapers (Kreutz 2003: 49, Kuhn 2006: 84).

MoveOn.org "Democracy in action" is a family of organizations that consists of the two separate branches "political action" and "civic action". It was founded in 1998 and its first major action was an online petition titled "Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation", which was meant to remind politicians that there were more important things than impeaching Bill Clinton in the context of the Le-winsky affair. Today, MoveOn.org has more than 3.2 million members across America, continues online fun-draising activities and initiates campaigns concerning issues such as climate change, health care programs, elections or the genocide in Darfur (MoveOn.org 2008 and 2009).

Political online communities supporting certain candidates also often attain a special role in election campaigns. In 2000, an umbrella organization called "Chongseon simin yeondae" (citizens' solidarity con-cerning the parliamentary election) was formed by 412 organizations of South Korea that had already been ac-

tive offline for some time. They put a "black list" online containing 86 names of parliamentary candidates who they blamed for opportunistic actions, corruption and incompetence. During the next three months before the election, 910,000 visitors visited the website, and 59 of the listed candidates finally did not get elected. And in 2002 Internet communities supported Roh Moo Hyon's running for presidency, and he was the first candidate who ever won against the opinions presented in the large traditional newspapers. When he was impeached two years later, about 450 000 people participated in online protests. Three offline demonstrations within three weeks were organized online and attracted at first 15 000, then 100 000 and finally more than 200 000 citizens (Lee 2005: 53-63).

In the US the presidential election campaign of Howard Dean "launched the Internet era in American politics" in 2003 (McKibben 2006: 4). Dean's young campaigning team started the weblog Deanforamerica.com to present current news. In addition, the site Meetup.com, which was not meant to be political, was used to organize monthly meetings of voluntary supporters offline. The Dean campaign was particularly successful in online fundraising and raised large amounts of money by receiving only small single donations from numerous citizens.

Online campaigning was further brought to perfection by Barack Obama five years later. His site www.barackobama.com supported online fundraising breaking all records (BBC 2009) and functioned as a portal to candidate news in multiple online applications and communities including YouTube, Facebook and a microblog on Twitter (http://twitter.com/barackobama).

Most of the podcasts and videos shared in the online community YouTube do not have a political content. But during the presidential pre-election campaign in 2007 a new political star was born: Billiam the YouTube-Snowman. The video of Billiam showed a snowman who asked the possible democratic candidates what they would do reduce global warming so that his son

could have a full and happy life. CNN presented the video to the candidates and discussed the question with them.[1] The Time Magazine then honored Billiam as one of the "people who mattered 2007", alongside with persons like Britney Spears, Nikolas Sarkozy, Obama and Clinton, Rupert Murdoch, Angela Merkel, and the Burmese Monks (von Drehle 2007).

In spring 2008, the question was raised if there was a Facebook-revolution going on in Egypt. A group of citizens had repeatedly used the famous community pages to call out on general strikes as a form of protest against corruption and a demonstration for higher salaries and better price controls, especially for food. Riots took place, the police intervened, and hundreds of people were injured or even killed. The police arrested the founder of the Facebook group which promoted the protest as well as several bloggers and activists. But the problems did not stop. Hence, on May 1st, President Mubarak announced that the wages would rise by 30 per cent, prices would be controlled more strictly and corruption would be reduced. But in addition to that, the officials also expanded the surveillance of communication via Internet and mobile phones (Rötzer 2008).

The blogosphere can be regarded as a special group of online communities which have celebrities of their own. Sometimes bloggers may not aim at being politically influential. But in times of catastrophes and wars, they must be especially aware that their texts might be read and spread within minutes and become a crucial information source for people in foreign countries. One example in this context is the warblog "Dear Read" which covered the situation before and during the first months of the Iraq war. The texts were later published as a book, and the blogger, a man with the pseudonym "Salam Pax" (that is the word for "peace" in Arabic and Latin), became a columnist for the British newspaper "The Guardian" (Pax 2003, Möller 2006: 131).

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1 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0BPnnvI47Q and www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArhGkNs5uAI

4 Relevance of Political Online Communities in Germany

4.1 Internet Use in Germany

In order to determine the relevance of political online communities, one should also consider general data about Internet use. According to EUROSTAT, about 72 percent of the German population aged 16 years or more uses the Internet at least once in three months. This is above European average, but less than in Scandinavian countries (Norway: 85%) and in the US (79%, see Initiative D21 e.V. 2008: 66-67). More detailed data is available in two recent studies on Internet use in Germany, namely the latest edition of the "(N)Onliner Atlas" and the "ARD/ ZDF-Onlinestudie".

The "(N)Onliner Atlas", edited by Initiative D21, has been published annually since 2001. It is based on a survey among residents in Germany who are 14 years or older. 52 503 interviews were completed by phone between February 22nd and May 14th 2008. The study distinguishes people who have been using the Internet during the last three month (onliners) from non-users (non-liners) and those who are planning to start using the Internet (planners). Each status is related to sociodemographic criteria then. The main results in 2008 are: The percentage of Internet users in Germany is still rising. There are 42.2 million onliners today, which equals about two thirds (65.1%) of the total population. But some segments of the population do not participate equally in Internet use. For example, it is still more men than women who are using the Internet, more young than elderly people, more persons with a higher education, more employees than unemployed persons and more people in the Western parts of Germany than in the Eastern parts. Additionally, in comparison to 2007, the gender and the regional gap even seem to slightly widen (Initative D21 e.V. 2008). Similar results are presented by the "ARD/ZDF-Online-Studie", a survey among 1 802 adults in Germany that was done in March

and April 2008. The study showed that 42.7 million of the people in Germany who are older than 13 years are at least casual Internet users (65.8%). The largest growth rate is among the so-called "silver surfers": 29.2 percent of the 60- to 79-year-old people are Internet users today (Eimeren/Frees 2008: 332).

Table 2:   Internet Use in Germany (Age 14 Years or Older)

	(N)Onliner Atlas		ARD/ZDF-Online-Study	
	2007	2008	2007	2008
Onliners in million	39.2	42.2	40.8	42.7
Onliners in %	60.2%	65.1%	62.7%	65.8%
Male	67.1%	72.4%	68.9%	72.4%
Female	53.8%	58.3%	56.9%	59.6%
Age 14-19	89.4%	93.7%	95.8%	97.2%
Age 20-29	87.2%	89.9%	94.3%	94.8%
Age 30-39	82.2%	85.4%	81.9%	87.9%
Age 40-49	72.6%	78.2%	73.8%	77.3%
Age 50-59	58.3%	63.5%	64.2%	65.7%
Age 60+	24.8%	29.0%	25.1%	26.4%

Source: TNS infratest/Initiative D21 e.V. 2007, Initiative D 21 e.V. 2008, Eimeren/Frees 2008. The values presented by the ARD/ZDF-Media-Commission are usually slightly higher as they ask for "casual Internet use" whereas the Internet use had to be during the last three months for the "(N)Onliner Atlas".

A third study called "Deutschland Online 2007" is in part based on interviews with 142 experts of digital life-style. These experts point out that social web and online communities are gaining importance for both business and private life in Germany. And at least one fourth of them are convinced that it will be possible to foster political participation via online interactions between citizens and politicians or state institutions (Deutsche Telekom 2008: 31, 35, 42-43). Accordingly, the ARD/ZDF-online-study (2008) found that 49 percent of the users age 14-29 visit online communities and private networks at least once a week (Fisch/Gscheidle 2008: 359).

Wrapping it up, the data show clear gaps in German Internet use, and the proportion of women and elderly people on the Net is still comparatively low. This leads

to the question whose ideas and interests are represented online. It need not necessarily mean that some segments of the population are disregarded. After all, the German Bundestag is not representative for the German population in its composition, either. But the delegates have a political mandate that they achieved during the elections, whereas online activists have nothing to care for except their own desires.

4.2 Success Stories of the Past

Literature on political online communities predominantly focuses on international success stories, so usually only a few German examples are mentioned. The Internet first became an integral part of campaigns during the students' strike in the winter semester of 97/98. Students linked their websites, documented events there, announced new activities and coordinated them via mailing lists. They published ready-made letters of complaint online and asked their fellow students to mail them to policy-makers. In addition to that, many participants put the "lucky strike"-logo on their pages to demonstrate their support for the claims (Bieber 1999: 174-178, Kamps 2007: 341-342).

The first netstrike in Germany was part of the campaign "Kein Mensch ist illegal" (No Human Being is illegal). The "DeportationClass" called it out against the German Lufthansa on the date of its stockholders' meeting on June 20th 2001, because the company carried out deportations on scheduled flights. In 1999 the German border police had forced the Sudanese Aamir Ageeb into such an unnatural posture that he had finally suffocated and died. During the strike 13 000 computers caused more than 1.2 million hits on the Lufthansa server, and both newspapers and television reported on that (Leggewie/Bieber 2001: 41-42, Siedschlag/Rogg/ Welzel 2002: 93, Medosch 2003: 292-297, Kuhn 2006: 83).

In 2005 the German blogosphere reacted to the political public relations campaign "Du bist Deutschland" (you are Germany). Small blogs circulated a photo taken from a book of the city of Ludwigshafen that showed a demonstration of national socialists in 1935 and with it a banner saying "Denn Du bist Deutschland". Then the larger weblog Spreeblick reported on that and Spiegel-Online and Zeit.de got alert. So when the story in the end reached a broad public, many historians were already prepared to discuss the issue (Möller 2006: 130, Schmidt 2006: 133, Szugat/Gewehr/Lochmann 2006: 33).

4.3 Online Communities of the Present

Concerning activities of online communities, the 25th w3b-survey (Fittkau & Maaß 2007) provides us with relevant data. The study points out that 26 percent of all German-speaking Internet users visit a social network portal at least once a week. StudiVZ, the online community for students similar to the US-applications MySpace and Facebook, is visited by one third of the users and is so the most famous. It is followed by Xing, the social network for job contacts, which every fifth of the users had a look at weekly. Applications like these do not focus on political action. But in the election campaigns in Hesse 2008/2009, SPD-candidate Thorsten Schäfer-Gümbel tried to learn from the American example of Barack Obama, had a profile on Facebook and was active on Twitter. It was a premiere to German politics, when he was even interviewed via Twitter by the famous German blogger Robert Basic (Basic 2009). Nevertheless, he has not won the elections.

German performance on webrings is very poor. At webring.com, the world's largest webring portal, located in the US and consisting of more than 40 000 online communities (WebRing Inc 2009), only 16 German webrings consisting of about 266 websites can be found in the category "home > regional > countries > Germa-

ny" (June 14th 2009). None of them deals with current politics; one of them covers historical knowledge and GDR nostalgia. If one takes the virtual path "home > government & politics > by country or region > countries > Germany > politics" one additional webring about the Berlin Wall is shown. Meanwhile Webring.de, the German counterpart to webring.com, has been offline for more than two years now.

However, German-speaking people are quite active in wikis. The German version of Wikipedia is the second largest in the world, and additional versions in "Plattdüütsch" (Low Saxon), "Alemannisch" (Alemannic) and "Boarisch" (Bavarian) exist. However, Wikipedia is meant to be an encyclopedia and no political platform. Coherently, the official policy reads

> "Wikipedia is not a soapbox, a battleground, or a vehicle for propaganda and advertising. This applies to articles, categories, templates, talk page discussions, and user pages. Therefore, all content hosted in Wikipedia is not:
> 1) Propaganda, advocacy, or recruitment of any kind, commercial, political, religious, or otherwise. […]
> 2) Opinion pieces. […]" (Wikimedia Foundation 2009).

Nevertheless, people have been trying to use Wikipedia as a political instrument by manipulating the vita of politicians, especially during election campaigns. In 2005, when Jürgen Rüttgers was running for prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Wikipedia article on him intermittently changed in a minute cycle, thereby sharpening or watering down his statements on religious issues (Jutzi 2005: 92). Furthermore, Wikipedia articles on hot topics such as global warming or tuition fees have been repeatedly re-edited within a short time. In this context, parts of the Liberal Party's manifesto had been copied into an article on deregulation and bureaucracy dismantling (Herwig 2007: 141). Usually, the Wikipedia community detects such manipulations

quickly and replaces the text with the earlier version as soon as possible.

All the same, the accusation of politically relevant partisanship recurs from time to time, particularly in the context of edit wars, when two authors rewrite an article in turns to insert their positive or negative opinion of the topic until an administrator of Wikipedia intervenes. But in July 2008, the situation between advocates of nuclear power and anti-nuclear activists was a little different so that even traditional media got interested: The BUND, an environment protection organization, had added links anti-nuclear power pages to Wikipedia again and again, but they always had been deleted promptly, whereas links to nuclear industry pages remained. Even more, Wikipedia had put the BUND from Freiburg on its blacklist of institutions which cannot be linked to anymore because they have violated community rules, in this case spammed the online encyclopedia. When the "Badische Zeitung" reported on this incident, it mentioned that the BUND had charged a young man doing social service instead of military service with working on the links. Then Wikipedia made a complaint to the "Bundesamt für Zivildienst" (Federal Office for Civil Service) in order to get this wastefulness of taxpayers' money punished. Hence, the BUND assumed that the nuclear industry had infiltrated Wikipedia, whereas Wikipedia denied this. But the section "Nutzen der Kernenergie" (benefits of nuclear power) of the "Kerntechnische Gesellschaft" (Nuclear Association), a leading pressure group of nuclear power, discussed the topic "Wikipedia. Public relations and work at schools" on a conference meeting in Merseburg in April 2007 and published a protocol of another meeting in September which states that numerous members of the section are active authors and correctors at Wikipedia (KTG-Fachgruppe "Nutzen der Kernenergie" 2007 a and b). Heute.de, the online version of a television news program in Germany, informed its audience (ZDF 2008), and so the news spread (Diehl 2008).

There are other wikis that are willingly more political than the famous encyclopedia. Jimmy Wales, initiator of Wikipedia, also founded Wikicities.com in autumn 2004 and transferred this group of wikis to wikia.com in March 2006. In August 2008, wikia.com supported over 6 000 communities in more than 70 languages (Wikia Inc 2008a). There was a category called "politics" linked to the subcategories "activism", "campaigns", "candidates" and "conspiracy" and such comprising 147 wikia-communities, eight of them in German. At the same time, the German offspring launched on wikia.de listed about 500 German wiki-projects, twelve of them categorized as political (Wikia Inc 2008b). Later, wikia.de discontinued categorizing wikis.

Within the group of political wikia-wikis, Jimmy Wales also founded special campaigns wikis. The American campaigns wiki gathers information about election campaigns and candidates from all over the world (Wikia Inc 2009a), whereas the German Kampagnen-Wikia applies a broader meaning of the word which is not limited to elections. Instead, the campaigns deal with issues such as basic income, privatizations, energy sources or public finance. There are also a few international campaigns concerning software patents, the human rights situation in China and Tibet and the global finance and economy crisis. Many of the campaigns are limited to presenting pros and cons, others include protest letters, petitions, offline action or refer to other organizations, like for example Amnesty International (Wikia Inc 2009b).

In addition to wikis, the community of the blogosphere can be regarded as an essential part of the web 2.0. The famous blog search engine Technorati provides users with the information that it indexed 133 million blog records between 2002 and 2008 and that in 2008, 7.4 million blogs posted within the last three month, and 900 000 blog posts were realized within 24 hours (Technorati 2009). There are no similarly specific data about the German blogosphere. It is estimated that there were about one million German blogs in August 2008,

but that not all of them were active. In December 2008, according to Blogcensus about 125 000 German blogs had had postings during the last two month and about 200 000 blogs during the last six month (Schmidt/Frees/Fisch 2009: 51).

In autumn 2007, the w3b-survey showed that more than three fourth of the German-speaking Internet users knew weblogs and more than one fourth visited a weblog at least once in a quarter. The weblog visitors seemed to form a special group, because the proportion of men, of people younger than 30 years and of pupils and students was above the average of onliners (Fittkau & Maaß 2007). The data presented by the ARD/ZDF-online-study are much lower: Here, only 24 percent of the onliners knew weblogs and only six per cent used them at least rarely. Of these people, 61 percent only read posts, whereas 39 percent commented on them or even had a weblog of their own (Fisch/Gscheidle 2008: 358).

The enormous difference between the two results is difficult to explain. It seems to be related to the research method, because the ARD/ZDF-online-study uses interviews by phone whereas the w3b-survey takes place online and such relies only on people who are especially attracted to the Internet. But one aspect that has been pointed out by several studies is that the German blogosphere is less developed than the one in the US, Japan and other European countries (Neuberger/Nuernbergk/ Rischke 2007: 97-102). This refers also to its political degree. A study comparing the political awareness within the American and German blogosphere came to the result that none of the analyzed political topics was addressed in more than half a per cent of the German blogs whereas political topics in the US-blogs reached a percentage more than ten times as high (Berendt/Schlegel/Koch 2008: 85). Nevertheless, there is a considerable mass of political weblogs in Germany as well (In der Smitten 2007: 255-262). And some bloggers and blogs have become popular to a degree that can ascertain the attention of a broader public if they

discuss political issues, which they sometimes do. Examples are Spreeblick, law blog, basic thinking, netzpolitik or stefan-niggemeier (Holler/Vollnhals/Faas 2008: 97, 100, Schröder 2009).

There are additional political online communities in Germany that are neither focused on a wiki nor on a blog nor on a community portal comparable to Facebook. Probably the most famous one is Campact.de. It was founded in 2004, following the American example of MoveOn.org. The name refers to the words "campaign" and "action", and the organization aims at fostering political participation via e-mail, letters, fax machine and phone in addition to different offline actions. 130 542 people are part of the network today, about a dozen people are part of the staff, and there is an additional circle of mainly political scientists, economists and sociologists who function as advisors (Campact 2009b). Campact's first campaign was to write letters to deputies demanding a plebiscite on the European Constitution. A second highlight in 2005 was an online-demonstration where 4 800 people from all over Europe uploaded photographs of themselves that were combined to the slogan "No epatents". That picture was later printed onto a banner so that it could be used in an offline demonstration outside the European Parliament. Inside, the delegates decided against the new directive on patents (Campact 2006). One major success was in autumn 2006, when thousands of Campact-activists sent e-cards to the Commerzbank, HypoVereins- and Deutsche Bank to protest against their granting credits for two nuclear reactors in Bulgaria. In 60 cities people also prepared for demonstrations in front of bank branches. Three days before the action week was to begin, the banks disclaimed the credits (Campact 2007). Currently, Campact is leading campaigns against nuclear energy and genetically manipulated corn (Campact 2009a).

5 Access to the Political System

As explained in section 2, there are several ways of action that political online communities can take. But even e-mail-flooding, for example, does not guarantee that one of the e-mails is really read. Hence, protest might get lost in cyberspace (Plake/Jansen/Schumacher 2001: 86). This section will examine important restrictions and chances more closely.

5.1 Limiting Factors

Some political online communities weaken themselves by not clearly defining their political objectives. That way, the ends often run out in discussing topics and have no clear direction of impact. But even if the members agree upon their objectives and ways of action, their access to the political system is limited:

In dictatorships and non-plural societies group interests are basically unwanted and may even be seen by the rulers as a danger to their monopolies of power. China is one example of a state that is often mentioned when it comes to arresting bloggers and Internet activists (Reporters without Borders 2009: 7).

In states with strong corporatist structures group interests are acknowledged. But there are only a few clearly defined groups that get the access and are allowed to take part in formal negotiations. That way, the system shows a closing tendency towards newcomers.

In pluralism, finally, group interests are welcome. This usually leads to a situation where there are so many players that one cannot watch them and listen to them all. The pluralistic sphere of the Internet seems especially confusing in this context. Politicians have by now become used to applying the Internet in their public relations and campaigns. But in everyday contexts they can easily avoid online contacts with grassroot activists. They usually prefer relying on traditional media, public-opinion polls and well-established pressure

groups to tell them about citizens' current problems and views. This is especially true in Germany with its well-defined number of high-quality newspapers and news magazines and its strong employers' federations and labor unions. In addition to that, laws like the German "Parteiengesetz" and the "Vereinsrecht" (laws concerning political parties and associations) ensure a minimum of democratic inner structure for political offline communities. But there is no equivalent for the online sphere. Therefore the quality of the decision-making and policy-formation of online communities remains dubious, and this can be used as a justification not to take them too serious within the political discourse. In sum, the predominant effect of political action of online communities is the arousal of public attention as a sign of successful articulation of interests, but even this is often hard to achieve.

5.2 Strengthening Conditions

The fact that online communities seem too fragmented to hand on issues and opinions to political decision-makers is no new phenomenon. In 2002 the political economist Hans-Georg Wels put it that way: "Was in einem Lokalblatt steht, bleibt für die massenmediale Öffentlichkeit genauso verborgen wie eine Homepage, die keiner beachtet – es sei denn, ein landesweit rezipiertes Medium, sei es nun ein Print- oder ein Online-Erzeugnis, greift das Thema auf und erzeugt so die notwendige Öffentlichkeit" (Wels 2002: 6).[2] This is a draft that there might be strengthening conditions for online communities to reach public attention and political weight.

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[2] What's published in a local paper is concealed from the general public like a web page that no one pays attention to – unless it is also covered by nationwide print or online media which consequently creates the necessary publicity (translation S.I.d.S.).

Figure 1: How Online Communities Can Reach Political Decision Makers
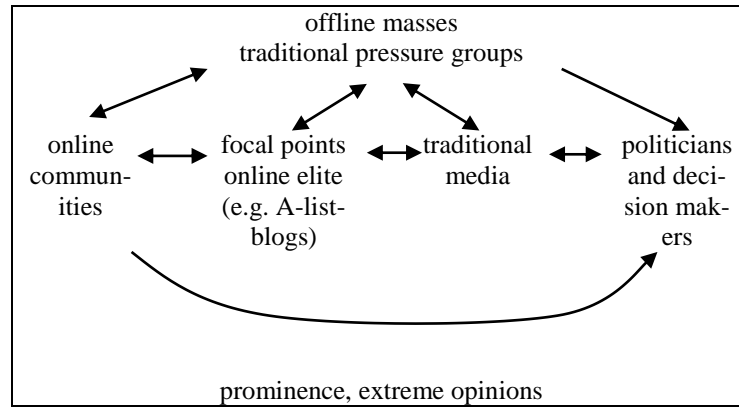
Source: author's own illustration.

Certainly the most important strengthening condition is the attention of traditional media. One idea is that some kind of online elite might develop and that journalists might rely on this elite in their reports of the online sphere. The contact could take place at focal points on the Internet, i.e. especially popular portals and frequently-linked weblogs, the so-called A-blogs that might be used for journalistic research. Unfortunately, studies give hints that this concept does not work in Germany yet: There are only very few A-blogs and some of them have hardly any outgoing links, so that they are integrated into the blogosphere only one-sidedly. In addition to that, less than half of the German journalists read weblogs, and even fewer use them for professional research (Holler/Vollnhals/Faas 2008).

Therefore political online communities cannot rely on virtual focal points but are well advised to address offline media directly. This can be done by operating with traditional news values, because they are decisive selection criteria. Against this background, topics that are currently on the agenda anyway, extreme positions, prominent supporters and offline masses can be very helpful to attract the attention of journalists. In the cases of extreme positions and prominent reputation, a direct access to politicians seems possible sometimes. Never-
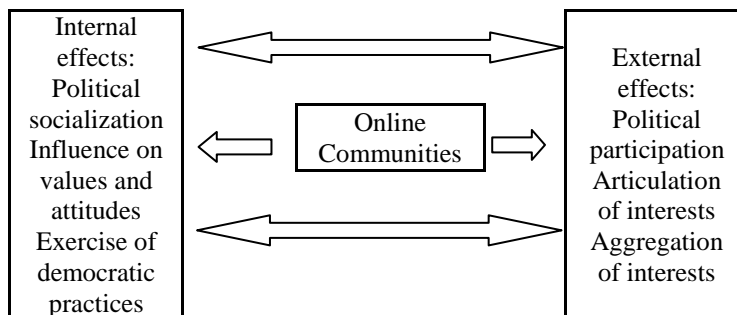
theless claims of extremist groups will usually not be fulfilled, but politicians will think about ways to destroy the group structures instead.

Apart from the pursuit of media access, online communities can also cooperate with traditional pressure groups. That way they may benefit from the pressure groups' contacts and experiences and get help in organizing offline events.

5.3 Indirect Long-Term Effects

As pointed out in section 1, political socialization and the recruiting of political personnel are important input functions of the political system, too. This leads to the thought that online communities might not only have external but also internal political effects that they might form political attitudes of their members and function as a kind of school for democracy.

Figure 2: Internal and External Effects of Online Communities

Internal effects: Political socialization Influence on values and attitudes Exercise of democratic practices	Online Communities	External effects: Political participation Articulation of interests Aggregation of interests

Source: author's own illustration.

But democracy can only be learnt if there is democracy within the association. As mentioned above, no legal provisions ensure democratic structures of online communities. And if one has a look at famous American online communities, one finds strong positions of administrators, Jimmy Wales presented as a "benevolent dictator" of Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation 2008), and a majority of political webrings where members have no influence at all, where they neither vote on their

ringmaster nor on the ring policy (In der Smitten 2007: 186-188).

Nevertheless, there are seeds of hope: Dol2day, the German community "Democracy Online Today", has been in existence since 2000. Its more than 10 000 members do not only discuss political issues, they simulate a political system: They found political parties and initiatives and arrange different ballots. Every four month a new chancellor is elected as a leader of an online government. It is also possible to initiate doliscites, a kind of plebiscite, to change community rules (Dol2day 2008a and b). There are no research findings yet if and in which way a dol2day membership forms political attitudes and whether there are consequences for offline political actions such as participation in demonstrations or voting behavior.

The state of Iran may function as a second example. It had already about 70 000 weblogs in 2005, today the numbers are projected at 400 000 (Schmidt 2006: 131, Michaelsen 2009). And it was foremost young people, both men and women, who met and discussed online about news, politics and human rights, forbidden films and books, and their hope for a revolution that will bring about more freedom (Alavi 2005, Aminpur 2006). Meanwhile, self-censorship, especially on political issues, has increased during the presidency of Ahmadinejad (Alavi 2009). Nevertheless, Iran still holds a vivid blogosphere, and it remains an open question whether the online interactions can help to develop new gender concepts and will one day have consequences for the role of women within the Muslim society. The problem for research in this context is that such indirect effects of online communities may take decades to appear and that it will be very difficult to show the connectivity between online interactions in the past and social change.

6   Concluding remark

It has been shown that there are online communities in Germany as well as elsewhere who are willing to influence the political system. Therefore, they make use of a variety of online actions. Hence, they do have a political potential. But the degree of influence finally exerted usually depends on intensifiers and multipliers such as prominent persons, offline pressure groups and traditional media. Up to now hardly anything is known about their politically relevant long-term effects, so that is something further research should focus on.

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